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Maltese Historical Association (Aust) Inc
(Għaqda Storika Maltija (Awstralija) Inkorporata)

No 4/2011

August Newsletter

This Month: Our next talk will take place at the Maltese Community Centre, 477 Royal Parade, Parkville at 7.30pm on Tuesday August 16, 2011. Mr Albert Agius will be our guest speaker this month and his topic is 'They booked their place in Maltese history'.

The motivation for this talk comes from an editorial in *Leġen is-Sewwa*, a Maltese weekly. This was written at the time of the death of Count Prof Preziosi who was, and still is, recognised as a very prominent citizen of Malta.

The editorial spoke of the greatness of a people's civilization. It argued that this is measured by how much the people know how to appreciate the great people of the country and by how it is grateful towards those who dedicate their lives to the benefit of humanity and to the progress of knowledge and of science.

With this in mind, I decided that perhaps an Association like ours should endeavour to spread the good word about the works and activities of some Maltese personalities who have made a great contribution to our native country's development over the centuries. The talk is based on people from various spheres of life in Malta. Some of them are very popular but there may be some whose name is familiar, but who may not be as well known to us all. There are also many others about whom we know almost nothing.

The talk is embellished by some photographs taken by Albert and by Joseph Borg during their recent visit to Malta of statues or monuments erected by the nation to honour such personalities.

Mr Albert Agius is well-known to our members. He is one of the Association's founder members. In fact, it was Albert who persuaded his brother-in-law Mr Joseph C Sammut to give two talks (one about Maltese coins and the other about French and British cartoons on Malta) to groups of people at the Ċentru Malti in 1986/87. This eventually led to the formation of the Association. Mr Sammut was then visiting Melbourne and staying with the Agius family. Albert himself has also given a number of talks to our members.

Albert migrated to Australia in November 1978 and he took an early interest in the various activities of the Maltese community. He was the correspondent for The Times of Malta for some 25 years and he obviously had his finger on the pulse of the community with good connections with its leaders. His full-time job was as an Administrative Officer with the Commonwealth Government of Australia. He spent several years as an employee of the Commonwealth Department of Health. In September 1993, he was seconded by the Australian Government as a Consultant to the Parliamentary Secretariat for the Care of the Elderly in Malta under the auspices of UNDP, the United Nations Development Programme.

Interesting Websites

Check these out:

- 1] www.malteseabroad.org - the website of the Federation of Maltese Living Abroad, formed following the Convention of Maltese Living Abroad held in Malta in 2010.
- 2] <http://www.maltain360.com/#110001632> - this Heritage Malta website takes you on a virtual tour of a number of historically significant sites (courtesy of Joe Borg).

In 1997, Albert became a Member of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta.

Albert was the senior journalist in the Maltese language with SBS (Special Broadcasting Services) between 1987 and 1989. He was also busy with feature articles and news stories in the 'Malta Cross' and 'Il-Maltija'.

Albert is proud of having published, in May 2000, *It-Teżawru* which is the first published thesaurus in the Maltese language. He has just recently

published the second and greatly revised edition of *It-Teżawru*. His other book, *Qwiel, Idjomi u Laqmijiet Maltin*, has been very popular with members of the Maltese community in Australia.

Quite apart from giving exposure in Malta to the activities of the Maltese community, Albert also published two books in the series 'Maltese Settlement in Australia' ('Building a community' and 'Fears, tears and cheers').



June 2011: The history of the Maltese islands in mediaeval times is shrouded in mystery; much of what has traditionally been taught in schools was often based on not much more than myths. In June, Professor Maurice Cauchi delivered a lecture to the MHA on this topic, with the aim of shedding some light on this fascinating period of our history. His talk drew on accounts written by mediaeval chroniclers such as al-Himyari, Ibn Hawqal and Giliberto Abbate.

Professor Cauchi began with a brief timeline, highlighting the period of Byzantine rule (roughly 395 to 870 AD), that of Arab domination (from 870 to 1090 AD), and the arrival of the Normans and successive European dynasties. Arabs based in Tunisia launched their first concerted attack on the islands in 869 but they were repulsed by the Byzantines. A second attack in 870 was, however, successful. According to al-Himyari, the islands were laid waste and remained virtually uninhabited until around 1045 when a colony was established, made up of Muslims (four hundred combatants with families) and their more numerous slaves. In 1175, a Christian visitor to Malta, Burckhardt von Strasbourg, referred to the inhabitants as Saracens.

The next phase in Maltese history begins in 1191 with the arrival of the Normans under Count Roger de Hauteville. Although the Arabs were defeated, the Normans simply imposed taxes and returned to Sicily. It was not until a second expedition in 1127 that the Normans, led by Count Roger II, assumed more direct control of the islands. Professor Cauchi spoke about some key events, including an Arab uprising, an attempt by the Byzantines to regain the islands in 1144 and the final expulsion of the

Arabs in 1224. He also pointed out that many Muslims converted to Christianity during the years prior to 1224, a development related to sustained efforts to re-christianise the islands. For example, the cathedral church in Mdina, possibly a restructured mosque, is mentioned in official documents in 1299, but it may have been established decades earlier. A late thirteenth-century document, *Lo Compasso de Navegare*, refers to a church of St Mary on Comino. This would suggest that, by around 1300, similar places of worship would have been established across the islands.



