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Jewish Tourism to Malta: A Nostalgic Pilgrimage?

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The good air transport links with most major European cities and Malta, has led to an increase in tourists from all over the world. This has also led to an increase in tourists of the Jewish faith. These tend to be mainly coming from North America, and the cultural tours that are planned for them, always provide a number of visits to Jewish related historical and cultural locations. The itineraries that are planned make sure that the Jewish heritage on the islands is visited. What are these locations that attract the attention of Jewish visitors to Malta?

The earliest mention of a Jewish community in Malta is securely dated to the first centuries of the Common Era. In various underground burial places, around the old capital city of Malta, there are catacombs with Jewish symbols carved on the walls of burial places. These tend to confirm the presence of a substantial Jewish community in Malta. The fate of this community is not known. The 13th century sees Abraham Abulafia, considered as a prophet, living in Malta and presumably dying here. Documentary evidence from the 13th century, point to a small Jewish community living here. By the 15th century it is clearly evident that there was a Jewish community, forming part, and taking part within the everyday life of Medieval Malta. Jews were to be recorded in Malta throughout the following centuries.

There are cemeteries dating from the 4th and 6th centuries, and others from the 19th century onwards. There is an indication of where the Jewish Silk Market was located during the Medieval times. Nowadays, pilgrimages are taking on a different aspect. The religious aspect of such a visit is not of great importance, while visiting places associated with the Jewish communities in Malta throughout the centuries, is of great significance. This can be referred to as nostalgic pilgrimage, and not necessarily a religious and spiritual pilgrimage. This is part of a cultural type of pilgrimage, identifying with previous communities of the same religious views.

Key Words: nostalgic pilgrimage, Jewish tourists, Malta's Jewish heritage

Introduction

Since the rise of civilization, the Middle East has been rich in notable sights and sites, and people have been visiting them for millennia. The Great Pyramids, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and places of religious significance such as Jerusalem and Mecca were drawing visitors long before the invention of the word tourism. And while travel for the purpose of seeing religious sites or carrying out religious obligations may be rightly termed 'pilgrimage', the social and economic effects of this sort of travel are essentially indistinguishable from travel for purely secular reasons. If one accepts a broad definition of tourism, then it has been going on for centuries, on a large scale, to the region's many religious destinations. If one defines tourism more narrowly, as secular travel for the purposes of sightseeing and leisure on a scale large enough to be economically significant, then tourism,

especially by Europeans, became important in the region only in the second half of the nineteenth century, when transportation methods improved, and leisure time increased along with disposable income (Mattar, 2004:2195).

The above quote can easily be considered as relevant to many regions around the Mediterranean. There have always been reasons why people travelled to the Mediterranean, for cultural reasons or to visit the great archaeological sites. Most important of all there are the main religious sites that are associated with the three monotheistic religions and which are in the region under discussion (Zammit, 2010). Besides religious sites, early visitors to the Mediterranean were interested in all sites – religious, cultural and heritage. These travellers were typically on their Grand Tour, and Malta was also included in many of these itineraries (Freller, 2009).

The facility to travel has never been easier than it is nowadays. In the past travel was a restricted activity, and only the rich and elite were able to travel around. Such travelling began as part of the education of the individual, and this led to the many Grand Tours that were the norm, starting from the late 16th century but gaining rapidly in importance during the 18th and 19th centuries. The European Grand Tour would take visitors to the main cities, while the more adventurous would also venture away from the safety of the European mainland. The Mediterranean together with the Levant was on the itinerary for some of these travellers. Some of these illustrious travellers would visit the Maltese Islands (Freller, 2009). The reasons for these stops were sometimes governed by the need to have a safe harbour or stop to take on board more supplies. Others meant to take a few days break from sailing and visit the famous sites that were already well known outside the islands. The great majority of these visitors to the islands were European.

Nowadays, tourism in Malta is one of the most important economic activities that generate wealth and employment. It contributes to about 30% of the country's Gross Domestic Product, while 29% of the total employment in Malta is supported by the industry. The total number of visitors to Malta in 2018 amounted to 2.6 million, an increase of 13.8% on the previous year. There was another half a million visitors from cruise liners, which was a slight decrease of 2.2% from the previous year. The amount of non-European travellers to Malta is quite substantial, amounting to 18.5% of the total arrivals (Authority, 2019). The Malta Tourism Authority do not register religious affiliations, and therefore it is not possible to know the religious background of the visitors. Yet, religious tourism has been on the increase, albeit in a low-key way.

