

The history of Maltese emigration

Jake Schembri



A boy waves farewell to a migrant ship as it exits Dockyard Creek. © Emigrants Commission.

A treasure trove awaits all those who seek it at Dar I-Emigrant, in Valletta, where Monsignor Philip Calleja has painstakingly archived anything and everything related to emigration.

Mgr Calleja, who heads the Church's Emigrants Commission, is in the process of organising all the photos, documents, newspaper cuttings and a whole range of other items he collected over a lifetime's work among migrants in preparation for the launch of the Migration Museum.

It is intended to provide a repository for the preservation of information about an important period of Maltese social history, telling the story of the tens of thousands that left Malta in search of pastures new and making such material accessible to the public.

The Emigrants Commission plans to house the museum at its offices in Castille Place. The five-storey building covers a surface area of about 120 square metres, meaning the museum can be spread over 600 square metres of floor space.

The intention is to set up a visitors' centre along with exhibition space, a catering outlet, fully-equipped lecture rooms and study rooms.

A digital section, which, in Mgr Calleja's words, can replicate a country such as Australia through state-of-the-art audiovisuals, will take prominence on the top floor of the building. Digital archiving will also provide people with the opportunity to search for information quickly and easily.

In addition, an existing auditorium lies silently in wait for its first visitors on Dar I-Emigrant's bottom floor. The intention is to screen a 20- to 30-minute video there giving an overview of the emigration phenomenon that occurred in Malta in the first half of the 20th century.

The planned museum's location is also fitting because it is at a perfect vantage point, just behind the Upper Barrakka gardens in Valletta, where one could have had a clear view of migrant ships leaving for faraway, unknown lands in the 1940s and 50s.

Unfortunately, funding for the project is not yet secured in spite of an application filed with the EU, however, Mgr Calleja is determined to open two years from now - some time at the start of 2012.

His heart's desire is to tell the story of Maltese emigrants that literally worked their way up from the dirt to become multi-millionaire success stories, facing trials and tribulations but always keeping the memory of their homeland alive.

Unifying people through the museum is an important concept to Mgr Calleja, because he feels it would serve to forge a link between people who left these shores long ago and those who remain. "The Maltese spirit has been taken by the Maltese to foreign lands and it lives on in them today," he said.

Mgr Calleja can be contacted at Dar I-Emigrant, Castille Place, Valletta, VLT 1062 via telephone on 2122 2644/2123 2545/2124 0255 or via e-mail at maltamigrationmuseum@melita.com.

Comments

Victor Sammut (Toronto) (3 hours, 42 minutes ago)

My departure from Malta was by air in April 1964. I was only 18 then and left Malta due to the bleak employment situation in Malta at the time. The Maltese government was supportive in arranging our exit from the Island but there were no follow up by the Maltese government afterwards. Employment was plentiful in Toronto but the homesickness which I endured for Malta and the family is indescribable. Most of those who leave their motherland and family to seek employment elsewhere can attest to this void that we feel and the ache that never seems to subside. I applaud Mons. Calleja for his immense contribution towards the history of emmigration of his Maltese country men and women. May his efforts serve to pay homage to all those that found it neccessary to leave our beloved island, families and friends to seek employment in other lands.

John M. Grima (5 hours, 14 minutes ago)

Written in haste. I opologice for my spelling error. John M. Grima

john M. Grima (7 hours, 7 minutes ago)

Dear Jesmond. You might be interested in my own experience. We left Malta on the 24th of May 1951. Frist stop was Napoli, one day. The next stop Lisbon, Portugal. So far very beautiful. However, after we let the Mediterranean, things have changes drammatically. We ferd the fish regularly by getting sea sick most of the time. We played cards. We watched some Greek girls dance and sing.photo. We were given two choices of landing destinations. One family had to land in Halifax, Canada. The rest of us chose the second choice, which was Ellis Island, New Jersey, USA. We arrived at our destination of Toronto, Ontario. Canada on June 9th 1951 Seventeen later. Today of course, you can make the trip in just twelve hours.

Jesmond Micallef (10 hours, 13 minutes ago)

Sometimes I just wonder how it felt to be on a ship for long days out in the open seas, stormy weather or not !! Even the accomodation on such ships makes me curious indeed.

The Story of Maltese Emigration is indeed massive. Excellent, well done indeed. I am looking forward to this very important collection here.

With my very best wishes.