Evidence also points to a dramatic increase in rural settlements in Malta, a development already noticeable in the Arab period. Documents of the time refer to wheat and cotton production, the latter a particularly critical introduction, providing the islands with a cash crop. Late in the thirteenth century, Giliberto Abbate estimated that the population exceeded ten thousand, almost all of whom were dependent on agriculture. According

to this source, the vast majority in Malta were Muslims; in Gozo, on the other hand, more than half the people were Christian.

After the Normans, control of the Maltese islands passed from one dynastic house to another, often as the result of major battles fought in the Maltese islands, which surprisingly have often been overlooked in our history books. For instance, the Aragonese and Angevin fleets fought a pitched battle in the Grand Harbour in 1283; according to Desclot, Angevin casualties amounted to three thousand five hundred dead and five hundred wounded (an exaggeration, perhaps?).

Professor Cauchi also spoke about a much maligned figure in our history, Don Gonsalvo Monroy. In 1421, in a contract referred to as an *impignoratio* (pawning), Monroy paid thirty thousand florins to the King of Aragon in return for lordship over the Maltese islands. This was done through an intermediary, the Sicilian viceroy, Antonio de Cardona. The Maltese swore their loyalty towards Cardona, against the pledge that their 'rights and privileges' would be honoured by their new lord. Four weeks later, Cardona officially transferred all his rights to Monroy. Revolt against

Monroy broke out in Gozo in 1425, the rebellion spreading to Malta by 1426. In 1427, forces were put together to subdue the revolt. Two Maltese clergymen then travelled to Sicily with guarantees for payment of the thirty thousand florins. Only twenty thousand florins were paid by the agreed deadline, October 1428. However, Monroy passed away early in 1429; in his will, he stipulated that, of these twenty thousand florins, ten thousand were to be paid to the Aragonese king while the remaining ten thousand florins were to be redistributed among the Maltese population!

The Knights of St John made their entrance into Maltese history in 1530. Jean Quintin d'Autun in his *Insulae Descriptio* (1536) provides this not very flattering picture of the Maltese at the time:

The people have a Sicilian character, with a mixture of African...they are not strong enough nor adapted to warfare...The women are not at all ugly, but live very much as if they were uncivilized; they do not mix with other people; they go out covered in a veil, as if to see a woman is here the same as to violate her.

Melbourne Winter Masterpieces: Vienna Art & Design

The Maltese Historical Association has made arrangements with the National Gallery of Victoria for our members to be given an introductory talk, followed by an escorted tour of this outstanding exhibition currently running at the National Gallery of Victoria - International, St Kilda Road, Melbourne. For the talk and tour we meet in the foyer (near the water wall) of the NGV at **10.45am on Sunday September 4**. The all-up cost is as follows:

Adults: \$30 per person

Holders of the following concession cards: \$26 per person

Student Card, Healthcare Card, Senior's Healthcare Card, Pension Card, and Veteran's Gold Card

Note: Seniors Card Holders are not eligible for the concession.

NGV members: \$24 per person

As numbers are limited, bookings are essential and need to be made early. To book, please send a cheque payable to Maltese Historical Association c/o Lewis Zammit, 22 Barry Street, Kew 3101. Book early to avoid disappointment.

Lewis Zammit

Upcoming Events

~ The Missionary Society of St Paul extends an invitation to all members of the MHA to participate in the feast of Our Lady of Victories at 2.30pm on Sunday September 11 at St Mary Star of the Sea Church in Howard Street, West Melbourne.

~ A Migrants Mass will be celebrated at St Patrick's Cathedral at 2.30pm on Sunday August 28.

~ Mgr Mario Grech, Bishop of Gozo, will be visiting Melbourne in October. A cocktail party has been organised at the Parkville Centre on Thursday October 20. Further details will be passed on to our members as they come to hand.

Reminder

Memberships for 2011-2012 are now due. These remain unchanged at \$10 for singles and \$15 for couples. Please see Mario Bonnici at our next meeting or mail your cheque to 59 Binnak Drive Watsonia 3087.

Prospective members: please note that you can download a membership form from our website www.mha.org.au

Collecting Victoria's immigration & settlement material heritage

Arts Victoria is supporting an Initial Scoping Study being conducted by Dr Helen Light which will provide an overall indication of the number and scale of multicultural collections in Victoria in order to develop a methodology for assessing and scoping the collection material, stories, condition, access and ownership. It is hoped to eventually find a way to help communities preserve their material for posterity. Many of Victoria's ethnic groups still hold collections of materials which immigrants valued enough to bring with them. The material reflects their particular experience in the settlement process and the adaptation of their original culture to their new home.

Anyone with any information regarding the existence and whereabouts of Victorian migration and settlement objects, or about communities that hold their own history, should contact Dr Helen Light on mobile number 0416 096 160 or by email to helenlight@netspace.net.au.

(<http://www.mccv.org.au/>)



**Claudia Zammit - Senior
Travel Consultant**
**170 Warrandyte Road
North Ringwood Vic 3134**

+61 3 9876 4166
Toll free: 1300 885 805
Fax: 03 9879 0471
Claudia@signaturetravel.com.au

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