

From stories to history

The *Memorja* project reaches out to people and the past, James Baldacchino tells **Fiona Vella**.

For hundreds of years, the recording of the past focused on public records, statistical data and the lives of prominent people. Yet in recent decades, the spotlight turned onto the general public and its memories in order to provide a more accurate picture of the historic narrative. “People who have lived through particular events can contribute different viewpoints and perspectives that fill in the gaps of documented history, at times correcting or even contradicting the written record,” explained James Baldacchino, the administrator of the *Memorja* Project, adding that the lat-

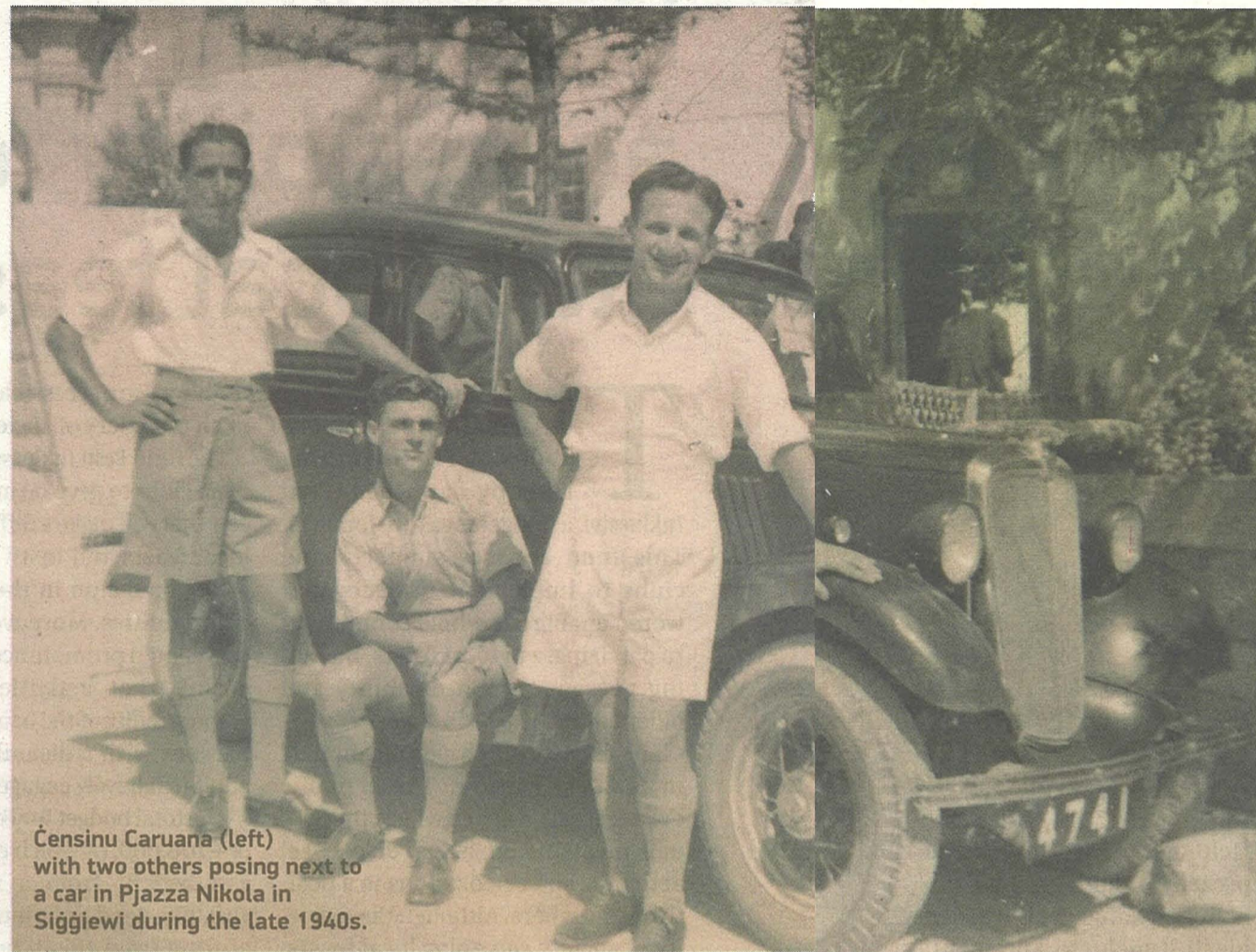
ter aims to give a voice to those who have not been heard.

