

MEMORJA: Capturing Malta's National Memory

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On 22 March 2004, the then President of Malta, His Excellency Prof. Guido de Marco inaugurated the *National Memory Project* at the Legal Documentation Section of the National Archives of Malta. This event marked the start of an extensive and ambitious project to bring under one roof the Maltese Islands' national and public memory.

In late 2016, the National Archives of Malta initiated plans for to rebrand the *National Memory Project*, calling it MEMORJA, which will serve as an oral, sound and visual archive. The main objective of the MEMORJA project is to employ cutting-edge research, methodologies, theoretical and archival approaches and techniques to collect, record, transcribe, preserve and make available all deposited material detailing the history of the Maltese Islands. This resource will serve as the main depository of national and public memory.

MEMORJA aims to record and collect oral history interviews, personal photographs, documents and other ephemera. As a result, the National Archives of Malta has taken on the dual roles of a memory-capturing institution and records-creating institution, as opposed to the traditional role as an institution focused on preserving government/public records. The research themes that have been selected as the current focus of MEMORJA include:

- Maltese Emigration (The Malta-Lampedusa connection);

- Experiencing War: Survival, Shelter and Food;
- British Expatriates in Malta;
- Public Administration; and
- Bell ringing / campanalian culture.

A five-person team started working on this project in January 2017. This team undertook a course in oral history and public memory taught by Professor John Chircop and began their fieldwork soon after. As of writing, MEMORJA is in possession of 70 oral history interviews and 6 written accounts. In addition, Professor John Chircop, who manages the Public Memory Archive (PMA) at the University of Malta's History Department, had agreed to deposit copies of the PMA's oral testimonies as part of MEMORJA: in all, these interviews number more than 500.

MEMORJA is also accepting private collections. Two of the collections received so far are:

- *The Stanley Fraser collection*: photographs and motion pictures recorded by a British Royal Artillery gunner who was stationed in Malta during the Second World War.
- *The Sir Anthony Mamo collection*: the private papers and photographs of Malta's first President of the Republic. Before holding office, Sir Anthony had served as a Professor of Law, Attorney General, Chief Justice, Acting Governor and Governor-General before being made President in 1974.

British Expatriates in Malta

British Expatriates in Malta seeks to delve deeper into the history of the relationship between the United Kingdom and Malta by recording local history with the help of individuals who

lived during the final decades of British Malta. Interviewees – British, Maltese and Anglo-Maltese persons – discuss the military bases, everyday life in post-war Malta, political issues and cultural differences, amongst other subjects. This theme was further expanded when the experiences of

Public Administration

Civil servants are often regarded working quietly, 'behind the scenes', to implement the policies of Government. Their own stories are rarely heard. Yet, through their memories, the public is now able to mould an idea of the



Gunner Vincent 'Ċensinu' Caruana (standing at centre, with arms folded) with Gunner Joseph Psaila (to Mr. Caruana's left) and Sergeant Anġlu Azzopardi (first from right, holding girl), with two unidentified men and a boy. This photograph was taken at an anti-aircraft gun position sometime in late 1942. Mr Caruana was interviewed twice about his wartime experiences for the MEMORJA project.

service families' children started being recorded for posterity. These children had attended the Naval Children's School and HM Dockyard Children's School, which had occupied sites at Ta' Xbiex, Cottonera, Senglea and the Dockyard before moving to Tal-Ħandaq, Ħal Qormi.

structure of 'iċ-Ċivil' and of certain episodes that are now history. Background stories of the granting of Independence in 1964 and the inner workings of the British Forces' 'run-down' and the events leading to Malta's accession to the EU form a substantial part of the oral history part of the project. Other stories addressed



Frank Mifsud at the Labour Office in 1969. His last two positions in the Civil Service were those of Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health and CEO of Heritage Malta, the national cultural heritage agency.

in these oral reminisces include the activities of former Prime Ministers, their work ethic and their relationships with other government officials, as well as changes to public administration over the decades, different functions and grades within government, and the personal experiences of people in the civil service, including the less-known stories of women.

Experiencing War: Survival, Shelter and Food

Experiencing War: Survival, Shelter and Food aims to document a past that is slowly but surely disappearing from public memory. These oral testimonies – of which there is still a substantial number – strive to preserve the daily experiences of the people on the ground during the Siege of Malta between 1940 and 1943. Stories of the outbreak of hostilities and the first bombings on 11 June 1940 are still strong in interviewees' memories.

Mass evacuations, the refugee experience, fear and uncertainty, the communal kitchens, racketeering, hunger, sanitation, shelters, soldiers and sirens are still recalled with stirring clarity.



A Royal Navy sailor posing for a photograph in the Grand Harbour with Valletta in the background.

The Malta-Lampedusa Connection

Even though Malta and Lampedusa are separated by a stretch of the Mediterranean Sea, they share similar economic, trade and socio-cultural qualities. In September 2017, fieldwork and research was conducted in Lampedusa, capturing the memories of Lampedusans about topics such as the following.

- Stories – oral traditions – that were transferred from one generation to the next about the first Maltese settlers, who came to the island in the early 1800s. These families had worked predominantly in agriculture, although, today, two families with Maltese surnames remain: the de Battista family and the Caruana family.
- The commercial and cultural connections between Lampedusa and the Maltese Islands the 1950s and 1980s. Testimonies of Lampedusan fishermen make reference to life at sea, life in Valletta before the British departure, entertainment, the products on sale in shops at the time and the sale of fish stocks.

The Memorja initiative strongly supports the National Archives responsibility, as stated in the National Archives Act (V, 2005), to 'preserve the collective memory of the Maltese nation'. We are excited to make use of the powers of digital technologies to bring the story of Malta to people on the islands or around the world. For more information, please check the National Archives of Malta Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/groups/fna_malta/ for regular updates.



Salvatore Davi, a Lampedusan fisherman, had relocated to Malta in 1970 after marrying a Maltese girl in 1968. This photograph was taken in the 1970s.