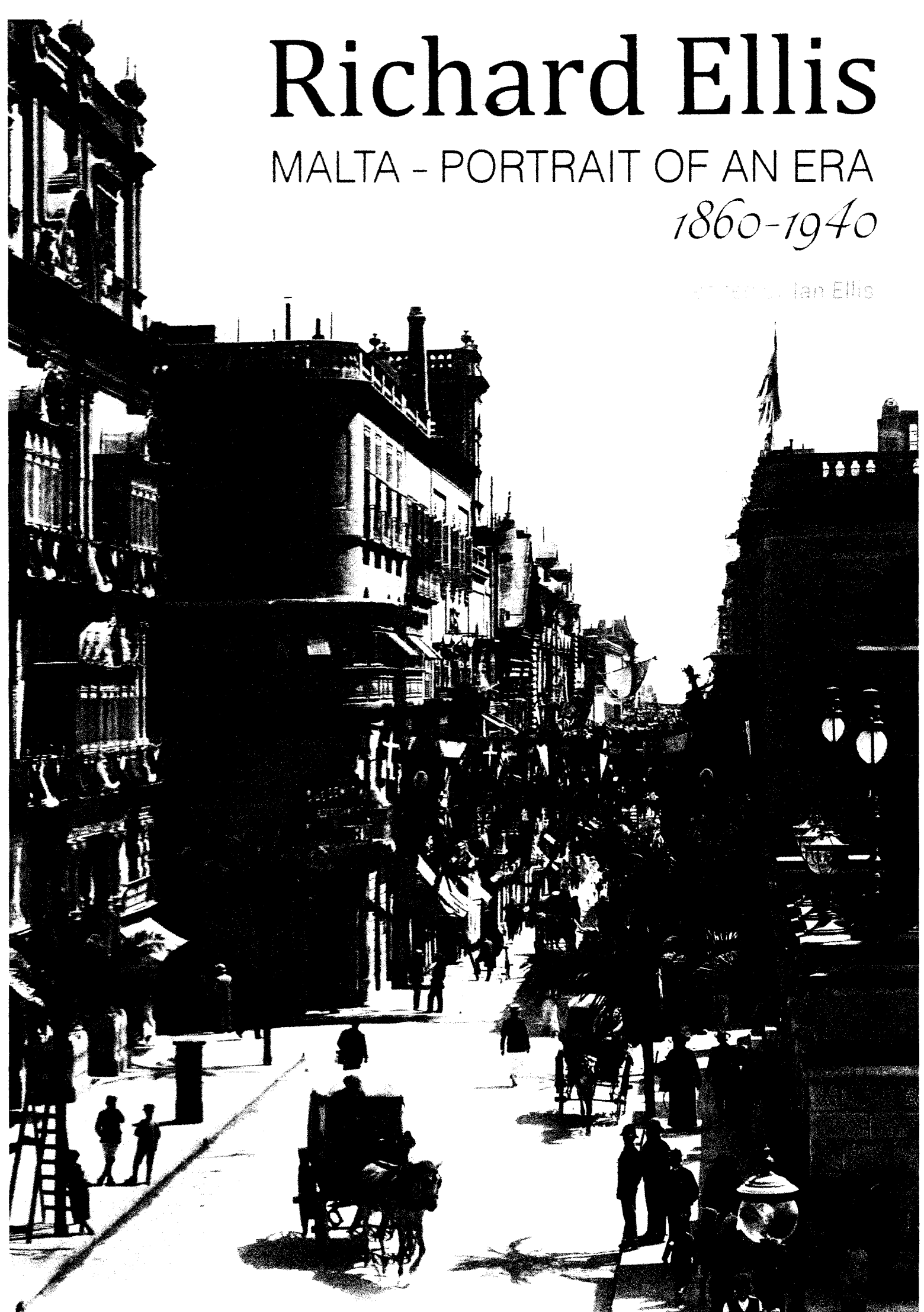


# Richard Ellis

MALTA - PORTRAIT OF AN ERA

*1860-1940*

by Ian Ellis



Co.

L. B. RAYBURN

# J. ZORZY & SON

257 WATCH - MAKERS 257

*J. Zorzy & Son*

*WATCH MAKERS*

*J. Zorzy & Son*

*WATCH MAKERS*



U.S.S.

S & Co.

## Chapter 6

## COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

CARMEL VASSALLO

Fernand Braudel, the renowned French historian, has written that during the eighteenth century shops came to rule the world. As a prime example of this phenomenon he cited the case of Valletta where shops had ‘... proliferated so much that no single shopkeeper can make an adequate living’. Malta, in fact, seems to have become ‘a nation of shopkeepers’ well before Napoleon used the term with reference to Great Britain in the early-nineteenth century.

Given the minute size of the islands and the fact that they are poorly endowed as regards agriculture, the Maltese islands have had to rely on commerce from very early on to secure the means to feed their relatively dense population. For many centuries this had meant exchanging raw and semi-manufactured cotton for a wide range of foodstuffs and raw materials from many sources but particularly from neighbouring Sicily and Southern Italy. The former was traditionally important as the supplier of grain and wine, the two major imports, although with the advent of the nineteenth century, Black Sea grain became more important, as did Greek wine.

With the coming of the Knights Hospitallers, consumer demand reached hitherto unimaginable heights of ‘sophistication’ as well-heeled Hospitaller knights and others with foreign tastes and foreign-source incomes, created a market for goods which would not ordinarily be associated with the subsistence-level lifestyle which normally characterized small Mediterranean islands.

With the advent of British rule, but particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal, the presence on the island of ever-increasing numbers of armed forces personnel meant that new tastes had to be catered for, either through imports or,

eventually, through the establishment of import-substituting manufacturing enterprises locally.

### Shop until you drop

Garrison towns and naval stations have always acted as a magnet for the proliferation of retail outlets of all sorts. In the case of Malta this meant not only many Maltese-owned businesses but also businesses set up by the many non-Maltese attracted by the custom. Englishmen and other Britons were understandably prominent amongst these but there were others as well, including Italians, who had always loomed large in the business milieu of the harbour towns, but also Greeks, Indians, Jews, and others who often carved out specific niches in the market.

### Just here for the beer

A prime example of an import-substituting manufacturing enterprise has come down to our time in the shape of Simonds Farsons Cisk plc. It is a frequently-noted peculiarity of the post-colonial period that phenomena originating in the metropolis have sometimes survived in the periphery long after they had died out where they had originated. The first Simonds brewery was founded in Reading in 1785. In the nineteenth century it became a leading supplier of beer to the British Army at Sandhurst and Aldershot and eventually overseas, apparently first sending its beer to Malta in 1880. In 1929 it merged with L. Farrugia & Sons, a year after the latter had produced the island’s first beer, to become Simonds, Farsons Ltd. Shortly after the Second World War, Simonds Farsons merged with a Scicluna’s Bank-operated brewer of lager-type beers to become the present-day Simonds Farsons Cisk Ltd, a company which is still going strong and has long been a mainstay of Maltese industrial endeavour. In the UK itself, on the other hand, the name Simonds disappeared in 1970 during one of the many mergers, amalgamations, and

acquisitions affecting the brewing business in that epoch; and the Reading brewery finally closed down in 2010.

### Our daily bread

Wheat is probably the most nutritious of the three staples which dominate the world's food intake (the other two being maize and rice). It can be used in many ways but it is probably mostly identified with the making of bread which in turn comes in many types, shapes, and sizes. Bread has always figured prominently in Maltese culture and it was probably the failure of the British authorities to appreciate just how important a component of the Maltese diet it was, 'in contrast to the British diet which had much less bread but much more meat', that led to the June 1919 bread riots which many feel set the scene for self-government two years later.

To most Maltese and many British palates the Maltese loaf – the *ħobża tal-Malti* – is considered tastier than the English-style bread manufactured to cater for British tastes, but there can be no denying that even in this aspect the British presence has had a considerable impact. Not just bread but other savoury food such as the ubiquitous meat pies, sausage rolls, toasted ham and cheese sandwiches, and other British culinary delights which have remained to haunt us, as have the apple pies, Battenberg and chocolate cakes, cream, jam and ring doughnuts, Christmas puddings and cakes, éclairs, mince pies, and roly-poly puddings for those with a sweet tooth, which used to grace the shop window of Blackley's on *Strada Rjali*, Valletta's main thoroughfare.

