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THE ROLE OF MALTESE AND ENGLISH IN MALTA

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(The text of a talk with some later additions given at the British Council on the 10th April, 1970)

IN 1934 I gave a talk on Anglo-Maltese Culture at the British Institute. At that time, Malta was still a British Colony; the British and the Maltese were both close to the challenge of a common enemy against whom later on they fired their guns together in the same direction and for the same purpose. That purpose was the defence and victory of Democracy.

The main point of my talk then was the creation of a Maltese culture out of the heritage of Malta and England, two islands with so much in common in spite of many differences which, I am afraid, have grown more serious since the enactment of some recent British legislation which involves the Christian conscience in acts of condemnation, rejection and resistance. At that time, most of us were still too colonial-minded to think that it would ever be possible for Malta to survive without a strong Power to back our economy. We had to choose between continued membership of the British Empire (now imaginatively replaced by the Commonwealth) and of the Fascist-Nazi Empire.

Faced with this momentous choice, when hostilities started in earnest, marked by an abrupt transition from a cold war of words to a real hot war of continual bombardments, the Maltese fought bravely on the side of Britain. They would have fought on the side of Britain even if at that time they had Malta's eventual independence in mind. The independence which Malta obtained in 1964 created a new constitutional status, mainly regarding the direct exercise of executive authority, which was transferred to Maltese hands. The colonial Civil Servants from Downing Street

packed up, and our Civil Servants took over, unfortunately with a mentality still steeped in the 150 year old stale tradition of colonial service. History shows that constitutional and mental reforms do not always keep pace, because, unfortunately, the latter very often lag behind. Post-war Malta is now not only an independent nation, she is also a member of the British Commonwealth owing allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen like the other members of the British Commonwealth. Malta has two official languages which are, or anyhow should be for teaching purposes, a first and second language. Many Maltese can be bilingual or trilingual, but there is no doubt that Maltese is otherwise everybody's first home language. The few exceptions do not form a rule and certainly have no right to break the rule or expect others to break the rule for them.

Every small country needs one of the few world languages. Luckily, British rule in Malta brought with it the English language, not without strong opposition from those who, in the early years, would rather have Italian instead as Malta's official language.¹ Time has proved the wisdom of those who, reading the signs of the times, insisted on the teaching of English along with Maltese. This is as it should be though there are still embarrassing anomalous situations, such as the exclusion of Maltese as an official language in the Royal University of Malta,² a situation comparable to the similarly arbitrary situation in the Church which in 1936 declared Italian the official language of the Curia. Appendix 6 of the Diocesan Synod dealing with parish priests' reports to be submitted to the Archbishop every January enjoins that these be written in Italian. I understand that the Curia now receives also reports in Maltese, but the law is still there completely out of context with the Constitution of the country and the recent liturgical reforms of Vatican Council II.

The subject of my talk, as announced in the press, is the creation of an Anglo-Maltese culture. If you think that I am digressing because I have not yet touched on the subject, may I please tell you that I do not think I am doing so. I am still introducing the subject which is largely linguistic against the pre-war and post-war background without which one cannot understand the ambiguous relationship existing formerly between Italian

¹ The question of the official status of Italian was raised recently in *Corriere della Sera* of November 24, by Paolo Monelli. Are the Neo-Fascists, a growing party in Italy, going to resuscitate Mussolini's claim that Malta is Italian *terra-irredenta*?

² The University Council has since made Maltese and English the two official languages of the institution. But this decision will come into force as law when the relevant change is made in the University Ordinance.

and Maltese and now between English and Maltese in our schools and society largely due to lack of balance in the planning of school syllabuses as well as lack of foresight as in the case of the University Ordinance of 1947 which was drawn up by the last of the U.K. colonial civil servants who made English the only official language of our *Alma Mater* and left us with a minor Language Question on our hands. Do you realise the implications of this for independent Malta? Under the present, still un-amended Ordinance, any member of the teaching staff who speaks Maltese at any official University meeting, or uses it in official correspondence, technically acts illegally because he violates the said Ordinance. But it gives great pleasure to many of us to break the law (how can one respect a foolish law?) by occasionally speaking Maltese, observing, however, the etiquette of personal courtesy when we have a mixed board, generally including our English colleagues.

