

MEDEURO: THE LONGING FOR IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY AMONG MALTESE MIGRANT SETTLERS IN NORTH AFRICA

HENRY FRENDO

University of Malta

Based largely on materials held in the Service des Periodiques at the Bibliotheque Nationale de Tunisie in Tunis, and especially on content analysis of a 1930s newspaper *Melita* published in Sousse, this study explores the yearning for and the anguish of a cultural *survival* among Maltese migrant settlers in North Africa, above all the retention of Maltese as a language of expression, affinity and identification, at a time when Maltese itself was experiencing a literary rebirth. However, such a campaign is undertaken in a 'non-Maltese' context, where moreover, in addition to separation and distance, the influence of European empires—the French, the British and the Italian—is pronounced, if not dominant, thus interfering with any continued loyalty to one mother tongue or mother country. Masterminding the intellectual push for a collective self-identity anchored in language, literature, history and religion, is a leading francophone *litterateur* whose family had settled in Algeria from the island of Gozo. What is also offered here, in the annotations, is a fairly comprehensive bibliography of Maltese migrant settlement in northern Africa with special reference to lesser known articles and other publications not available in English.

Les contacts entre vous ne sont plus qu'exterieur, vous ne vous reconnaissez plus guère que par vos noms de famille. Mais ce qui est extérieur est appelé à être effacé par le temps: encore une génération, deux tout au plus et, l'effet des alliances aidant, nos descendants n'auront plus la moindre idée de leurs origines; alors on ne pensera même pas à se grouper; ce sera la mort, nos colonies maltaises ne seront plus qu'un souvenir bientôt lui même évanoui. Vous ne pensez qu'au présent, je pense à l'avenir; voilà donc l'avenir qui nous attend! Vous ne pensez qu'à votre communauté, je pense à toutes nos communautés à la fois; consentez-vous à ce qu'elles continuent de s'ignorer les unes les autres dans un même mort, car c'est mourir que de cesser d'être soi-même? Nos pères en émigrant en terre étrangère ont cherché la vie non la mort, et cette vie qu'ils ont été capable de créer, nous devons être capables, nous, de la transmettre avec le soufflé dont ils l'ont animée: un soufflé maltais! Ce soufflé, il est dans notre langue, il est notre langue. Elle seule peut conserver puissamment et indissolubles les liens qui unissent le Maltais, tous le Maltais de la terre jusque dans le plus lointain avenir. Elle seule permet la fraternité profonde car elle est elle-même la fraternité. Je ne veux pas que, dans quelques siècles, les historiens disent: "ici vivaient des émigrants maltais; ils se laisserent rapidement absorber par des peuples plus énergiques; leur trace ne se retrouve plus que dans quelques noms de famille encore reconnaissables"...

LAURENT ROPA, "Ma province franco-maltaise: Vous voulez fraterniser? Parlez Maltais!", *Melita*, no. 45, Mardi 5 Juillet 1938, p. 1.

For some decades now we have been hearing about 'Euromed' initiatives. During the CSCE in Helsinki in the mid-1970s Malta had insisted that there could be no security in Europe without it in the Mediterranean. More pointedly, from the start of the EU's 'Euromed' process in Barcelona in 1995 to President Sarkozy's 'Union pour la Mediterranee' in 2008, such initiatives have been largely Europe-driven, in spite of token recognition such as placing the Euromed Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures in Alexandria, Egypt (naming it after a former Swedish foreign minister). All-Mediterranean initiatives, such as the Permanent Assembly of the Mediterranean, based in Malta, have been slow to take off and have had only a very modest impact, if at all. There have been various Mediterranean-oriented academic initiatives, such as university networks, including most recently the Tarragona-based Euromed Permanent University Forum and a Euromed University in Slovenia. Arab partners on the southern Mediterranean shores have not tended to feel as central to such initiatives as Europeans would have liked them or had hoped they would be. Concerns generally have been economic, political, strategic and cultural.

Until the 1950s and 1960s there was another reality among European migrant settlers in North Africa, who saw Europe from a southern coastal lens. They had developed interests and affinities with the host populations but still looked to European identities for self-definition and self-preservation as separate ethnic-cultural entities. The smaller minorities, such as the Maltese, almost inevitably felt close to one or another of the dominant occupying powers, often making of that association an aspect of their very identity—Britain in Egypt, France in Algeria and Tunisia, Italy in Libya. At the same time, however, several sought to resist any wholesale assimilation and acculturation: they were Mediterraneans but they were Mediterranean Europeans. I have coined the term 'Medeuro' in this paper to distinguish between the more contemporary generally EU-driven version of 'Euromed', and the colonial-patriotic North Africa based outreach until decolonization. The press was a tangible means for the expression of such concerns and preoccupations with retaining, losing or changing identity, while consular offices were central to questions of nationality and citizenship, with their attendant liabilities or benefits.

In Tunisia, as in Algeria and in Egypt, the second half of the 19th century saw the publication of a number of bulletins and newspapers, which served as a means of giving expression and of sharing information to the Maltese or Maltese-descended communities settled there. In North America and in Australia such publications began to appear in the first half of the 20th century. Some attempt was also made in Malta to publish a paper or review which sought to service the interests and needs of the Maltese

overseas, partly as a vehicle for the retention and maintenance of an inter-migrant communion, far the longest surviving such periodical being *Lil Hutna*,¹ started from Palazzo Caraffa, Valletta, in 1950 under the auspices of the ecclesiastically-led Emigrants Commission.²

Overseas settlement over a long period shaped and transformed identities, perceptions and relationships, although it was the mother country which ultimately and perhaps necessarily remained the chief cultural-ethnic matrix in the migrant mind, so long as this sought to feed on the collective memory of a shared past. In most cases, ethnic journalism, even literary production, was strongest among first generation emigrants; but in some areas, especially in the Maghreb, including Libya, and in Egypt, linguistic and cultural retention persevered inter-generationally to a considerable extent, much more so it seems than in the English-speaking world across the oceans. One aspect of this was and remains to this day the Roman Catholic religious practice, which has been dented but certainly not broken by growing secularization and consumerist materialism or indifference.

