

# **La Nostra Storia**

*(Our Story)*

***By Romeo Cini***

Translated from the Italian by Dr George Boffa

## **INTRODUCTION**

Writing a historical dissertation about the Maltese community established in Tripoli (Libya) since the early 1800s has always been strictly a personal desire without ambitions to publish.

Several times I started writing, in diary form, the most significant facts and recollections of the past, but for various reasons I never continued.

It was something which was really close to my heart because it appeared to me unjust to see buried a splendid reality ignored by so many who, much better than I, could have immortalised it, giving it its proper credit.

The decisive opportunity presented itself to me following an invitation by my countryman, Dr. George M. Boffa. This duty, not so light, I venture into with good heart, having recourse to the few but valid documents, and above all, to my memory.

Therefore I apologise in anticipation to the reader for any involuntary omission of facts, happenings or other details.

However, I hope that my writing will give a picture of the active Maltese presence in Tripoli, so that it will be remembered and, with the passing of the years, made known also to future generations.

## **TRIPOLI OF BARBARY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

The Maltese community, established in Tripoli from the beginning of the 1800s deserves a prominent place in the history of this city by virtue of having lived there for nearly two centuries, undergoing and bearing witness to periods of the different nations from the Turkish to the Italian which was followed by the British, until we come to the day of independence and the present time of the Gaddafian revolution.

Whole volumes had been written on this splendid city caressed by blue waves of the Mediterranean. They recounted her history, progress and development, praising now this community and others, with every writer obviously favouring his own and ring or mentioning only briefly the old and industrious Maltese presence. This community knew how to live and with the fall, demonstrating its undoubted and exemplary spirit of pacific co-existence even when, in a sad circumstance of war, it was itself an innocent victim.

### **The Maltese Community in Tripoli – When and how it started to be formed**

In the first decades of the 1800s some Maltese pioneers left Malta ring to Tripoli of Barbary, as it was then known, where they I good scope to develop their commercial activities. Encouraged by the good opportunities, they decided to settle there their families. Gradually other families of various backgrounds moved to this city confident of improving their prospects.

This was how the Maltese community in Tripoli started to form.

It results, from the documents of my family, that the first Cini came from the Island of Gozo in the first decades of the 1800s. He was called Francesco. From then my forefathers established themselves firmly in Tripoli, and stayed there for several generations.

Like us, Maltese families had settled in Tripoli since then, founding a community very well respected by the Turkish authorities for their energetic enterprising spirit combined with an ability to co-exist in peaceful harmony. From these intrepid pioneers were born the first Tripolitans of Maltese descent. Among these were:

CINI Michele born in Tripoli on 24.9.1844

LANZON Felice born in Tripoli on 25.1.1849

TALIANA Giovanni born in Tripoli on 30.5.1852

CARABOT Tommaso born in Tripoli on 29.8.1855

The Maltese Community was made up of merchants (traders), contractors, shopkeepers, builders, bakers, fishermen, bricklayers, carpenters, woodworkers etc; and among the different categories was also a chemist by the name of Lanzon.

The merchants reached out into several fields going as far as the most remote villages, following the caravans with their horses. Others sailed on ships, exporting pure bred Arab horses to Italy and importing utensils and provisions. From Malta, they imported seeds and other goods; others conducted their affairs within and in the outskirts of the walls of the city.

To this hard-working Community were united, as the years went by, some Maltese families coming from Tunis, several Italian, Spanish and Greek families. Also some Armenians who had originally arrived as slaves of the Turks and were later freed with full civil rights but without the right to nationality. They were in fact stateless.

In the European environment, the largest group was that of the Maltese; in fact their language dominated to such an extent that it was adopted both by the Italians and by the Spanish, and even by the family of the Polish Consul, Vladimir Gazinsky. These groups intermarried thanks to the common religious creed.

The scholastic teaching of the children was looked after diligently until 1911, the year in which Tripoli was conquered by Italy, by the worthy French teachers of the Religious Order of St. John the Baptist de La Salle, among whom was a brother of my grandfather, Francesco Cini. He was transferred to Reims in France, where his mortal remains still rest in peace. The teaching of the girls was carried out by the sisters of St. Joseph in a convent founded by the Very Reverend Mother Carmela Cassar, who had almost all her relatives in Tripoli. From 1911 till the coming to power of Gaddafi, the Brothers and Sisters were substituted by teachers who were from the same Religious Order but who were Italian speaking, and with the continuous influence of Italian families from Italy, many state schools were founded. Despite this, the Maltese continued to send their sons and daughters to Catholic schools run by the Christian Brothers and by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Thus, until my grandfather's time, education was in the French language, but after that, in Italian.

Throughout this period, that is from the eighteenth century until the present day, the Maltese Language was jealously preserved in our homes with marked national pride. Many, who despite the fact that like me they had never seen Malta, still felt tied to her by sentimental bonds of iron.

During the Turkish domination of Tripoli, our ancestors lived peacefully, trading and working in every field enjoying total freedom. The majority lived in the city protected by a high wall and more specifically in a quarter near the sea, facing the small church of Santa Maria degli Angeli.

This had been built by the Franciscans long before in 1650 when there were already some Christian families belonging to the Diplomatic Corps.

Other Maltese families, on the other hand, lived in a quarter situated on a height called DAHRA (Dahra El Kebira and Dahra El Sghira) a few kilometres away from the City.

The third group gathered in an isolated area between the City and the Dahra in low-lying dwellings where, in fact, a street was named in honour of an old Maltese merchant, Riccardo Cassar, who had built along that road a windmill and a large block inhabited by Maltese families, as well as other houses, the community in Dahra lived around the little old church of St. Francis, and the third group, the one isolated, near the little old church of the Sacred Heart, well situated in the Cassar estate.

These small churches were enlarged gradually over the years. The old Cathedral of that time, Santa Maria degli Angeli was greatly enlarged in 1870 by the architect Fra Frotunato da Rosina and modified in 1891 through the work of Fra Silvestro of Lastebasse who in his turn decorated it. At that time in Tripoli there were no more than three thousand Christians, a good number of whom were Maltese, in an indigenous population of little more than twenty thousand inhabitants.

When, in 1908, the Religious Mission was officially entrusted to the Franciscans Minor of the Lombardy Diocese, projects were started which included the subsequent development of new buildings, namely the churches of Saint Francis and the Church of the Sacred Heart. The latter was completed in 1928 and consecrated the Cathedral of Tripoli.

The previous cathedral, Santa Maria degli Angeli, was constructed totally from stone imported from Malta. Even the workers who built it were Maltese. In fact, it was always thought of as the Church of the Maltese.

During the nineteenth century, a number of our families settled right along the Libyan coastal strip: from Zuara near the Tunisian border to Homs, Sliten and Misurata, along the Gulf of Sirte and on onto Benghazi, Derna and Barce in Cyrenaica, which borders on Egypt. Thus they formed small communities always united with that in Tripoli which in fact was their stronghold.

As regards social life the only clubs existing in the heart of the European population were at that time the Maltese ones, one in the historic city and the other at Dahra. Many enjoyed dancing, in particular the famous and entertaining QUADRIGLIA. The ladies would be robed in voluminous but splendid dresses as they, together with their skilful partners, danced to the accompaniment of talented musicians and singers. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the clubs were organised in such a way that they succeeded in bringing over full orchestras and highly rated singers from Malta. They enjoyed shows, concerts and classical operas. Thus, in their small world, they did not neglect culture; in fact they engaged themselves in its pursuit seriously.

We now come to the "VITTORIA", the most deeply felt National Feast of the year - the 8th September - a historic date reminding us of the immense sacrifice of the people of Malta which had stopped the terrible invasion of the Ottoman Empire, effectively saving Christianity in Europe.

This yearly occurrence was always celebrated in a singular way. It started with a Mass of Thanksgiving which was followed by the broad smiles which spread amongst all the Maltese. Sumptuous family dinners were followed by the unfailing "QUADRIGLIA".

During the Italian era a spectacular "giostra" was also organised, with the greasy pole being fixed on a barge floating on the stretch of water near the old bathing establishment known as BARACOPOLO. It attracted the happy attention of all the population, including the authorities and even the Governor of the time, General Emilio De Bono. The long pole fixed to the barge was covered generously with lard. On its tip was fixed a small flagstaff with the old Maltese flag, on which was shown the glorious Cross of the Knights of Malta. The young Maltese men would compete in repeated attempts to reach the flag, walking along the pole and most times slipping and plunging into the sea. After long hours of competition, someone would ultimately succeed in reaching the flag; he would be crowned champion of the year and receive a beautiful prize.

QUADRIGLIA - quadrille (Maltese - KWADRILJA) a square dance for four couples.

GIOSTRA - Maltese *Ġostr*a - public competition involving climbing up a greasy pole (KUKKANJA) at the tip of which prizes are attached.

DE BONO - early convert to Fascism who helped Mussolini gain power. He voted against Mussolini in the Grand Council July 24-25, 1943. He was later tried for treason by Mussolini and executed in VERONA by a firing squad.

After the thirties, the GIOSTRA was transferred to the stretch of water in the harbour along the old road of the Bastions, so that an ever-increasing number of spectators could watch this annual amusing spectacle in greater comfort.

At this point I would like to point out that along the Bastions there rises the imposing and beautiful Mosque dedicated to the memory of one of the greatest and most implacable enemies of Malta, Sidi Dragut.

The triumphal giostra was significantly held right in front of this Mosque for reasons unbeknown to the local people. Sidi Dragut as killed in Malta on 23rd June, 1565 after he had been injured on 18th June during a fierce battle along the fortified walls of Fort St. Elmo<sup>1</sup>. His body was later transported to Tripoli and buried in this mosque.