Literature Review

Nostalgia tourism is considered as a new segment within cultural tourism. According to Russell

there is a segment of cultural tourists ... that are not seeking other cultures, but rather insights into their own ancestral culture. This segment is referred to as nostalgic tourists (Russell, 2008:104).

It is considered that there are two types of nostalgic tourists, the real and the historical. The real nostalgic tourist is the one who is trying to revisit their personal past, a past that could also be traumatic (Russell, 2008). Real tourism is also referred to as personal,

where a person travels for their personal nostalgia (Kim, 2005). The historical nostalgic tourist aims to visit places that are not necessarily personal, but rather places that are connected to one's wider cultural heritage (Russell, 2008). This type of tourism is related to cultural and heritage tourism. It is said that this often involves the events, buildings and places that are beyond contemporary individuals' memories:

[these fixtures] from bygone eras have intrinsic appeal because of their aesthetic qualities, educational worth, novelty and ability to stimulate a wide range of pleasurable thoughts and feelings associated with the real or imagined past (Janiskee, 1996:400).

It is also interesting to note that due to the growth of secularism, there is an increase in a yearning for places where peoples' forebears lived. This has continued to increase due to the timespan separating modern society from the past (as noted in relation to Judaism by Ioannides & Cohen, 2002). This is in line with the need to trace one's roots.

In the meantime, the Jewish sites being visited in Malta are varied, and there is no common link to connect them, except that they belong to Jewish heritage. Cultural tourism has a number of sub-sections, like religious (and pilgrimage), artistic, and dark amongst others. The only religious site is the presumed location where the synagogue used to be. Yet, sites associated with dark tourism are more numerous. It is well recognised that humans are attracted to sites associated with death and disaster (Podoshen, 2013) and in Malta there are a number of such sites that can still be visited. This has led to an increase in offering such dark walks in Malta. The archaeological remains that fall into this category are numerous and offer an excellent opportunity for the interested visitors.

Heritage is a common feature all over the world. There is much heritage that although it might be considered of great importance by the locals, it might not be considered as such by the visitors (Timothy, 2011). Yet, there is also the other side of the coin, namely the heritage that might be of greater interest to a specific group of visitors, even though they would not be considered as so important by the locals. The Jewish heritage sites in Malta are such an example. Although this can be said to be of minor importance within the general cultural and heritage aspects of Malta, for tourism purposes this has its own value and importance.

Cultural Tours

The creation of thematic tours goes hand in hand with the need to diversify what is being offered to the visitors to Malta. These ‘special interest tours’, are tours designed according to individual needs, usually because of an increase in interests by individuals looking for different locations and subjects, in order to satisfy their own interest. The following suggestions and comments regarding thematic tours being offered in Malta are the result of designing an itinerary to satisfy the needs and preferences of the market, in order to keep ahead in the field.

The increase in tourist arrivals has led to the need to diversify the product. This has had an impact on the way that guided tours are planned and organised. Although the great majority of the organised excursions still offer the same visits, same routes and same set-up that has been in place for many years, there has been a drive towards providing alternative tours, or special interest tours. This is also the result of more individual travellers visiting the islands. The arrival of low-cost airlines to Malta, has led to more individual travellers, in relation to package tours. These usually spend a few days, but it has been clear that they are more interested in culture and heritage than in anything else.

In recent years, there has been an increase of tourists from the United States of America and Canada, and interestingly an increase of Jewish travellers from these areas. Besides arriving in Malta by various airlines, a number of North American tourists arrive in Malta while on a Mediterranean cruise. The direct airline with Tel Aviv from Malta, has led to more international Jewish travellers visiting Malta, some of whom are on their way to Israel. This has created a new market, a new group of people with different interests – therefore new opportunities and the need for new ideas regarding cultural itineraries.

Tourism most often serves hedonistic pursuits; however, many of today's retirees are using their savings to not only explore the world, but also to seek a sense of self by returning to the lands of their ancestors, while others are simply seeking out new cultural experiences. To this end, cultural tourism has been deemed one of the fastest growing segments within the tourism industry and has become a focus of interest for national governments as well as international organizations such as the World Tourism Organization and UNESCO (du Cros, 2001, cited in Russell, 2008:103).

