

**M**ALTA IS A LONG WAY from Australia but, in the heart and mind of Josephine Cauchi, the sun-drenched

Mediterranean island is always close at hand. Josephine Cauchi has lived in Adelaide since 1922 and has never returned to her homeland. However, when I met her in Adelaide to conduct an interview for the National Library of Australia's Oral History Project, it was clear beyond doubt that she is very much a Maltese-Australian woman who thinks of herself as Maltese.

Despite nearly seventy years absence from Malta, Josephine Cauchi still makes Maltese lace in the traditional way, with the *tribu* she brought out to Australia on the

*Such interviews help to fill a gap in the writing of Australian history*

Orient liner *Orsova*, and still speaks the Maltese language. Mention the word 'Malta' and her eyes brighten. Our interview, conducted at her home in Glanville, touched on her childhood in Malta, the migration process and the problems of settlement in a new environment, and provided some valuable insights into life in Adelaide in the 1930s.

Such interviews help to fill a gap in the writing of Australian history. For too long, Australia's history was portrayed as the exclusive property of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celtic Australians. Apart from occasional references to the Chinese, who were invariably regarded as 'the Chinese problem', the role played by thousands of immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds was overlooked. Oral history, which is a research technique based on the idea of learning directly from the reminiscences and interpretations of living people, has been useful in ensuring that a more complete picture of Australian history is painted.

Josephine Cauchi's reminiscences brought out, for me, the human side of the migration experience,

# The lar DANCING

## A Maltese woman's 68 y



Left and right: Josephine Cauchi making lace in the traditional way with the *tribu*. Centre: The Schembri family in 1915. Photographs courtesy of Josephine Cauchi.



especially as it affected young women. Migration is, in any situation, a different process for women than for men but, in the context of the prevalent Maltese culture of Josephine Cauchi's time, migration was a particularly traumatic experience. In Malta in the early decades of this century migration was seen as a masculine act. It was the men who made the first move, be they the eldest sons or fathers of a family.

Josephine Cauchi's father, Frank John Schembri, left Malta for Australia around 1915, when Josephine was only three. In Malta he had been a canteen manager on

British Navy ships but, in Adelaide, his first employment was at Port Pirie's notorious smelters and, later, at Shearers farm implements factory. Frank Schembri's brother, Charles, had migrated a few years earlier but had settled at Sydney.

Young Josephine, and her mother, sister and brother, lived with her grandparents, Joseph and Concetta, at the dockside town of Bormla. Malta's natural deep water harbour meant that the island was ideally suited to servicing shipping activity and for many decades the Grand Harbour at Malta's capital, Valletta, was the Royal Navy's Mediterranean base.

The National Library's Oral History Project  
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The Royal Dockyard, as it was then known, was the hub of Malta's economy and the most important employer of Maltese labour. Malta's population in the 1920s was about 230,000 and the fortunes of the Maltese people relied heavily on naval and other shipping activity in the harbour.

Josephine's grandfather was a blacksmith at the dockyard. He, and his brothers who worked with him, would tramp their way back home after work up the steep stairs leading to their street. The crest of the hilly steps was invariably crowded with young children waiting for their fathers. Josephine Cauchi would

join them, but her father was thousands of kilometres away in a mysterious land called Australia. She told me, 'I used to think, "Oh wouldn't it be nice if there'd be a father coming up for me like these other children.'"

It would take seven years of hard toil in Adelaide before Frank Schembri could send for his family to join him. The passage money for Mr Schembri's wife and his two daughters and son was loaned to him by a well-to-do aunty who had a hotel in Malta. Such extended family support was vital, not just as a way of reuniting families overseas, but also for the survival of the wife and

children in Malta during the husband's absence. Frank Schembri occasionally sent money orders back home but, as employment was erratic, the family really survived through the support of Josephine's grandparents.

Josephine barely remembered the man who met her at the Adelaide wharves when the *Orsova* berthed on New Year's Day, 1922. She was three years old when she had last seen him and now, aged ten, she was taken to a strange house in a strange land. The house, which was situated on the corner of Hart Street and Russell Street, Glanville, had bedrooms upstairs but down below, facing the street, was a shop.

It was, from today's perspective, an old-fashioned general store or

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mixed business. Frank Schembri had put his many years' experience as a ships' canteen manager to good use in Adelaide and had started the little 'deli' with a loan from a Maltese friend who worked on the Adelaide wharves, Harry Cauchi (who, despite having the same surname, was not a relation).