Another grand popular spectacle organized by the Maltese was the Carnival. The three days of Carnival were celebrated with a cut variety of masked balls accompanied by small orchestras. Even in the Italian era, the Maltese were always the only ones to brighten the streets of our beautiful city choking the main roads with the long and entertaining carnival parades, bringing so much merriment with their radiant costumes and the inevitable buffoonery. The cheerful atmosphere was well accepted by all the cosmopolitan population and by the respective authorities, who admired the entertaining enterprise of our community. During these three days emerged the rivalry between the Maltese of the old city and those of DAHRA who competed in their organizational ability. These were the only days of the year in which the Community was seen to be divided in two factions. The three days of carnival always ended with resounding success, cheerfully culminating in a grand masked ball where the participants enjoyed appetizing stuffed rolls and a variety of sweets which remind me of the Jewish confectioners who occupied almost the whole of the narrow street called Arba Arsat.

How good were the sponge cakes (Pan di Spagna), the macaroons, biscuits dipped in cool orgeat! How many memories bloom in my mind, how much happiness and joy was part of the wonderful bliss of the good times!

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<sup>1</sup> Fort St. Elmo fell on the same day - 23rd June, the eve of the Feast of St. John the Baptist

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Maltese families used to entertain themselves playing the undying tombola in a large shed built on my grandfather's estate. It was situated on high ground outside the city walls, and was later called the "81". In our days three roads were built in the area - Via Mazzini, Via Garibaldi and Via Porta Pia which linked up with the side streets Via Costanzo Ciano from Sciarra Riccardo and Via Lazio from Sciarra Mizaran. The large shed was built exclusively for the Maltese and their European friends to be used as a recreation centre. This is how it remained until the arrival of the 51st Italian Infantry Regiment, who pitched their tents there and confiscated the estate for strategic reasons.

This estate and later on a new one situated at the Sixth Kilometre at MIANI were the preferred destinations for country excursions by the Maltese. To get there, gigs were used, whilst the young people rode out on fast donkeys; later on, people used coaches capable of the then amazing speed of 30 km/her, or the much cherished and well cared for bicycles. At the height of summer everyone would go to the sea. Even here there was a favourite destination called BUSCBULEJLA, an old Spanish Fort built on the cliffs.

Contact with Malta was by way of sailing ships or by the irregular Italian and French steamships which ran between Syracuse, Malta, Tunis and Marseilles transporting goods and passengers.

Postal services were conducted through the Consular Offices.

This brief chapter is enough to confirm that the Maltese Community was already established in the last hundred years of the Turkish domination. It was an integral part of the city, and yet from early times it distinguished itself for the unfailing patriotism which was faithfully transmitted from generation to generation with unquestioned national pride.

This fact was one of the reasons for which they gained the utmost respect above all from the Turks, with whom they maintained reciprocal good relations.

We come now to the period of Italian domination, which began on October 1911 with the landing of the Italian troops and the subsequent conquest of Libya. The landing did not meet with any assistance from the small Turkish military garrisons, but only from the indigenous rebels.

During this conflict the Maltese remained neutral, maintaining very good relations with both the Arabs and with the Italians. They continued to live peacefully, moving about everywhere, even in the inland regions controlled by the rebels.

At the start of the 1920s began the era of progress and the development of the new city, with its gradual growth, to which the Maltese made significant contribution together with Italian citizens who arrived from Italy in large numbers with their families and settled in Tripoli for good.

During this prosperous period, some Maltese expanded their commercial activities, others joined and became agents of the best known European food and pharmaceutical manufacturers. Others, profiting from the building boom, enlarged and built new lime kilns. At the same time, the first factory to make tiles and bricks was built. In general these enterprises gained an absolute monopoly of the production of these important items. In the field of ironmongery the firms of Carabot and Aquilina were paramount, extending their business to supplying the most important Italian building projects.

Giovanni Drago, our co-national, entered boldly amongst the powerful building firms which came from Italy. He won contracts and sub contracts of great importance using his tireless capabilities so that he always enjoyed total trust.

A much praised assistant builder since the days of the Turks was Mr. Paolo Taliana, who was much respected in this industry.

What may I say about Guiseppe Agela Salinos? Another Maltese who carne from Malta in the mid-Twenties, soon after the Italian occupation of Libya. He built the Royal Theatre "MIRAMARE", the greatest one in Tripoli, where we enjoyed the most European Classic entertainment of Opera and Operettas.

Thanks to him the city of Tripoli had the first sporting ground with all the facilities for a11 types of sports. He did so much that he was honoured with the title of "CAVALIERE" by the Italian Government.

The bakers did not lag behind the progress. They modernised their bakeries with the most modern equipment holding strongly onto their business and thus moving forward to increased prosperity. Amongst these we find foremost the firms of Mallia, Meilak and Mifsud.

Amongst the various business activities, the Maltese owned various bars and cafes. Amongst these that of Nappa brothers was famous. This was situated in the central street of that time which was from the days of the Turks called "Suk El Turk" - the Turkish Market. The brothers Nappa made their establishment famous by their skill in playing the accordion, the guitar and the mandolin.

With the passing of the years, various mechanical workshops for the repair of bicycles and eventually of machines in general were opened. Also blacksmiths, like the very busy one of Mr. Aurelio Taliana, and plumbers' shops.

In the field of highly considered trades were the painters and the decorators. A few worked on their own, forming small businesses, but the majority were employees.

A large number were builders, electricians, panel beaters, varnishers, drivers - real desert wolves, joiners as well as fine carpenters who repaired and constructed boats.

They also had a shipyard on the seafront of the coastal strip. This was excellently equipped for the general repair of ships. It was owned by Paulo Xuereb and, the brothers Camilleri. They built the ships "Monte Carmelo", "Stefano Verde" and "Provvidenza Di Dio".

### **1930s**

We find ourselves in the years during which Libya reached its maximum development which did not tend to slow down. Far from it, the projects of improvement in the inland desert areas started with a massive migration of Italian peasant holders. The new city spread very rapidly, new educational complexes, from elementary to middle and senior schools, from the Magistrale to scientific and classical Lyceums were established with capable teachers. At the same time a formidable hospital complex was constructed with imposing departments of Surgery, Medicine etc. etc.

In this gigantic work the Maltese Community collaborated efficiently and in its small way knew how to continue giving its contribution living peacefully and promoting not only the material progress, but also in the cultural aspect.

Unfortunately, however, the bigger part of our people still lived confined in their old district, holding onto their old ways. Many of them were fishermen, who thus preferred that quarter because of its very close proximity to the sea where they had their boats.

Towards the middle of this decade, started the turbulent years caused by politics, which, while giving it due respect, did not interest us at all since, as always, we preferred to remain neutral, dedicating ourselves to work and to our beloved families.

Our peaceful principles started to undergo real and special obstructions and even discrimination in the field of certain Government works from which we were totally excluded unless we were ready to renounce British Citizenship and accept the Italian one. We were also excluded from sporting competitions in which we had some individuals who were a credit to our Community in various sporting activities like football, swimming, boxing, cycling, etc.

These factors did not, in any way, demoralize the Maltese Community but in fact strengthened the spirit of solidarity inherited from father to son over several generations.

With the approach of the last World War the Italian authorities proclaimed their legitimate right to call up for military service all those Maltese youths born in Tripoli during the Italian era and who had not been registered with the British Consulate. Following the promulgation of this law many families sent their sons to Malta to avoid military service - which later they had to do just the same in the British Army.

On 10th June, 1940, Italy entered the war and many Maltese youths were, on the basis of Act 3 of Law 555 of the 13th June, 1912, dealing with Italian citizenship, considered to be Italian and were conscripted into the army. Several took active part in different battles against British and French troops. Some were captured and spent years in prison.

On 20th May, 1940, the Italian Secret Police took the first security measures by expelling from Tripoli the following Maltese: Luigi Cini, Roberto Carabot, Emilio Carabot, Pasquale Carabot, Paolo Cassar and his three sons. They were allowed a choice of their place of exile in Italy. They all chose the neighbourhood of Naples because of easier contact with their families in Tripoli.

On 1st June 1940, all the above mentioned Maltese left Tripoli for Italy under the supervision of the Police.

Nine days later, Italy entered the war. Roberto Carabot and Luigi Cini were transferred from their place of exile, first to the prison of Poggio Reale in Naples and subsequently for confinement on the Tremite Islands. After about a year they were transferred to the Montechiarugolo Castle in the Province of Parma. The Carabot brothers all died during their imprisonment. All the others survived.

Still at the beginning of the Second World Conflict, that is in 1940, about 60 Maltese were arrested and taken to the prisons in Tripoli. Amongst the first was my father Carmelo Cini and all his cousins Rinaldo, Romeo, and Roberto Cini. Other conationals whom I remember with certainty were: Ercole Lanzon, Giovanni and Vittorio Muscat, Emanuele Sammut, Nazzareno Farrugia, Giuseppe Falzon, Alberto and Natalino Aquilina, Giovanni Zareffa, Guido Zammit, Antonio Buttigieg, Egeo, Joseph and Alberto Aquilina, Francesco Cassar, Aurelio Cini, Giuseppe Mizzi, Francesco Mizzi, Walter and Eddy Aquilina, Rosario Azzopardi, Antonio Gusman, Francesco and Vittorio Annati, and many others whose names I do not recall, and yet another - Salvatore Meilak.

Anyway, thanks to the International Treaties of Geneva (Geneva Conventions) which allow only 30 days of imprisonment for political internees, after the 30th day they were transferred to a concentration camp at BUERAT EL HSUN along the coast of Sirte.

During their detention in prison they were placed in cells with adequate comfort and were each paid 5 Lire daily. During this period only two members of their families could obtain a permit to visit them every two weeks.

They were allowed a short conversation of just 30 minutes, however, thanks to the Arab guards who served in the prison, we managed to exchange messages with news from each other.

