

ORGANISED PHILATELY IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

(PART 1)

by NICK A. CUTAJAR

MALTA PHILATELIC SOCIETY — 1890

Ever since the appearance of the first postage stamp in May, 1840, stamp collecting established itself rapidly, not only in the country of origin, but in most other countries where the use of the stamp as prepayment of postage was introduced. People were then fascinated by the little bits of paper that were travelling long distances witnessing that postage had been paid. And in spite of the difficulties the early collector had to face, stamp collectors were buying the few stamps in existence through the services of the couple of dealers that had presumed profitable enterprise in stamp dealing. Thus philately was getting itself organised and a number of stamp clubs and societies were forming themselves in many parts of the world.

Malta issued its first postage stamp on December 1st, 1860. The stamps had been in Malta for over a year, after their dispatch from London in 1859, and their introduction must have been awaited with great anticipation. Within a span of thirty years, five stamps in different designs were already in existence, though of course, the specialist will affirm that there were at least twenty-nine different printings of the first Malta stamp alone, which even to the early collectors must have provided (them) with the rudiments of philately in all its interesting and suggestive aspects.

In 1890, the first form of an organised philatelic fraternity in Malta had its birth, catering in its fold for an ardent group of collectors. The society was known as the "Malta Philatelic Society". Very little is known of the first committee of the Society, its activities and members. However a little research has revealed an active society with connections far and wide.

Reference is made to the Malta Government Gazette of 1899, in connection with the sale of revenue stamps. (Govt. Notice No. 218):

"List of Post Offices, shops, etc., to sell revenue stamps —

The Malta Philatelic Society, 134d Strada Brittanica"

Palace Valletta

August 7, 1899.

From the above, it appears that the Malta Philatelic Society, by 1899, had established itself in such a manner as to be entrusted with the sale of revenue stamps, and presumably postage stamps, though no records to this effect have yet come to light. It is also evident that the Society had its own quarters in "Strada Brittanica", and this within only a span

of nine years of its inception, thus reflecting the extent of its needs. One may also safely assume that these quarters were open daily at least during working hours, (in those days much more than today's norm of a forty-hour week), to provide the facility for the sale of the revenue stamps, otherwise the licence would not have been granted.

The Society's activities were not confined to local official business. In fact, very early in its existence, the Malta Philatelic Society had the courage to introduce an exchange or booklet circulation scheme for members, which must have had quite a success, as a member from Brazil was already on the list of possible source of material to satisfy the earnest needs of the members. A Malta postal card dated 13, March, 1900, and locally postmarked the next day with the Valletta oval postmark, sent by the Vice Honorary Secretary of the Society, Mr. W.R. Gatt, reveals the extent of the connections established, and the success of the packet exchange branch of the Society. The card is addressed to "Senor Viktor Weskofef, Horencio de Abreu No. 4, Sao Paulo, Brazil". The following is the text:

170 Strada Forno
Valletta, Malta
13.3.1900

Dear Sir,

I have been a long time expecting to receive your sheets for exchange, as you promised me in your letter of the 11th December. As I have not, I thought it well to write to you. Some of the members want Stamps of Falkland Islands & the new Jubilee (Commemorative) stamps of Brazil with view, namely 100, 200, 500, 700 reis —

We will send you some of our sheets in a short time. We have been appointed Stanley Gibbons Agents & we have everything in stock.

(signed)

W. R. Gatt

I will leave the conclusions as to the success or otherwise of the exchange scheme of the Society to the readers. But one other interesting observation develops in the fascinating history of this remarkable society, by now ten years of age. It is a striking development in the unpredictable history of organised philately in Malta, especially in the late nineteenth century and the first years of the consecutive century.

Stanley Gibbons, the famous dealers, were granting agencies to established philatelic societies for the sale of postage stamps that were being handled by the firm. The Malta Philatelic Society was a fortunate applicant, and it deserved it quite rightly, as the agency must have provided the Society with a much needed financial addition to its funds. Furthermore, the Hon. Vice Secretary affirms in his letter, that the Society "had everything in stock". I can only imagine a group of

members in charge of the agency, working full-time, stocked with "everything" the reputed firm had to sell. Quite an astonishing feat and one that must have entailed substantial organising requirements.

It is a pity that the Malta Philatelic Society seems to fade away into history some time early in this century. It would be very interesting to know of any members of our Society who may have been members of the Malta Philatelic Society. Maybe they could supply me with its performance during the first years of the twentieth century. When did it last cease to exist? What was the reason? Was it because the number of members began to dwindle or because of some other development that forced it to close doors.

THE MALTA PHILATELIC MONTHLY JOURNAL — 1916

In my endeavours to trace the history of organised philately in Malta, in July last year, having a spare couple of minutes, I dialed a number on the phone. When the voice of Mr. Alfred Micallef answered, I apologetically excused myself for my voice, (I had a soar throat) and continued to tell him that his son-in-law suggested this contact. In our first short talk over the phone, Mr. Micallef revealed quite an astonishing development I was not prepared for. He told me that at one time, some sixty years earlier, he was involved in the publication of a monthly philatelic magazine.

