

# A GROUP OF YOUNG MALTESE WORKERS IN BRITAIN – SOME SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

E.L. ZAMMIT

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

The fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted during December 1966. It is part of a series of preliminary investigations carried out by the author which subsequently led him to a more extensive study of the Maltese migrants in London. The main hypothesis being explored concerned the extent to which the socio-cultural background of the Maltese migrants structures their patterns of behaviour in their new environment. The present article is mainly a descriptive account of the author's observations containing practically no attempt at analysis. His participation in this group was made possible through 'Charlie' – one of the migrant workers who introduced him to the others as a 'friend of his on a short holiday'. As they both happened to come from the same Maltese locality and as 'Charlie' was regarded as an informal leader by the other workers, he was readily accepted among them. People originating from the same Maltese locality often refer to each other as *Tar-Raħal* (i.e. 'of the village'). This is a term of belonging and therefore implying some solidarity, expected familiarity and possibly friendship. Apart from 'Charlie' and 'Johnnie' – the author's room-mate – none of the other Maltese workers knew they were being studied. As no interviews could be carried out during work hours, observation was confined to their leisure time i.e. during the lunch hour in the factory cafeteria and after work in the hostel. A more recent re-visit of the workers has revealed few and insignificant changes from the situation described below.

Since the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962), Maltese migration into Britain has become organized. Often an employer in need of manpower approaches the 'Employment Attache' at the Malta High Commission in London, goes to Malta to interview those willing to migrate, and for those chosen, the British Government issues entry permits. Lately, the number of entry permits has been limited to 1000 a year for Malta but, in fact, this number is not exceeded by the applications of prospective migrants. (In addition, about 250 seasonal workers – mostly females – spend their summer months in the U.K. each year.)

As a result of this policy, Maltese migrants, since 1962, began to congregate in various groups working in a given factory and often living in the same hostel. These factories usually lie in the outskirts of London or another large city. These migrants tend to be young males, (ages 18-25), with a semi-skilled or unskilled technical background, often school-leavers or drop-outs.

Naturally, such a group is very mobile. Many of them go to Britain in search of new experiences – 'just to try something new'. Others sign up with a factory as a means of getting into Britain and once there they soon depart on their own, or join their friends or relatives in London. The majority continue to have very strong ties with Malta which manifest themselves particularly in frequent short visits home, at least once every other year. Recent Maltese migration in many respects resembles the traditional Irish pattern.<sup>1</sup>

The particular hostel under description is situated on a hill about half an hour by bus from the town centre where the factory is located. It was built during the last war as an army barracks and it is now owned by an industrial firm. The hostel houses about 500 workers from various nationalities, of whom about 40 are Maltese at any given time. It consists of a central building, housing the lounge, the dining hall, television and games rooms and a number of isolated wings housing the tiny bedrooms on both sides of a long, narrow corridor. In each bedroom two camp beds and two lockers are squeezed in – thus accommodating two workers. Space is so scarce that there is no room left for chairs or any other furniture. There is not room enough to allow two persons to walk abreast along this corridor. The Maltese workers are concentrated in three adjacent blocks.

#### WORK PERSPECTIVES

A typical work-day starts at about 6.00 A.M. when most of the workers rise just in time for breakfast and to catch the coach for work. If they miss the coach they have to walk about 15 minutes to the nearest 'Bus Stop' and have to pay the fare (8 New Pence) – whereas the coach is free. They are also likely to be late for work with the consequent wage deductions. Still, there are usually about three to five every day who take a day off because of 'not feeling well'. It is quite common for a worker to stay away from work for a number of days without any compelling reason. Then they spend most of the day playing billiards and chatting around the hostel.

<sup>1</sup>J.A. Jackson: *The Irish in Britain* (1963).

At work one is mostly by oneself, working on one's machine. There is a one hour lunch break and though work officially stops at 4.30 p.m., most go on working daily for one hour overtime. At 6.00 p.m. they are back in the hostel where they eat and relax till they go to bed. Most retire rather early, being tired from the day's work and no complaints are raised – by the few who are still watching it – when T.V. is switched off at 11.00 p.m. On Saturdays most work half the day and on Sundays everyone is free.

Earning up to an average of £20 a week – including 'bonus earnings', – most feel they are given a 'fair wage' (*paga tajba*). By this they mean that their wage is 'satisfactory' both in terms of the work they perform and in terms of their expectations before migrating. This equivalent justifies the deprivations inherent in their situation and renders their work more palatable. Their orientation to work is exclusively pragmatic – concentrating on its financial benefits. They do not envisage any intrinsic values to be derived from the experience of work itself.<sup>2</sup> Whatever notions they may have concerning the nature of their work and its management remain dormant or are non-existent. Work for them stops at the factory gates and seldom forms part of their conversations. Most of them have never done any work in Malta, and so they can make few comparisons. In this particular firm preference is theoretically given to the selection of applicants with some technical school background, so that several workers fall into such a category. But the majority fall short of these requirements.

