

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE GERMAN-MALTESE CIRCLE

31st JANUARY 2007

Speech by the outgoing President Albert Friggieri

In October 2001, I had the great honour of being elected President of the German-Maltese Circle for the first time. Since then I have been re-elected every year.

Before, I had been an active member of the Circle for many years. I had served as committee member; I had taught German here and, at one time, I was the coordinator for the German language courses. In the late sixties, as a teenager, before I went to university in Germany, I had also been a student at the Circle, when the Circle's premises were still located in Gunlayer Street in Floriana.



In 2001, I succeeded Chevalier Carmel Fenech who had been at the helm of the Circle for 31 years. He had seen the Circle grow from strength to strength, to become one of the leading cultural and educational institutions in Malta, in fact the largest of its nature, highly regarded both locally and abroad.

During the five years and three months that I have been President of the Circle, I have worked with excellent teams of Committee members. Both Maltese and German nationals formed part of these committees - persons coming from very different backgrounds and walks of life, and all contributing in their way to the work and success of our association. We discussed the activities of the Circle, sometimes for long hours, at times disagreeing on certain issues, but always respecting each others' points of view, and striving to reach a compromise whenever opinions differed. There was not even one single case of acrimony within the committees of the past five years. We managed to resolve all issues in a friendly and civilized manner - indeed an example of German-Maltese friendship and cooperation at its best.

As in all institutions such as ours, the first responsibility of the President is to make sure that the organization follows the aim for which it was established. The President's role is further defined in our statute which, besides providing us with a guideline, is legally binding. During my term of office I have tried to fulfill my obligations to the best of my ability.

Our association was founded 44 years ago, in October 1962, with the aim of fostering Maltese-German relations in all sectors, except those directly related to politics. This is something which the Committees, which I had the honour of leading, always kept in mind and strictly followed. *Our only aim was and remains one: to strengthen the understanding and friendship between the peoples of our two countries.*

Naturally, this aim has different facets and may also gain new dimensions as time passes and circumstances change. For example, there is no doubt that, with Malta becoming a member of the European Union, even the relationship between Germans and Maltese has changed. Within the Union, both Germans and we Maltese have opportunities to take advantage of and obligations to fulfill. This has to happen within

the multi-national structures of the EU. And yet, within this framework, as within a group of friends, there is nothing which rules out a stronger alliance between two of the members, a closer relationship between two of the friends. That is what we, at the German-Maltese Circle, want to achieve between the peoples of Malta and Germany. That is our declared aim.

Friendship between peoples might seem to be a very general or even an abstract concept, until one starts to set specific and concrete aims and define priorities. For an organization such as ours, it is impossible to work without such priorities. A committee, once elected, must identify its priorities and set specific aims for its work. The President may have his or her own ideas on how the Circle could or should be run and, as long as the Committee is convinced that those ideas are of benefit to the Circle, they can be adopted. This has always been a democratic institution, and no one can do what he or she wants, not even the President. The Committee as a whole is the supreme body. Once the Committee agrees on certain measures, they will be implemented.

When deciding about these priorities, besides its aim, an association like ours always has to keep in mind its *members*. What do our members want from us? Why are they members (*paying* members) of the Circle? In which way do *they* wish Maltese-German cooperation and friendship to develop? Why do our *Maltese* members show interest in Germany as a country, in the German language, in German culture, in the scientific and artistic achievements of the German people? And, on the other hand, why do our *German* members show interest in Malta, in our rich cultural heritage, in Maltese society, in our traditions and the various aspects of every day life in our country? How can the Circle best meet the expectations of as many as possible of its members?

These are the questions which a committee has to ask itself. And it has to be guided *not* by preconceived ideas, but by the answers to these questions. A committee of an association like ours is there to serve its members. An institution which disregards its members is doing itself the greatest disservice.

