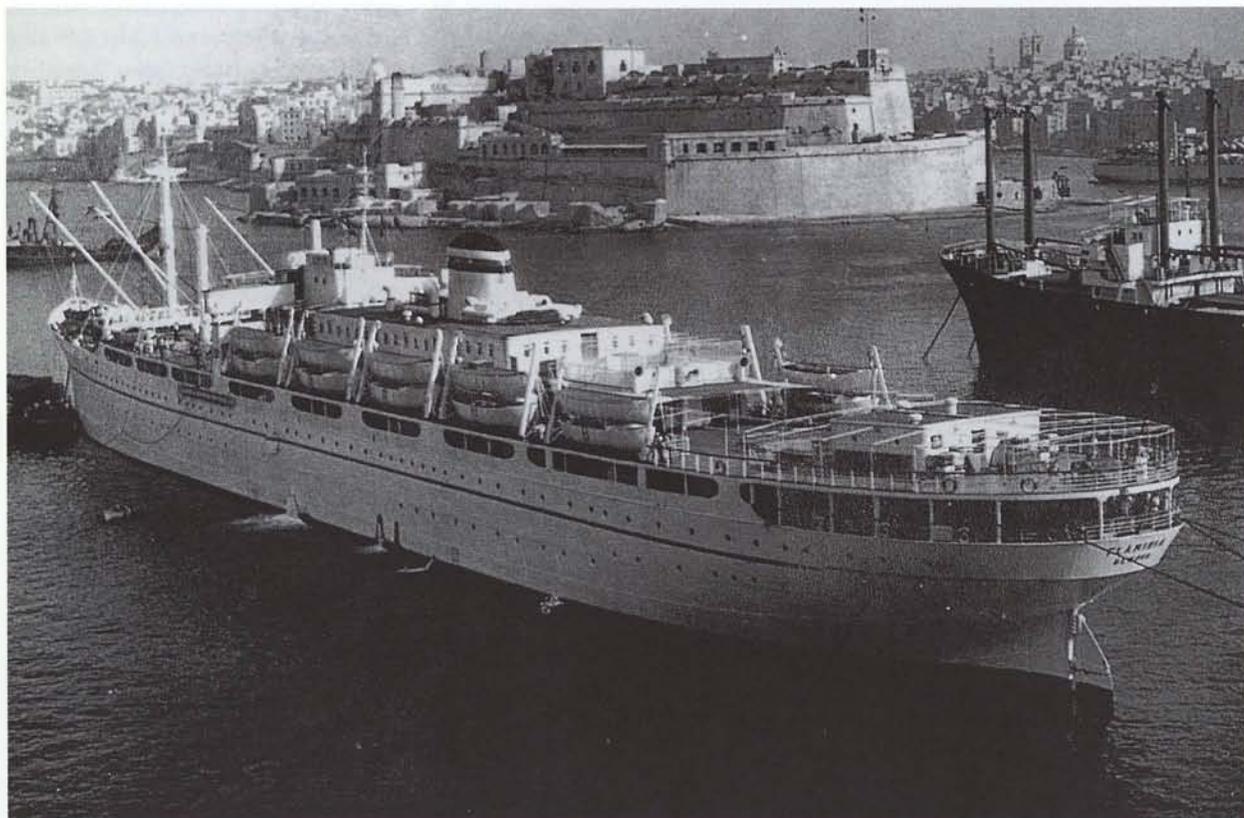


Maltese Voices Down Under

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Malta–Australia Assisted Passage Scheme, Barry York reviews the Library’s Maltese–Australian Folklife and Social History Project



In 1988, the National Library commissioned me to undertake an interview for its Oral History Collection with a former High Commissioner for Malta in Australia, Joe Forace. It was a good interview—Joe is an excellent raconteur—and we put down more than ten hours of tape over a few sessions. I had earlier travelled around Australia for four years while completing my doctoral thesis on Maltese immigration, recording the reminiscences of scores of early migrants on cheap cassette tape; but now I was in the big time. The National Library used the best archival tape and state-of-the-art recording equipment. And this interview would be preserved for posterity by the Library’s Sound Preservation and Technical Services Unit.

Joe Forace was born at Valletta, Malta, in 1925 and came to Australia in 1954. He was Malta’s High Commissioner to Australia from 1971

to 1978. The interview discussed his upbringing in Malta and his experiences as a new settler in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. (It is also particularly informative for Forace’s account of certain behind-the-scenes processes leading up to the Australian Government’s recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1972. In his accompanying capacity as Malta’s Ambassador to China, Forace developed a personal relationship with Premier Chou En Lai. It was a great example of how a ‘Maltese interview’ can provide insights well beyond the field of migration history.)