A good deal of complaining goes on about Income Tax deductions. But the general feeling is that one's income basically depends upon one's 'bonus' – a system of measuring one's wage in direct proportion to one's productivity and the current sales on the market. Yet, the workers say, one must not overdo it at work. This norm is expressed in the words *Biox ma jqażżi zġhiex* – meaning 'Not to make others sick' by being too greedy for money. Such a person behaves like 'a pig'.

Most workers say they migrated because they were unemployed in Malta. In fact they cannot conceive any other motive for migration. Some are deeply resentful of the patronage networks which they consider as 'necessary' in order to obtain jobs in Malta.

When asked about their spendings, only two workers replied that the *ideal* of everyone of them is to save weekly a reasonable amount of their wages and also to send a 'small sum' (*xi ħaġa zġħira*) to their mothers in

<sup>2</sup>A. Fox – *The Sociology of Work in Industry* (1971)

Malta regularly. In practice, however, many spend most of their wages in games over the week-end, in heavy smoking and in weekend visits to London, and in buying expensive clothes and other articles which they hardly ever use. Some consider it advantageous that the hostel is far from the town because otherwise they would be tempted to spend much more money. Those who manage to save do so secretly. In fact some denounce publicly those who claim to be 'broke' on Monday without apparently having spent anything during the week-end. What influence, however, group pressure exerts on their spending is difficult to assess and requires further study. There are clear indications, however, that this influence is considerable.

If one wants a transfer from one type of work to another, one achieves this by applying informal pressure on management, for example, by being incompetent. 'If you stand up to your charge-hand you'll get what you want.'

Some time previously, when a Maltese worker was given what they considered an unfair treatment by their factory management, the Maltese got together and decided to leave the Company *en masse* unless he was treated better. 'Practical difficulties' made them drop the suggestion and the worker himself found work elsewhere. 'British Trade Unions', they say, 'are quite ready to defend the Maltese. One has to present a really strong case, though.' However, unlike some of the more experienced Maltese in London, these workers do not feel they are discriminated against because of their foreign nationality.

#### COMMUNAL TENDENCIES

The Maltese went to the hostel in two main groups: the first group preceding the other by an interval of fourteen months. Most of their social relationships within the hostel are limited to their fellow countrymen. They form 'Maltese groups' at lunch-time, during their free hours in the evenings and during week-ends. They usually occupy corners in the lounge and dining hall. The first impression is that there is a high degree of solidarity among them and one has to observe closely in order to perceive that a certain amount of friction exists beneath this unified front. On some toilet walls, for example, there are many coarse expressions in Maltese directed against other Maltese workers. One worker whose new, expensive, tape-recorder has been stolen, immediately suspects one of his fellow Maltese rather than the English. In fact he thinks that the theft was motivated by envy. Since his social contacts are predominantly Maltese, his main suspects are among these rather than a-

mong the more 'hostile' – but distant – 'outsiders'. Gossip – a favourite pastime – revolves around group members and covers a wide range of topics. The affected, meaningless, gestures of one Maltese, is a main source of amusement for a good part of an evening – in his absence, of course. Another group discredits one of them who claims that he has daily opportunities of sexual relations, and show their disbelief as soon as he turns away. 'Who does he think he is? It's all bluff!'

Nevertheless, their common cultural background, their minority and marginal situation – the language factor in particular – draws them constantly to each other. They address each other by their nicknames, sometimes by a reference to their home-town or village. An accident happening to one of them is quickly circulated around the whole group and if need be, their support is always available against the non-Maltese. This gives the group a certain feeling of strength and solidarity which they express by behaving in a rowdy manner when in each other's company. The fact that the hostel is situated in a practically deserted area and that the bus connections with the town centre are poor, invite the workers to spend most of their evenings in the hostel. Conveniently for the management, their life pivots around the factory and the hostel. There, they eat, chat, play billiards and watch television. They usually perform these activities in groups of three to five – not always made up of the same persons though certain cliques, naturally, are more persistent than others. Such groups occasionally go to the town centre ('it-town'), and more rarely to London. Though they claim to have good friends among their English fellow-workers, these are not so in the same sense as their 'Maltese friends'. Some exclaim openly: 'Who can ever make real friends with an Englishman?'

Close friendships among the Maltese tend to follow the patterns previously established in Malta and these friendships provided one of the main incentives to migrate to the U.K. Their shared experiences and characteristics confer on them a common identity which, in particular situations, over-rides personal relationships. One could also detect a 'central group caring' for the well-being of all. One of the workers, for instance, was unusually lonely on arrival – being the only one originating from Gozo. Several workers were concerned about him and tried to cheer him up. They later expressed their satisfaction when he occasionally laughed at their jokes. Possibly the fact that few English girls live near the hostel – and only two Maltese girls inside it, one of whom being engaged to be married – compels the workers to seek each other's company. At the Christmas dance, for example, one Maltese got drunk

and started behaving very rudely and aggressively. It emerged later that the man had got drunk because another Maltese had taken his girl-friend. Rather than provoke a public fight with a fellow Maltese, he got drunk and made a mess of himself.<sup>3</sup> Trying to calm him down, several Maltese reminded him that he was making a 'bad name' for the group and would get them all into trouble! Clearly their collective reputation ('fama') is a common preoccupation.