While to be a Maltese tended to mean, almost automatically, to be Catholic, to be Catholic did not mean of course that you were Maltese, there were so many million others who were so and who would never even have heard of Malta.³ In the case of the socio-linguistic and socio-cultural 'mental' make-up of a national self-identity, to the extent that this thrived, it was different. What was especially different here was the factor of language, of which there existed a rather unique Maltese version, which had evolved over the centuries, initially as a vernacular, with hardly any literature worthy of the name before the 19th century. Although attempts to draw attention to the significance of Maltese had been made at least since the late 18th century, and an attempt to rehabilitate and at the same time purify it occurred in the 1880s, it was in the inter-war period that we may speak of a linguistic-literary resurgence. Ironically, it was by British decree in 1934, at a time when Malta's elected administration had been arbitrarily dismissed and self-government just about abolished, that the Maltese language, together with English of course, was made a national language of the fortress colony, while the locally very old established Italian language was effectively removed from all spheres of public life, including the university and the courts where, partly in defiance of the colonial regime, it had survived.

How far this resonant background to the complex 'language question' of Malta was felt or understood among Maltese migrant settlers in French, British and even Italian imperial territories in the Mediterranean is open to question. In December 2005 I had occasion to examine practically all the Maltese-related publications at the Biblioteque Nationale in Tunis from the 1880s onwards, when I also had the privilege of addressing a post-graduate

seminar at the University of Tunis, Manouba, in the company of my friend and colleague Habib Kazdaghli, based on my published interview with Edgar Pisani, the former Minister under De Gaulle and Mitterrand, President of the Institut du Monde Arabe and later Commissioner for New Caledonia, who was raised in Bab el-Khadra and whose four grandfathers and grandmothers, he told me, were Maltese.⁴

In this presentation, an original draft of which was first delivered in French at the Centre Culturel in the Medina of Tunis in January 2007, I shall seek to offer, from a Maltese and Mediterranean perspective, a somewhat contextualized and comparative critical analysis of just one newspaper, which was published in Tunisia during the late 1930s, and which for various reasons is rather more seminal and intriguing than others. Entitled *Melita* and published in Sousse by Jean Vella, this is not so representative of the bent or level of Maltese 'discourse' in the history of Maltese ethnic journalism, although it still addresses various issues familiar to the genre, including personal, parochial, patriotic and religious highlights, as well as ongoing links with the country of origin of a mundane or nostalgic nature. Typically too, and more so than usual, it is concerned with the notion of honour, that is of self-esteem as much as of self-identity. To renounce to your Maltese parentage or ancestry or, worse, to be ashamed of it and seek or pretend to have been assimilated into another vein, was tantamount to a betrayal—not only of your race but of yourself. As the anthropologist Peristiany among others showed years ago, notions of honour and shame were particularly relevant in certain contexts, such as the Mediterranean one. To a lesser or greater extent, Maltese ethnic journalism is everywhere concerned with proving to others, if not to oneself, Malta's worth, hence the need to respect ancestry, history, tradition and continuity in spite of, or perhaps because of, changed situations and circumstances. This concern however has also been a means of self-preservation and indeed of self-assertion, inter-culturally and inter-ethnically, even politically, within broader parameters which remain essentially foreign, if only because they are not 'in-group'—that is, not wholly internalized, possessing lingering heart-felt memories, experiences, relations and indeed a language-driven knowledge and sentiment.

The knowledge-inspired patriotic ardour expressed in *Melita*, which seeks to encompass not only North Africa but if possible North America and Australia, is itself caught up in some constraints if not contradictions.⁵

First, there can be no doubt on which side of the Maltese political divide it rested. It is pro-Strickland and anti-Mizzi. The social-imperialist party led by Lord Strickland, a former colonial governor who had been a Tory member of the House of Commons and since 1928 sat in the House of Lords, had long supported the elevation of Maltese into a national language,

together with English, and opposed the continued use of Italian in Malta. That was a cause which had also been championed by the small Labour Party, founded in 1920 as *La Camera del Lavoro*; by the late 1930s this had been almost completely overshadowed by Strickland's Constitutional Party, to which it had allied itself in 1926. Strickland, a millionaire who was the son of a British naval captain and a Maltese noblewoman, had founded the main printing works in Valletta upon returning from the colonies after the First World War, and he had taken care to ensure that he would have a daily mass circulation newspaper in Maltese, *Il-Berqa*—the one which *Melita* understandably and unhesitatingly recommended to its readers. It was the leading and indeed the only long-lasting daily newspaper published in Maltese anywhere before the Second World War. Unknown perhaps—and no doubt unpalatable—to *Melita*'s contributors would have been Strickland's earlier declaration of intent—to make the Maltese people as English as possible: in thought, in speech and in fact. Maltese would be the means for de-Italianizing and, instead, Anglicizing the British Empire's strategically-placed island colony. Anglo-French relations had improved greatly by the late 1930s, but earlier Strickland's administration had prevented even a Maltese-Tunisian brass band from visiting Malta, while a coadjutor bishop, Antonio Maria Bugahiar, seen as a pro-nationalist protégé of Cardinal Lavigerie during the campaign for representative government in the 1880s, had been quickly expelled to Santo Domingo, where he died shortly afterwards.⁶ What *Melita* published eulogistically about Strickland's politics was sometimes incorrect or untrue.⁷