### '*Għallu l-ħalib qabel ma jgħallikom*'

#### (Boil milk before it gets you into hot water)

Equally compelling is the story of the manufacture and marketing of dairy products which, setting aside artisanal production, started in earnest in 1938 to address the undulant fever which afflicted many in the community and which was directly attributable to the picturesque but unhygienic practice of the sale of milk door-to-door by herdsmen who brought their goats into town. The link between contaminated milk and *brucellosis melitensis* had been discovered earlier on in the century by our very own Themistocles (Temi) Zammit who had been knighted for his services in this field. The milk of goats taken directly on the consumers' doorsteps was probably better-tasting but it had been the cause of many dying and even more becoming disabled for the rest of their lives. From its Ħamrun facility, the Milk Marketing Undertaking started selling and distributing pasteurized milk in pint bottles, 1/4 pint penny cartons, and 1/2 pint two-penny cartons in Valletta, Sliema, Floriana, and Ħamrun in special electrically-driven vans. It subsequently

expanded its operations to the production and sale of butter, yoghurt, cream, and cheese, particularly the ever-popular *minotta*, but it was not until 1957 that the sale of raw milk was prohibited in the whole of Malta. In 1986 it was privatized and became the Malta Dairy Products Ltd, owner of the Benna brand.

### King Cotton and its offspring

Cotton had dominated Maltese exports since time immemorial; it is to be found in foreign markets as early as 1164 and was the mainstay of rural communities where it employed many farmers in its cultivation and thousands of women and children in its spinning and weaving. In Malta, there were still nearly 15,000 cotton-spinners and weavers in the mid-nineteenth century but this number had plummeted to just a couple of hundred by 1931. One small sideline of this sector was the production of lace which used the left-over cotton threads from the weaving loom when the finished product was cut off.

In the early-nineteenth century, cotton was replaced by silk as a result of the initiative of Lady Hamilton Chichester, who brought lace-workers over from Genoa to teach their craft in the island in 1838. The production of 'Maltese' lace, which initially included shawls and veils of great beauty but subsequently consisted mostly of narrow trimmings, eventually spread to France, Britain, Ireland, and India while local manufacture declined considerably although there have been periodic efforts to revive it.

### On the road to modernity

Modernity exhibits itself in many guises but the change from a material culture based on natural raw materials such as wood, stone, hides, and such like to metal, plastic, and others has been one of the most evident and pervasive. Traditional craftsmen such as carpenters and stone-masons continued to exist and even prosper as increased disposable income permitted consumption patterns to move away from subsistence levels; people in general, but especially expatriates with relatively large incomes, were able to afford well-appointed homes, but modernity mostly stood for new technologies and new materials.

Motor vehicles must surely be one of the most enduring features of modernity and this shift from horses, and the many other draught animals used to transport people and goods from one place to another, to horsepower led to the creation of a whole new range of businesses to import the new vehicles as well as a wide range of new, skilled jobs to service and maintain them. These included panel beaters, mechanics, electricians, painters, body-builders, and so on but modernity was not just about technologies and material things, it also applied to institutions.

### Borsa, la Banca, e la Società

One way or another, the British had a hand in the establishment of three institutions which figured prominently in the modernization of Malta's civil society in the nineteenth century: the Chamber of Commerce, the Banking sector, and the Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce.

Standing in the middle of the inner courtyard of *La Borsa*, the building which houses the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Industry, one can easily imagine the wheeling and dealing that must have taken place on the trading floor of the building which has housed the Malta Chamber of Commerce for more than a century-and-a-half. Established in 1848, it brought together two associations of merchants which had not always met eye-to-eye on many issues, the Society of British Merchants and the Committee of Maltese Merchants. This happened at a time when Malta was a busy entrepot trading with the four corners of the Mediterranean and beyond with goods carried on Maltese-built shipping, financed by Maltese capital, and crewed by Maltese captains and crews. In the earlier half of the century, during the Continental Blockade, British and other foreign merchants had been very important but, by the time the Chamber was established, no fewer than 113 of the 160 or so names which appear on the founding charter had Maltese-sounding surnames. The Chamber was to be split asunder in the twentieth century when 'industrialists' came to feel that their interests had become incompatible with those of importers and other representative bodies of these sectors would not be reunited until the early twenty-first century.

*La Borsa* also housed Malta's two banks, the *Banco Anglo-Maltese* and the *Banco di Malta*; like many other aspects of modernity, it was the British who had introduced modern banking when the former was established in 1809. Others would follow, including the Anglo-Egyptian Bank which would eventually

metamorphose into Barclays Bank, D.C.O. These two institutions dominated Maltese banking during most of the British period.

In 1852, shortly after the establishment of the Chamber, and undoubtedly prompted by the success of the Great Exhibition at London's Crystal Palace, the British Secretary of State wrote to the respective administrations in the Imperial Colonies to solicit the founding of an association similar to London's Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce. The then governor of Malta, Sir William Reid, obliged by enlisting the collaboration of Baron C. Azopardi and others to form the first Management Committee of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, much involved to this very day in the organization of courses in practical subjects. In addition it also organized exhibitions of local arts and crafts and was at one time presided over by John Ellis, son of the founder of that well-known family of photographers, Richard Ellis.