Figure 1: Jewish Synagogue in Mdina



Photo: Vincent Zammit

Malta has a lot to offer with regards to cultural sites. There are six prehistoric temples, the underground prehistoric burial site, the ancient capital city Mdina and the more modern capital city of Malta, Valletta which is listed by UNESCO on their World Heritage List. Besides these, there are various sites reflecting the islands' Millennia of heritage.

The increase of visitors interested in Jewish heritage in Malta has led to the need to create specific and thematic tours. In general, one can easily divide these visitors into two groups – those that are interested in anything Jewish, and others who are mildly interested, but being in Malta they would like to know and visit some of these places. Unfortunately, although there are various documents about the Jewish presence in Malta throughout the centuries, the material evidence is not so rich and neither is it spectacular. In the meantime, tours with a Jewish heritage theme are becoming popular.

Thus, the question is - What type of Jewish heritage tours are organised in Malta? What type of Jewish heritage is still visible and present in Malta? The following locations associated with Jewish heritage can be found and visited:

Jewish Synagogue in Mdina

The original Synagogue building does not exist anymore, but it was located on the bastions of the medieval city (Figure 1). This was also the site where the Jews on military duty, would report for work. It is interesting to note that while Jews were allowed to be soldiers, they were not allowed to do coastal guard duty, for fear of being traitors (Wettinger, 1979).

Figure 2: Disused 18th Century Cemetery

Photo: Exclusively Malta

Disused 18th Century Cemetery

This is a cemetery that was established during the time of the Knights of St John in 1784 (Figure 2) and was the only Jewish burial place before the building of another cemetery. Unfortunately, it is abandoned, but, there are efforts underway to restore the cemetery and the few tombstones that have survived.

Disused 19th Century Cemetery

This forms part of a larger cemetery which was established by the British Colonial government in Malta, during the first half of the 19th century. Due to the size of the area that was reserved for the Jewish community, it soon became full and there was need for

another cemetery to be built. The cemetery is well taken care of, although no Jewish burials take place here anymore.

Present Jewish Cemetery

The present cemetery (Figure 3) dates to 1879, built in lieu of the previous and smaller one. It is the only cemetery for the Jewish community in Malta, and still in use. Buried here are a number of important personalities that settled in Malta, set up businesses and were leaders of the community.

In 2009 there was a controversy between Heritage Malta and the Jewish community, when the former started clearing the Jewish catacombs within the larger

Figure 3: Present Jewish Cemetery

Photo: Vincent Zammit

Figure 4: Jewish Silk Market in Mdina

Photo: Vincent Zammit

St Paul's Catacombs complex. Eventually, after a series of talks and discussions, it was agreed that the human remains recovered from Jewish tombs, were to be handed over to the representatives of the Jewish community in Malta and reburied at this Jewish cemetery in Marsa (Sansone, 2009). This was one of those moments when archaeological and research needs, were in direct conflict with the religious needs of a community (Walter, 2009).

Jewish Silk Market

In one of the side streets, off the main street in the medieval city of Mdina, there is a marble tablet indicating that here there was the Jewish Silk Market. It is well documented that the silk trade was one of the monopolies of Jewish tradesmen. They even supplied silk to the canons of Mdina Cathedral (Wettinger, 1985).

Only the façade of the building has survived, and it is located where the medieval Jewish synagogue used to be.

Figure 5: Catacombs Dating From 4th to 7th Century

Photo: Vincent Zammit

Catacombs

Amongst the various catacombs in Malta, some of them have decorations which are associated with the Jewish community. These are the earliest evidence of Jewish presence in the islands. Besides the St Paul Catacombs, other burial places from this period are located in other complexes (Buhagiar, 1986).

These remains are mainly of archaeological importance, and for the locals they are associated with the early Christians. Yet, due to the presence of various Jewish symbols carved or painted in some of the burial places, they form part of the collective memory of Jewish heritage (Harrison, 2010). The majority of the symbols are carvings of the menorah (Figure 5).

Avraham Abulafia

Comino is a very small island located between the main islands of Malta and Gozo. This is where the well-known Jewish Mystic, Avraham Abulafia a Spanish mystic and founder of practical Kabbala lived. Abulafia, a kabbalist from Zaragoza, arrived here in 1285 and lived on the island until his death in the 1290s.