In 1941 the British forces launched an attack and reached Benghasi and penetrated up to AGEDABIA so that they came to within a few kilometres from BUERAT. For this reason the Maltese internees were transferred first to CUSSABAT (MSELLATA in Arabic) where unexpectedly they received a great demonstration of solidarity from the local Arab population which rushed to offer them all sorts of oriental food including their favourite food the "CUSCUS". This humane demonstration surprised the commander of the Carabinieri, the good Marshall Prato. Later they were transferred to an old fort situated on a hill at the 6th kilometre at Gargaresc. There, acting on uncertain information, I was the first to trace them and reached them on my bicycle and with much emotion embraced my father after such a long separation. In no time I gave their news to all concerned. From that day the little fort saw a continuous coming and going of families visiting their interned menfolk. The good commander of the camp allowed the visits without any permission from Headquarters. The place became almost my home. In fact, every morning I left at sunrise on my bicycle laden with a thermos with coffee and a basket with groceries and spent almost the whole day with my father and all the Maltese Internees.

In the meantime the war continued both with the bombardments on our city and the rest of the community living under the threat of more arrests. My grandfather although being free was subjected to continuous checks by the police. To go outside the city to direct the work in his lime kiln he was obliged to obtain a pass from the police station.

At that time, two trucks which were our property were requisitioned by the Military authorities who used them to supply the front. They also confiscated our interest due to us from the Banco di Roma without even allowing us enough to pay salaries of the drivers of the trucks which were regularly paid by my grandfather.

In yet another of the retreats, the trucks were abandoned in Cyrenaica and lost for ever, together with the money accumulated the said Bank.

On 19th April, 1941, thanks to the intervention of various Italian and Arab personalities such as the Gran Cordone Cherbiscia, Imiral Fenzi and others, my father and many others were freed and sent back home, but always under surveillance. Others, on the other hand remained interned and from the fort of GARGARESC were transferred to that at TAGIURA where they stayed until the first days of January 1942 when they were finally transported to Italy in a merchant ship. They were sent to Villa Selva near Florence until Armistice Day - the same day in which Natalino Aquilina was killed by the Germans whilst attempting to escape.

During these two turbulent years - 1940-41 - the Maltese still tried to keep out of the political turmoil which was at that time very agitated. They fared better by confining themselves to their close circles and avoiding the slightest involvement in politics. They, therefore, led a life strictly confined to home - work - home.

On the 15th January 1942, like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky, the entire community was subjected to a decree of arrest. In only hours, all of us women, old people and children found ourselves packed into the large school ROMA, taking with us only few suitcases containing strictly necessary articles of clothing; thus abandoning all our property to the mercy of the many vultures.

Some managed to sell some things in a hurry, however, at a very low price, but the majority left all to the mercy of an adversary fate. At that time there were about 2500 Maltese.

So on 18th January, 1942, we embarked on three merchant ships - the Gino Allegri, the Nino Bixio and the Lerice - settling ourselves on straw in the holds. We were in the middle of winter and left in very rough seas. The Mediterranean at that time was strewn with mines and it was a real battlefield.

The three ships separated, one went towards Naples and the others to Brindisi. I found myself on the Gino Allegri which miraculously avoided a mine whilst off the Island of Panttalleria.

At dawn on 21st January we arrived at Naples and disembarked. We were placed on a long train and were escorted by the police who incredulously assisted us in our odyssey.

At this point I would like to point out that neither we nor the men interned since 1940, were ever informed of our destination until we actually reached the predetermined locality. Therefore our journeys were always towards the unknown.

Finally our convoy departed. During the journey, in the middle of the night, several carriages full of Maltese were detached from the train to go on yet another unknown destination.

I, together with the rest of my family, continued the voyage with the majority of the Community (about 600 persons). At one, in the middle of the night we arrived at Fiuggi in such cold as we had never experienced in our lives. This was our destination. At Naples we had only been given permission to take with us part of our baggage. All the rest was put in a heap in a big open space of the harbour. This luggage was also lost for ever.

We were thus literally lacking even the most important and intimate articles of clothing.

At Fiuggi, a most beautiful tourist locality situated at the top of mountain and famous for its mineral water, we were put in the biggest hotel aptly called GRANDE ALBERGO. This had been closed for years but was re-commissioned for us to serve as a centre for political internees. It was in excellent condition and the setting was marvelous.

In that freezing hour of the night, as we gradually arrived in small groups from the station, we were undressed, totally naked and disinfected, because we had on us a dreadful number of lice. Then we were wrapped in an army blanket and sent to our respective rooms to sleep in beds already laid out.

Our clothing was retained, disinfected and returned to us the next morning when shivering but with a delightful surprise we saw through the windows the white snow which fell uninterruptedly. It was the first time that we were seeing snow.

For several days we were not allowed to leave the hotel. We were in obligatory quarantine. Later, the great door was opened and we were allowed to go freely into the small village but not to leave the village.

Breakfast and main meals were served in the great dining. The quantity was not enough and the quality left much to be desired. However, thanks to our financial situation we acquired tiny articles of food especially fruit. We emptied the few shops of the locality. So much so that at one point the local people had to complain and succeeded in limiting our free exit from the hotel to the hour of 10 in the morning, thus allowing time for the local citizens to buy their daily requirements.

In the Grand Hotel we were too many for the service to be satisfactory. Thanks to the mediation of the owners of several small hotels and pensions, a number of families were transferred to the smaller places where we experienced better treatment, due also to some degree to our financial contributions.

We learnt later that the rest of our Community, both those who disembarked at Brindisi and those separated from the main railway train which had been put together in Naples, were put up in various boarding houses at Montecatini Terme, at Bagni di Lucca and other localities in the Toscana.

In practice we were all interned but free to go about in the community and enjoyed an incredibly marvellous life especially when the Swiss Delegation acting on behalf of British interests started to send us regular monthly subsidies. Thus we were modest tourists placed in various holiday places, but still under the constant control of the police.

From time to time some fanatic would provoke a political incident leading to his deportation to other free communities and separation from his family.

At that time almost all of us were wrapped in a fanatical pro-British feeling. However, even in Italy we created sincere friendships and were respected by all, even by the authorities responsible for us because in fact we had no feelings of malice at all.

This beautiful life, which one only dreams about, did not last long for the majority. In fact, whilst we were enjoying a comfortable life sitting and well relaxed outside the cafes of Montecatini, Fiuggi etc. blissfully partaking aperitifs and various drinks; looking and winking at the sparkling girls; being served at the table during meals; occasionally escaping for the areas established by the

authorities going on outings with the excuse of pilgrimages organized by the various parishes, and so on, a big concentration camp was being constructed in a valley surrounded by the mountains of the CIOCIARIA. The locality was in the neighbourhood of the small city of ALTARI, at the foot of Fumone a small village perched at the top of the mountain. The concentration camp was named LE FRASCHETTE<sup>2</sup> who knows why?!

At that time, who of us could have imagined that soon all would end up in that camp?

Well, in August of that same year we had the unexpected official visit of a group of Maltese amongst whom Dott. Carlo Mallia, Rev. Fr. Chetcuti and Mr Mizzi were prominent. Dott. Carlo Mallia introduced himself as "the representative of the Maltese Fascist Party" which had its headquarters in Rome. The visit went on for several days at Fiuggi and also at Montecatini etc. They informed us that we would be transferred to the camp already mentioned unless we made a declaration that we were, at the least, sympathizers of the Fascist Party. Their proposals and their suggestions were none other than a compromise worked out in our favour with the Fascist Government to free us from the concentration camp.

However, the majority of the Community mistrusted their interest in us even if in reality they might have been genuine and their proposals true. Our reply was not delayed and our clear refusal left the representatives of the Maltese Fascist Party perplexed. So much so that Dott. Carlo Mallia in his last address in the great hall of the Grand Hotel at Fiuggi said these exact words:

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<sup>2</sup> FRASCHETTE - poor silly fellows or Coquettes.

*'I leave you with my best wishes but before bidding you goodbye, permit me to tell you that you do not know the British and when you come to know them I ask you to remember me. "*

With those words he bid us goodbye and from then onwards we never saw him again.

To agree to those proposals of conformity with the Fascists appeared to us to be treacherous to the people of Malta who were fighting a war in favour of the British. To adhere to them gave us the feeling that we would look like renegades. And that our sense of solidarity with Malta would have changed into one of great cowardice. In a few words we were ready for everything provided it did not compromise our loyalty to Malta and therefore to Great Britain. These were our principles.

Those were turbulent days. Some were active in propaganda towards solidarity especially when it was learnt, who know how, that a group wanted to declare itself "sympathizers" to avoid that their families and they themselves should face the horrible prospect of the Concentration Camp. These events occurred not only at Fiuggi but in all places where Maltese were interned. It was the first time that we declared openly our ideals, our determination without delay or hesitation and when we openly demonstrated our real sentiments to the Fascist Government.

At Fiuggi, towards the end of September, all the so called "sympathizers" were transferred together with their families in one single hotel, the hotel SABATINO. On the 30th September 1942, the police informed the "non-sympathizers" to prepare themselves for the Concentration Camp. In fact, on 1st October the first group of some 100 Maltese left at 6.30 in the morning with all the best wishes and embraced by all.

Among them, I remember very well, was Salvatore Farrugia nicknamed HANNUSI. That day we were engulfed by sadness. We all trembled and were anxious to follow them and join them in their fate whatever it might be.

On 2nd October the second group left and so on until 13th October when the departures were suspended. The non sympathizers left at Fiuggi were very few - amongst them also my family. They left us there for a few more days attempting to convince us to agree to the usual declarations. But in vain; my Uher, my grandfather and others were adamant in the absolute and definite refusal. They accepted all consequences including that of joining the main body of our community in the concentration camp.

28th November. A memorable date in which even we found ourselves amongst the lot to board the train on the journey to Alatri and from there on military trucks towards the Camp where we were greeted so joyously by all our compatriots that it seemed like a feast day.

From 1st October, since we already knew the conditions at the concentration Camp and the treatment which was faced there, my father wasted no time in informing the Swiss Legation in Rome by way of letters sent secretly, asking for immediate intervention and urgent help for the Maltese families.