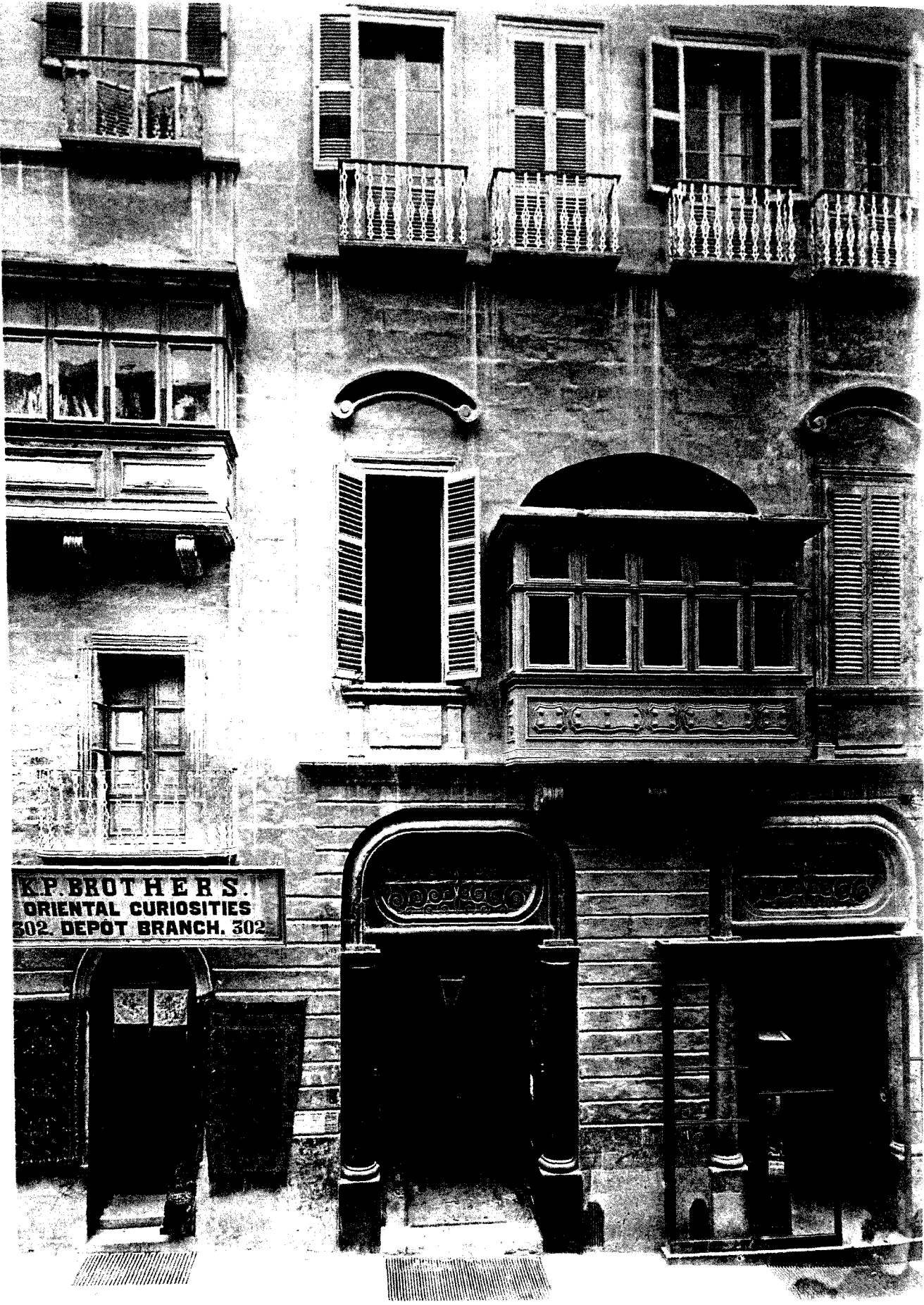
### Conclusion

In overall terms, one can see that a somewhat conservative Malta was in many ways dragged into modernity by its Imperial masters. This was undoubtedly motivated by the desire of the overlords to ensure that they themselves could live in a milieu that was congenial and suitable for their requirements. This is reflected in the fact that, despite the diminutive size of the island, it was divided into two fairly distinct worlds for most of the British period. In the harbour area where British rule writ large, the spill-over on to the indigenous population was very considerable, even intrusive. On the other hand, in the rural areas beyond and in Gozo, life in the villages and hamlets continued very much like it had been for many hundreds of years, endlessly repeating the agricultural cycle over and over again under the watchful eye of the parish priest and a handful of local notables.





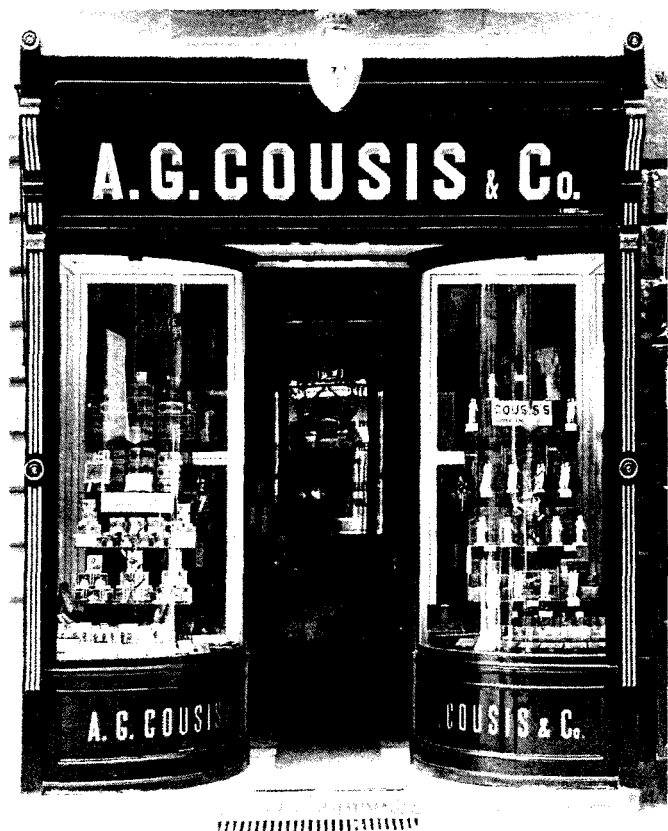
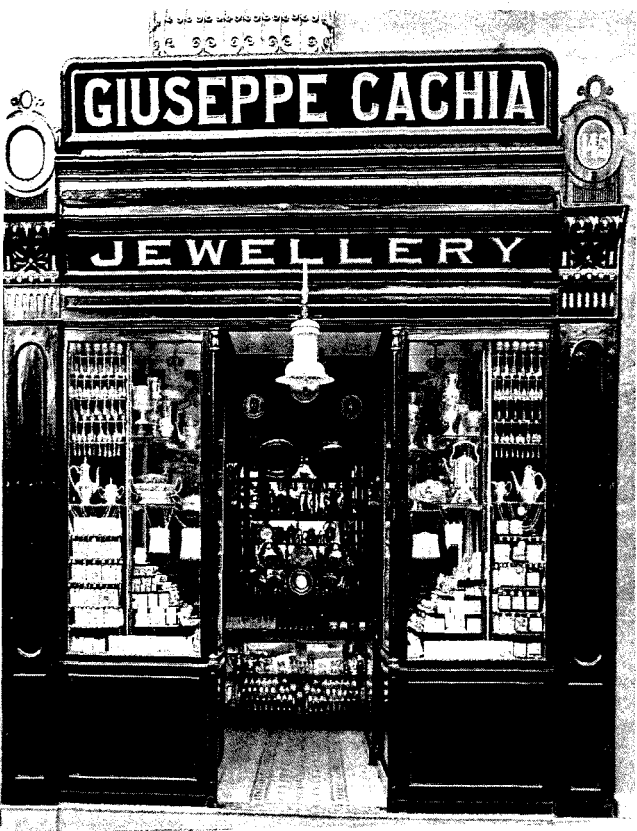
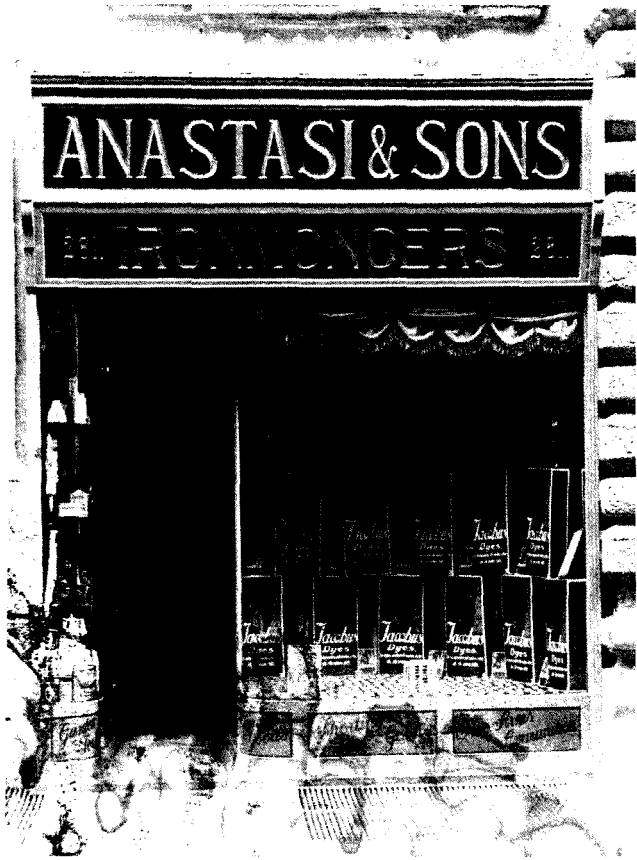
Long before the advent of containerization, cargo generally arrived in loose form in barrels, boxes, and cartons. Before being collected by shipping agents and importers, it was unloaded from ships to lighters and from there to shore to one of a number of enclosed cast-iron sheds or verandahs. This particular verandah at Pinto Wharf lasted, albeit in a dilapidated, rusty state, until the development of the area as a facility for cruise ships. To the right of the verandah is the Chapel of the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt and Forni Stores. At far right is the Austro-Hungarian steamer *Carola*, a familiar vessel on the Malta-Syracuse run until the First World War. Next to the lighters are the water boats, special lighters with a hand-operated pump, that supplied water to ships in harbour.