Enrico ('Nerik') Mizzi, on the contrary, was seen by *Melita* as an enemy, an 'Italian' whose newspaper, *Malta*, published in Valletta in Italian since 1883, was, it even suggested at one point, owned by the Fascist regime, which it certainly never was; while Mizzi was actually the Malta-born son of a Franco-Maltese marriage, his mother being a Fogliero de Luna from Marseille. His father, Fortunato, had founded the *Partito Nazionale*, later *Nazionalista*, in 1880, to resist an imposed Anglicization—the policy of 'English, and English only, taught through the medium of Maltese' in schools, and the elimination from appointment or promotion of those Maltese who did not 'thoroughly understand it [English]'.¹⁰ The Mizzi which *Melita* went on about, admittedly at the time of the Munich crisis, had been court-martialled for sedition in 1917 when an elected member of the legislature, and Italy was a British ally; and he was about to be interned and subsequently deported to Uganda, without trial or charge, for suspected possible disloyalty to the British Crown.

One of the arresting features of the Maltese migrant mentality in North Africa is the high esteem in which it holds Empire, be that the French Empire in Algeria and Tunisia, or the British Empire in Egypt. As Malta was a British

possession, it did not have its own embassies or consulates; the Maltese overseas depended for anything they might have needed on the consulates or authorities of the occupying powers in their host societies. But belonging to an Empire seems to have given them additional status or clout, as *colons* or as expatriates, and as Europeans, so they tended to identify proudly with these European empires. Thus for example we find the Maltese in Egypt rejoicing that Lord Lloyd had intervened to institute English schools, so they would no longer have to send their children to French or Italian ones.¹¹

The leading light of the newspaper *Melita* was Laurent Ropa (1891–1967), an accomplished prize-winning novelist and translator whose family had emigrated to Algeria from the island of Gozo when he was an infant. He was an ardent supporter of the Maltese language and literature, including poetry, and saw this as the overriding characteristic of his nationality and of its uniqueness. He chastised those who turned their back on this living heritage, and failed to appreciate artistic creativity. Hence the attention to all those individuals of Maltese descent who excelled in any field and could thus be seen as role models for the migrant communities. Ultimately, however, Ropa would have seen such ethnic communities as Bretons or Provençales in France, that is distinct entities but very much within the French sphere, loyal citizens whose qualities enriched the diversity of the mother country and its Empire. Difference and loyalty were combined.

In the case of Maltese nationalism in the homeland proper, however, the separate cultural dimension was also a political consideration and aspiration. Once again ironically, apart from the practically identical pro-British and Imperialist rhetoric in Malta, it was no other than Nerik Mizzi who would have come closest to Ropa's vision so far, however, as Italy was concerned. In an article in an Italian journal in 1912, at the time of the Italian occupation of Libya and the Anglo-French *entente* to counter the rise of Germany, he had proposed an Italo-Maltese federation, with Malta retaining a separate politico-cultural autonomy within the Italian kingdom. For this he would suffer for the rest of his life, labelled an irredentist, if not subsequently a fascist as well. While 'Britishers' in Malta readily adjusted to and became comfortable with the colonial situation, the more committed Maltese pro-Italian core, a small minority, would have seen themselves in an ethnic-cultural guise as 'Italiani di Malta'.¹³

One noteworthy feature that emerges from content analysis of *Melita* is the fairly elaborate and profound discourse on language and nationality but not, of course, citizenship. Another is the campaign somehow to found a world migrant federation, or at least a North African one, comprising the Maltese *diaspora*, if only by means of an inter-communal, extra-national organ such as *Melita* itself was and aspired to be during the few years that it appeared.

Although Ropa wrote in French about the need to speak and read Maltese — ‘Parlez Maltais!’¹⁴—he knew Maltese, and even translated Maltese poetry into French. His *Poetes Maltais*, an anthology of Maltese poetry translated into French, was in turn carried in an Italian translation by Mizzi’s *Malta* in Valletta.¹⁵ *Melita* also carried some usually anonymous columns and articles in Maltese. Among the names and works we find mentioned or printed over the years are those of the leading Maltese poets, such as Dun Karm Psaila, Ruzar Briffa, Mary Meilaq, Prof Anastasio Cuschieri, Karmenu Vassallo; of the best-established linguists and lexicographers including Pietru Pawl Saydon and Ġużè Aquilina, the latter two even met Ropa at Chartres in France.¹⁶ Even the ingenious self-made writer Gwann Mamo gets the bye-line more than once, deservedly so because his biting satire on Maltese emigrants in America, *Ulited in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka*, remains outstanding. Mamo had been a friend of Manwel Dimech, the excommunicated left-wing nationalist ex-convict who died in exile in Alexandria in 1921, and from whom Mamo had imbued much of the Maltese self-confident citizen philosophy. Another whose name appears in *Melita* more than once, pleading for more Maltese dramatic companies to perform popular plays and shows (*teatrin*), is Salvu Agius, who had been one of the members of Dimech’s Xirka ta’ l-Imdawlin, later the Xirka Maltia, before the latter’s expulsion from Malta without conviction or charge in 1914.¹⁸

