

# Casa Rocca Piccola

The history of Casa Rocca Piccola at 74, Republic Street, Valletta goes back over 400 years to an era in which the Knights of St. John, having successfully fought off the invading Turks in 1565, decided to build themselves a prestigious city to rival European capitals. Palaces were designed for prestige and aesthetic beauty in most of Valletta's carefully planned streets, and great bastion walls fortified the new 16<sup>th</sup> century city.

The house is named after the first owner, Don Pietro La Rocca, Admiral of the Order of St John in the Langue of Italy. It was, in later years, let to a succession of Italian aristocratic knights and was sold to a Maltese nobleman in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This house has been lived in by Maltese families for over 200 years. It is now the home of the 9<sup>th</sup> Marquis de Piro and his family. The Marquis, a cousin to our Honorary President, Mr. James C.B. St. George is also 9<sup>th</sup> Baron of the Maltese fiefdom of Budach and a Knight of Malta. Frances, the Marchioness, is English. They have four children: Cosmo, Clement, Louisa (Mrs. Hugh Preston) and Anton. Their two young grandchildren are Serafina and Nicholas.

Casa Rocca Piccola is not a museum: it is, in a sense, more than that. It is a living relic of a past way of life burdened with the pretensions and aspirations of a Maltese lineage. In preparing the *piano nobile* rooms for viewing by the public, an effort has been made to change as little as possible. Among the better pieces, there are also numerous items of memorabilia to be seen, not for their artistic merit, but only to contribute reality to the overall scene. The place does indeed house a number of collections including archives, lace, vestments, costume, chessmen and a quantity of paraphernalia not in the main rooms. Some of these items can be viewed in the basement, in the house museum called "Costumes & Collections". There are also two World War II bomb shelters deep underground, cut out of the rock foundation of Valletta.

A visit to Casa Rocca Piccola is an opportunity to see inside one of the last private unconverted Valletta palaces still lived in today.

## The Chapel

The walls have been painted to simulate damask, which was used copiously in many Maltese churches. The altar and *retable* are wooden and have been painted to simulate marble. The altarpiece of the Madonna and Child with St Gaetano is by Pietro Paolo Caruana. The altar-cloth is sometimes changed and is usually 18<sup>th</sup> or

19<sup>th</sup> century Maltese bobbin lace. The family is very proud of the chapel as it originally belonged to a member of the Sciberras Testaferrata family that produced Malta's only Cardinal. There are two crosses on the altar: the ivory crucifix is of fine quality and was granted two hundred days indulgence by Cardinal Godfrey in 1960 at the time of the Pauline centenary. The second cross houses a particle of the True Cross behind the little red curtain. Its authenticity is confirmed by no less than seven Vatican seals on the reverse.

As was the case with most European noble families, it was customary for a younger son to become a priest, and perhaps for



Il-Markiż De Piro jifirma l-ktieb tal-viżitaturi fil-Każin

that reason in particular, many patrician families were given the privilege of keeping a chapel in the house.

You can see some decorations of the Knights of St. John. The Marquis' father's medals are here, he was present at the Coronation of H.M. Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Together with his wife the Baroness of Budach and the Baron of Diar-il-Bniet and of Bucana they represented the Maltese Nobility at Westminster Abbey.

The Marquis' grandfather represented Malta at the Coronation of George VI and his medals are also here including the pair of fine gold filigree earrings, a present from the Bishop of Gozo to Nicolina de Piro after her husband had donated land to build a famous church in Gozo called Ta' Pinu. They are an example of the fine craft to be found on the Maltese Islands. You can also see shoes known as Papal buskins. In days gone by, a Pope might present you with a shoe symbolising a gift from the foot of the throne. There are examples in the family originating from Popes Leo XII, Pius IX and Clement XIII. Between the papal slippers there is the chalice of the Maltese Cardinal, Fabrizio Sceberras Testaferrata. The three silver statues are of St Peter and St Paul with St Quentin in the centre. St Quentin's statue has a fascinating history: it was presented to Leo XIII by the silversmiths of Paris on his election to Pope. Some time in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Pope St Pius X, an Italian bishop asked His Holiness for some charity for a parish priest doing some very good work. The Pope said that there was a problem with 'liquidity' but picked up the silver statue of St Quentin from his chest of drawers and said, "Will this help?" A young Maltese Monsignor, Joseph Apap Bologna serving in the diplomatic service of the Vatican heard the story and asked the priest to sell it to him rather than raffle it. The Monsignor was the great-uncle of the present Marquis de Piro.