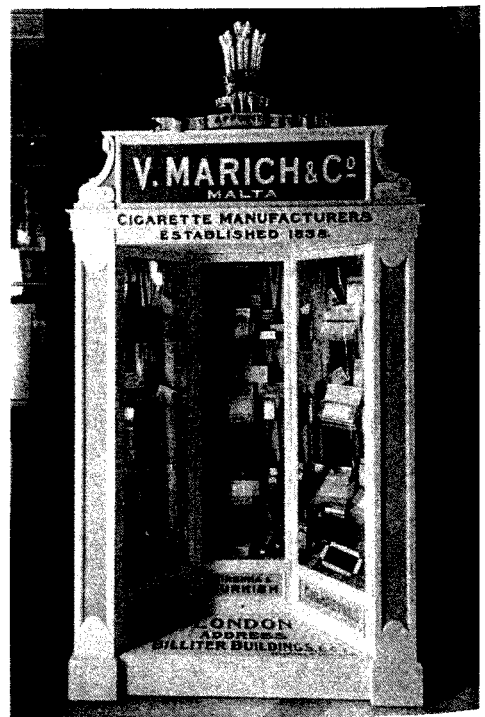
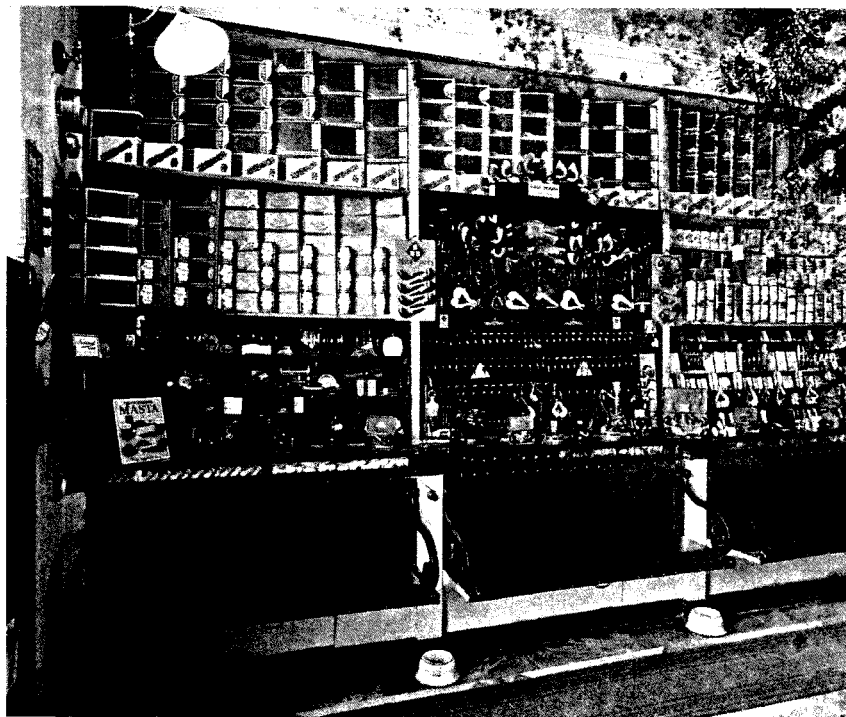
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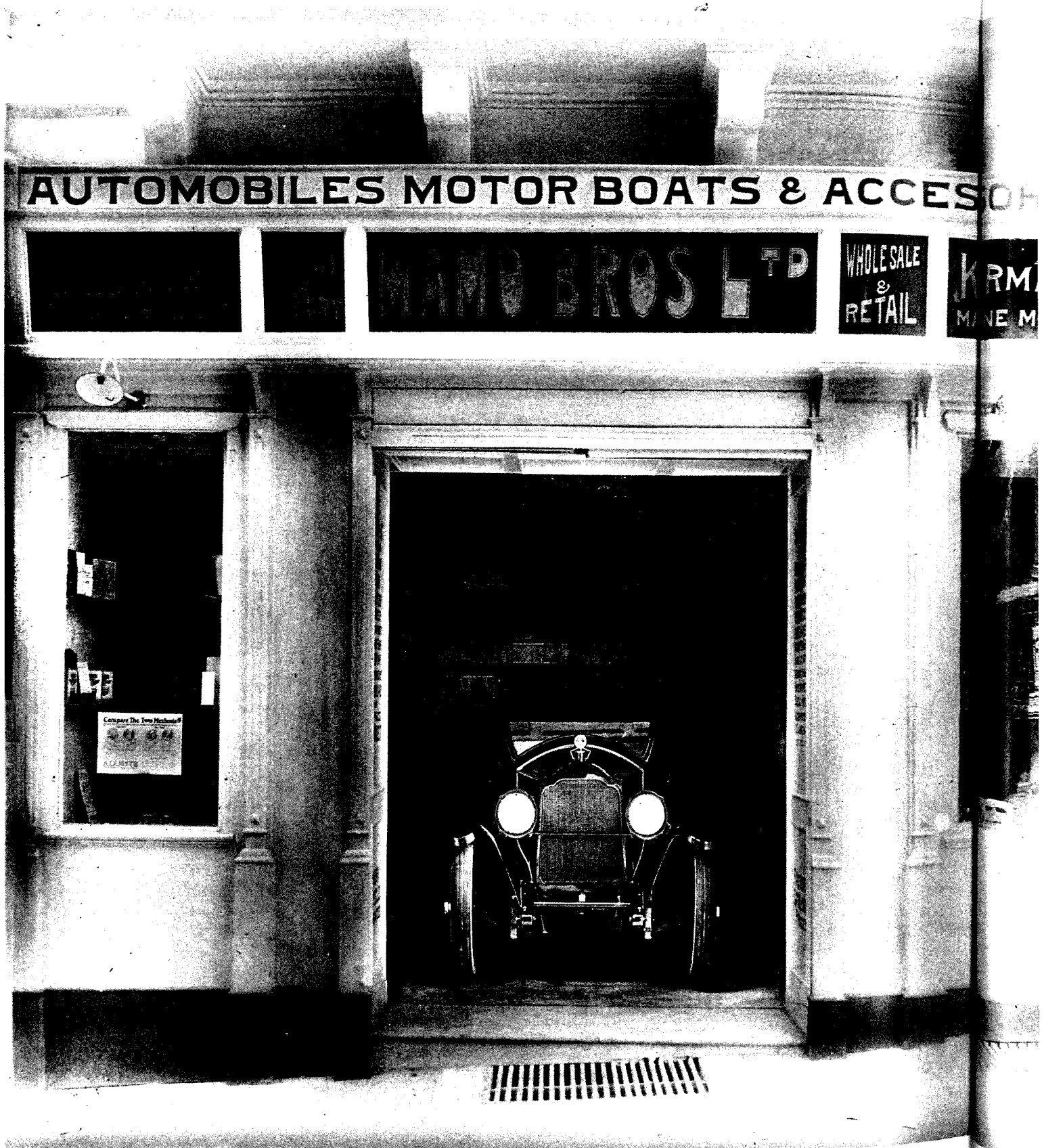
opposite page: Space for business premises in Valletta has always been at a premium and every nook and cranny was exploited to accommodate shops like this one probably belonging to one of many Indian retailers selling oriental goods.  
bove: Old-established Maltese businesses like Anastasi & Sons Ironmongers and Giuseppe Cachia Jewellery co-existed alongside more recent arrivals like tobacconists V. Marich & Co. and A.G. Cousis, both of non-Maltese origin.