Some of the poems published in Maltese, morphologically at its most Semitic, praise the language, identifying it with being oneself, with springtime, communion, belonging, the sense of place, faith and solidarity, and are highly evocative by their very authenticity. This little harvest is from Mary Meilaq’s ‘Ir-Rebbiegha’:

*In-naspla sfaret,
Is-silla smaret,
In-nahla daqet,*

*Hlewwiet il-ward.
.....
l-imhabba xaghlet*

*ma’ kullimkien.*¹⁹

Or this tribute to Maltese, from a Carmelite father, Professor Anastasio Cuschieri:

Ruhi minghajrek bhal fomm imbikkem,
li jrid jitkellem u ma jstax.
.....
Int nisel tajtni kbir u qalbieni,
Hsieb u qalb lilek naghti flimkien.²⁰

Although events concerning ecclesiastical or religious feasts and celebrations do occupy space in *Melita*, they by no means dominate it; on the contrary the overriding concerns continue to be throughout the linguistic, literary and cultural ones. Naturally the visit of some brass band, such as the Sant'Elena band of Birkirkara, whose marches and concerts invariably attract Maltese audiences in a big way, would figure prominently; but the front page is almost invariably dedicated to the cultural 'Malta taghna' (Our Malta) campaign.

It is this, too, which cements the liaison and communion with other Maltese communities and community organizations in North Africa, especially in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, the writers in particular, although if there were Maltese products on show at some fair in Tripoli, *Melita* would not miss out on the publicity and encouragement. In Alexandria, there was the Valletta-born Ivo Muscat Azzopardi, a prolific author and the son of Ġużè, perhaps the most famous promoter of the language who had died in 1927. In Port Said, you had Toni Said, who was a purist; in Cairo you had other militants, such Ivan Magri-Overend; and various other personalities, some of them professional people, who led clubs and associations, including mutual self-benefit associations and charities.²¹ Most importantly of all, however, apart from such organizations as philharmonic societies and dramatic companies, which also existed of course in Tunisia, Algeria and just about everywhere else where sizeable minority ethnic communities existed freely, in Egypt we had Said's *Xirka għat-Tixrid tal-Qari Malti* and his journal *Il-Qari Malti* and Muscat Azzopardi's *Società Letteraria Maltija*, in liaison with Malta's own *Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malti*²² (whose not uncontroversial 1931 'phonetic' alphabet had been officially endorsed by 1934), with which Muscat Azzopardi corresponded regularly. These institutions were at the forefront of the Maltese linguistic-literary revival of the 1930s. Just witness *Melita*'s attention to Ninu Cremona's biography of that pioneering linguist Mikiel Anton Vassalli, who first identified the native speech with Maltese nationhood.

The first newspaper by the name *Melita* actually had seen the light much earlier, in Egypt, not Tunisia; started in 1893, it was directed by G. Palmier and M. Nuzzo.²⁴ And as for spreading the Maltese cause worldwide, the Association of Maltese Communities of Egypt, founded in Alexandria in 1854 and transferred to London in 1956, would later have a stencilled Newsletter directed until a few years ago by the Cairo-born Ivan Magri-Overend, regularly mailed to all its members and to libraries for the best part of half-a-century. This kept track assiduously of Maltese-related goings-on from Detroit to Durban, let alone North Africa's *émigrés*, who literally spread throughout the world after the mid-1950s.²⁵ After the war Ropa himself moved to Paris, where he became a schoolmaster, and died. But in

literary terms Tunisia's *Melita* with its input from Algeria, Egypt and Malta, remains probably the best and the earliest, if not the only, such exponent in French North Africa, a bold effort to unite North Africa's Maltese migrant communities in a respect for language worth, hence its necessary retention for ethnic-cultural survival.

What is truly impressive is the pro-active role in this movement taken by such migrant groups, who in spite of distance and ambience, or because of it, seek to assert their vitality through a Malteseness in poetry, novels, drama, music and song, journalism, in sports, and otherwise. With a new-found self-pride in national identity by means of language, they are inspired by and they themselves also inspire the literary movement in the country of origin and overseas simultaneously, a heart beating in unision across the sea. At a time when the transfer of knowledge was almost exclusively through the written word, apart from orally, one can well understand the insistence on reading and writing as bulwarks against inertia, passivity, alienation, and a rude self-denying assimilation. Every Maltese association, *Melita* insisted, had to have a library of Maltese works, or it might as well not exist.

This was all the more important in the case of Maltese, whose history had always been more oral than literary, and in situations where *diglossia* prevailed—a point which the *Melita*'s contributors, including Ropa, tended to pass by in their disdain for those who did not attend their poetry sessions or buy their books. After all the vast majority of Maltese migrants were poor labouring folk, how many of them would have been to school, most would have been illiterate or semi-literate. At the same time, there would be no future generations mindful of their heritage as Maltese unless they could have access to a sharing of literary and artistic creativity rooted in language and history. It was a cruel dilemma—on top of which there was the urgency of possessing French. 'Il faut que les Français-Maltais d'Afrique apprennent à penser e à sentir maltais en même temps qu'à penser et à sentir Français; c'est alors qu'ils seront vraiment eux-mêmes, dans leur belle originalité.'