On top of the showcase is the statue of St Paul, patron saint of Malta. This 17<sup>th</sup> century carving is reputed to be the original model for the famous statue of St Paul by Melchiorre Gafà in the Collegiate Church of St Paul's Shipwreck in Valletta. Notice the snake at St Paul's feet; this is symbolic of the fact that a serpent bit him when he arrived in Malta.

The legend is that since then, there have been no poisonous snakes on the islands.

## The Four-Poster Bedroom

The bedroom is the only room in the house that is not in use. It would be almost impossible to prepare it every morning for tourists. The bed is a showpiece: great-grandmother Orsola's matrimonial bed. She married in 1867 and produced 9 children: 7 boys and 2 girls. They all survived childhood and so the bed is considered lucky.

It is particularly important to the family as one of the 9 children born in it is now a candidate for sainthood – Mons. Giuseppe De Piro. He was the founder of the Missionary Society of St Paul which has flourished in Canada, Australia, Perù and other parts of the world. Another of Orsola's children born in the bed was Igino, the present Marquis' grandfather.

The bedcover is changed every two months: there is a variety of them - one is bobbin lace and involved an able lacemaker in at least two years' work; another is knitted. To the left of the bed on the wall is an 18<sup>th</sup> century pocket watch holder designed so that the time could be read during the night. The shaving bowl to the right of the bed is 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the chamber pot below is made of Venetian blown glass and is also over two hundred years old.

The two 18<sup>th</sup> century Maltese tables on either side of the door display family photographs on the left and various local, British and Italian dignitaries on the right.

The large painting above the baby's cot is of the Maltese Countess de Fremeaux. It is an *ex voto*. If you are wondering why there is a dying saint in her picture, it is a deliberate act of humility. The portrait was painted



when there may have been a scare of the plague. Normally, being rich and aristocratic, the sitter would have been shown in all her finery with embroidered dress and jewellery, but here the Countess wears black and opts for lowly straw to kneel upon.

The carved wooden chest is 16<sup>th</sup> century and possibly came from the Greek island of Rhodes with the Knights of St John. It is rare because so much of the furniture of this period was replaced by the more elegant styles that followed. The Pre-Raphaelite picture of the Roman martyr St Rufina above the 'Rhodes' Chest is by the celebrated Maltese artist Giuseppe Calì. He was the maternal great grandfather of the family and he painted many churches including the interior of the great rotunda at Mosta, the Church of St Francis in Valletta and the Dominican Church of Porto Salvo around the corner from this house. Above the door leading out of the room is a '*memento mori*' by Doris Zinkeisen in which the Angel of Death is visiting the wealthy, the young and the successful and ignoring the aged and the infirm.

If you approach the last room at this end of the *enfilade*, you will see one of the treasures of the house: it is a golden sedan chair made for the Knight of Malta Fra Victor Nicolas de Vachon Belmont who was Captain General of the Galleys from 13<sup>th</sup> October 1764 to 9<sup>th</sup> January 1766. He was a romantic figure in a sense and did not spend much time on land, but led his men personally. You can see his coat of arms on the front door of the vehicle. This chair, with its ornate painting and overall gold colour coat of arms, banners and plush interior, was designed to show off the fact that it was presented by the ruling Prince, the Portuguese Grand Master Pinto, to one of Malta's most significant knights.