Memorja is an oral, sound and visual archive. Its main objective is to employ cutting edge research, methodologies, theoretical and archival approaches and techniques to collect, record, transcribe, preserve and make available and retrievable all the deposited material detailing the islands’ history.

“Work on this project has begun in January 2017. This is a new platform which is giving an additional dimension to the National Archives since this time, it is not only collecting records but reaching out to create them.”

At the early stages of the project, four themes were selected, namely the World War II, British expatriates in Malta, public administration and the Lampedusa-Malta connection.

“The theme related to experiences during World War II aims to document and record a past which is slowly disappearing from public memory especially with the passing away of the older generation. Oral testimonies and photographs serve to recollect the terrible years of war and what the people have lived through in those times. Stories of the outbreak of hostilities and the first bombings on June 11, 1940, the mass evacuations and refugee experiences, fear and uncertainty, hunger and the Victory Kitchens, shelters and sanitation, soldiers and sirens, and tragedies of bombings are part of the significant remembrance which needs to be collected and preserved for future generations before it is lost for good.”



Censinu Caruana (left) with two others posing next to a car in Piazza Nikola in Siggiewi during the late 1940s.

The history of the relationship between the UK and Malta is another central theme which has not been documented through the eyes of the British and Maltese individuals.

“This section includes interviews with British and British-Maltese people who were either in the British forces during the 1960s (or their spouses) and remained in Malta, or civilians who married a Maltese person and relocated to Malta. Such recordings open a window on everyday life in Malta during the 1950s-1970s. Much of the narratives relate to military bases, post-war experiences,

political issues, relationships and cultural differences.

“This theme was further expanded when the experience of service families’ children was included as well. These children had attended the Naval Childrens’ School and HM Dockyard Children’s School which had occupied sites at Ta’ Xbiex, Cottonera, Senglea and the Dockyard before moving to Tal-Handaq.”

Civil servants are often regarded as those who are implementing the Government policies. However, through their memories we can get a glimpse of what happened ‘behind the

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As the team of the *Memorja* Project reached out to people, they were soon welcomed by the different communities who were eager to share their recollections.

“We found a huge amount of data which existed only in the minds of people and in their photos,” Mr Baldacchino adds. Many individuals were enthusiastic to make their voice heard in order to help out with the shaping of the public’s narrative which up to now was not formally recorded for posterity. Even though we have four selected themes, it does not exclude us from recording other memories as well which we deem to be of importance to form part of the community memory.”

The search for the stories which make the history is still going on. The final goal of the *Memorja* Project which will be officially launched later on this year will be to make this information accessible online for educational and research purposes.

“Oral history allows people to express the personal consequences of change, from the simplest things in life to the more complex. It enables people to share their experiences in their own words, with their own voices, through their own understanding of what happened and why. Eventually, such documentation will offer depth to the understanding of the past to present and future generations.”

If you are interested to contribute to the *Memorja* Project, contact James Baldacchino on james.baldacchino@gov.mt or call 2145 9863. The National Archives is located at Santo Spirito in Hospital Street, Rabat, Malta. ●