In a homage to Jean Vella who subsidized and set the newspaper in Sousse, Ropa says that *Melita*'s programme could be summed up in these words: 'Vive la France! Vive l'Angleterre! mais aussi: Vive Malta!' Vella saw his compatriots divided into French citizens and British subjects: 'étonné qu'on puisse être ainsi divisé par des mots, il ne désespère pas de leur faire entendre qu'ils sont Maltais avant tout...'²⁹ As early as 1888 Servonnet and Laffite had observed that in Tunisia 'les Maltais constituent le noyau de la population le plus facilement assimilable'.³⁰ In the same vein one century later Abdelkrim Mejri noted that *Melita*

*n'évoquait aucun problème politique concernant la Tunisie. Le journal des Maltais de Tunisie passait, sous silence, les événements du 9 avril 1938. De même les quelques archives du gouvernement tunisien que nous avons consultées ne mentionnent le nom d'aucun Maltais parmi le gens à surveiller ou les agents suspects.*³¹

To these evaluations in a fairly consensual discourse of make-do ambivalence in the Maltese expression of their lifestyle or identity in Tunisia, I must add, among others, the perceptive, illuminating contributions at least of Carmel Sammut,³² Carmel Camilleri,³³ and Hichen Skik.³⁴

Finally, and refreshingly, we have an emerging Mediterranean regional conscience, with which Malta and the North African littoral are closely associated. Giving pride of place to an article by Gabriel Audisio in *Cahiers du Sud* published in Marseille, "il interesse tous les Méditerranées, c'est à dire tous les Maltais", highlights *Melita* in its front-page lead. This is in turn a follow-up to the foundation in Algiers of a 'maison de culture' and its review *Jeune Méditerranée*: 'Cette idée que nous faisons de la civilisation Méditerranéenne, du rôle de la Méditerranée dans l'humanisme, chaque jour se repand davantage...' It was a veritable 'renaissance'.³⁵

Thus we could style it a 'Medeuro' approach, an outreach from the South, instead of the usual but more recent 'Euromed', emanating from Barcelona or Brussels to the North. In line with the views of Albert Camus, among others, there is a tendency to de-Latinize and de-Romanize the perception and image of the Mediterranean, thereby rendering it more holistic, although in Camus, as in Ropa, and others, the French imprint is never missing. This seems to have been partly a political reaction to the Graeco-Roman inspired integral nationalism of Charles Maurras, one suspects. But Ropa had already alerted his readers to a group born in Nice some years earlier, 'Les Amitiés Méditerranéennes'. This was 'un mouvement d'idées proprement méditerranéen, c'est-à-dire libérateur... Ce n'est pas du tout la même chose que les 'Amitiés Latins'. What was desired was 'l'union des élites Greco-latines, chrétiennes, juives et islamiques. Ensuite, la réconciliation des peuples ... leur union spirituelle; c'est d'union que nous avons besoin et non d'empereur ... l'avenir est à l'union des peuples... La Méditerranée est la patrie de l'Homme ...' And finally the coup de grace:

*Malte, l'un des sanctuaires les plus antiques de la civilisation, peut-être la plus antique, Malte, Coeur de la Méditerranée et somme de toute son histoire, ne saurait rester étrangère à ce mouvement: il importe qu'un Maltais de Malte soit délégué aux Amitiés Méditerranéennes...*³⁶

Back home, for Mizzi, the Italian presence in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica after 1911 made *italianità* and *latinità* more akin to a Mediterranean Malta; whereas for Strickland and the pro-Maltese language lobby, they made Anglicization, hence de-Italianization and the insertion of Maltese, more urgent than ever as Italy was 'getting closer'.

Such postures were partly related to how people saw themselves in colonial times—and on the margins. Where empires meet, periphery can reach out for mainstream, revealing and transforming itself in the process. Dark clouds were amassing on the horizon. There were also some philosophical underpinnings: to what extent should a nation be identified exclusively with its language, on the Herder model, rather than on a shared past and common aspirations for the future, as Renan had suggested? If language, however vital, were all that mattered, many Frenchmen of Maltese descent, or indeed Britons, Americans, Canadians and Australians, who no longer speak or read Maltese, would hardly continue to be so intrigued by the land of their ancestors, often visiting it repeatedly. One *pied-noir* from Algiers has written poetically and movingly how after he (like thousands of others) had to move to France following the independence civil war, he had discovered that his real 'homeland', his homeland 'of the heart', of ancestry and memory, was after all Malta. It was neither Algeria, which he had been constrained to leave, nor France, where he did not really feel welcomed.

Qu'il est beau ce pays
Quand le soleil revient,
Et que la mer scintille,
Alors je me sens bien...

Si Algér s'est enfuie,
Pauvre mère disparue,
Je sais qu'elle est la fille
De Malte que j'ai revue...

Mais je me sens d'ici...
Chez moi, du fond des âges.³⁷

And yet he can hardly speak a word of Maltese.

Between the wars the question however was also this: if English snuggled Maltese to oust Italian, would the nest-builder become a cuckoo? Or had the vernacular's buttressed emergence as an official language from 1934 onwards mirrored the nation's own growing-up, the language question having

been its catharsis?³⁸ Although spoken Maltese today fairly indiscriminately dominates local broadcasting, by far the best-selling Maltese newspaper is unquestionably in English, very originally called *The Sunday Times*, and there are others, including more recently another Sunday one, trying to chip into the middle class sales market.