In the old days liveried servants or even Turkish slaves would have been summoned to carry the smartest sedan chairs around Valletta. Try to imagine what a sight this would have been as they strained themselves for example up the steps outside this house to reach, say, the Palace of the Grand Master. The occupant could choose to open or close the curtains and could also be carried right into a palace and up the stairs to the drawing rooms if he so wished. De Vachon actually ruled Malta for a short period as Lieutenant of the Order when Grand Master de Rohan suffered a stroke towards the end of his reign. De Vachon did not leave Malta with the banished knights in 1798. He decided to stay on in spite of Napoleon's orders. He took bread to the poor until his funds ran out.

The British admired this Frenchman and actually gave him a pension. He lived on until 1807 and was buried with pomp in the Conventual Church of St John. His tombstone is in the Chapel of the Langue of France under the lower step of the altar.

Ref. *Casa Rocca Piccola* by The Marquis De Piro K.M.

## FTEHIM

FTEHIM milhuq illum I-Erbgha 13 ta' Jannar 1993 f'Laqgha li nżammet fis-Sala Ĝawhra, Qrendi, bejn is-Socjetà Mužikali Santa Marija, Qrendi, rappreżentata mill-President is-Sur Nikol Aquilina, Segretarju s-Sur Nazzareno Mallia, Kaxxier is-Sur Anthony Bezzina u l-Assistent Kaxxier is-Sur Martin Formosa, u bejn is-Socjetà Mužikali Lourdes, Qrendi, rappreżentata mill-Viči President is-Sur Joe A. Magro, Segretarju s-Sur Tarcisio Vella, Kaxxier is-Sur Godfrey Axiaq u d-Delegat is-Sur Christopher Tabone, fuq dawn il-punti:-

1. Illi meta l-partitarji li jkunu quddiem il-Banda jaslu quddiem il-Kažin oppost, jindaqqu żewġ Marċi shah u mat-tielet Marċ, il-partitarji jridu jimxu l-quddiem sabiex jippermettu li l-Banda tiehu postha quddiem il-Kažin oppost;
2. Illi meta jkun għaddej il-marċ oppost, u jasal quddiem il-Kažin oppost, HADD mill-partitarji ta' dan il-Kažin ma jista' jinżel minn fuq il-bankina;
3. Illi peress li l-Pulizija minn din is-sena 1993, mhix se toħrog permessi għall-hruq ta' safar u gassijiet għal waqt il-Marċi, is-Socjetajiet tagħna jiddikjaraw li mhux se jagħmlu tajjeb la finanzjarjament u lanqas se jkunu responsabbi quddiem l-awtoritajiet civili jekk xi persuna taħraaq xi stafar jew gassijiet hawn fuq imsemmija;
4. Illi jekk il-Pulizija toħrog dawn il-permessi msemmija f'paragrafu 3, iż-żewġ Socjetajiet jinrabtu li:-
  - (a) Is-Socjetà Mužikali Lourdes, Qrendi, ma tippermettix li jinħarqu dawn il-gassijiet minn fiti' l-isfel mill-Istatwa ta' Santa Marija fi Triq il-Parroċċa, sa ħdejn il-Kažin tal-Banda Lourdes;
  - (b) Is-Socjetà Mužikali Santa Marija, Qrendi, ma tippermettix li jinħarqu dawn il-gassijiet minn ħdejn l-istatwa ta' Santu Rokku fi Triq il-Parroċċa sal-bidu ta' Triq San Nikola. Jekk il-Marċi ikun tiela' minn Triq is-Suq, ma tippermettix li jinħarqu dawn il-gassijiet mill-istess tarf ta' Triq is-Suq sakemm jaqbeż Pjazza Santa Marija;
5. Illi ż-żewġ Socjetajiet jikkundannaw, ma jaċċettawx u ma jippermettux l-ebda insulti personali u kliem oxxen li jingħad, specjalment quddiem il-Kažin oppost;
6. U illi kopja ta' dan il-ftehim tintbagħħat lis-Supretendent ta' dan id-Distrett.