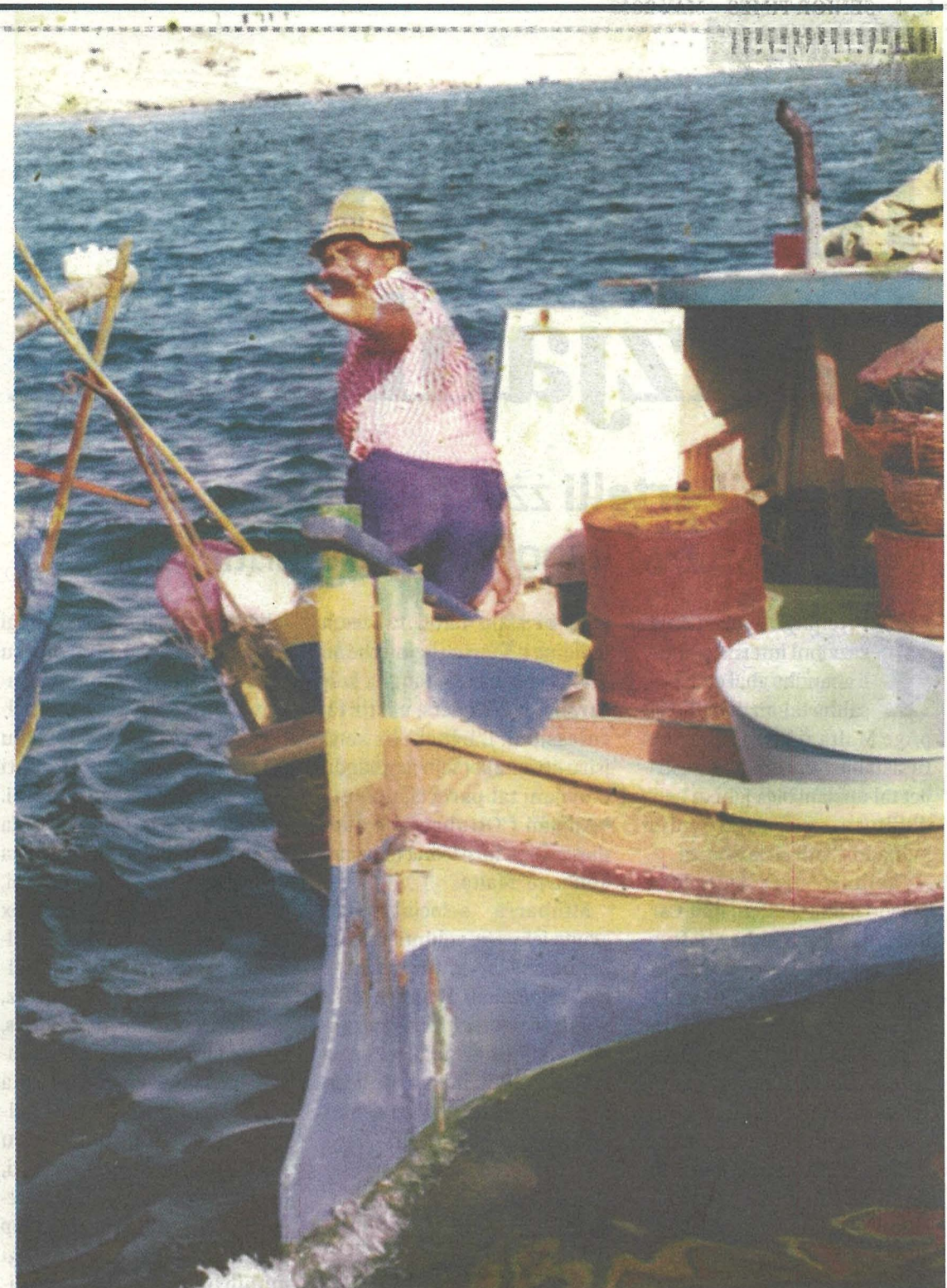
scenes’ during the most important political, social and economic decisions undertaken by Maltese political leaders.

“These include background revelations of what was taking place during the granting of Independence in 1964, the dismantling of the British military base in 1979 and how the Maltese prepared for such an event, membership in the EU and how it affected the civil service, the migration of the hospital from St Luke’s to Mater Dei and many other memorable challenges.”

Lampedusa and Malta are two islands with different political histories. Yet to some extent they share similar economic, trade and socio-cultural interest.

“We have an interest in Lampedusa since in the early 1800s, there were a number of Maltese settlers on this island. Until now, no one had attempted to record these people’s history in order to understand the link between the two islands. The *Memorja* Project is mainly focusing on two time frames to investigate the islands’ shared history.