Josephine was not at all happy in Australia. 'We had to work very hard when we came here,' she told me, 'because when you've got a business you've got to all hop in, you know, kid or not.' Homesickness badly effected her: 'I was so homesick, I used to look at the sky and I used to say to myself, 'Oh my God, that's the same colour as the one in Malta! (laughs) That's the same sky! (laughs).'

In 1923, following the birth of his first Australian-born son, Frank Schembri purchased machinery for the manufacture of icecream at the back of the shop and, later, expanded the plant into a soft drink factory which took over the house next door. The shop has a place in the local history of Adelaide as it was

an important and ongoing collecting activity.  
e migration experience' he found through  
Josephine Cauchi

located at a corner known as Martin's Corner, where the unemployed often gathered during the depression.

In recalling the depression years, Josephine Cauchi said that 'people used to come in (to the shop) for half a candle, two cigarettes, a penneth of vinegar, threepenneth of fruit cut thin ... or a quarter of butter or a couple of rolls.' Such were the stringent times that 'a woman used to come in for some marrow and ask for the seeds to be taken out because that would weigh a bit more.'

Moreover, a system of bartering took place whereby, for instance, an empty beer bottle would be exchanged for two cigarettes. They were hard times in which the Schembri family was generous in giving credit to others. 'If all the people paid us back what they took,' Josephine Cauchi stated, 'we'd be rich now.'

Apart from the depression, the nature of the family business placed enormous strain on Josephine, especially when her father set up an outlet at the local Semaphore beach. 'You'd be there till midnight serving,' she told me, 'and then you had to come home, go back to the factory, and fill up these little "Dandies" (icecreams) for the next day .... It was hard because you were working in the house, and working in the shop, and then, three o'clock, go down there till midnight.'

In the icecream factory, Josephine was on the ice-breaker, crushing ice which was then packed with salt to keep the icecream from melting. 'I used to be there,' she recalled, 'barefooted in the water ... I mean, what could you do? I wasn't allowed to go and work outside like other girls.'

The latter reference to not being able to go out to work indicates the extent to which Josephine Cauchi had a traditional Maltese family life in Adelaide. Discipline was strict, and she was not allowed to go to the movies, let alone seek employment outside the family home. She did all the cooking for the family, including such Maltese

favourites as baked macaroni, minestra and pastizzi.

Religion, the Catholic faith, was and is a key aspect to Maltese identity. In Malta, Josephine Cauchi said, 'You couldn't be anything else (but religious) because everyone was.' In Adelaide, her mother maintained both the faith and its rituals. The Rosary was said every night at home and candles and oil lamps were lit each



*A view of the National Library's Sound Preservation and Technical Services Studios used for the recording of oral history interviews. Kevin Bradley and Michelle Grant are in the control room. Jenny Gall is interviewing Alan*

*Scott in the studio*

Photograph by Eleni Kypridis,  
NLA Photographics

day. 'If anyone was going to have a baby,' Josephine Cauchi told me, 'out comes this holy picture, which is supposed to help.' The presence of Maltese priests in Adelaide in the 1930s and 1940s was a morale-booster to the Maltese community

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there which, incidentally, numbered about 240 Maltese-born persons.

Religion, and secular meeting places such as the Maltese Club in Hindley Street, Adelaide, were vital for the Maltese to be able to support themselves in an often hostile

economic and social environment. Prejudice against immigrants, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, was among the problems confronting the Maltese in Adelaide. Josephine Cauchi remembered a particular example: '... we had the shop there and up the corner there was another shop, another chap opened a shop, and he used to write on his window with chalk or something... "Shop Here Before The Day Goes". You can take it both ways! (laughs). Before the day finishes, or before the "Dagoes" on the corner'.

Despite the difficulties, the Schembri business survived until 1966 when the premises were demolished to make way for highway development.

Josephine married a Maltese, Frank Cauchi, who had migrated from Gozo a couple of years before her own move. He had worked in an Adelaide shipyard and passed away, suffering from an industrial illness, in the mid-1970s. He left behind Josephine and their children, two boys and two girls.

Before leaving Malta for Australia, Josephine's favourite aunty, Rose, had told her: 'In Australia, it's so good even the water dances in the jug.' Nearly seventy years later, however, Josephine Cauchi looks back on her childhood years in Malta with great affection. 'I was so happy there all the time,' she said, 'and then we came here and had to change our way of living all the time, you know, work, work, work, all the time, no pleasure.'

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