The above-mentioned Jewish sites are not that spectacular, yet, Jewish visitors to Malta, still ask to visit these places.

Role of the Tourist Guide as an interpreter

It is very difficult to try and define the reasons behind the visits to Malta by Jews. Many visitors are on a Mediterranean cruise, and their stop in Malta would be part of the itinerary. There would not be any specific reason or aim for them to visit the islands. But while here, they would try and take a private tour which highlights Jewish heritage on the islands. At the end of the tours, they comment favourably on the tour's itinerary, and recommend that others would do well to take such tours, as very little information about the Jewish presence in Malta is generally known. This falls in the sector where customised tours are planned and organised for the interested party.

The aim of this paper is about the role of the tourist guide during these themed tours. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the tourist guide needs to be well versed and prepared in the subject matter. It is also important that one needs to be a good interpreter of different cultural backgrounds, as interpretation is an important tool for any tourist guide. Being just a

deliverer of information will render the tour boring. Good interpretation skills will give value-added experiences to the tour (Weiler & Black, 2015). It is important that the guide encourages the visitors to think and feel during the tour experience. But this can only be achieved by the tourist guide who has the necessary information available.

Tour guiding is often characterised as the telling of stories and 'narratives' (de la Barre, 2013:6)

The narratives need to be well researched as well, as otherwise these would end up flat, and non-believable. It is therefore important that the tourist guide needs to be able to delve deeper into the subject matter (Weiler & Black, 2015). One needs to be able to observe a site, look at it from different angles, and present it in a way that the audience understands and appreciates better the perceived significance of the subject. Jewish heritage in Malta is limited, and yet, several tourists still appreciate these few sites that are associated with their culture and traditions. One of the places that are visited are the catacombs, located outside the old medieval city of Mdina. Like the other sites in Malta, namely cemeteries, these locations tend to attract visitors for a nostalgic visit. There is nothing personal; no families are buried here. But, it is still part of the Jewish heritage that people desire to visit. This is one of the sites which brings out the fact that persons of different cultures and religious affiliations lived harmoniously together. It is of great importance that to enhance the experience, the tourist guide needs to be well informed of the written material that still survives, the history of the Jewish community during the medieval period, as well as their contribution to the local community.

These particular visits to cemeteries and catacombs are becoming more popular. This forms part of the so-called dark tourism. The allure of visiting cemeteries and old burial places has increased substantially in these last years, and in Malta it has also become popular to organise visits to cemeteries. The visits to St Paul's Catacombs, dating back to the 4th century, have become popular, since it is well documented that these were used by different beliefs – Jewish, Christians and Pagan. The main Catacombs in Malta are the aptly named St Paul's and they provide several individual chambers over a large area (Buhagiar, 1986). While the majority do not have any religious markings to indicate the religious beliefs of those buried, some of these have Jewish symbols – mainly the menorah. It is always important that the tourist guide makes sure that

guests are taken to visit these burial places and shown the various graffiti and even paintings and carvings of the menorah.

Dark tourism has increased substantially in recent years, even though this has been going on for centuries. People are known to travel to visit sites, attractions or events that are linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence or disaster (Sharpley, 2009). Visits to these underground burial places in Malta, do not bring on any negative feelings, such as those experienced when one is visiting places associated with war or other atrocities. Yet, these can easily fall into the nostalgia type of travel. The fact that visiting these sites in Malta is not associated with any atrocities or disasters, makes a visit to these places a more pleasant one, and more associated with nostalgia.

In the meantime, a visit to such sites brings the authenticity of the place even closer to the visitor's perception of identity (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). There are no additions to the site, no Disneyfication, and thus the sites visited are still authentic. Although bereft of any human remains, the religious symbols carved on the walls are usually considered enough for the visitors' satisfaction and more important, to establish authentication.

The tourist guide needs to understand that there are difficulties in this kind of tour, as one needs to identify the interest of the small group of visitors, with special interests, in order to provide the best experience. This is going to lead to the need to have a good idea of the interpretation methods of such a subject. Interpretation forms an important and an integral part of the experience (Timothy, 2011). The visitor to Malta can end up with a bad experience due to the deluge of facts, dates and names throughout the tour, and being rushed from one place to another. One of the most important things for a tourist guide to remember is the need to offer the possibility of a relaxing tour, with time for the visitors to engage with the subject.