This revelation struck me and I immediately prompted an appointment to meet him the following Saturday at his office in Merchant Street, Valletta, which he accepted with delight. That Saturday, Mr. Micallef had brought with him a treasured bound volume of all the issues of the "Malta Philatelic Monthly Journal", as well as a few unbound loose copies for me to go through.

The "Malta Philatelic Monthly Journal" had its first edition published as Vol. 1. No. 1 in August 1916. Messrs. G. & A. Micallef were the editors and publishers, and the journal was printed at the "Malta Herald" Printing Office. It measured seven and half by ten inches, the front page printed in red and black, containing five odd leaves. Above the name of the Journal, printed in red, there was also printed in red and white the Maltese Cross enclosed in two rings, the outer being red, topped by a crown. Subscription to the "Malta Philatelic Monthly Journal" was a humble florin per year for twelve issues. The publishers offered a free advertisement of 4 lines repeated 6 times yearly as an incentive.

The Journal also carried the formal advertisements at the rate of 15/- per page, 8/- per half-page, 4/3 per quarter-page, with a 1 inch column advert costing 1/-. It is noteworthy to record that Stanley Gibbons had an advert in the first issue, announcing their purchase of the "Famous and most important Stamp Collection, Queensland of Mr. Leslie R.R. Hausburg" and greatly added by several stamps from the collections of Messieurs W.W. Blest and Vernon Roberts. "M.M. Yvert & Tellier Amiens" of 37, Rue des Jacobins also had an advert in the first edition.

That historic edition also carried the headline "Guaranteed World-wide Circulation" and it was no mere boisterous claim. The Editors in their inaugural write-up promised that the second issue will contain a page in French and Italian, which they fulfilled to the letter in the next edition. In the "Miscellaneous Advertisements", addresses from some odd forty countries, including most European countries, as well as Bermuda, Chile, Cuba, Argentina, Egypt, New Zealand, Ceylon and Jamaica, were noted. From the onset, the publishers were ascertained a wide distribution, and to prove this, the fifth edition, published in 1916, the editors proclaimed "Publication now exceeds 2500 copies" in bold headline type.

The Journal provided very interesting reading with reportage of philatelic news in the "New Issues and Discoveries" furnished by the Editors as well as readers and official notices. Local philatelic events, the few that were organised, were also reported, and supplemented by comments. The articles were as varied as can be; the first issue carried "Observations on the Plates of the First Issue", an article communicated to the Siam Philatelic Society on the 22nd September, by its Secretary J.R.C. Lyons. Also in the first edition, the following details about type-written stamps of Long Island were featured:

"The "L'Echo-Amiens" states that the English had established an island in the Aegean Sea for their naval base. This belonged to Turkey and was then baptised "Long Island". On the 7th May (1916) a post office was established and issued Turkish fiscal stamps with surcharge something similar to fig. 1 (G.R.1./Postage/2½/Pence), S.G. 1-3. These run out very quickly and then typewritten stamps were issued nearly similar to fig. 11 (G.R. 1/LONG ISLAND/POSTAGE &/REVENUE/ONE PENNY) S.G. 4 onwards.

It was thus only a few months after their introduction that the Journal reported their appearance, proving once again the swiftness of reportage on the part of the editors and the reliable contacts they had established. In the following edition of the Journal, a press-release from the Post-Master General was reproduced concerning the type-written stamps renouncing the issue as invalid for the prepayment of postage and unauthorised. The catalogue seems to think otherwise.

In Vol. 1, No. 2, (September 1916), it was reported that the Bahamas 5c Orange and Black stamp has been surcharged "SPECIAL DELIVERY" in two lines, and that these stamps were sold out as only 600 copies were surcharged. A glance look at the catalogue confirms the report, noting that the first printing of 600 was on sale from 1 May 1916 in Canada.

In Vol 1, No. 3, reference is made to the then current 6d stamp (Said No. 80) of the King George V series, being "now printed in deep violet colour." That same edition also carried an article by Rog. Cachia, entitled "Stamp-Collecting and its Educational Utility"; while their French correspondent contributed "Les Consequences de la Guerre". A serialised article entitled "History as exemplified by Postage Stamps" by

Rog. Cachia made its first appearance in Vol. 1, No. 4, while, prompted by Rog. Cachia's earlier contribution, Rev. Dr. J. Psaila-Cumbo, took up "Educational Value of Stamps" launching his series with the New Testament account of St. Paul's Shipwreck in Malta.

The "Malta Philatelic Monthly Journal" must have generated local interest in the formation of a new philatelic society as witnessed by a letter sent to the editors by Mr. Rog. Cachia, who proposed it. The Editors took up the initiative and readers were invited to write to the temporary secretary, Mr. Rog. Cachia himself, so that a general meeting would be arranged.

In the next edition of our Society's magazine, I hope to treat this society on its own and hope that readers who may have been members of that society way back in 1916-1917, would communicated to me their memories so that a full account and tribute will be published.

MALTA GIBRALTAR CYPRUS

(1937 - 1976)

Please send 10p or 8c postage for lists.

I also wish to buy and welcome your

offers but please write first.

RODGER G. YEO

P.O. BOX 10, RUISLIP, MIDDLESEX HA4 7NG, U.K.