Both English and Maltese have an important role to play as languages in the creation of an Anglo-Maltese culture. Languages are vehicles of ideas. One can therefore understand that the social role of these two languages in Malta has to be well defined to prevent first of all encroachment and conflict where there should be harmony, and disintegration where there should be integration. Not the muddle-headed amateur but the well-trained linguist is qualified to define co-ordinated areas of Maltese and English in our Country. This would necessitate expert planning without which the two languages in Malta would drift and encroach on each other to the great detriment of linguistic co-existence. In normal circumstances, one would assume reliable knowledge of what a language means to us. Unfortunately, the situation has been obscured by the anti-Maltese tactics of pressure groups both inside and outside Malta and also by the adverse effect on the people's language as a result of both the State and the Church using a foreign language for official purposes for several centuries now. We still suffer from the hang-over of this centuries' old intoxication of benumbed common sense showing a great deficiency of that reasonable measure of patriotic feeling one expects from a self-respecting people.

A similar frame of mind obtained in Italy at the time of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) who shocked his friends when he decided to write the *Divina Commedia* not in Latin but in Italian or the *Volgare*, as it was called at that time. There were several other countries that suffered the same language inhibition which in Malta strengthened the foundation of illiteracy, disgraceful ignorance even of our history, and of our language, which has always been freely used for all sorts of human purposes sometimes wisely

and sometimes unwisely.

Not to know a foreign language is not necessarily disgraceful, especially if one speaks other languages. There are millions of monoglots in the world, but not to know one's own language is the height of folly. This may sound platitudinous, and so it is. However, the folly of this mental attitude was not seen by the Heads of some of our public schools, some of them foreigners who not only did not teach Maltese, and thus caused students seeking admission to the University to pay for supplementary private tuition, but punished them when they caught them talking Maltese among themselves. I wonder what other self-respecting government could have tolerated this situation without challenging it, especially when the policy-makers were non-Maltese. Would the French or the British government, or indeed any self-respecting government, have suffered foreigners to degrade the people's national language in this way? Courtesy has its limits beyond which discourtesy begins, and discourtesy is reprehensible or punishable according to its degree of gravity. In every act of discourtesy is implied what in law is known as *animus iniuriandi*.

As a result of this anti-Maltese complex, we inherited an illiterate or semi-illiterate society which made an earlier growth of literature practically impossible. Saint Isidore who lived in the 7th century was a much wiser man than some of the 19th and 20th century educators that laid down our educational policy. In his work *Etymologies* he wrote:

'Though a knowledge of all languages is difficult for anyone, still no one is so sluggish that, situated as he is in his own nation, he should not know his own nation's language. For what else is he to be thought except lower than the brute animals? For they make the sound that is proper to them, but he is worse who lacks a knowledge of his own language.'

Language consciousness is the evidence of self-respect without which no country can earn the respect of other countries. An important point is this: A country's language derives its right not merely to survive, but also to flourish, not from the number of people that speak it (numbers make crowds), but from its own nature as a living document of the people that inherited it from their ancestors and in their turn transmitted it to posterity. It is surely by a similar principle that one can defend the autonomy and right to independence of small nations like Malta and Cyprus vis-à-vis the self-glorifying and self-advertising Great Powers like the U.S.A., Russia and China and one time empires whose gargantuan appetite often swallowed up smaller nations in the past. For this and other reasons the

argument of physical smallness does not hold water. It is the 'spirit' that makes us great and not sheer territory.

What is the linguistic position in Malta today? Malta has had its own home-made language of Semitic parenthood for a good number of centuries. We can use our language partly for closer communication with the East, and partly with the West from which we have inherited a large number of words of Mediterranean parenthood, generally Old Sicilian and Italian. This twofold admixture is the product of our geographical position so close to Europe and Africa, which has conferred on us a precious linguistic and national identity of our own. To be able to cross over a bridge between Europe and Africa is no mean advantage. That advantage is our Maltese linguistic privilege. Only a fool can throw away the key to two worlds and feel happy after. A fool's happiness is pathological. And pathological also is the self-complacency of a nation that is insensitive to insult.

So far the key to the East, the rising Arab world, has been tried only in our University tentatively through the Department of Maltese where classical Arabic is a compulsory subject for those who read for B.A.(Hons.) Maltese. Let us not underestimate the fact that there is a Maltese language precisely because there is a Maltese people and that one could no more drive a wedge between the two and keep the nation alive than one could drive a nail into a man's heart without killing him.