Furthermore, an association like ours has a tradition to follow; it has a certain role to fulfill, based on its past experience. At the Circle things have been done and are done in a certain way. This is characterized primarily by idealism, by work done and time sacrificed *voluntarily*. For us, committee members, to work for Maltese-German friendship is an ideal for which we are prepared to sacrifice our time and to which we dedicate a great deal of energy, without expecting any remuneration or anything else in return, except the satisfaction of seeing this friendship grow to the advantage of both sides.

Therefore, on the one hand, our committee has the statute and the Circle's successful history as points of reference. On the other hand, it has to listen to the wishes and expectations of the members, who are the soul of our association. Without them, without their enthusiasm, this would only be a historical building, beautiful but empty.

Five years ago, in committee, we discussed at length the situation of the German language in Malta. Reports coming in from various quarters showed that the German language was losing ground everywhere - in schools, at university and at the Circle itself. Unfortunately, this was a trend and is still a trend in many countries (not in *all* countries, but in *many* countries, such as the United Kingdom, for example), and Malta was not an exception. In committee we decided to start a campaign to respond to this trend. We made this our top priority.

We conducted our campaign together with the Goethe Institute, with the help of the German Embassy, and with the consent of the Department of Education. We visited schools and met pupils, teachers and parents. We took every opportunity that was offered to us *and* we created opportunities ourselves to underline the importance of the German language for us here in Malta. We did this through seminars, publications and interviews on radio. As in many other aspects of life, in a small country like ours, contacts are particularly important. We tried our best – utilizing all our contacts in every possible sector of Maltese society – to underline the importance of having a good number of people in Malta who can communicate in German, and to have at least some, who have a very good command of the language. This was a national campaign, carried out on various levels, initiated and coordinated by the Circle.

Figures show that we were successful. Naturally we would have liked to see even better results, but what is certain is that we managed to stop the downward trend, and in some quarters we even managed to reverse it to a positive trend. Had it not been for our timely initiative and energetic intervention, the German language in Malta would have continued to lose ground.

Besides the work carried out on a national basis, here at the Circle we also responded positively to our own members' preferences. We introduced *new* types of language courses and modules because that is what our members wanted. We started offering short language courses, modules without examinations, courses mixing learning German with entertainment, and specialized language courses (for example "Business German") and culturally-oriented language courses (for example, those based on traditions in Germany, such as Christmas traditions, or sessions on particular German authors).

Therefore we offered *not only* what we are actually equipped for, qualified, and used to offer – that is, the normal language courses leading to the prestigious Goethe Institute's certificates, conversation classes, and so on - but also what certain groups of members wished the Circle to offer them. We have *changed* our ways of looking at the courses, reacting to the situation that has developed. Furthermore, we also started offering *new* courses to youngsters (secondary school pupils) who have no opportunity of learning German at school or who did not choose it as one of their subjects. We have been innovative and pro-active. By doing this we succeeded in keeping our members and gaining new ones - persons who would have otherwise stayed away from us or opted to study another language or follow other types of courses.

To me as President of the Circle, the moments of greatest satisfaction have always been our certificate giving ceremonies, like the one held here some weeks ago, when our successful students received their Goethe Institute certificates and the prizes for their hard work and perseverance. These were the events, when I felt particularly proud to be the President of the German-Maltese Circle. I am sure that all of us, who have the German language at heart, share this sentiment.

Allow me to underline once more *the importance of the German language courses* for our association. These courses are not the only activity, but the *main* activity that immediately distinguishes us from other cultural institutions. All our investigations over the years have shown, repeatedly and beyond any doubt, that the courses are *the* activity organized by the Circle that by far the absolute majority of our members expect and appreciate most. For sure, some also participate in our other cultural events, but it is for the language courses that most (a) become and (b) stay on as members of our association.