In general, however, the other Maltese at the dance were rather bashful and quietly sat around a table, smoked and drank beer. In fact, some had never had a date with a local girl yet though these are not typical of the whole group. Those who would like to marry, at some future date, say they would prefer a Maltese to an English girl. 'The English are not like us' – as one of them puts it. 'Their principle is: tomorrow never comes!' He means this in a wider sense than simply financial matters. In one instance, at least, this attitude was due to an unsuccessful love-affair with an English girl. The Maltese boy also claims that the girl's father disapproved of the match.

#### SETTLEMENT:

Though the Maltese workers are reluctant to admit that they are homesick, their attachment to Malta is very conspicuous. It can be seen especially in their frequent home visits, in the anxiety with which they rush to pick up their letters after work and the frequency of their writing back, and in the amount of conversation centering around Maltese topics. The main reason why they are in Britain is for work. As one migrant sums it up, he prefers Malta 'for everything': 'That is my country!' Several disagree with this blunt view and say they do not like to live in Malta even if they have a good job!

This might indicate that in the case of these latter ones, they had other underlying motives for migrating besides the financial factor. Moreover the experience of living in Britain may have widened their horizon. In fact some say that on recent holiday visits to Malta they have been bored after the first few days. Their attraction to Malta is mostly directed towards close family members and close friends.

In general very few seriously think about their distant future – but most of them vaguely feel that they do not intend to stay on in Britain indefinitely. A few want to go to Canada or Australia and settle there.

<sup>3</sup>Of course, fear of his opponent and of the police may have been an underlying factor in this issue. In any case, he 'avenged himself' by getting drunk.

Others prefer to settle in Britain, not to be too far from Malta. When they speak about their homes and parents, they use highly emotive terms. Only on rare occasions do they refer to bitter quarrels which they may have had with their parents. And yet they often give the impression that such quarrels may have remotely pre-disposed them to leave home and to migrate.

In their letters home, they do not give a realistic or objective picture of their way of living. They write only of the attractive and acceptable things their parents would like to know about. Thus, for instance, if they send home a photo of their rooms they make sure a holy picture or a rosary get into the picture – in spite of the fact that they hardly ever use them. Similarly on their home visits they do their best to give a rosy picture of their new, 'affluent' way of living.

Probably the most conspicuous evidence of the group's religious background is the amount of swearing which goes on. Since all of it is in Maltese only they can understand it. This phenomenon is so frequent and so methodically persistent that it merits further study and needs to be explained on several levels. On their part it is an attempt at asserting their 'manliness' through discarding the sacred symbols of childhood. However, their swearing only serves to emphasize the fact that these symbols still play an important part in their lives. As one informant observed, words which go only half way are never used. And it is not only in anger that they swear! It is an accepted part of their ordinary conversation. Clearly the absence of traditional restraints available in Malta as well as the 'marginality' of their present situation accounts for the frequency of this habit.

About five to ten workers go to Sunday Mass in a nearby Catholic chapel and these are known as the 'pious ones'. On first arrival from Malta usually the number is bigger – but they soon dwindle down to this 'normal pattern'.<sup>4</sup> They justify themselves on the grounds that 'it's different from Malta.' In their rooms they often parade obscene pictures of girls, their favourite film stars or sportsmen on their walls. Occasionally one has a holy picture on top of these! They have hardly had any relationship with a priest since migrating to Britain and they often express anti-clerical opinions. One worker used to go to Mass regularly for a year and even invited others to go with him. Eventually he gave up the prac-

<sup>4</sup>When this fieldwork was in progress it was still considered sinful for Roman Catholics to eat meat on Fridays. Nevertheless the majority disregarded this precept although alternative food was available in the canteen.

tice as he concluded that it is meaningless in his new environment. Another one who went to Mass and then spent the day swearing was 'finally dissuaded' from going any more. Group pressure to conform particularly in religious matters is often irresistible.

Several trace their religious indifference in Britain to the interference of the Church into politics in Malta. As practically all of them are Malta Labour Party supporters, they resent this. 'Here it's different, nobody tells you for whom to vote and not to vote. You vote for whoever you like.'

Many are impressed by the religious dedication of some Mohammedans who work with them and by the local Salvation Army. 'These people,' they exclaim, 'are more religious than the Maltese!'

In a heated discussion between one of the 'pious' ones and another Maltese worker they finally concluded that the Beatles are better known than God, though after much arguing they also admitted that the Beatles are not greater than Him!

The Maltese workers do not consider their educational level as inferior to that of their British work mates. They feel that their promotion depends mostly on their practical ability or actual performance at work and that their educational certificate is 'simply to be kept in one's luggage.' They recall their schooling as a series of personal relationships with certain teachers, some friendly, others not. There is only one illiterate in the group. All the others are fairly fluent in English. Their reading is limited to a few sports magazines and an occasional glance at a newspaper often sent to them from Malta. Consequently, their heated arguments, invariably on factual topics, are usually inconclusive even among the most articulate of them.

Not surprisingly, the building constantly re-echoes to a local rendition of the Beatles 'We all live in a Yellow Submarine.'