Malta's official language pattern is based on two complementary considerations, one which regards Maltese as a national language because it is our first home language, and another which regards English as a second language enjoying the status of a world language that enables us to keep the lines of communication open with the English-speaking world — a large portion of humanity. To those who love this language for a less mercenary reason, English is above all the key to one of the greatest literatures of the world.

English is for us an immensely useful historical heritage of which we are all proud. What some of us regret is not the time devoted to English in our schools, but the very little time devoted to the teaching of Maltese.³ There are strange things we do not like such as our children being made to pray in English when they could pray more naturally in their native

³ The number of Maltese teaching lessons has now been increased — there are new signs of language values and what one might describe as 'an improved sense of proportion'. Maltese is slowly coming into its own in Government and public schools — a question of time.

language (our theologians have no doubt about the Almighty being conversant with Maltese!); to memorise English nursery rhymes which grew up in a different social climate when we have so many beautiful nursery rhymes that are a beautiful heritage of child-lore which Malta shares with other Mediterranean countries. We disapprove also of the use of English in the official correspondence of Government Departments where the Maltese are concerned.

As Maltese in Malta is still a living language, one therefore could hardly compare it to the revival of Gaelic in Ireland or Hebrew in Israel. It is, like the people that speak it, a historical continuum. An important fact to bear in mind here is that the role of Maltese in our Society is comparable to that of English in English Society. All other languages are second, third, etc. but never a first, language. The problem of bilingualism and sometimes trilingualism has not yet received scientific treatment in our Teachers' Training Colleges.

History is not merely a record of dated or undated events; it is also the document of the language spoken and its speakers. How about the small number of Maltese families that speak English only at home, and the few who, harking back to the pre-war times, still speak Italian? All I can say of these families is that though they have opted out of Malta's linguistic heritage, they have not thereby released themselves from Maltese communal responsibilities. Their choice of a foreign language, generally for social purposes and on social occasions only such as cocktail parties (showing off class snobbery) etc. goes against the grain of an independent nation proud of its ethnic identity.

In Sliema where a few such families congregate more than anywhere else, one often hears what one could describe as pidgin Maltese, made up of an ill-assorted admixture of so-called English and so-called Maltese, a hotch-potch unworthy of educated people.

Our problem at the moment is one of national identity, looking for Malta's Soul (our minds are its mirror) and being able not only to recognise it when we see it, but having found it, (some are taking too long), let it spur our newfound freedom of self-expression to greater heights than we could reach when we were a colony and Malta had no mirror of its own soul to look in. If I can borrow an idea from Proust's famous book, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* we Maltese (some of us anyhow, those who care) are in search of the time we lost in endless squables about our National Identity blurred by insidious anti-Maltese propaganda at home and abroad which, for a long time, like a distorted mirror showed the wrong picture of our country, its people, and our ancestors. We must now

patiently gather the broken pieces of our nationhood one by one, as one picks up and glues together the pieces of a shattered chandelier. To do so successfully, we have to remove the many artificial obstacles that are retarding national self-consciousness.

When Malta became independent, I wrote two signed articles in two local papers which at that time, to some of my jubilant compatriots, may have sounded not sanguine enough for the occasion. In these two articles I said that we had won the first round, but that we could celebrate real victory only when we had won also the second round. The first round was the declaration of Malta's sovereignty in 1964, the second round was going to be more difficult, for it meant the shedding of a colonial mentality and attitude which, in the course of centuries, undermined, and often destroyed, some of the sterling qualities of Maltese character. By a colonial mentality, I understand a mentality that lacks initiative and originality because it has been conditioned to rely on a higher authority to do the work for it — spoon-feeding as a step-mother spoon-feeds another woman's baby. It also indicates a mind so awed by the prestige of the foreigner that it ended by losing faith in itself.

Some of us are finding it difficult to restore the true image of Maltese national identity because it was brutally battered and disfigured especially by foreign Fascist propaganda and mouthpieces, who for many years propagated the image of Malta as *terra irredenta*. Long before the Fascists, such propaganda was insidiously inserted into our party politics by Italian refugees during the period of the *Risorgimento*, who escaped to Malta and abused our hospitality by indulging in pro-Italian politics. We do not like anyone to tamper with our dismembered body politic while we are trying to reconstitute it. No one must stand in our way, openly or secretly, to prevent the re-creation of a truly Maltese Nation as seen by the Maltese poet, Ġorġ Pisani:

Malta fil-L sien u l-Qalb, Malta Maltija.

