

The 1916 Maltese Emigrants' Incident

The story behind the Gozo Philatelic Society and the Philatelic Society of Canberra Inc.

Joint First Centenary Anniversary Commemoration

by

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*Hon. Billy Hughes, Prime Minister
of Australia, 1915 - 1923*

The protagonists of the episode, who later became referred to as the “Billy Hughes Children”, became embroiled in Australia’s racial, political and moral turbulence through the application of the ‘dictation test’ – Australia’s principal method of excluding unwanted migrants during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The Maltese, including a disproportionate number from the Gozitan hamlet of Santa Luċija (1), had boarded the French Messageries Maritimes mail-boat “*Gange*” in Malta bound for Australia, scheduled to arrive in Melbourne (en route to Sydney) on 28th October - the day of a referendum to impose conscription in Australia.

Prime Minister Hughes (pro-conscription), fearing that the subject of Maltese migrants might turn the tide against the conscription vote, resorted

to the Immigration Act stipulation that persons seeking to disembark at an Australian port could be classified as ‘prohibited immigrant’ if they failed a dictation test in any European language. So the Maltese were given a Dictation Test, conducted by a professor from the University of Melbourne (2) - in Dutch! They undoubtedly promptly failed and were not allowed to disembark.

The vessel then headed off for Noumea in New Caledonia, 1,207 kilometers east of Australia, where its bewildered Maltese passengers lived in a nightmarish limbo for ten weeks. Finally, under pressure from the British Colonial Office outraged by the discrimination against the Maltese (British subjects by birth), the Hughes government arranged for their return to Sydney.

However, on arrival they were only transferred onto an old hulk, the “*Anglian*”,

in Sydney Harbour, under armed guard! (3) Supporters of the men became more active, including the Governor of New South Wales Gerald Strickland. After much public controversy and a fair amount of pressure on Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes, not to mention the ordeal for the men and their families in the Maltese islands who came close to starvation as they were dependent on the wages these men-folk would have earned in Australia; no legitimate reason was left for continuing the men's incarceration and Prime Minister Hughes had to finally agree to their release and admission into Australia. The emigrants were finally allowed to disembark on 9th March, 1917. This was roughly four months after the "Gange" was supposed to have disembarked them at Sydney.

The following report published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Saturday 4th October, 1919 (4) mentions the financial cost of the incident for the Australian taxpayers.

Detained Maltese! Cost to the country

It was stated by Senator Russell in the Senate to-day, in reply to a question, that in October, 1916, on the eve of the conscription campaign, the Gange arrived with 214 Maltese passengers for Australia. The unexpected and inopportune arrival of the men gave colour to the wildly circulated but totally incorrect statement that the Government were introducing Maltese to take the place of Australian soldiers who were serving at the front.

The men on the Gange were, therefore, refused admission under the provisions of the Immigration Act. They were taken by the Gange on to Noumea, but as that vessel had been chartered by the French Government to carry troops back to France it was necessary to land the Maltese at Noumea, pending further arrangements being made for their repatriation.

Owing to the shortage of shipping, efforts to repatriate the men were unsuccessful, and they were brought back to Sydney, where they were detained pending efforts to secure passages for Malta. Eventually they were permitted to land at Sydney on guarantees being given that they would join unions, and that employment would be found for them. The total cost of maintenance at Noumea was £2,332, and at Sydney £743. The owners of the ship were paid for damage and other expenses incurred in connection with this matter the sum of £4,050.

References:

- ¹ Private correspondence from Mr. Anthony Grech, 15th February 2016
- ² The Times of Malta, 22nd February, 2016
- ³ <http://www.ozmalta.page4.me/90.html>
- ⁴ <http://www.maltamigration.com/history/newcaledonia.shtml>