To younger people and the cash-and-carry media operators of so-called 'popular culture' in a post-war, post-colonial internationalizing and globalizing world of satellite and internet, jeans and hamburgers, all talk of race, nationality or nationhood, or indeed of identity and values other than human rights and possibly solidarity, may perhaps seem old-fashioned and *passé*, if not 'xenophobic' (to use a very politically correct term). Is it? (Fanon and Memmi would have called them *déracinés*.) The safeguarding and enrichment of nationality-related pursuits, foremost among them language in a *cultivare se ipsum*, certainly wasn't at all secondary to the contributors of *Melita* in the 1930s. In all loyalty to their Imperial step-mothers, they saw cultural *survivance* as a distinguishing, self-fulfilling life-force, which transcended national borders, states, and the very frontiers of empire.

Notes

1. Titles of such publications or associations in the original transmit their evocative quality. Thus this magazine's title means literally 'To Our Brethren', i.e. those who had emigrated but who were still considered as Maltese 'brethren'.
2. Lawrence Attard, *L-Emigrazzjoni Maltija: Is-Seklu Dsatax u Ghoxrin* (Pin, Valletta, 1999), p. 163.
3. But the role of religion in Maltese migrant settlement overseas has tended to be all-encompassing as I have shown in, for example, 'Religion and Ethnic Identity in the Maltese Australian Community', in Abe Ata (ed.), *Religion and Ethnic Identity: An Australian Study* (Spectrum, Melbourne, 1988), 177–205, and to a lesser extent in 'Australia's Maltese Language Press', in Abe Ata & Colin Ryan (eds), *The Ethnic Press in Australia* (Academia Press, Melbourne, 1989), 125–136. For Northern Africa see in this regard, for example, Marc Donato, *Rue de Maltais: La Vie de la colonie Maltaise de Tunisie* (Histoire des Temps Coloniaux, Gandini, Nice, 2002), *L'Emigration des Maltais en Algérie au XIXème siècle* (Editions Africa Nostra, Montpellier, 1985); Pierre Dimech, *D'une jetée l'autre* (Recits & Nouvelles, Curutchet, 1997), *Si jamais je t'oublie, Algérie* (Les Presses Littéraires, Paris, 1998), *Chants pour Malte* (auto édition, Salon-de-Provence, 2002), 'La Fin de l'Emigration Maltaise en Algérie: Circostances et Causes', *Storja 2003–2004* (ed. H. Frendo, Univ of Malta), 103–113; Pierre Soumille, 'Le cimetière européen de Bab-el-Khadra à Tunis: Etude historique et sociale', *Le Cahiers de Tunisie*, Université de Tunis, tome xix, nos 75–76, 1971, 129–182.

On the Maltese in Libya, see Romeo Cini, *La Nostra Storia* (Melbourne, 1992). For an earlier Algerian-Corsican Maltese connection, see *Eugene Fenech: Memoire d'un officier de santé maltais dan l'armée Française, 1786–1839*, edited by Richard Spiteri (La Vouivre, Paris, 2001). See also the autobiographical historical novel by Claude Rizzo, *Le Maltais de Bab El-Khadra* (Lafon, Neuilly-sur-Seine, 2003). For a general overview of Maltese emigration, including that to Northern Africa, see Lawrence Attard in H. Frendo & O. Friggieri (eds), *Malta: Culture and Identity* (Ministry for Youth & The Arts, Valletta, 1994), 253–270; *L-Emigrazzjoni Maltija: Is-Seklu Dsatax u Ghoxrin* (Pin, Valletta, 1999); for the inter-war period, *The Great Exodus, 1918–1939* (PEG, Valletta, 1989). For an analytical overview of the communities in Tunisia see Habib Kazdaghli, 'Place des communautés dans l'histoire moderne et contemporaine de la Tunisie', *et al*, in *Les communautés méditerranéennes de Tunisie* (Colloque organisé par le Laboratoire de recherche sur le Patrimoine à la Faculté des Lettres de Tunis-Manouba, 1–4 Mars 2000), which comprise *i.a.* the directly Maltese-related contributions by Carmel Sammut (Les Maltais de Tunis à travers les souvenirs d'Antoinette Schembri), Ahmed Brahim (Éléments pour une comparaison du maltais e l'arabe parlé de Tunis), Patrice Sanguy (Itinéraire d'une famille maltaise de Tunisie: les Camilleris), Marielle Anselmo (Lecture dans les oeuvres de Salmieri et Spiteri); and a more comprehensive work in progress, *Apports et place des communautés dans l'histoire de la Tunisie moderne et contemporaine*.

4. Thanks are due to Mme Hajer Sahli, director of the Service des Periodiques at the Library, and to the Maltese ambassador, Dr Tanya Vella, for making the necessary research arrangements on my behalf. My Pisani interview appeared in *The Sunday Times*, 'Maltin ta' Tunes between the wars: Conversations with Edgar Pisani', 26 Nov. 1995, pp. 32–33; but on related ethnicity and identity discussions see some of my other writings including 'Is-Silta tan-Nisel: Maltin fid-Diaspora u l-Identità Etnika', in D. Massa (ed.), *Malta: Esplorazzjoni* (Univ of Malta, 2001), 34–47; 'Ilhna tal-Maltin fid-Dinja: X'Futur hemm ghal Rabtiet ta' Kultura Hajja u Identità Etnika?', in G. N. Busuttill & V. Pace (eds), *Proceedings and Report: Convention of Leaders of Associations of Maltese Abroad and of Maltese Origin* (UNDP/MFA, Valletta, 2000), 119–132, 'Is-Safar ghax-Xoghol', kap. 7, sezzjoni III, in *Žmien L-Ingliži: Is-Seklu Dsatax* (KKM, Valletta, 2004), vol. 3 of the *Storja ta' Malta* series, 118–123, *Il-Ġurnalizmu f'Malta 1798–2002* (Pin, Valletta, 2003). On Malta's 'language question' and its multifold ramifications see H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (Midsea, Valletta, 1979, 2nd ed. 1991) and G. Hull, *The Malta Language Question: A Case Study in Cultural Imperialism* (Said, Valletta, 1993).
5. See Laurent Ropa, 'Ghaqda tal-Maltin mad-Dinja Kollha', the dream of his heroine in one of his novels, *Kaline, Melita*, no. 49, 20 Sept. 1938, p. 1, reprinted from *Il-Qari Malti (Maltese Readings)*, edited by Antoine (Toni) Said in Port Said as the organ of his *Xirka ghat-Tixrid tal-Qari Malti (Community for the Spreading of Reading in Maltese)*, and ending with a favourite quota-