That interview was ten years ago. Today, it is part of a collection of some 70 Maltese oral history interviews and recordings of musicians, singers and bands. What particularly pleases me is the variety within the collection—which, incidentally, was given in 1995 the name Maltese–Australian Folklife and

The Italian liner *Flaminia* departs Malta’s Grand Harbour with migrants bound for Australia, 1959

Photograph courtesy of Joe Bugeja/Barry York

Social History Project (hereafter the ‘Folklife Project’). I have recorded diplomats and labourers, sugar farmers and cane-cutters, factory workers, carpenters, cooks, tilers, storemen, housewives, politicians, businesspeople, child migrants, writers, poets, singers, the editor of *The Maltese Herald*, a poultry farmer, a boxer and a wrestler ... even a former Minister for Migration. And my own father, Loreto. All with a Maltese background.

The Maltese are a medium-sized ethnic group in Australia. The community has not been replenished by fresh immigrants since the 1970s and thus the numbers of Malta-born (who mainly settled here in the 1950s and 1960s) are diminishing. The 1996 census found 50 879 Malta-born

persons here, compared to 57 001 in 1981. Their Australian-born descendants, however, are numerically increasing.

The Library's Folklife Project captures the diversity within the broad 'Maltese' label. For example, while the majority of interviewees have been from the principal Maltese island, Malta, others are from the smaller island of Gozo. The Gozitans are a special type of Maltese. They are more rural, tend to be pre-industrial in outlook and even speak a different style of Maltese. They were the pioneers of Maltese settlement in Australia from around 1910, when rural labour was in demand.

About a fifth of the interviewees are Australian-born, with one or both parents Maltese. And about a fifth are women. There are reasons for this imbalance between men and women, but the Library's recordings with women such as Josephine Attard, Carmel Baretta, Monica Attard, Antonia Bartolo, Isabel Bugeja, Rita Calleja, Josephine Cassar, Josephine Cauchi, Carmen Testa and Valda Winsor (nee Busuttin) are of very high quality.

Another indication of diversity is the inclusion of interviews with Maltese from communities outside of Malta. Egyptian-born and Libyan-born Maltese communities date back to the nineteenth century and their experiences are represented in the interviews with Robert Gauci in Fremantle, and Romeo Cini in Newport, Melbourne.

The Library has also succeeded in developing recordings that reflect the main spread of Maltese settlement across Australia. About half were with people who settled in Melbourne and Sydney but I also completed seven in Mackay (Queensland), six in Perth and Fremantle, four in Adelaide and three in Canberra.

Similarly, there is a reasonably good representation of vintages. Of the interviews with immigrants, most are folk who arrived during the principal decade of Maltese immigration: the 1950s. Half a dozen or so are with immigrants of 1940s vintage; two came in the 1960s, and one each in the 1970s and 1980s. A highlight of the collection is the interviews with

pre-Second World War arrivals: Emmanuel Attard (arrived 1916), Joe Vella (1920), Josephine Cauchi (1922), Antonia Bartolo (1925) and Joseph M. Camilleri (1928). Sadly, both Mr Attard and Mrs Cauchi passed away during the 1990s, but the thought that their stories live on in their own words is gratifying indeed. (The transcript of the Emmanuel Attard interview was edited and published in 1995 as *Emmanuel Attard: from Gozo (Malta) to Gallipoli and Australia*, while Mrs Cauchi's story appeared in *National Library of Australia News* in February 1991.)

Most Maltese who came here were working class people who laboured in factories in Melbourne or Sydney. Again, this is reflected reasonably well

in the range of interviewees. About half were wage-workers and a fifth professionals. Others ran small businesses or were farmers or housewives. Two of those interviewed are Members of State Parliaments—John Aquilina in New South Wales (who migrated from Malta with his parents in 1956) and Eddie Micallef in Victoria (who was born in Melbourne to Maltese/Gozitan parents). Seven interviews were with Maltese poets in Australia: Manwel Nicholas-Borg, Joe Saliba, Frank Zammit, Rigu Bovingdon, Albert Marshall, Josephine Cassar and Manwel Cassar, who were the subject of a *National Library of Australia News* article in March 1993.

Of special importance was a 1992 interview with Joe Galea, focusing on



Early Maltese migrant Jean Rizzo at Woolloomooloo, 1912
Photograph courtesy of Barry York

his role in what the Maltese call *ghana* (pronounced 'arner') or 'folkloric music'. In addition to discussing his life in Malta and his 1955 emigration to Sydney, Joe performed examples of *ghana*, accompanying himself on guitar. This recording, combining social history and folklore, was a precursor to the Folklife Project. Instigated in 1995, the Folklife Project extended the aural record of Maltese life in Australia by including music and song alongside the spoken word.