Our arrival at the camp was also met by torrential rain, as if we had not had enough discomfort already. There was mud everywhere because the work on the camp was not yet finished and therefore the roads were muddy.

It was nearly 11 in the morning. We settled in a big barrack where we found tiers of bunks with a straw mattress, three army blankets and a pillow each.

The barracks were divided into compartments with a long corridor. We hung up some blankets to provide the ladies with some privacy. We had to adopt ourselves without discussion. Now the hotels in Fiuggi remained only in our dreams.

After a few minutes they gave us big and small bowls and the cutlery and sent us on to the refectory for lunch. Here we realised that there were various people from Tripoli who had been at Montecatini, Bagni di Lucca etc., and even amongst these we noted that several families were missing. Most probably they were those who had declared Fascist sentiments without giving up their nationality. Today one could maybe say that they did the right thing. However, at the time, their conduct did not appear worthy in their relations to the majority who had lived with totally steadfast ideals.

Lunch, or better, the stale food, was disgusting and insufficient. Hunger began to be felt from the very first days. My father started his futile protests to the Director of the camp who, although a very nice person, had his directives which he could not change. At the same time he started an intense regular correspondence with the Swiss Legation, stressing the urgent need of their intervention by sending details of the living conditions of all the Maltese in the camp.

With his urgent and almost desperate letters, he asked for foodstuffs, clothing, medicines - but above all, food essential for children and also the need to respect the Geneva Convention regarding political internees.

(On its part, the Legation responded with the necessary urgency assuring us of their immediate interest. They started by the despatch of food parcels which continued to reach us regularly every month from 5th January 1943 – a day of great rejoicing.

1943, the insupportable hunger led to our physical deterioration. Despite this, our morale tied to a lively hope of better days, was always strong and confident.

There were months of sorrow. I remember that chestnuts, when we could find them, were the only things one could acquire to diminish the terrible hunger. I also remember that some Italian soldiers assigned to guard duty along the closures of the camp gave part of their bread ration to children, human gestures much appreciated by us. One of the soldiers was a Sicilian from Canicatti. His name was Zattero. This name I will always remember.

Another factor has remained impressed in my mind. At that time, our ration consisted of twenty grams of pasta daily, a very small quantity of oil, boiled vegetable, often of ordinary quality, and on Sundays they added a little piece of meat. In the morning we had coffee and milk and one hundred and fifty grams of bread. The children were given soup, also of poor quality. At meal times I remember that as soon as the cooks entered the dining hall with the pots, we hurried to open the windows, despite the freezing air, to avoid the bad smell of the contents of those cauldrons.

One evening towards the end of November or early December 1942, whilst we were lined up along the tables of the dining hall awaiting the rations, the light went out accidentally, leaving us for several minutes in the dark. We made a lot of noise and din with our bowls. When this happened, a boy of about four was seized by panic and escaping the control of his mother, started to run between the two long rows of tables. He tripped and fell into the cauldron which was full of boiling soup which was to be distributed. The soldiers assigned to distribute the rations became aware of the fall and pulled him out of the great pot.

They took him immediately to the hospital in Alatri to treat him, however, all attempts to save him were in vain. The poor boy was so badly burnt that he died immediately after his arrival in hospital.

That child was named Gaetano Falzon and is buried in the Cemetery at Alatri where other Maltese also rest in peace.

Hunger was so deeply felt that it did not allow us to refuse that horrid soup. Today with a shaking heart I have to declare "we all ate it."

On 5th December 1942, the Director of the camp proposed to diminish by a few grammes the daily ration of pasta and oil until Christmas Day when what was saved up would be added to the ration for that day. We would be able to enjoy a plate of spaghetti for Christmas Lunch. We all accepted. After all a gram more or less did not alter anything. When the expected day for spaghetti arrived, Holy Christmas Day, we realised that the cooking was being done without salt. Incredible! Therefore a collection of twenty centesimi each was raised and three Maltese escorted by guards went to the nearest village on foot and bought the salt.

At noon our long wait came to an end. There we were, full of joy with half a cauldron of pasta and a second container with meat in sauce. It was the first Christmas of my life during which I did not enjoy tasting the traditional and very good Magrud<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Magrud - dale tilled pastry fried in oil - Maltese Maqrut

At 5,30 in the evening we returned to the dining room with the playful din of our eating bowls for the Christmas dinner finding a sour surprise, a ladle of boiled onions and a salted sardine per person ... At this point our patience broke and a little insurrection broke out. The soldiers, accompanied by police, controlled the situation, arrested and took to prison several Tripolitans, accusing them of being agitators. Whilst in prison they fared much better as regards food, but after some weeks they brought them back to the camp. My father, as always, protested strongly against the exaggerated punishment inflicted, and communicated the facts even to the Swiss Legation so that they could intervene through the International Red Cross. Amongst the insurrectionists who were punished, were Enrico Mallia and Biagio Schembri.

On 4th January, 1943, the Director informed my father of the arrival at the station of Frosinone of the first wagon with foodstuffs from the British Red Cross through the Swiss Legation. The next day my father with a big group of men, escorted by guards, went to the station of Frosinone and took possession of the first providential load which they packed on a truck.

The anxious wait at the camp changed to enthusiastic applause when the truck, laden with parcels, was seen approaching at the entrance to the camp. The parcels were stored in a hut assigned by the camp administration as store and internal administrative office of our community.

From that day, my father ran the office with the help of other Maltese. He was officially entrusted with this responsibility and was recognised by the Swiss Legation in Rome. From then the situation began to improve in all aspects, including the relations with the administrative authorities of the camp.

After a few months, the construction of the camp was nearly finished with a beautiful little church dedicated to St. Francis; a school and a sanctuary managed by nuns; showers; a beautiful sports field; a nice bar at the entrance to the camp; and some food shops run by Tripolitans who obtained permission to run small businesses.

In February of that year we were transferred to a better part of the camp where the barracks were subdivided in small apartments.

With the passing time the rations were totally ignored. We passed them on to the Slav prisoners who received help from no human organisation. They were considered communists and therefore ignored even by the Red Cross.

The concentration camp had become a little village inhabited by political internees passing their days in tranquility whilst awaiting the end of the war to return, each one, to his own home.

Always through the Swiss Legation, we received all God's good things; foodstuffs; clothing; even the necessities for newly born babies; medicines; cigarettes; vitamins for the children; sporting gear and equipment. We practically had everything, including the regular subsidy to be able to acquire other necessities.

We formed a good football team which competed in very lively matches against the Slav teams and that formed by the camp military guards. The matches were a very pleasant distraction for all the interned of the camp, and also for the authorities.

Sometimes trouble caused by some foul play on the field served to increase the support for one's team. But when things tended to become serious the Commandant decided to disband the "national" teams and reformed them with players of different nationalities in each.

Thus everything was proceeding very well indeed. Some Italian soldiers had cemented real friendship with us internees. So much so~ that when they went home on leave we gave them small boxes with cigarettes, chocolate, tea and many other things which we ruccived in the parcels, to take to their families.

Unforgettable for his evil deeds, however, has remained a sergeant of the Public Security Services whom we nicknamed "MARIONETTE"<sup>4</sup>. He was of low stature with an overbearing character and above all jealous of our young men who kept the company of the beautiful Slav girls. In fact he did not hesitate to punish them with days of detention in the isolation barrack, reserved for the undisciplined, when he surprised them in the quarters of the Slav girls. A real farce which made everybody laugh. Amongst the many young men punished for these ridiculous reasons I remember very well Giusi Psaila and Ettore Annati.

The 8th September, 1943, the day of the famous Armistice, the situation was totally reversed. General Badoglio ordered the Italian troops to turn against the Germans, but these in only 24 luours, succeeded in disarming the whole Italian Army that did not react at all. Two German jeeps arrived at our camp like thunderbolts. They came so suddenly that we initially believed that they were the British, but quickly we realised that they were Germans coming to disarm the Italians who escaped. Some of them hid in our quarters. We gave them civilian clothes to allow them to escape. The Germans advised us not to leave the camp so as not to become involved, in those days of their merciless and massive invasion of Italy.

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<sup>4</sup> Marionette: puppet

The Slavs practically all escaped but we, with women, old people and children, where could we go? Therefore we remained in the camp, now unguarded, awaiting events.

On that same day, 8th September, the day of victory, the day of Italy's surrender, a tragedy struck the Maltese. About 20 Maltese had been interned in Villa La Silva near Florence. They were separated from their families. One of them, Natalino Aquilina, tried to escape to avoid falling into the hands of the Germans. At that very moment the Germans arrived to take control of the Maltese civil internees. They saw Natalino escaping. Despite their order to HALT he continued running in the hope of saving himself, but was mortally hit.

The days of want started afresh. The parcels did not arrive any more and the stores were exhausted. Three eager young men were sent by my father to the Swiss Legation in Rome with a message. The three were Antonio Mifsud (Tony Bafra), Lorenzo Mallia and Salvino Mizzi. It was a really dangerous mission. They succeeded in reaching the offices of the Legation and delivering the message. But on departing, thence, Antonio Mifsud was arrested by the secret police and interned in other camps.

Thanks to the message delivered they sent us through a high ranking German Officer a large sum of money to be able to keep going. We left the camp only to buy food from the farmers. Food was in short supply and we managed as well as we could.

One fine day the Germans arrived at the camp with a couple of trucks and took several men for forced labour. My father tried to oppose this but all in vain since they gave an assurance that the men would be brought back to the camp. Assurances which we could not rely on completely.

So much so that a young man Ettore Annati rebelled and refused ~ with them. The Germans reacted. First he was beaten and thrown bodily into the truck. Those taken to do forced ur included Riccardo Sammut, Aurelio Zammit, Lorenzo lia, Nazzareno De Bono, Aurelio Schembri, Natalino Meilak many others, among whom Orlando Mizzi who was released r a couple of days due to the intercession of my father who ;d that he was the book-keeper responsible for the accounts lie Swiss Red Cross. All the others were subjected to hard air for the defence and resistance of the German Troops. , with the passing of several weeks, a few at a time and risking r lives, they succeeded to escape and return to the camp and heir families.