tion from the great Maltese linguist and translator P. P. Saydon: ‘Il-fohrija hija lil dawk li jiftahru b’nisilhom, bit-tradizzjonijiet taghhom, bihom infushom, lil dawk li ghandhom il-hila li ma jitjassrux u ma jinxorbux minn poplu iehor, imma li jibqghu dejjem, bhal ma huma, Maltin.’ (Praise is due to those who are proud of their origins, their traditions and themselves, those who manage not to subject themselves and to be absorbed by another people, but who always remain, as they are, Maltese.)

6. On all this see *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony, op. cit., passim*.
7. In one edition for example it held that Malta owed to him its 1921 (self-government) constitution and its first political party, and he had been unanimously named by his compatriots as prime minister. Reports from Malta were usually anonymous but one *Melita* correspondent in Malta was a certain Oscar Grech-Ellul (*Melita*, no. 47, 5 Aug. 1938, p. 3.)
8. ‘Indhil tat-Taljani’, *Melita*, no. 59, 20 Feb. 1939, p.1, was a report from Alexandria, where the Maltese community was on the whole staunchly and no doubt conveniently Imperialist, and more so since the advent of Fascism in Italy, especially after the occupation of Abyssinia; but see also *i.a.* ‘Les Nationalistes’, *ibid.*, 8 Apr. 1938, p. 1, ‘Nerik Mizzi’, 29 Apr. 1938, p. 1, ‘L-Ilsien Malti’, *ibid.*, 5 Feb. 1939 (Supplement).
9. I owe this information to his son, Mgr Fortunato Mizzi. He remembers his father being called ‘Henri’ at home; French was also spoken in the family.
10. On all this see *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony, op. cit., passim*.
11. Ivan Magri-Overend, ‘En Egypte: Au Caire une instruction anglaise sera donnée aux enfants de la Colonie Maltaise’, but adding this: ‘Qu’on nous permette dependant de formuler un désir: celui que nos enfants ne soient plus tenus dan l’ignorance de leur langue nationale ainsi que l’histoire de leur pays. La grosse majorité de notre jeunesse méconnaît les hauts faits de Malte et c’est vraiment dommage...’ *Melita*, no. 50, 5 Oct. 1938. See also, for example, ‘Inhossuna Kburin’, *ibid.*, no. 68, 5 July 1939, p. 2; or an uncritical report on the governor’s praises for the new 1939 constitution (*ibid.*, no. 57, 20 Jan. 1939), which actually was similar to that given by Britain to the colony in 1849, one century earlier.
12. See for example his ‘Maltais, soyons Bretons!’, *Melita*, no. 45, 5 juillet 1938, p. 2.
13. For an extreme case see H. Frendo, ‘The Ghost of Borg Pisani: Awaiting Redemption, Whose Traitor Was He?’, in C. T. Vassallo & I. Callus (eds), *Malta at War in Cultural Memory* (Socrates/Malta Univ., 2005), 180–216.
14. *Melita*, no. 45, 5 July 1938, pp. 1–2.
15. *Ibid.*, no. 38, 29 Apr. 1938, p. 1.
16. *Ibid.*, no. 50, 5 Oct. 1938.
17. See Oliver Friggieri, *Ġwann Mamo: Il-Kittieb tar-Riforma Soċjali* (Mid-Med Bank, Valletta, 1994), and Mamo’s biography by Francis Galea, with my introduction, *Juan Mamo: Hajtu u Hilietu* (SKS, Valletta, 2007).
18. See the Xirka membership list published for the first time in H. Frendo, *Lejn*

Tnissil ta' Nazzjon (KKM, Valletta, 1971); Dimech knew English, Italian and French, was a militant promoter of Maltese language and literature, proposed a Maltese alphabet and published two dictionaries, but there is never any mention of him or his school in *Melita*.