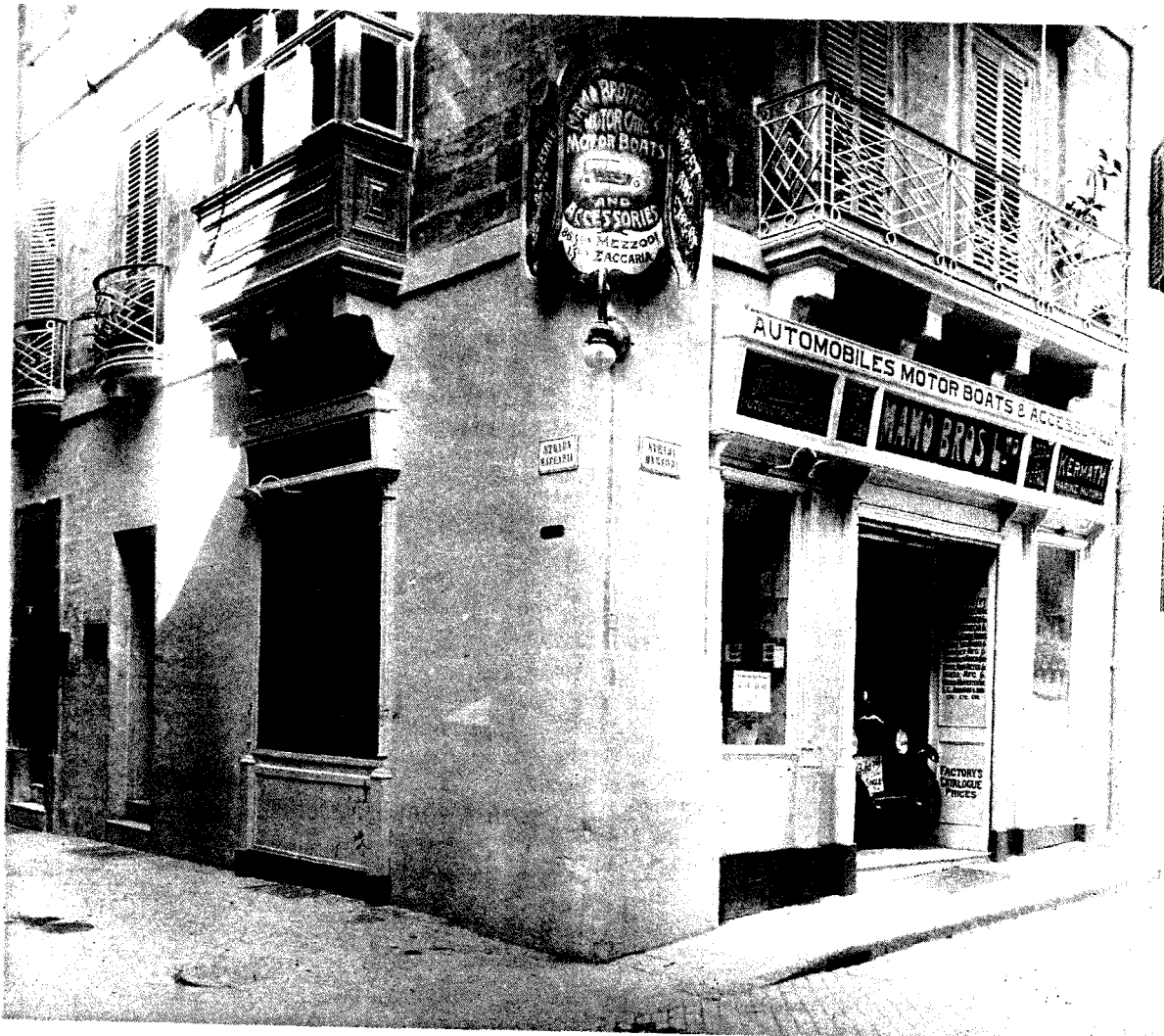




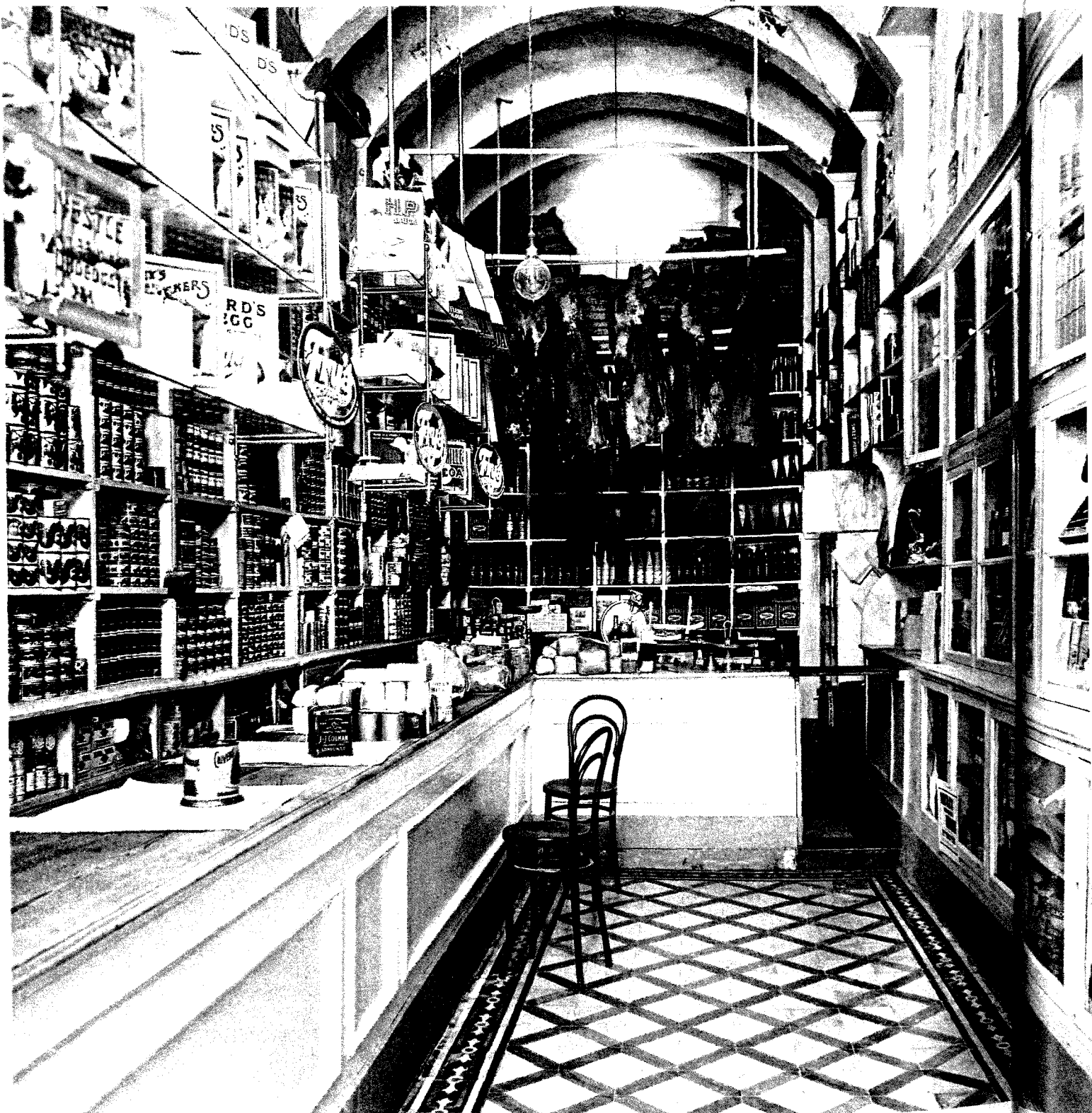
osite page: Established in 1838, V. Marich & Co. were one of the most important producers and sellers of cigarettes, cigars, and tobacco in Malta. The company produced not just for the local market but also exported to places as far away as India, South Africa, Canada, and the USA with cigarette manufacture in Malta employing hundreds of people. One fascinating offshoot of cigarette smoking was the cigarette cards which were originally conceived to stiffen the box but became collectable items for which there is still a considerable market.

Many remember the 'Flag' brand cigarettes with its yellow packet and the 'Red Duster', the flag flown by British merchant ships. Another brand known was the Scissors brand. Both brands were manufactured locally by W.D. & H.O. Wills, whose factory was at Barriera Wharf. Cigarettes were rolled by hand, namely by an army of women who took their break out on Barriera Wharf to the delight of the sailors on ships moored in the Mediterranean fashion – with bow anchors on hard mud and stern ropes to the shore.





Left and above: There is no consensus on when the first cars were actually imported into Malta but Mammo Brothers, whose showroom was located at the corner of Zachary Street and South Street, were one of the earliest dealers.