At this point, fearing a second German round-up, my father advised all the able bodied youths and men to escape to the surrounding mountains until the stormy situation changed for the better.

We spent the first night of our exodus to the mountains in the ,n air in groups hidden in the thick woods. From the next day were helped by the mountain people and stayed in their ious thatched huts. From that day our good women found us I came daily up the mountings, bringing us food which we Id not do without.

It was winter. The freezing cold aggravated our malnourished physical state. Between the various groups on the mountains we succeeded in organising communications which extended down to camp where only women, old people and children were left. o, naturally, my father for their protection.

It was the month of November 1943. Then, towards the middle December, we all returned to the camp to spend Christmas with our families and, because the situation appeared stable, we never went back to the mountains.

In January 1944 the Germans occupied some empty barracks, changing them into workshops for the repair of their vehicles. They caused us no annoyance. In fact, I remember that one night a strong hurricane threatened to demolish our huts and we were all obliged to shelter in some store goods sheds to feel safe. Well, in this sad occasion - one of so many - the German soldiers helped us and even brought us bread. We practically lived at the mercy of events - be they good or bad - and we were prepared for anything.

The Allies and the Germans fought without mercy at the Montecassino Line, that was only a few tens of kilometres away from us. We thus entertained the hope that we would be liberated in a short time. Unfortunately we all deluded ourselves.

On 15th February at about 8 o'clock in the morning, a squadron of American planes attacked our camp, violently machine-gunning without pity. We were innocent victims of our own allies. We did not have a way of escape, much less shelters. We were like the early Christians awaiting the inexorable pitiless death in the middle of the Colosseo.

When the strafing ceased, with tears in our eyes we counted the dead and the wounded. The wounded were put not on ambulances, but on civilian trucks which had come to our help from the nearby village, Alatri. They were taken to hospital. They were days of sorrow for all. We were totally depressed because we could not find a way out.

A few days later, to be exact on 22nd February 1944, several American fighter-bombers descended again on us, dropping bombs everywhere. Several youngsters driven by an incredible courage rushed along the roads of the camp, waving white bedsheets to show the pilots of those planes that they were destroying women, old people and children who were their allies

in a concentration camp. In fact, in all probability, the pilots and their crews realised what was happening. They circled the camp for several minutes, maybe photographing the horrible spectacle, where, amongst the many dead, I remember Giovanni Loriente, Lazzaro Attard, Salvatore Mallia and Giuseppe Lanzon.

These last mentioned had served and fought with the British Army in the First World War and had been decorated.

The wounded were many, they were not counted. Many were mutilated permanently. Among them, one is with us in Melbourne. His name, Pasqualino Costa. At the time he was still a boy. He lost completely his right arm. Another Maltese boy lost his entire left leg, and others like them!

Aid was always the same, inadequate and pitiful. The burials of the poor dead were done in haste. We, ourselves, built some coffins from wood taken from our own barracks and always under the threat of yet another aerial attack.

In that hour of panic my father raised a strong and decisive protest with the Italian civil authorities and the German Military of Alatri, who ordered an immediate evacuation of the camp and sent convoys of trucks for this purpose.

The evacuation started on the afternoon of that very same day under torrential rain. It was a sad spectacle, but also a marvellous occasion, because the Maltese yet again proved united. They helped each other in everything. But, above all, they helped the stricken families with children who found themselves unexpectedly orphans.

But it is practically impossible to describe the state of mind and the total situation in which we found ourselves. As I write I can see again the sorrowful spectacle of that day.

Then the sorrow for the dead and the agonising hope for the wounded were mixed with the fear of another air attack and the uncertainties of the immediate evacuation of the camp. First the women, old people and children helped by the men to get on the trucks which carried them to a convent of nuns in Alatri where they were accommodated in large halls, all on blankets on the floor. As it was getting dark we finished moving the very few and poor pieces of luggage to the respective owners lying exhausted on the floor in the convent.

Many belongings were abandoned and left at the camp. By now all of us were resigned to every possibility, and to lose everything in trying to save our lives. I was amongst those last to arrive at the convent. I had managed to stay with the men assigned to load the baggage on the trucks and was held behind with them. It was already night when we got back. Wet and very cold I huddled amongst the numbers of my family. All were there except my father who was always busy comforting the stricken and anxious together with the authorities to put some order in the desperate situation. Preparations had to be made for the hasty burial of the dead.

In the afternoon of the following day, only a small part of our community was transferred by coach to Rome and was locked up in the great hall of the Accademia Britannica where we arrived at about eleven at night. Even here, no beds, no mattresses, no blankets. All on the ground. I spent all night long on a chair.

All the others were held up at Alatri due to lack of means of transport but should have rejoined us on the following day. My father felt it was his duty not to abandon this last group and he stayed with them. From that day, 23rd February 1944, we got no news of him until we saw him again at Santa Maria di Leuca in June 1945.

After a couple of days locked in the Accademia Britannica we were taken to the Railway Station in Rome, where we were pleased to find another group of our countrymen coming from Altari. But my father and others were not there.

A long train of livestock trucks was waiting for us at the platform. We had been given nothing to eat. A German Officer ordered us into wagons where he found some straw to lie on. The train on the point of leaving when the Inspectors of the Swiss Legation arrived unexpectedly. They delayed the departure by a I two hours, which was the time required to provide us with • food and a sum of money for our requirements. In those ins we felt relieved by the God-sent protection. Who had warned the officials of the Swiss Legation? Even today I do not N. However I suppose that they had been informed from the moment that we had arrived in Rome.

Anyway, we left. During the journey the train made a stop and Ruards allowed us to fill our water bottles. In that interval we machine-gunned from the air, provoking a great rush to pc. With the bottles of water in our hands we sped to the wagons and jumped aboard because the train had started to move ct away from the station to avoid the bombing. It was the on of Ortu, which we later learnt had been bombed. There were again underway, huddled close together on the straw only some blankets which we had just managed to take with. At dawn on the following day we arrived at Florence where train made a stop of a couple of hours. Even here the vials of the Swiss Legation reached us and provided us with c food and flasks of Chianti wine. They gave a sum of money our Spiritual Assistant, Reverend Father Goddfredo Arsuffi, to be used for our needs.

Thus we left Florence and arrived at Carpi (Modena). From here they took us to the Concentration Camp of Fossoli in coaches. This camp was divided into different sections with barbed wire fences. At each corner there were towers with machine-guns. It was surrounded by a water-filled canal on whose embankments were two high barbed wire fences. The guards were fascists of the Republic of Salo under the command of the Gestapo.

We were put in a separate section where the barracks had several broken windows. The cold entered with the freezing air especially at night. We all had our own bunk, a mattress and only two blankets which were not sufficient. We were at the end of February with a hard winter in North Italy.

As regards food, the Germans did not treat us badly. Everything was rationed but there was enough to allay our hunger. There we were again in yet another concentration camp. Of the rest of the Community left at Alatri, we knew nothing at all. Only after the war did we learn that they had been cut off in Rome until they were freed by the Allies and taken back to Tripoli.

After a few weeks in the camp at Fossoli (Fossoli being the town near the Concentration Camp) they brought there even those Maltese who had been interned with freedom of movement in various communes. Finding ourselves together again was a great surprise to all. Nevertheless they were welcomed in a brotherly way.

In April of 1944, to be exact on Easter Day, the whole population of Fossoli led by their Mayor and the local doctor of the small town asked the German Authorities to allow the children to leave the camp to be able to spend that Holy Day in the warmth of their homes. This request was granted even for Easter Monday, the people of Fossoli having agreed to take full responsibility.

This was a grand gesture which the Germans accepted and it uplifted our hearts to see our children so happy.

All the families of Fossoli came for our children and brought them back in the evening with new clothes and so many parcels containing so many good things. This decent and humane demonstration of the Modenese people so touched our heart strings that we shall never forget it.

Amongst the many memories I have is yet another worth recounting. The Police Officer which we had known at the Camp in Frascette, the one we called "Marionette", whom I have already mentioned for his various misdeeds in our regard, in those days was serving in Bologna. He learnt of our presence in Fossoli and prompted by a desire to see us again, paid us a visit. His entry into our section was greeted with exultation and prolonged shaking of hands. Both we and he had forgotten his wicked deeds of the past and we appeared like great friends. He stayed with us a couple of hours, then he bid us goodbye, wishing us all the best. His welcome visit might have had the scope of seeking pardon for his excessive rigidity, but we had never harboured any grudges against anybody. In fact, he left happy that he had seen us again.

Towards the end of April 1944, the Gestapo after having examined, and to their surprise, learnt the reasons for which we were in a concentration camp, did not hesitate to grant us our liberty and encouraged us to leave the camp, providing us with safe passage documents.

This was marvellous news, but where could we go with our entire families? We were thus faced with yet another problem which the Germans understood and therefore, advised us to leave the camp a few at a time to try and find accommodation in the farmers' houses.

The Modenese, yet again, showed their good hearts and put whatever they could at our disposal. Thus we adapted as best we could, even using the stables.

In a few days, thanks to the Germans who informed the Swiss Legation of our situation so that it could arrange for the provision of our regular financial subsidy, and also thanks to the Modenese who welcomed us, all the Maltese were free and settled in the various farmers' houses in the neighbourhood of hamlets like Budrione, Novi Di Modena, Migliarina, etc.

With the subsidy we could lead a reasonable life regarding food. Accommodation, on the other hand, depended on adjusting to the circumstances.

Since this area was typically communist, after some months the Partisan Organisations began to be active in their operations. The Partisans were hunted and pursued as much by the Fascists as by the Germans. In this dangerous fray, we managed again to keep ourselves completely neutral and thus succeeded in making ourselves respected by all without ever compromising ourselves. At that time the war raged furiously in all parts of Europe.