Piecing the broken fragments of Malta's soul together is not going to be easy. But we are not disheartened, for we know that one cannot work miracles in a few years of independence. There was a time when Malta meant nothing more to the outside world than a coaling station of the British Empire which, like the frequent reference to Gibraltar as the Rock, petrifies the personality of the people dehydrating them of their flesh and blood, turning them into non-entities.

Our Maltese identity suffered incalculable damage not less by the identification of its history with that of the Order of St. John as if this

was a Maltese Government or any less foreign than other foreign governments before and after. One of the reasons is that too many books have been written about this over-written period dazzling with shining armour, and very few about the Maltese themselves. But where is the history of the people of Malta? I mean, the real people and not their rulers.

Excessive nationalism is reprehensible because, by its nature, it leads to the contempt of others. The Second Great World War showed us what harm unrestrained nationalism can do, but no nation can survive without a certain amount of self-respect. That is why we who write books or articles for the press are trying to find a place for it in our national education and public life. Can anybody blame us or call us to order for doing so? Only a thorough reform of retrograde mental attitudes in our Primary and Secondary schools can hasten the day of victory to which we who believe in Malta are looking forward. A great deal of dead wood will have to be removed for the way to such a victory is still cluttered with it. Victory will certainly come one day. I am not pessimistic. Post-war Malta is slowly realising that she has a soul of her own which we must save before it gets hopelessly dimmed. *Din l-Art Helwa* has saved many historical edifices from profanation or destruction. Our task today is to save not only our physical heritages in stone, soil, bastions or castles, but also our *soul* intangible and invisible but nonetheless not less real than bastions and fortresses without which we are lost like children that do not bear their parents' names.

I have noted with pleasure that *Din l-Art Helwa* has received the whole-hearted support of a large number of some of the British residents of whom I understand there are about 4,000 on the island. I have not checked this figure; I give it as it was given to me. One notes also with no less satisfaction the interest of some of these residents in Malta's customs and traditions and also our afforestation programme. At the moment I have in mind 'The Men of Trees' who are trying to make Malta look much greener where it was left bare and barren by those who did not care for our country's landscape.

This is one side of the picture. It is no use trying to hide the other side by ignoring the fact that the additional increase in our population from abroad, through the new residents, who are very welcome not only for the economical reasons which induced the Government to bring them here, but also because we are by nature a hospitable people, has also to a certain extent, upset us in many ways disturbing our economic pattern. Speculators with a talent for quick money-making started buying land in such large quantities and at such fabulous inflated prices, that many

feared that in a few more years there would be not much free unsold land left for us Maltese. The tourist industry, depending on an influx of incoming and outgoing holiday-makers, has also upset the social pattern of our country. To attract tourists we had to pay a heavy price. Luckily, Malta has not yet been suffocated completely. Her soul is still there to save, nurture and treasure.

I now quote a relevant passage from the introduction of a recently published poem *The Maltese Rhapsody* by my friend Dr. George Zammit to show that my apprehension is shared also by others.

This is what he says:

'Now that independent Malta is undergoing such a radical change and is taking her stand as a highly attractive tourist centre, with such resulting innovations as big, towering hotels, night spots, the opening of new roads entailing the demolition of quaint, old-world nooks and corners so strongly characteristic of our Islands, it is time one took a look round in search of what remains that distinguishes Malta and Gozo from the anonymous mass of tourist centres scattered over the globe... I am afraid too much that is so deep-rootedly and intimately ours, and which therefore gives our Islands a distinctively national colour, is being ironed out or ruthlessly destroyed. Too many houses and other buildings, with their characteristic architecture, with their picturesque wooden or stone balconies supported by intriguingly sculptured stone brackets, are being pulled down, sometimes substituted by ungainly, soulless monstrosities in concrete. Too many winding lanes and blind alleys, so quiet, so old-world, so sweetly peculiar to our towns and villages, with the vine or pomegranate peeping cheerfully over the white-washed wall of the frontyard, with the external staircase sunnily leading from the vine-festooned, geranium-decked yard to the loggia and the *ghorfa* so dear and precious to the frugal peasant are being razed to the ground for the sake of widening a road or opening a new piazza. Picturesque gardens and orange groves, ancient dwellings, street shrines and corner niches have been sacrificed to this craze, and not even fortifications and churches have been spared.'