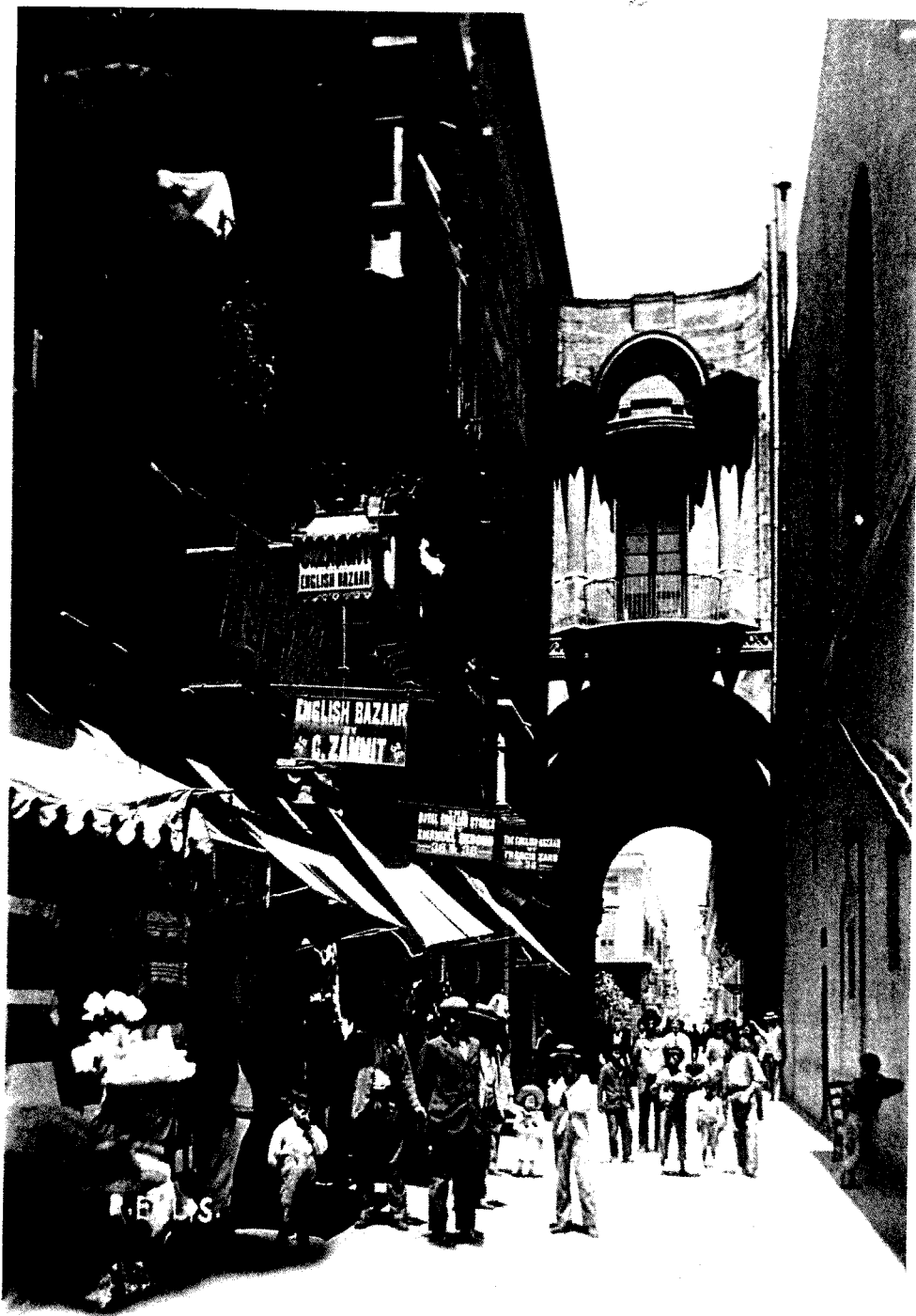




L. Calleja & Co.'s Colonial Stores at Cospicua and Sliema supplied only the '... finest and freshest groceries and provisions...' aimed at providing English people with everything they were accustomed to in the 'Motherland'. A specialty was Pelseo tea imported every month from Ceylon.







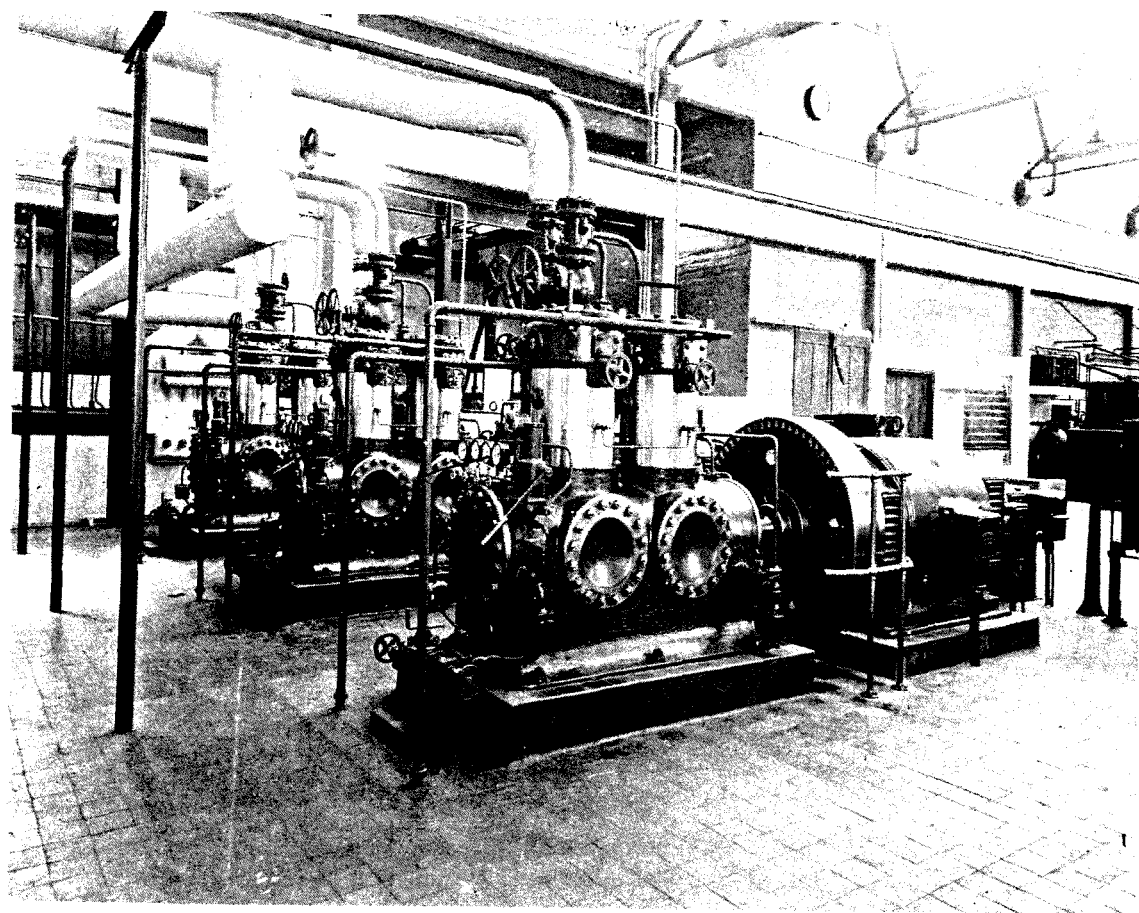
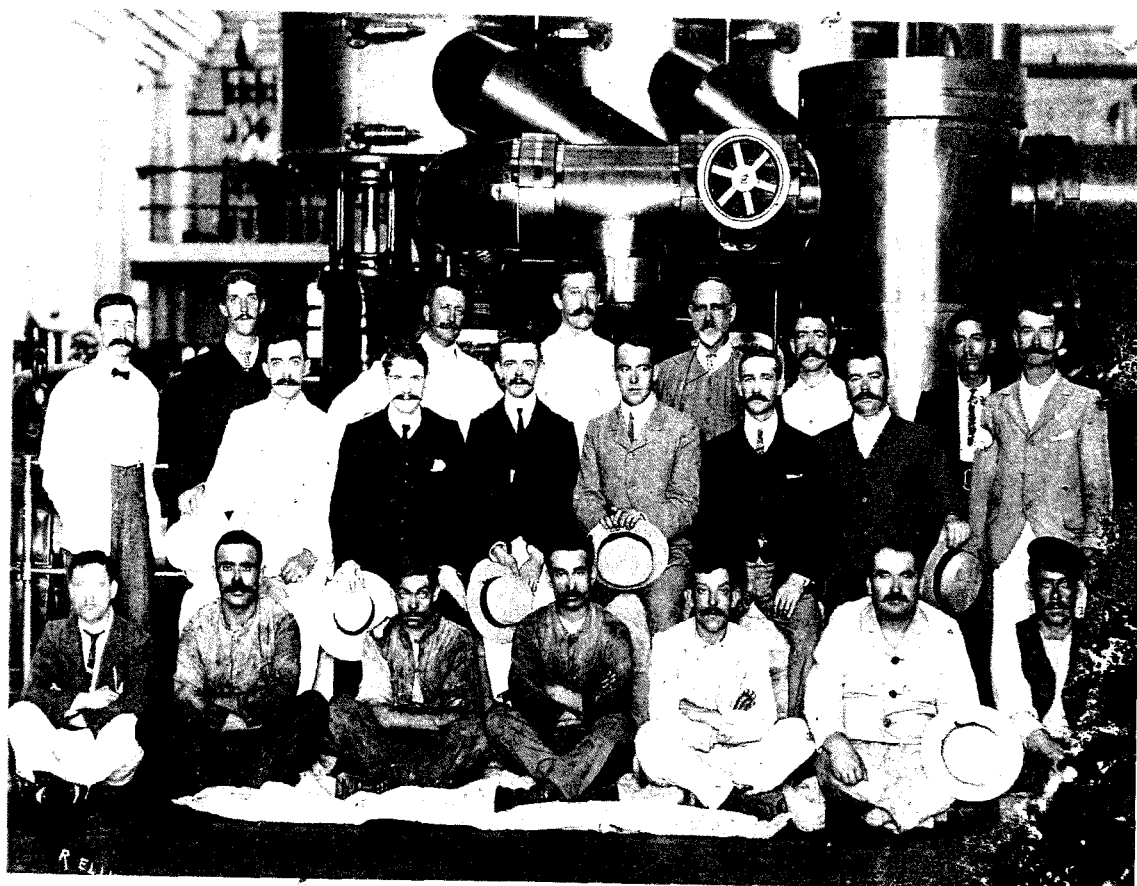
Left: L. Vassallo & Co., Grocers and Wine and Spirits Merchants, with premises at 288–289 Strada Reale, Valletta.