### **22nd April, 1945**

The German troops were in full retreat and, trembling with joy, we exulted at our final liberation as we assisted at the never ending passage of the allied troops along their unopposed advance. We all left our homes and rushed to celebrate this much awaited day. We sang and we laughed. But we also wept because the suffering and the sorrows were not easily forgotten.

23rd April 1945 we all went to the City of Carpi to celebrate in the square and all the streets. Our euphoria had reached the seventh heaven. The next day we celebrated again but only after having participated in the funerals of several partisans killed during those days in the fighting to impede the German retreat.

Calm returned on 25th April and all returned to normal. But we, what were we going to do? No authority took note of our presence. We felt ignored and abandoned by all except by the good farmers with whom we still lodged and who continued to give us all possible assistance. The British flags which we waved in those days, started to be hauled down. We had to do something to make our existence known, to be identified and to show the urgent need of help, of some merciful assistance, because, in truth, we had nothing except the few clothes and some blankets.

We held a meeting and decided to nominate a delegation to go and spur on all the authorities starting with the Allied Forces. The delegation, composed of Eugenio Drago who in the absence of my father had assumed his duties; Giovanni Drago because of his respectable and imposing presence; and two very raw youngsters, Wander Mallia because he already had an elementary knowledge of the English language, and yours truly, Romeo Cini. Thus we left and went on foot all the way from Budrione to Carpi where we presented ourselves to the Allied General Command asking to be listened to. We were received by a high official, who after having listened to us, offered us a packet of cigarettes each and then asked us to leave because our situation was not his concern at all. We attempted to continue asking at least where we should turn to solve the desperate situation of our families. But he did not even deign to give us a suggestion and opened the door of his office to throw us out. At this point, Wander Mallia, who understood English, flung his packet of cigarettes violently on the desk saying:- "We have not come here for a packet of cigarettes". That gesture, coupled with the ferocious expression on Wander's face, have remained impressed on me even until now because from that moment I realised a truth which until that hour had appeared to me impossible.

Humiliated, but with a sense of rebellion which arose in us, we went towards the piazza of Carpi on our way to the Town Hall where we intended to appeal to the Mayor. Whilst crossing the square we noticed an American jeep with the Red Cross occupied by four American nurses. We approached them and explained our situation. These heard us and fortunately took keen interest in our plight. They asked us several questions, made us board the jeep and took us to the area of Budrione to visit the area where the majority of Maltese resided. They took notes and asked us to be patient, to keep calm and not to turn to anybody else for help, because they were taking due interest and would keep in contact with us and keep us informed of developments. They in fact, really took keen interest in us and towards the end of May 1945 asked us to inform all the families to gather at the Piazza of Rolo on a particular morning, of which the exact date I do not recall. Rolo was a village some kilometres away from our habitations. In the twinkling of an eye, with great happiness, we informed all. There we were, contented again. With joy in the bottom of our hearts we all started to gather and pack our poor rags.

On the morning of our departure, the farmers helped us and took us to the Piazza of Rolo on their wagons where they embraced us and gave us a very emotional farewell, whilst wishing us all the best. Good people! They deserve that for a moment I testify to their infinite kindness of heart. Often I ask myself; had we been in their place would we have done the same for entire families previously totally unknown in our lives? Sadly, it is not easy for me to give an answer to this, my own question.

Thus we found ourselves in the square. In the great confusion I noted one of the ladies of the American Army Red Cross busy with various officials. Later many coaches arrived. We got on board in some confusion and the column of vehicles departed for Reggio Emilia. It was nearly four in the afternoon when we all found ourselves in the great barrack square.

Here they distributed blankets, pillows and mattresses for us to settle ourselves in the various large sheds. We went to the sheds and started to position the mattresses on the ground, when suddenly, some Maltese inadvertently hit a mine and were flung here and there, fortunately only with minor injuries. The Americans then realised that the whole barracks were mind. They ordered all to stay put, not to take one more step. The bomb disposal personnel arrived quickly and, a few at a time, we were taken back to the square where they ordered a column of American Military trucks to evacuate us immediately. Meanwhile the injured were taken to hospital.

We were happy when an hour or two before we had left the coaches. Now, there we were, on stationary trucks on a road of Iteggio Emilia waiting to depart again ... who knows where to? In the meantime the people of Reggio Emilia came to know of what had happened and hurriedly came to the convoy of trucks offering all help. Some even offered us money which we refused with gracious thanks.

Finally we left. It was getting dark. We arrived in Modena and were put up in the large halls of the Military Academy from where we left after a few days, again on military trucks, towards Forli'. We arrived at the square of Forli' at the dead of night and spent the whole night in the open air lying on the ground, scarcely protected by some blankets.

The following day we were taken to the Station and put on freight cars. We travelled to Rimini where, for the first time in years, we saw the sea again. Several availed themselves of the occasion to have a good swim.

From here, again on trucks, we went down all the Adriatic coast with brief stops for food. At a certain point the convoy changed direction and took us towards Taranto.

Here we descended from the trucks and again boarded other railway wagons travelling to Lecce where we changed again to trucks until we came to Santa Maria di Leuca, a little seaside holiday resort. There we settled in charming small villas which had been requisitioned from the owners. This locality was the place where they gathered all the foreign refugees for proper identification and later repatriation. It was controlled by UNRRA<sup>5</sup> and administered by American and British Officials. We stayed there for four months from June to September 1945 always awaiting our return home to Tripoli. Food was not satisfactory. I remember we had an intolerable excess of tinned peas. Still, we managed to survive well enough.

A few days after settling in this place we were happily rejoined by my father with whom we had lost all contact. He could easily have returned to Tripoli one year before with the rest of the Maltese who had previously been held up in Rome. But he preferred to decline that possibility to be able to find us and to return home together with us.

Whilst we were still at Santa Maria di Leuca we providentially received a big sum of money from the Ministry of the Interior in Rome: money due to us during our internment at the Grand Hotel at Fiuggi but which had been stolen by the contractor. He had been found out and tried by the Fascist authorities. Even this detail I remember very well because I had to work all night with my father typing a full list of all the names of every single Maltese staying at Santa Maria di Leuca.

In August of 1945 the Second World War finally came to a definite end. We were still in Italy.

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<sup>5</sup> UNRRA - United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

Finally, towards the end of September we were transferred to Aversa, very close to Naples, awaiting our repatriation. We were billeted in a free wing of the mental hospital. The conditions were not bad. Besides we were free and could visit Naples and lie surrounding area.

Towards the end of October we boarded the heavy cruiser 'Garibaldi'" and with a prolonged sigh and much joy in our hearts we left Italy on our way to our very well loved country of birth, Tripoli.

During this long awaited voyage, an infinity of dreams went through our minds - of a brilliant tranquil completely peaceful future. We were certain that from our Government (British) we would receive complete protection, help for hard hit families, and above all for those who had left their menfolk for ever behind in Italian cemeteries, an adequate recompense for the harm suffered and security for the young, innocent orphans. Orphans whom I have seen with my own eyes, on the ship sailing to Tripoli, clinging to their mothers, their faces bathed in tears because to their sorrow was added the weight of the tremendous tragedy of uncertainty.

Certainly we did not pretend any privileges but only those sacred - rights legitimately due to us.

Besides we cannot forget the maimed, those youths who had lost in arm or a leg and for whom, consequently, finding work was almost impossible.

Anyway, we were confident of everything and did not have any doubts.

When we arrived in Tripoli on the 25th October, 1945 we were taken to the camp at Porta Benito and because we lacked clothing, they gave us each a green British Military uniform.

Later we noted that it was the uniform worn by all the street sweepers in Tripoli.

From the first days, those who owned a house or had other accommodation and could go there could leave the camp at will to start a peaceful private life. All the others were allowed to remain in the camp until they managed to find where to go.

At that time in Tripoli there was a British Military Administration with a Governor named Blackley. They were difficult years. Work was everywhere very scarce. The building industry was paralysed. Despite all we rolled up our sleeves and little by little succeeded to overcome the difficulties and to manage well on our own.

In November 1945, that is a month later, occurred the great massacre of the Jews.

Regarding schooling for our children, although the Italian schools at both elementary to secondary levels still existed as did the Catholic Private Schools, the Department of Education of the British Military Administration quickly set up English Language Schools for which teachers were brought from Malta. This school attracted all the Maltese children. This school which was restricted to the elementary classes was called San Giorgio. It served, I feel, only for the English Language.

In fact, after going through elementary schooling, those who had the possibility felt obliged to send their children to Malta. All the others had to start work. Others, on the other hand, decided to send their children to the Italian Catholic Schools where they had the possibility to continue their education at secondary level in Tripoli and later at Universities in Italy.

At the beginning of 1946, a general meeting of all the Maltese was held at the San Georgio School, at which a representative committee of the community was elected. Sig. Roberto Ghirlando was the person most suited for the presidency of the committee for several reasons, amongst which the influence he had acquired with the military authorities, his perfect knowledge of the English language and his very comfortable financial situation which had started since the British occupation of Libya in 1943. He was one of the few who had avoided the concentration camp, having gone to England before the outbreak of war.

Thanks to this committee, we acquired the old official Italian club which we used both as offices of the community and as a social club called Malta House. We paid a regular monthly rent for its use. The social club (Malta House) was administered by a committee elected by members who paid a monthly membership fee. The club and its committee was always subordinate to the Community Council.

The Community Council had the duty of safeguarding the general interests of the Maltese in general, including assistance for the poor.

In fact they immediately started to submit requests for compensation for war damages by an intensive correspondence, first with the Governor, then with the Consulate and finally with the Foreign Ministry in London. It was an extremely long and lively work which ended with totally negative results. In fact, to try to make us shut up, a ridiculous compromise was proposed, that is, 27 pounds sterling per family, or the equivalent in blankets and bed sheets.

This was a deep humiliation, especially for those who had lost significant capital. Besides we need not speak of the war widows, the little orphans and the crippled.