The project required a broader range of specialist input, and in July 1995—in company with the Library's Sound Archivist, Kevin Bradley, and folklore consultant, Dr Edgar Waters—I spent three days recording in the Western Suburbs of Sydney.

(right) Panel from the Maltese Migrant Monument, Pendle Hill, NSW
 Photograph by Barry York
 From the album 'Maltese Life in Western Sydney'; Pictorial Collection



(below) Mrs Georgina Camenzuli with (left to right) Censu Gauci (nickname 'Tar-Rabat'), Joe Mifsud ('Il-Koka') and her husband Nazarenu Camenzuli ('Is-Simenza'). Taken at the Camenzuli's home in Fairfield Heights, Sydney, following recording of their song 'Saga of the Skaubryn'
 Photograph by Barry York



(below) Gozo Road, Greystanes, NSW;
named after Malta's smaller island
Photograph by Barry York
From the album 'Maltese Life in Western
Sydney'; Pictorial Collection

(right) Fred Cachia (in cap) and Vince
Pulo, being recorded for the National
Library at Victoria University's St Albans
campus, 1997
Photograph by Kevin Bradley
Oral History Collection

Blacktown, Merrylands, Toongabbie,
Greystanes and Pendle Hill are rightly
regarded as 'Maltese territory' and
here we recorded the 'Our Lady Queen
of Peace' Parish Band, Maltese
folk-singers (*ghannejja*) and a Maltese
choir. Where possible, interviews
were also conducted with the
performers. I interviewed Joe
Darmanin, the 'Our Lady Queen of
Peace' bandmaster.



In 1997, Kevin Bradley and I
returned to Sydney to record
Georgina Camenzuli, who had earlier
written a song about her experiences
on the migrant ship *Skaubryn*. The
Skaubryn was the only migrant ship
in Australia's post-War immigration
story to go down at sea. Mrs
Camenzuli—accompanied by her
husband Nazarenu and two friends,
Censu Gauci and Joe Mifsud on
guitars—sang about the family's
evacuation from the sinking ship in
the dead of night, and their terrifying
ordeal in an oarless lifeboat in the
middle of the Indian Ocean. The
song is sung in Maltese but the
following excerpts, kindly translated
by Wistin (Gus) J. Borg, tell some of
the tale:

Well, the day finally arrived
for us to leave as scheduled.
It was a day in the month of March



in the year 1958 ...
We stepped on board the ship
and were happy and contented.
We enjoyed ourselves a lot
because there were many other
Maltese with us.

We had been at sea a week
and then notice was brought to our
attention.

Everyone had to be prepared
because the ship had suffered a
malfunction ...

My husband and I and our children
hurried up on deck to save ourselves.
Because smoke was beginning to fill the
passageways we could hardly see our
way.

When we reached the upper deck
after nearly suffocating, we
discovered that in our haste we
had left our life-jackets behind
and had nothing to save ourselves
with...
The lifeboats were then lowered so that
people could be saved ...

While we sat in the lifeboat
the ship burned more fiercely.
But we could not move the boat away
because it had no oars or motor ...

Our boat was loaded to capacity,
amongst us being two nuns.
There was also a man with us
who suffered a heart attack and died.

The nuns thought that we would die
by drowning, and looked after us
with much affection;
and to prepare us for the next world
they gave final absolution.

Mrs Camenzuli's song is an
example of *ghana tal-fatt*, or folk song
generally based on fact. The Folklife
Project has captured on tape several
varieties of *ghana* and a very fruitful
week of recording was also completed
in the western suburbs of Melbourne
in November 1997. Kevin, Edgar and
myself undertook recordings at the
two main *ghannejja* clubs in
Melbourne's west and also organised
a Saturday session at the St Albans
campus of Victoria University of
Technology and at the home of
Australia's leading authority on
ghana, Manuel Casha.

As in western Sydney, the
Melbourne Maltese have their own
brass bands: in Braybrook, we
recorded the Maltese Own Band in
the year of its 20th anniversary, and I
later also interviewed Joe Muscat, the
band's founder-leader.

The Maltese-Australian Folklife
and Social History Project has
resulted in unique materials being
added to the Pictorial and Manuscript
Collections of the National Library,
and has built a solid bridge between
the Library and the Maltese
community.

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Selections from the Folklife
Project are being compiled for an
audio-CD/cassette titled *Maltese
Voices Down Under*