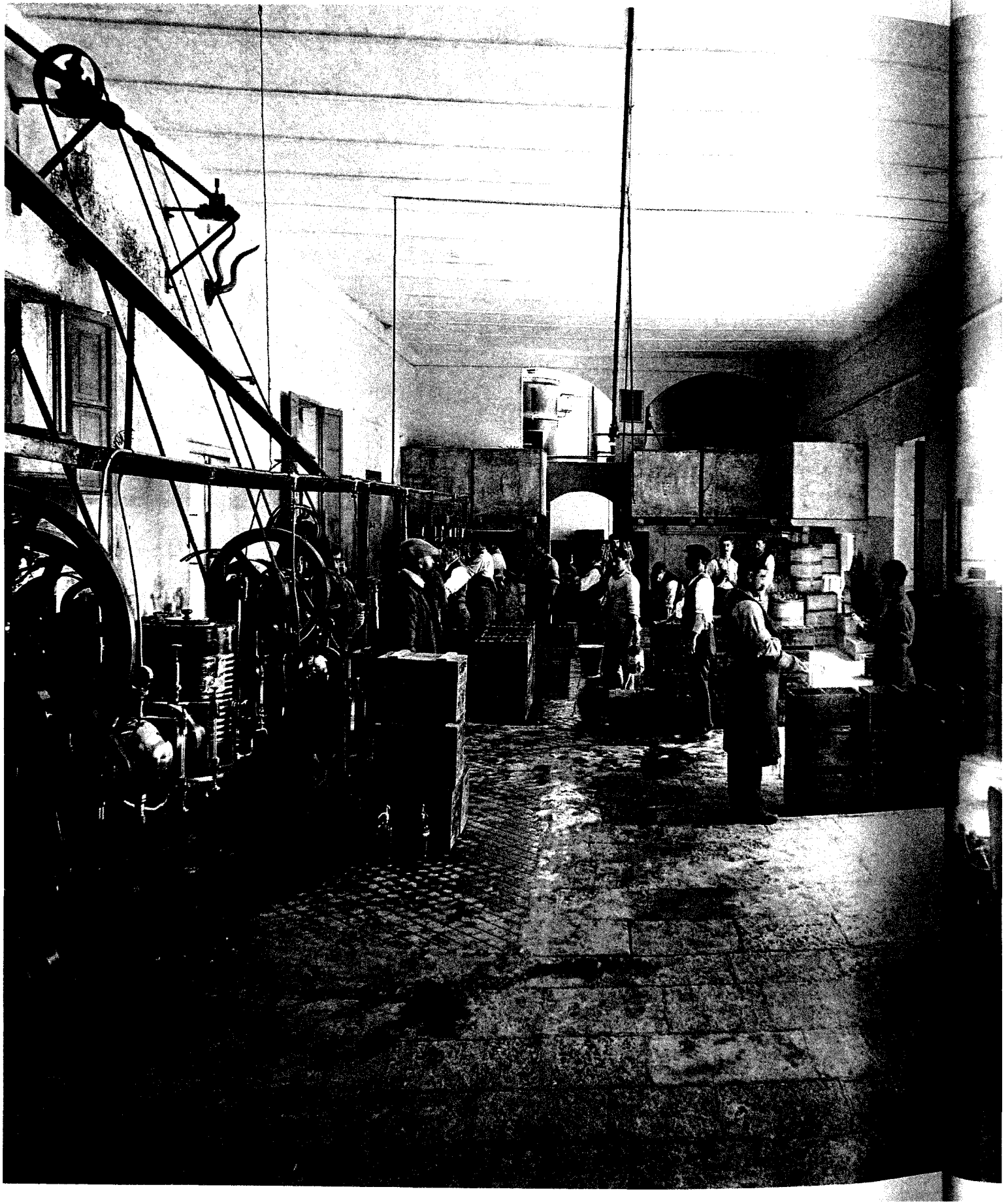
Above: Upper Old Theatre Street where the librarian of the Royal Malta Library had his office and a lovely view of street activity below. The street takes its name from the Manoel Theatre, further down and looking towards Sliema. As one went past the food market and looking towards the Grand Harbour, it was known as Churches Street, *'triq it-tigieg'*, where poultry sellers had their shops in the steps at the junction with St Paul Street. It is interesting how Maltese shopkeepers played to British shoppers' sentiment; three of the shops, side-by-side advertise themselves as Royal English stores and English Bazaar.



ve: Farsons Pale Ale, the first locally-brewed beer, was launched on 19 April 1928, just a few months after the Hamrun brewery was pleted. It has withstood the passage of time with the aid of willing volunteers, like this group of Royal Army Service Corps personnel accepted to test the quality of the product.

osite top and bottom: An architect and already involved in industry, Lewis Victor Farrugia had the technical background and vision unch one of Malta's enduring success stories.