The Jewish experience in Malta is mainly a visit filled with curiosity. There is the curiosity of visiting a small island, with some additional Jewish heritage included. This usually leads to a nostalgia tour, or what has been described as 'collective nostalgia' (Timothy, 2011). This is not necessarily that visitors would be visiting these places due to some family connections, but rather for religious and cultural nostalgia.

Discussion

The increase in culturally minded tourists all over the world, has led to a re-thinking of the various options on offer. Cultural routes and heritage trails have been on the increase and this is considered as an important offer to the visitors. Tourist guides in Malta tend to create their own routes and walks, although in general they would be very much dictated by what the tour operators would have planned. The increase in individual tourists helps the tourist guide to change and be innovative in the creation of new and imaginative trails. This is what is needed to keep oneself in the forefront of what the discerning visitor wants and expects to find.

Culturally minded visitors tend to be well educated and are also interested in getting off-the-beaten-track, rather than the usual stereotype routes that are typically offered. This has encouraged the local authorities and the Malta Tourism Authority, to take this idea on board. Some years back there were created a number of rural walks and these were completely off the beaten track, away from the usual places, and offering a different part of Malta's heritage and culture. This has been followed with specific themed routes and trails across the islands.

In the meantime, tourist guides in Malta are encouraged to create their own unique walks and routes. This will provide them with the option to be different as they offer an alternative to the usual trails and tours. During their preparation within the full time and part-time courses organised by the Institute of Tourism Studies, and coordinated by the undersigned, they are encouraged and guided in how to create such routes. Throughout their studies they will have to suggest different and / or alternative routes.

On a personal note, I have been creating such different routes for some years. The different tours can either be organised without any input by the interested party, or else they would be customised to the needs of the visitor. The customisation of the itinerary would usually include the personal experiences and wishes of the visitor. It is only in recent years that I have been requested to plan Jewish heritage walks and tours in Malta. These can cover various sites all over the island, while others can also be more relaxing, as they are walking tours.

It is important to affiliate the Jewish heritage in Malta with the wider European network which is called the 'European Route of Jewish Heritage' (Anon., n.d.). This will bring to a wider audience the Jewish heritage in Malta and offer the possibilities of learning about good practice from other countries. The creation of such itineraries needs to take into account the different needs of the visitor and the particular background of the visitor. This would mean that not each tour would be the same for all visitors, irrespective of their general common background – be it religious or cultural.

The nostalgia aspect of these walks and tours is important, it needs to be the focus of the interpretation. Nostalgia can also bring on emotion, and it is a known fact that some visitors do experience emotion in different forms when visiting places.

Emotional responses to places and memories of experiences are seen as intertwined, highly individual and very complex and even border on the spiritual (McClinchey, 2016:3).

Conclusion

The ever-changing role of the tourist guide is evident. Due to the various changes in the profile of visitors, one needs to keep abreast and able to venture into offering new products and tours. Being a good interpreter is of the utmost importance within the modern environment, and this helps to provide a better service. Many visitors to Malta are on a nostalgic trip – for example looking for relatives who served during World War Two and are buried here; others coming to visit their homeland – be they Maltese or even non-Maltese; and then there are those who are visiting the sites associated with links to their countries and culture.

Tourist Guides are the means to help the visitors to see beyond the site, beyond the name of someone who is buried, or even beyond the story. The tourist guide is there to provide the information, through interpretation, and bring it to life. This is an important aspect of the role of the tourist guide, as he or she needs to help in transporting the visitor to view the site from a different angle; bring the historical background into perspective and illustrate the site, the era, the story with the right interpretation. Although the typical understanding of the term diaspora might not be very relevant in the case of Jews travelling and visiting Malta, diaspora has also been said to be

nations or ethnic groups living outside their traditional homelands but which are being bound together either literally or figuratively by spatial concentration, culture, religion, ethnicity or national identity (Timothy, 2011:407).

It is a known fact that many people desire to search for their cultural roots anywhere they might be. Thus, it is highly important to encourage the preservation of all heritage. In the case presented in this paper, preservation and marketing of such heritage and the proper establishment of a Jewish heritage trail in Malta, is of utmost importance.

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