Malta has not been suffocated by the smoke of heavy industries yet. Gozo had a narrow escape when the survival of its wonderful landscape was threatened with destruction by a cement factory. Though this disturbance of the *status quo* was perhaps inevitable, I always felt that, unless somebody softened the impact of the foreign ethnic group on the native one, a time would come when it would not be easy to reconcile the

two communities to the new situation. The new social reality is mirrored in two types of advertisements published in the same local papers: one, advertisements of expensive villas generally in the open country in the more sought-after areas beyond the average income or savings of the Maltese and another, advertisements of flats for working class people and many middle-class families who are not in the run for easy money-making. I know the new residents in Malta are not to blame for this; they buy what their money buys. It is up to the Government to solve the problems which are created by its own economic policy for us Maltese.

I feared for some time that the ethnic isolation of a small affluent society living in villas and a native population living in flats in crowded areas while hundreds of unmarried young men and women still have to wait hopefully for their chance of a little house or some small flat which they cannot afford because of the artificially inflated price of land, and the exorbitant key money they have to pay to the landowner would one day drive a wedge between the native residents and the new residents. The situation is still serious. I repeat this is not the fault of the new residents, for it is once more a case of Government policy providing the brake to curb speculators' excesses in order to normalise social and economical situations between the more economically affluent new residents and the Maltese.

Some regard British residents as an economic investment. I am not an economist, but I am interested in the general uplift of the island. I regard British residents as an intellectual reservoir of brains fed by many years of experience in the higher responsibilities of British social life or former British colonies before they settled in Malta. I fear far too many of them live apart from the rest of the Maltese community. Does this isolation do them any good? Those of a more adaptable temperament who mix with the local people have set the right example, because by doing so they not only uncongeal their personality and enrich themselves, they also enrich us. The fact that already so many new residents are coming forward to enjoy and share common experiences with us, shows that the 4,000 strong body of new residents represent a precious intellectual capital which is bound to enrich Maltese life. I know that many of these new residents, products of their own secularist society with some of their laws entirely repugnant to us Maltese, can represent a principle of disintegration of our Christian moral values; but surely this is a healthy, mind-provoking challenge that some of the British residents may have brought us with them if ever they will make up their minds to argue with us about our differences? It is a challenge that we have been long facing

in the books we read and the picture we see in our cinemas. Those who fear this challenge because they don't know the answer had better brush up their principles, and if they really believe in them, gladly enter the arena in their defence whenever their cherished beliefs are challenged or questioned.

The answer to a new challenging situation is not running away nervously from one another, in order to live cosily in our ivory towers, but finding ways and means of coming closer to collaborate and, if necessary, to discuss and debate situations of common interest. This is not only desirable but also possible, provided we shall respect the feelings and sense of national honour of one another and stop any attempt by misguided people at encroachment on social and educational areas that belong to our language by which we can describe ourselves as Maltese and feel to be really masters in our own home.

I must now write a post-scriptum to my talk. *Il-Moviment Qawmien Letterarju* has started a campaign in favour of the Maltese language precisely to prevent this encroachment on the areas that belong to Maltese which (excuse me if I am being repetitive) gives us our nationality and our ethnic identity. These young promoters of the campaign have stirred our national conscience. Unfortunately, some misinformed or ill-intentioned, people have imputed ulterior motives to them. One scared correspondent in a local paper stated that their intention is to cut us off from Europe, to integrate us with the Arab World as agents of the Afro-Asian Movement! Nothing could be more outrageous than this vile imputation. The promoters of the campaign are personally too well educated to propose the exclusion of the use of the English language or any other foreign language in Malta, so long as this does not encroach on the place that is due to our National language. It is not they who are disturbing linguistic co-existence, but those wielders of administrative powers who are continuing to relegate Maltese to an inferior status in Government departments and in our social life.

Calling peoples names to express emotional disagreement has become very fashionable in our violent times. In Italy and France, for instance, rebel students scrawl insults on the walls of the Universities describing the University authorities as Fascists. Progressive elements in dictatorial countries are described as Imperialists or Capitalists. This is the feverish pulse of the times.

The young promoters of the pro-Maltese campaign have one very good intention, that of establishing the proper contexts for Maltese as our own

National language, and for foreign languages which we need for many purposes but which are not part of our National identity and ancestral heritage. That is the logistics of the language campaign today.

The future of a truly independent Malta depends on the right feeling and clear thinking of the younger generation who are publicly expressing their dissatisfaction with the present colonial mentality of some of the older generation. When the older generation fails to lead, the younger generation has no choice but to assume the leadership in its stead, and that briefly is the new Maltese History in the making.