

Editorial:

Emigration: a blessing or a curse?

A recent article in *The Times* (February 22, 2016) commemorated an event exactly a century ago, which has become known as ‘The Maltese Migrants of New Caledonia’, when 214 Maltese (mostly Gozitans) sailed to Australia but were not allowed to land, and were transported to New Caledonia, an island in the Pacific just over 3000 km from Australia, where they had to stay for several months. An exhibition was set up earlier on this year at il-Ħaġar Heart of Gozo museum in Victoria to commemorate this event.

Emigration has been called ‘a safety valve’ which releases economic pressures at a time of great hardship, now conveniently forgotten. For most of the time in the early 20th century, poverty was rampant in the Maltese islands. Young persons (mainly males) had to leave their home to feed their family. Their contribution has now been forgotten, but it is well to remember that by the late 1960s, remittances sent to Malta from Australia were equal to the current Government expenditure, and certainly helped to keep Malta afloat.¹

It is unfortunate that Gozo is still going through a process of depopulation with young Gozitans preferring to settle in the sister island. This is a loss which Gozo can ill-afford. This is not a matter of choice, but of necessity, seeing that it is unreasonable in these days of lightening speed, for a Gozitan to spend two hours each way every day to go to work in Malta.

So to answer the question posed in the title: emigration is always associated with deep divisions, heartache, and a profound sense of loss which lasts for years, even in some cases for a lifetime. In this sense, it is a curse. On the other hand, the flourishing of migrants in their new home is something to be seen and be proud of, as evidenced by the way that their families have prospered, and their children have become achievers unheard of a generation ago.

A recent survey of the second generation Maltese in Australia has confirmed that the proportion of participants with a tertiary qualification has reached 58%, far higher than that of the average in Malta. The standard of living is higher, with many living in houses worth a million dollars.

These descendants of Maltese and Gozitan migrants, who now outnumber the first generation by four to one, need not be pitied. The average salary in Australia currently is over 50,000 AUD (equivalent to 30,000 euro). Their children are thriving members of the community who consider the world as their oyster.

So what was a curse for their parents and grandparents has turned into an unmodified blessing from which Malta has benefitted in the past and still does: for instance, the average Maltese descendant from Australia is expected to leave several thousand dollars when they visit their relatives in the Maltese Islands.

In the first instance it is relevant to stress the distinction between the concepts contained in the related but quite distinct words, namely migration, immigration, and emigration, distinctions which seem to be lost on a considerable proportion of the population. It is a shame that the terms ‘emigration’ has been conflated in the minds of some Maltese with vague words like ‘migration’ which do not make a distinction between ‘immigration’ and ‘emigration’. It is a pity that the movement of people seeking refuge has become such a burden to those least capable of helping them, which includes Malta also. However, this is not a justification for considering our relatives living overseas as in any way inferior or requiring commiseration, or to ‘trivialise Malta’s migration history’ as indicated in the article mentioned above.

The Council for Maltese Living Abroad (CMLA) has been set up under the auspices of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to look after the needs of the many hundreds of thousands of Maltese living overseas. It was developed with the idea that Malta needs to reach beyond its shores, to develop into a ‘greater Malta’, to be all-inclusive consisting of those who left in the past and their progeny and those who stayed. It is a concept which has not yet penetrated into the psyche of the average Maltese.

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¹ See further: ‘The Migrant Contribution: Remittances by Maltese Migrants’, in: *The Maltese Migrant Experience*: M.N.Cauchy, 1999, p 190-198.