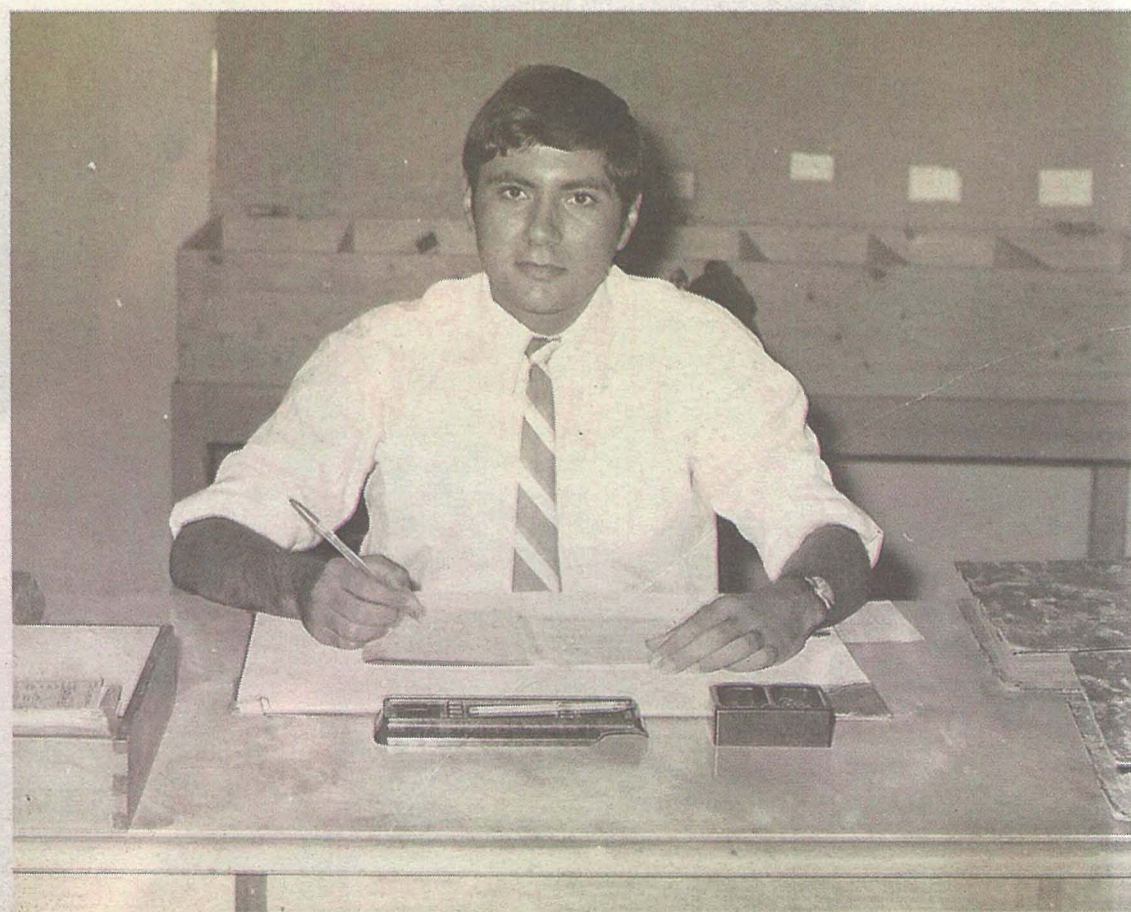
The first one relates to the period from 1800-1843 when Lampedusa was colonised by Maltese settlers working in agriculture and animal husbandry. The second covers the period between the 1950s and the 1980s when Lampedusani fishermen visited Malta regularly for the maintenance of ships, the sale of blue fish and the provision of supplies.”



Salvatore Davi was a fisherman from Lampedusa. After marrying a Maltese girl, he came to live in Malta in the 1970s. The photo dates to that period.



Karmena Calleja with her children in Floriana in 1933. She shared her experiences of World War II in Malta.



Frank Mifsud at the Labour Office in 1969 at the beginning of his career in the Public Administration.