

NATIONAL

When the Maltese were

Documents show the prejudice, instructions given to Maltese migrants in Australia

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Migration officers

Wash frequently, use cutlery in restaurants, avoid speaking with your mouth full, do not haggle in shops... and do not walk barefoot. This is some of the advice provided by Malta's Department of Labour to those who planned on migrating to Australia in 1929. The tips, listed in a booklet issued by the Migrants' Training Centre, came to light in an exhibition currently running at Spazju Kreattiv titled *Dehumaneation*.



Emotional scenes at the harbour..

"Maltese migrants were urged to avoid haggling over shop prices as they were fixed"

Back then, organised migration was an encouraged practice, or, as superintendent of emigration Henry Casolani put it, "a breath of life for Malta". "Without it, the greatest national calamity is within sight... without a smooth, continuous, scientific and carefully organised drain of our congested population, a catastrophe,



Some of the early migrants before setting off for Australia. PHOTOS: MIGRANTS COMMISSION ARCHIVE

which will be a landmark in the history of the Maltese Islands, sooner or later awaits us," he wrote in 1930. Pre-World War Two Maltese migrants usually settled down in places where their own relatives or friends would had settled down before them. Their aim was to overcome poverty, send money to their relatives in Malta and eventually help their own family members join them in Australia. Before setting off for Australia, some migrants were trained in farm work at Ghammieri, where

a replica of a timber bungalow was used until the 1950s to familiarise them with Australian culture and construction. But farm work and construction were not the only things the Maltese needed a lesson in. In the guidebook they are warned that employees in Australia go to work in a suit and they were shoes. "No one - not even beggars - go around barefoot or wearing sandals, while caps are only worn for sport events. No one wears hats made from straw, but rather felt, just as people wear



Maltese people seeing off their friends and relatives.

told to wash frequently

'NO GIUSEPPIS WANTED'

The Maltese: hard workers, but undesirable by some

When in the late 1920s Charles Farrugia came across a job vacancy poster that read 'No *Giuseppis* wanted' he changed his surname to Ferguson. Since Ferguson sounds nothing like a Maltese or Italian surname, he managed to secure a job at the Sydney wharf.

Charles was not the only migrant to change his name to fit in a society where prejudice against non-locals was rife. And the darker the skin, the harsher the derogatory labels, such as 'wog' and 'dago'.

The Maltese who travelled to Australia at the beginning of the century stood out - they spoke an unintelligible language, walked in groups with other Maltese, wore working-class clothes and walked barefoot.

Pre-World War Two migrants, interviewed by Mark Caruana who moved to Australia from Sliema in 1973, recalled making sure they wore a hat and carried at least one pound in their pockets when travelling to the city. Otherwise, they risked being stopped by a police officer and charged with vagrancy or homelessness.

But despite being perceived by some Australians as an undesirable migrant who might steal the locals' jobs, the Maltese were also known as hard workers and union loyalists, according to Caruana.

"Most found jobs outside the city - tilling land, cutting cane or working in the mine and railway construction industries.

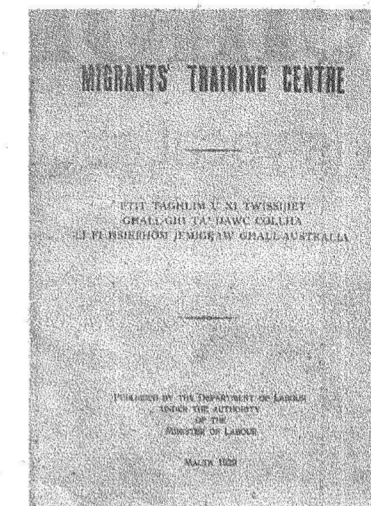
"They carried out work that not many Australians wanted to. One migrant recalled how the doctor's test, carried out on migrants before landing in Australia, consisted of an assessment of their hands. If they looked tough and able to deal with hard work, they passed the test with flying colours," Caruana said.

"Malta seems to be experiencing similar migration patterns right now, with most street-cleaning and construction work being carried out by economic migrants."