In effect, it was an unforgettable disappointment, not least because all the other ethnic groups, including the Italian community, received the best possible assistance from their respective Governments and were granted everything to which they had a right.

On 19th April, 1946, the British Secret Service invited two representatives of our community, Mr Carmelo Cini and Mr Leonardo Mallia to go to Malta to testify on some political facts regarding Dr Carlo Mallia, a certain Mizzi and Fr. Chetcuti who belonged to the Partito Nazionalista Maltese and who were being tried in their absence. The two gentlemen were kept in Malta until the 9th August 1946, that is four months with board and lodging expenses paid by the Secret Service. But no allowance was made for the families in Tripoli. Even the most basic help was refused. Luckily both these families were financially not badly off, even though they had just returned from a long period of internment in Italy. In this case, the absolute insensibility in our regard is again emphasized.

In those difficult post-war years, despite the many difficulties, we gradually succeeded to approach a normal civilian life. The various groups re-established themselves in their respective localities. In the group of the old city, thanks to the unbending Padre Goffredo, the Catholic Association was extremely active in all fields. The main beneficiaries of this work were many young Maltese people, particularly in the field of education for which local parish buildings belonging to the old and historic Santa Maria degli Angeli were used. Santa Maria was again recognised as the Church of Maltese.

In the bosom of this association, several sporting activities were born, including teams of football, volley-ball, basket ball etc. A big group of Catholic Explorers was also formed. They later participated in a big Jamboree in Rome.

Malta House did not involve itself in any religious activities, but confined itself to national matters. It concentrated mainly on social events with grand gala receptions with celebrations of the National Day, that is 8th September, taking pride of place. The National Day activities echoed like thunder throughout the city with amusements and sporting events.

There were in all, in the two groups, 96 boys and 112 girls. A really imposing turn-out of which I remember the triumphal parade of 8th September when, with the Maltese flag flying, this group marched in tight formation from Malta House to the Parish Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli where every year on this much loved day, a Holy Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated. It was attended by all the Maltese of Tripoli.

A group of these young people were invited by the Boy Scouts of I'luriana and thus visited their much praised Island of Malta. They were guests of the Scouts from the 15th June to the 26th June, 1949. Amongst the many happy occasions of these happy days in Malta, one remains indelibly impressed in my memory. There were nineteen of us. It was the last day and we were lined up on the deck of the cruiser H.M.S. Liverpool, ready to salute Malta for the last time. At the order to salute, the glorious Fort tiant'Angelo, whose history we knew, we were engulfed by a IXmerful emotion. From our eyes escaped tears which washed our trembling cheeks. This significant happening we could not explain.

However, it was the result of the patriotic sentiments acquired through our parents and a long chain of forefathers. Life Continued to improve. The young ones proceeded to learn a trade, others employed themselves, whilst others continued their studies. As regards work, the older ones resumed their old activities, progressing gradually.

The Parish of Santa Maria degli Angeli re-established its contacts with the Maltese Franciscans who, every year during Lent, sent an excellent preacher for the spiritual preparations leading to Holy Easter. For the great sermon of Good Friday, called the Sermon of the Three Hours of the Agony of Christ, all the Maltese community participated, even the most sceptic.

The grand and beautiful Carnival Parades, which always finished with the big ball, started to be organised again.

Even the entertaining greasy pole (giostra) on the sea on the occasion of the 8th September returned to amuse the whole population. All life continued to improve. Work increased, thanks to the spirit of enterprise of all the citizens of this beautiful sun bathed city. Later, we even had the years of the so-called BOOM in work and in prosperity which was initiated by the construction of the huge American military air base called Wheelus Field, and the arrival of various American and European Companies searching for oil.

Little by little even the village shows started again, like the Grape Festival at Zavia, and the motorcycle races in which the famous red and black devils raced along the jetty near the sea; the cycling tour of Tripolitania; football championship and the annual visit by teams from Malta like Sliema, Hamrun and others to whom we gave great welcome. In a few words, we started to live peacefully, forgetting the sorrows of the recent past.

In March of 1951 the Libyans obtained independence. The start of this new era presented itself to all the Europeans of Libya with dark clouds on the horizon. However, thanks to the economic boom stemming from the repeated findings on a real ocean of oil under the Libyan desert, we continued to benefit from the situation. After some years, laws favouring the native population confirmed our doubts regarding the security of a peaceful future.

In 1954 a general meeting of all the Maltese was held at Malta House to discuss a worsening of the situation in which, yet again, we feared that we would be innocently involved. The British Consul General, Mr Caruana, was present. At this meeting were born the prospects of emigrating to a distant and prosperous continent - Australia. Therefore it was decided to ask, at least for the less comfortably well off, for the same rights of the British and Maltese regarding assisted passages for emigrating to Australia. Unfortunately even this request received a negative reply. To be more exact it was suggested to us that we should first go to Britain at our own expense and live there for at least two years, after which we would ask again for assisted passages.

This was a proposal whose evasive intentions we understood. Therefore, we decided not to waste more time, because other requests would have been futile. We started the exodus towards Australia at our own expense. We thus avoided the possibility of being used as guinea-pigs by those who would have exploited particular political interests at the expense of our skins.

However we cannot deny that we always received high respect from the Libyan authorities and from our Arab friends in general, who showed their resentment at our decision. Some small personal confrontations occurred, but these few incidents were not the general rule.

Some preferred to emigrate to the United States, to Canada, to Britain; others also to Italy, but the majority chose Australia.

The first departures started. Some families left together, but mostly young people and men left on their own. These were obliged to leave their families temporarily in Tripoli because of the financial restraints caused by the failure to obtain the much hoped for aid from our government. Such help would have avoided the sad separations, even though temporary, from wives and loved little ones.

More tears, more sorrows and so much bitterness renewed themselves in the heart of our community. Nobody approached us to offer even a little help, not a few had to burden themselves with bank loans at high rates of interest to be able to be rejoined by their families in Australia within a reasonable time. Lucky were those who were in a position to pay for the entire passage and thus avoid separation from families.

The real exodus started in 1956 and finished about 1965 with all giving mutual help, support, and consolation. Very few families remained in Tripoli, those who did so nurtured the hope that there would be an improvement which would allow them to save their belongings and material interests. Unluckily they were totally mistaken and actually lost even the little they had with the eventual Gaddafian revolution when all the Italians had their assets confiscated and were expelled en masse.

Thus, as a rule, we had done well to organise and encourage the exodus. In fact, all of us here in Australia and all the others who are in different parts of the world, escaped yet another agonizing tragedy with the inevitable bitter consequences by setting off towards a new life filled to the brim with prosperity, well-being and above all, peacefulness, for us and our future generations.

In January 1971, to encourage as fully as possible the unity of the Maltese from Tripoli, resident in Melbourne, I started the publication of a modest stencilled monthly "*Il Corriere Tripolino Di Melbourne*" (The Tripolitan Messenger of Melbourne). It was compiled freely by one who had at heart the sense of solidarity.

The following is how the first text appeared:

First Edition  
January, 1971.

Dearest Tripolitans,

Thanks to the Tripoli Social Club, the small Tripolitan publication is born for the first time in Australia. Simple, but significant for the single fact that it is published exclusively to link our dear families not only in Australia but also in various other continents to which relatives and friends, to us also very dear, had emigrated in search of tranquillity and peace.

The Committee of the T.S.C. is the promoter of this praiseworthy initiative and to them I give my warm thanks for their moral and material help in the name of the Tripolitan Club of Melbourne. I am thus able to present myself officially to you and to make your voice heard to all those distant ones who remember you with so much nostalgia.

"Tripolitans...here I am, finally with you. I am the Tripolitan Messenger of Melbourne and I introduce myself with pride because I am proud of you.

The history of our Community goes back about 170 years, when a small group of European families landed on the shores of Libya. They were few, but united. Working men and their housewives from whom were born the new generations increasing in numbers to form an industrious very honest community. A community without national or religious prejudices which lived like brothers together and jealously guarding the most notable principle "Their Heritage" and holding always on high an only standard with one motto "Work and Family".

Our endeavours contributed substantially to the birth and growth of villages and cities where before there existed nothing but arid sand. Our efforts and sacrifices to achieve results were coupled with willingness. We defied the desert and the burning African sun. In a few words, we never dreaded tiredness, always for the well-being of our families.

The anguished years of the Second World War hit, amongst many others, our prosperous community and interrupted the educational and economic progress embarked upon by our forefathers. The consequences were disastrous for all.

With the end of the events of war, which in part divided us, we all found ourselves as if in one homestead: Alas ... difficult years!

With resolution and courage, we overcame all obstacles, but in vain! The re-establishment of the good old days was only a mirage. New political events engulfed us again. They multiplied and created serious problems, especially regarding the future of our children. An uncertain future, suffocated liberty ... and if these were not enough, we felt like intruders in the country of our birth to which we and our predecessors had dedicated our very existence.

We thus decided to find a way out. To leave. To emigrate - a sad decision, and not an easy one, but one which had to be taken and without delay. But, where to go .... ?

Finally about 15 years ago a small group of young people driven by courageous good will left once for all our much loved land on their way towards a new and very distant continent ... Australia. They were bid goodbye by a packed crowd of Tripolitans who, through these young pioneers, looked forward to a new and tranquil future.

Thus started the odyssey of our community. Family groups left uninterruptedly, travelling across the oceans towards Australia. They were encouraged, welcomed and helped by the first young pioneers and later by all those who had preceded them.

The majority of our community has chosen Australia to be their new home, whilst others have established themselves in Italy, Britain, United States and Canada. To all of these, always so dear to us, I promise again to send our voice from Australia to confirm the most lively sentiments of solidarity and to wish them all the best, and to renew with them ties which united us in the past so that the smiles and the tears of one may continue to be shared by all.

### **TRIPOLINI IN AUSTRALIA**

I now venture on to describe the last chapter experienced in this new, big and providential continent, towards which we all have profound gratitude.