Besides the language courses, and the various activities related to the teaching of German (for example the seminars for language teachers run with the help of the Goethe Institute), during the last five years, *over 100 cultural activities* have been organized by the Circle. I wouldn't know where to start if I were to mention the highlights of these years. Going through our records, I counted no less than 21 concerts, 24 exhibitions, 20 lectures, 4 major discussion sessions, 3 one-man shows dedicated to different German authors, 9 events concerning books, 2 dance performances and a number of film shows with discussions. We have organized cultural activities to appeal to different groups of people, young and old, academics and non-academics, artistically inclined and sports enthusiasts, Maltese and Germans. I want to underline that we managed to offer these cultural activities with the *minimum of expenditure*, often not involving the Circle in any expense at all. Those of you who would like to know more about these activities can check our web site where an enormous amount of information is available. From that information one can also see that some of these cultural events involved *highly qualified* German experts and artists, as well as some of the *best* local elements.

Furthermore, we organized or helped to organize several events involving *schools* (both Maltese and German). We hosted representatives from the University of Malta and from various German *universities* and other *educational institutions* in Germany. We welcomed to the Circle *delegations* from the German Bundestag and from State Parliaments - among them former Ministers - German journalists, artists, businessmen and many groups, who came to Malta on familiarization visits.

The government of the Federal Republic of Germany, through the Goethe Institute, gives us a financial grant which amounts to about *one-third* of our budget. For this support, which the German government has been kindly giving to the Circle for many years in recognition of its excellent work, we are *very grateful*. The other *two-thirds* of the Circle's financial requirements are made up of our own fees which we pay as members, and other contributions, which the Committee manages to obtain. One of my responsibilities as President was to contact companies and institutions that could help us raise enough funds to run the Circle properly. At this point, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our corporate members, the companies that set aside a small amount of money each year which they pass on to us because they are convinced of our good work. I am pleased to say that the Circle has never had as many corporate members and as much support from them as it has now.

Finally, some more words of thanks.

My special thanks on this occasion go to Mr Victor Sammut, our General Secretary, as indefatigable, ever-present and determined as when I met him the first time many years ago.

I would like to thank Mr Carmel Azzopardi, our treasurer, for his thorough and precise work.

My sincere gratitude goes to Miss Maryanne Azzopardi, who for many years has been our officer-in-charge of classes. During the past five years - as in the years before - she has been doing an outstanding job.

I would also like to thank all our teachers for their dedication, their sense of responsibility and their excellent work.

I would like to thank, once again, *all* the members of the Committees that I have had the honour and pleasure of working with. We have not tried to re-invent the wheel.

We have continued building on the solid foundations that our predecessors left us. At the same time, we have introduced *new ideas*, we have moved on with the times, we have been *pro-active and creative*. We can be proud of our achievements.

My thanks go to the German Embassy – to the former Ambassador H.E. Mr Merten, whose term of office as ambassador coincided with most of my time as president of the Circle, to the present ambassador, H.E. Freiherr von Stenglin, and to the other members of the Embassy, past and present, for the support that they have always given me.

I would like to thank Professor Viktor Dulger, the founder, owner and chairman of the ProMinent Group of Companies, (the Group of Companies that I work for), who is also Malta's Honorary Consul General in Baden-Württemberg. He did not only encourage me to accept the post of the Circle's President in the first place, but has also supported me and our association wholeheartedly whenever his assistance was needed.

My thanks also go to all the candidates for today's election for the new committee; you have already shown, with your candidature, that you are prepared to work for the Circle and contribute towards its success. The new committee will have, for sure, three new members. I wish you lots of hard work, success and satisfaction.

I would like to thank my wife, Catherine, who patiently waited for me to return home in the evening after our long committee meetings or after my other commitments concerning the Circle. After sharing her life with me for a quarter of a century, she (who is French) still cannot understand why everyone she meets for the first time thinks she is German!

Finally, to the new President of the German-Maltese Circle, who should be elected this evening, as she is the only candidate for the post, Frau Ingrid Kidder (whom I will be proposing), I promise my full support. Frau Kidder has been a member of the Committee for the past five years and she knows our association well. I have worked with Frau Kidder on several projects, and I know her as extremely reliable, hard-working and very capable.

In the 44-year history of the German-Maltese Circle, until now, the president has always been a Maltese person and a male. The fact that the next president of the German-Maltese Circle will be a German lady is yet another proof of the Circle's openness to new ideas.

Thank you.