19. *Melita*, no. 33, 25 Mars 1938. Like Ġorġ Pisani, to whom reference is also made, Meilaq was a Gozitan. Translation: The medlar has turned yellow/The clover has turned brown/The bee has tasted/The sweetness of the rose. Love has lit up/everywhere.
20. 'Ilsien Pajjiżi', *ibid.*, no. 50, 5 Oct. 1938. Translation: My soul without you is like a silent mouth/that wishes to speak but cannot... You gave me an origin, great and brave/To you I give both thought and feeling.
21. On Said, whose family originally hailed from the harbour town of Cospicua, see Geoffrey Hull, a distant relative, *op. cit.*, pp. 287–88, 334.
22. Translation: Society of Writers of Maltese. For translation of the other titles, see above, fn. 5.
23. 'Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764–1829): Père de la Nation Maltaise Moderne', *Melita*, no. 47, 5 Aug. 1938, pp. 1, 4. See Cremona's biography, *Mikiel Anton Vassalli u Żminijietu – Bijografija* (Empire Press, Valletta, 1937), this being a reprint of 19 instalments appearing in *Il-Malti* (Maltese) between June 1932 and June 1937. It was translated into English by May Butcher.
24. Manwel Nicholas-Borg, 'Taħdita fiċ-Ċentru Malti fil-Laqqha tal-Maltese Literature Group, Parkville, Victoria, 21 Nov. 1986, enc. Nicholas-Borg/Frendo, 23 Nov. 1986, f. 2.
25. In 1983 the Association of Maltese Communities of Egypt signed a Twinning Charter in London with the Paris-based Association France-Malte. 'It is to be hoped', wrote Magri-Overend, 'that other Maltese Associations from Australia, Canada, The States (and Great Britain too) will follow our example and join us, without losing their independence, into an International Federation of Maltese Associations operating outside Malta free from all politics.' See the Newsletter, special issue Nos. 41/42, Sept. 1983, p. 1. On this subject see also the correspondence between Magri-Overend and myself dating back to Feb. 1972.
26. 'Ordre du Jour des Associations des Colonies Maltaises', *Melita*, no. 50, 5 Oct. 1938, p. 1.
27. On this see *i.a.* H. Frendo's chapter 'Language and Nationhood in the Maltese Experience: Some Comparative and Theoretical Approaches' in S. Fiorini & R. Ellul Micallef (eds), *Collected Papers 1592–1992* (Univ. of Malta quatercentenary memorial edition, 1992); Oliver Friggieri, *La Cultura italiana a Malta – Storia e influenza letteraria e stilistica attraverso l'opera di Dun Karm* (Archivum Romanorum, Firenze, 1978). For a general history see especially J. M. Brincat, *Il-Malti: Elf Sena ta' Storja* (Pin, Valletta, 2000).
28. 'Pour nos futures foyers de la culture Maltaise', *Melita*, no. 20, 5 Dec. 1937, p. 1.
29. 'Précieux Encouragement: Hommage à Jean Vella Patriote Maltais', *ibid.*, just before an organized cruise to Malta; Jean Vella invited prospective investors

- in a one million French franc project to meet him at the British Hotel, in Strada Sant' Ursola, Valletta, between 7 and 15 Sept. 1937. The paper also carried an advert of this hotel, which was owned by P. Fenech.
30. Jean Servonnet & Ferdinand Lafitte, *En Tunisie: Le Golfe des Gabes en 1888* (Paris, 1888), p. 45.
 31. A. Mejri, 'La Colonie Maltaise en Tunisie et ses Préoccupations à la Veille de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale', *Les Cahiers de Tunisie*, (ed.) M. B. Tlili (Univ de Tunis, tome xxxvi, no. 143–44, 1988), p. 120.
 32. 'La minorité maltaise en Tunisie; ethnie arabe ou européenne?', a paper delivered at the congress on Mediterranean studies of Arabo-Berber influence chaired by Braudel and hosted by Aquilina at Malta, Apr. 1972, on which see especially Mme D. R. Galley's publications in Algiers in 1973 and in 1978. See also the subsequent Sammut/Frendo exchanges, July–Sept. 1972, especially with reference to my then highly controversial writings on Dimech, which had intrigued Sammut (and also Maxime Rodinson).
 33. 'Une communauté maltaise en Tunisie, entre les groupes arabo-berbere et français', *ibid.*; see also Patrice Sanguy, 'Remembering Carmel Camilleri (1922–97)', *The Sunday Times*, Valletta, 19 July 1998, p. 50.
 34. 'Le Maltais en Tunisie', *op. cit.*, in the linguistics section of the congress; Skik was a linguist at the University of Tunis. Other pertinent additions would be the contributions on French North Africa and Egypt at the Convention of Leaders of Associations of Maltese Abroad and of Maltese Origin, held in Valletta in January 2001, including those by Jean Pierre Zammit and Andrea Smith, on Tunis; by Pierre Dimech, on Algeria; and by Ivan Magri-Overend, on Egypt, *op. cit.*, *passim*. See also Gillian Bartolo's interview with the journalist Gérard Spiteri, author of the semi-autobiographical prize-winning *Le Bonheur de l'Exil*, *The Malta Independent on Sunday*, 18 Apr. 1999, p. 15; and my 'The Maltese of French North Africa', *The Sunday Times*, 1 July 2001, pp. 48–49, 'Malta l-ohra: Lejn Storja tad-"Diaspora" Maltija', *Il-Mument*, 30 Jan. 2000, pp. 20–21.
 35. 'Vers une Synthèse Méditerranéenne: Culture Méditerranéenne', *Melita*, no. 50, 5 Oct. 1938, p. 1, p. 4.
 36. 'Le Propos du Maltais de France: Malte aux Amitiés Méditerranéennes', starting with a quotation in bold print from a poem about universal brotherhood and love by Ružar Briffa, *Melita*, no. 33, 25 Mars 1938, p. 1. See also H. Frendo, 'Coexistence in Modernity: A Euromed Perspective', *The European Legacy*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2005, 161–77, which includes a discussion of views on the Mediterranean, including those by Camus.
 37. Pierre Dimech, 'Chant sur une autre musique', *Chants pour Malte*, *op. cit.*, p. 67; written in Buġibba, Malta, in May 2001, 'Pour être chanté' sur l'air de *J'ai quitté mon pays*'.
 38. H. Frendo, 'Language and Nationhood in the Maltese Experience: Some Comparative and Theoretical Approaches', *op. cit.*, p. 439.