Well then, the first years, obviously, were years of adaptation, of sacrifices heavy with the inevitable homesickness. Nevertheless, we found an abundance of work where we applied ourselves to quickly realise our dream of owning our home with its small garden and vegetable patch. We also came to appreciate the humane social welfare system with its unique rights and privileges, as well as the health scheme with its well-equipped hospitals and the incredible and commendable efficiency of its personnel. We were also fascinated by the large number of meticulously well-cared-for parks and the ubiquitous playing fields spread around everywhere. One was enchanted by the environment, the customs, the genuineness, the honesty, the order and the peace of mind.

Everything seemed like a dream, and slowly, jealously guarding our traditions, we succeeded to adapt and integrate ourselves easily into the local way of life.

Every year, our community developed and flowered in our newly found way of life and our children started their successful passage through the Australian Catholic School system. For us, the niggling problem of the future and of lack of security did not exist any more.

Slowly, we discovered the spectacular and enthralling beauty of this great continent, the immense and interminable expanses still in their pristine state, the thick forests swarming with the likeable kangaroo and the placid koala, the warm deserted beaches that stretched for many kilometres, the sea with an abundance of all sorts of fish, crustaceans and giant urchins ... much sought after by the Tripolini who are keen on fishing. One can't help but sing about the beauty of the coral reefs, a real natural wonder. The pastures, the orchards and the cultivated fields with modern and sophisticated equipment, the great variety of minerals which are mined like gold, iron ore, silver, copper, bauxite, coal, uranium, etc., etc.. All these represent the great wealth of this prosperous continent.

Rich also are the large reserves of oil and natural gas.

With the continuous influx of migrants from Europe, rural towns have developed and the suburbs surrounding the cities have grown with a frenzied rhythm. So too have the beautiful highways and freeways along the coastline and in the interior of the states.

Amazing was, and still is, the progress in all aspects of daily life, in industry, commerce, agriculture, tourism, culture etc.

Here then, a veritable paradise, where everybody had the chance of settling down well by taking advantage of their own ability and by honest work and without having to resort to the humiliating system of recommendations by others.

Towards the end of 1969, after having overcome the very real problems of settling down, the desire to form the TRIPOLI ASSOCIATION OF MELBOURNE was born. The large majority of our people resided in Williamstown, Newport and Spotswood. The rest had established themselves in suburbs around these centres and had unwittingly created a difficulty for frequent and direct communications. A small group of Tripolini, whose efforts are indeed laudable, went about trying to sell this concept to our people. At the same time, a provisional committee was formed with the task of drafting and presenting a constitution to the Association. This draft was accepted and adopted unanimously at a preliminary meeting that was held on the 7th of February 1970.

On the 25th of April 1970, the first General Meeting was called for the adoption of the constitution and the election of the first official committee of our Association.

### ***TRIPOLI SOCIAL CLUB***

It is important to note that the association was not limited solely to those of Maltese background. On the contrary, it was open without reservation to all Tripolini, be they of Italian, Greek, Armenian or Spanish background.

This initiative gave rise to a success that exceeded all expectations, such that on the 21st of October 1971, that is in less than two years, a move was made to acquire a larger place as a centre for our meetings and recreation. We bought an old Salvation Army building that was quickly restored so as to make it more liveable. It was later demolished and a new building, better suited to our purpose, was soon erected.

The demolition started on the 4th of June, 1977 followed immediately by the construction of the new building. By working from morning till night, we finished the building in record time, for on the 23rd of December 1977, the inauguration took place with a sumptuous party.

This stupendous feat was possible due largely to the total and commendable voluntary labour of all Tripolini tradesmen, concreters, bricklayers, carpenters, joiners, electricians, plumbers, tilers, painters etc., helped by a long list of labourers, amongst whom one should include the clerical people.

The building was designed by Mr. Albert Saragozza and the project was ably supervised by Mr. Emanuele Cassar. Even these two gentlemen donated their time and expertise freely for the good of our community.

### **FOUNDATION OF THE YOUTH MOVEMENT**

In the early years, much to the Association's delight, the Tripolini Youth Movement was founded with the aim of keeping together our new generation. This initiative was not in vain, for it too, exceeded our hopes.

Among the various activities which they organised, be they sporting, social or cultural, one function has left me with a pleasant, never to be forgotten memory, and that was the "Living Christmas Crib", a spectacular play in three acts, practically all in Italian, that was held in the Parish Hall at Newport on 16th December, 1972.

Amongst the collaborators in this play were some clever Tripolini electricians, who arranged the interior of the hall with various bits of electrical equipment, and also manned the spotlights.

One other gesture that was much appreciated was the involvement of the Tripolini Choir under the baton of the organist, Mr Natalino Mangion, who organised this choir especially for this great occasion.

The 'Living Christmas Crib' proved to be an enormous success, so much so that the following day it was repeated for the other people in the parish and to a large gathering of Sisters and Priests from the surrounding area, who were specially invited to enjoy this marvellous spectacle.

The Association has always kept an eye on, and encouraged the activities of the youth movement, towards who we have absolute faith in that they will follow the examples of our solidarity.

#### **"IL CORRIERE TRIPOLINO" OF MELBOURNE**

In January 1971, with the help of the Association, the abovementioned monthly magazine was first published. It was a simple, stencilled but significant newsletter that was published for twelve years, in fact till December 1982.

It was a small paper that limited itself exclusively to the news pertaining to our group in Melbourne with the aim of bringing together and re-establishing the bonds of our families, so that the ears and the joys of one could become, as in the past, that of the whole community.

The *Corriere Tripolino* of Melbourne was the first Tripolino magazine published overseas and was welcomed by all, even by our countrymen who had established themselves in Italy, England, The United States, Canada and Malta and to whom a copy was sent regularly.

The journal was very dear to my heart, and towards the last few years, I debated with myself whether I could afford the time, amongst all the other jobs that I had, to edit the magazine. Later, we had to regrettfully discontinue its publication. All in all, I still have all the copies of the 'Corriere', and I hope, that in the future one could find, amongst its articles, testimony to the harmonious solidarity of our community here in Australia.

Very worthwhile too, has been the contribution of the ladies, who, for many years, admirably lavished their time and labour for the club, especially the services in the restaurant. In alternating groups, they volunteered their service with a marvellous altruistic spirit for the sake of the association.

Amongst themselves, they formed a group called affectionately "The Domestic Group", and they organised excursions, picnics, social dinners and hired coaches so as to go together to enjoy the spectacle of the theatre.

As I write, joyful memories come to mind, memories of times past, full of happiness and marked by absolutely sincere sentiments.

Such memories, however, are inevitably combined with regret, that those times, which seemed to be eternal, were in fact incredibly ephemeral.

I treasure these memories and always hope that one day I will be able to relive them.

Among the many events worth re-telling, was the enthusiastic arrival of Rev. Father Goffredo Arsuffi to Melbourne on the 2nd of July, 1973. He was the ex Parish priest of our old church of Saint Mary of the Angels, a Franciscan missionary of the old school who dedicated his entire life to the poor.

Much to our excitement, his Eminence Cardinal James Knox had approved the transfer of Fr. Goffredo to the Melbourne Diocese, where finally, while still continuing with his spiritual mission, he could enjoy a comfortable and easy life. After two months, upset by the excessive consumerism, he again heard the call of his missionary vocation, and in fact asked for and obtained, a transfer to the Missions of Aitape' among the poor tribes of Papua New Guinea where, notwithstanding his old age and his state of poor health, he continued his good works until the doctor confirmed that he had an incurable disease.

Following this confirmation, he wished that he could spend his last few days in his beloved native country of Lombardy, but before he left for Italy, he made a brief return visit to Melbourne to see his friends for the last time.

He died in a hospital in Milan on the 13th of June, 1986, leaving a strong and living memory among the whole of our community.

Another triumphal and unforgettable event was the visit of the eminent Brother Amedeo Cavaglia on the 24th of December, 1981. He was our ex teacher and was then the Secretary of the Lasalliani Students' Association of Libya.

This visit, which was eagerly awaited by us all, was organised by our Association in collaboration with the Exlali Association of Italy. This brief visit re-awakened in us the joys of childhood in the schools of the loved Lasallian Brothers of Tripoli.

This splendid and grand occasion gave us the opportunity to show everybody our heartfelt gratitude towards the Lassalian Brothers for giving us a good education and above all, by teaching us to love God and our neighbour.

Many are the joyous occasions that took place in the course of time that are treasured in the heart of our Association, that, even now, continues to flourish with vitality and a wonderful solidarity in its many facets.

More than three decades have now passed since we decided to venture into the unknown and settle in this distant and prosperous continent, and today, I can say that we have all done well. In fact, the results speak for themselves and are testaments to our dreams.

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I hope that our future generations will follow our example, and uphold the principles and the traditions that have been passed down from father to son through the ages.

To those who, in the meantime, have grown and can reason in two languages, but have come to realise that some of them have not kept up the traditions or have only gone part of the way, such that they are preoccupied with the second language, the new one. I ask them to please remember the fact that their first language is not their mother tongue. If they are not careful, when they settle down later on in life, their own children will want to know why their grandparents are different, and many of them will go to learn their grandparents' first language from someone else, because of youthful curiosity and the thirst for knowledge of their origin.

## CONCLUSION

Here we are at the conclusion of our story. I started with fear and trepidation and I finish my story with great satisfaction. These are pages written for posterity, something I wanted to do for a long time, aided only by my memory and some diaries I have treasured over the long years, as well as the encouragement of those many people who, like me, have lived through the same events.

Let me now say goodbye ... a big thank you to those who have helped me in various ways, and particularly to you, my dear readers, who have followed my sometimes, somewhat untidy narrations.

A special thought of gratitude to Dr. George Boffa for his valid and excellent collaboration in the field of translation, and to my friend, Antonio) Mangion for the way in which he dedicated his time as a competent technician for all the printing.