Sociologist Shaun Grech, the artist behind the exhibition 'Dehumaneation' said: "We have a profound lack of knowledge of our own emigration history - the fact that the Maltese emigrated legally does not mean that the Maltese were wanted."

Grech said he included the guidebook and tobacco advert in the exhibition as they contradict "our very erroneous notion of our identity and some or other ridiculous idea of racial purity".

"What happened to the Maltese migrants back then is happening to migrants in Malta today. The juxtaposition of these experiences, a century apart, is indicative of patterns witnessed historically where the exploited eventually become the exploiters, the oppressed become the oppressors and the colonised become the colonisers."



The guidebook. Provided by Leonard Callus from the National Archives of Malta.

ing with one's mouth full, sprinkling salt and pepper with one's fingers, drinking straight from bottles or pitchers, or sipping tea or coffee from saucers.

"What happened to Maltese migrants back then is happening to migrants in Malta today"

"Cutlery is laid out on the table not for decorative purposes - use it, and drink from cups."

And while you can break a piece of bread with your hands, do not wipe the plate clean with it, the Maltese were warned.

One overarching advice that lingers throughout is to observe Australian nationals and act in a similar fashion.

belts, rather than sashes (*triehi*) to hold up their pants."

Maltese migrants were also urged to avoid haggling over shop prices as these were fixed and each item carried a price tag. This way you can compare prices and check who has the most competitive fees, the booklet notes.

A whole page is dedicated to hygiene. "Dirt is the most disgusting thing, and dirty people will be ridiculed and ignored," the guidebook reads, urging migrants to keep their hair short, shave as frequently as possible and keep their nails short and clean.

Most importantly, they should remember to wash their hands once they are done with work, especially before eating.

Apparently, some Maltese factory workers in America were fired because they used to skip washing their hands before lunch.

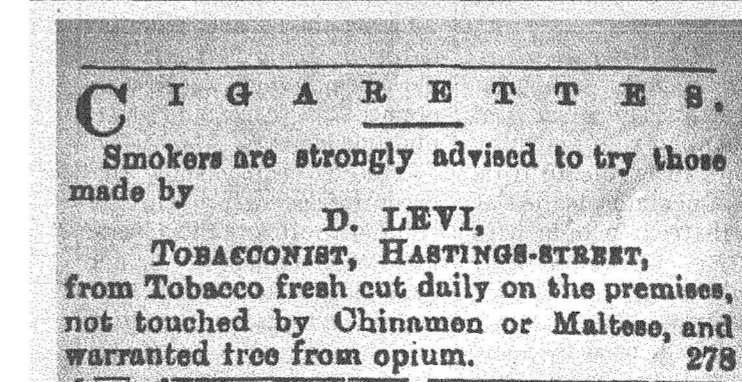
One last word of advice is printed in capital letters: "Old and clean clothing is better than new and dirty clothes".

Migrants also needed guidance how to behave outdoors: it is illegal in Australia and elsewhere to loiter at corners, on pavements or in the middle of the streets, the booklet reads.

"Everyone should keep walking and continue minding their own business" and if one wanted to hang out with friends, one could do so at the park.

The booklet also warns against eating with one's hands, speak-

'UNTOUCHED BY CHINAMAN OR MALTESE'



The advert published on the *Hawke's Bay Herald*, of October 18, 1883, on page four. Provided by Leonard Callus, from the National Archives of Malta

One stark example of prejudice is an 1883 advert "strongly" urging people to try cigarettes by D Levi, on Hastings Street, as they are made from tobacco that is freshly cut on the premises and is untouched by "Chinamen or Maltese".

The advert, which also features in Shaun Grech's *Dehumaneation* exhibition, must have been issued some weeks after the very first organised group of Maltese migrants moved to Australia in 1883.

The group consisted of 79 Maltese people, supported by a Capuchin friar, who migrated on a five-year contract to harvest cane in North Queensland, Caruana said.



Former director of the Malta Emigrants Commission, Mgr Philip Calleja (left), Mark Caruana (centre) and the late Fr Lawrence Attard OP (right). Photo taken in 2000 at the Malta Emigrants Commission, Valletta.