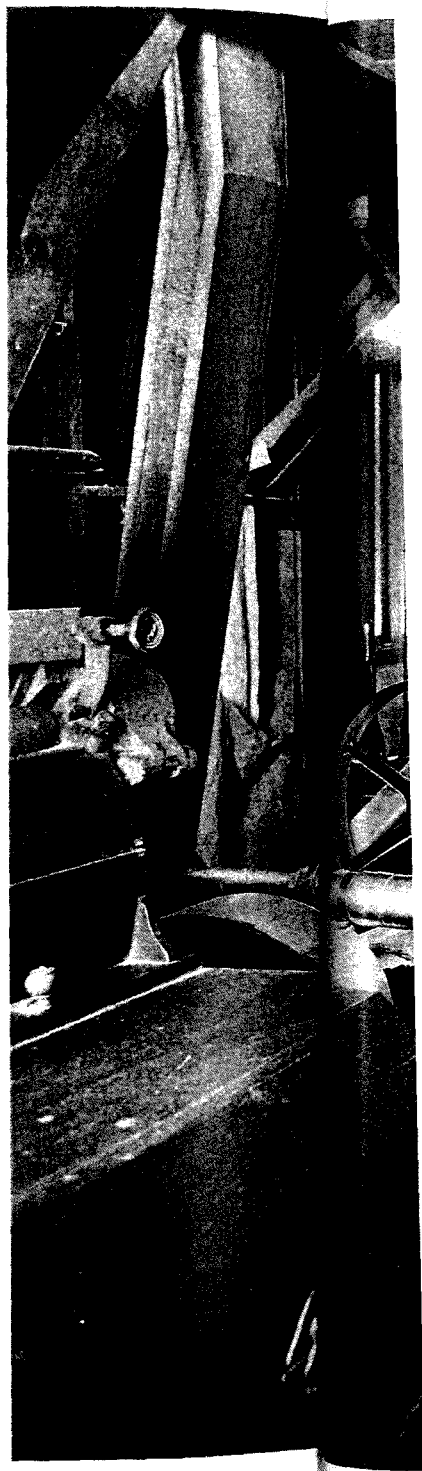


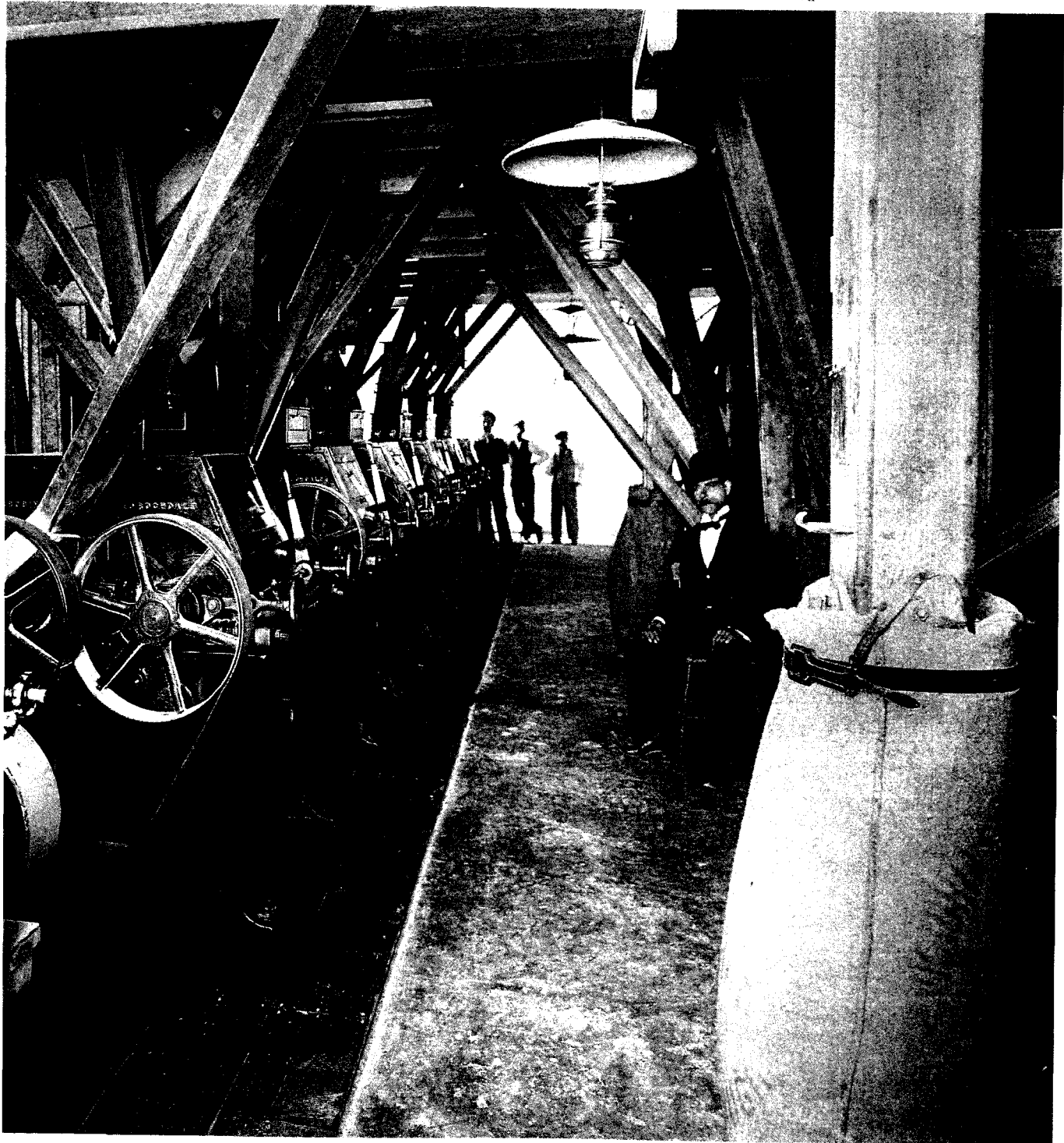




Left: Atkinson & Co. were general merchants importing wine and spirits, cigarettes, cigars, and tobacco and did a lot of business with British Army and Royal Navy establishments but they also produced soft drinks made from distilled water; this was considered to be safer than drinking water laced with whisky or spirits.

Above: Wine barrels lying on the waterfront next to Col. J.L. Francia's National Flour Mills. Malta had traditionally looked towards Sicily for much of the wine it consumed but during the nineteenth century more and more wine came from Greece by the hand of Greek entrepreneurs like Dacoutros.



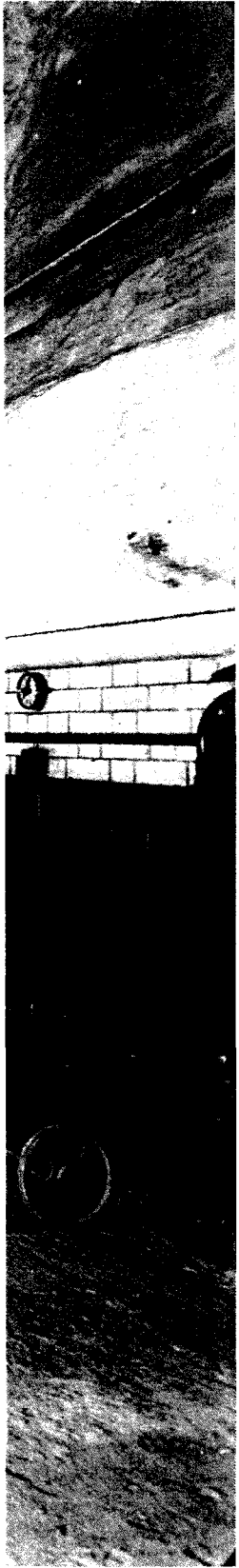
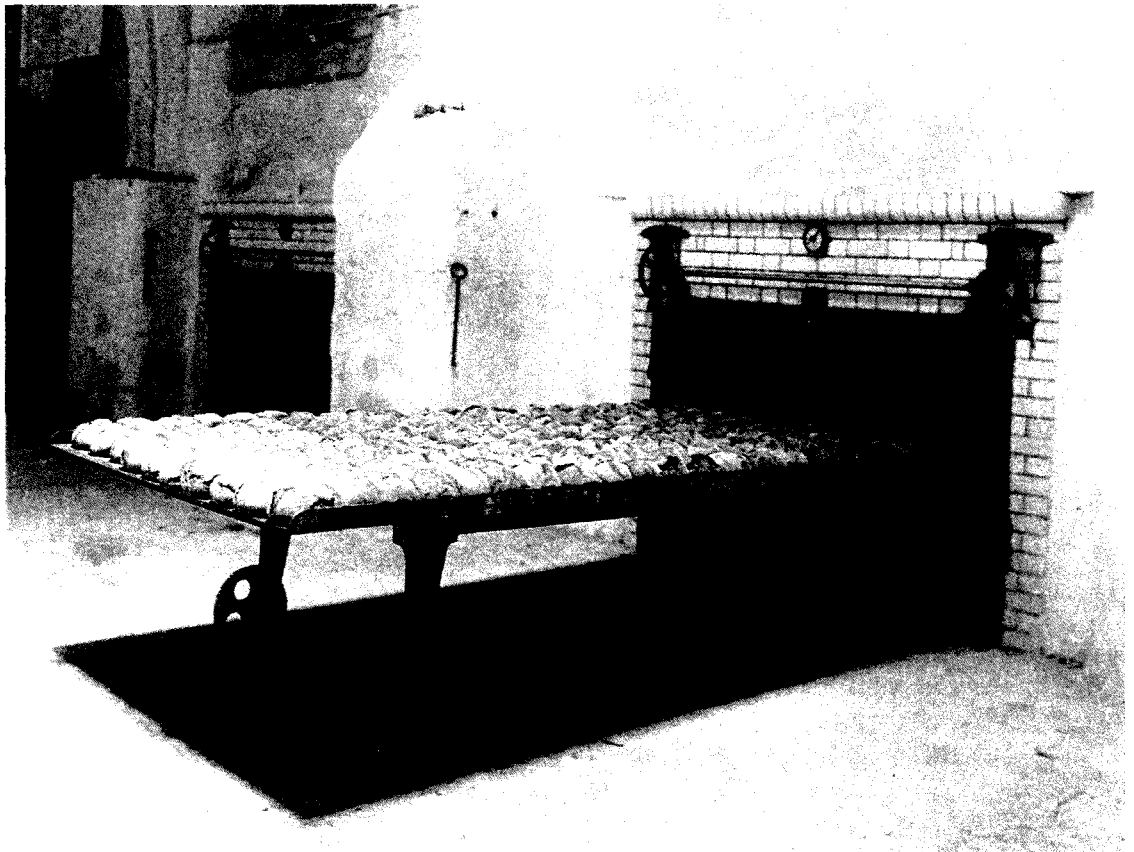
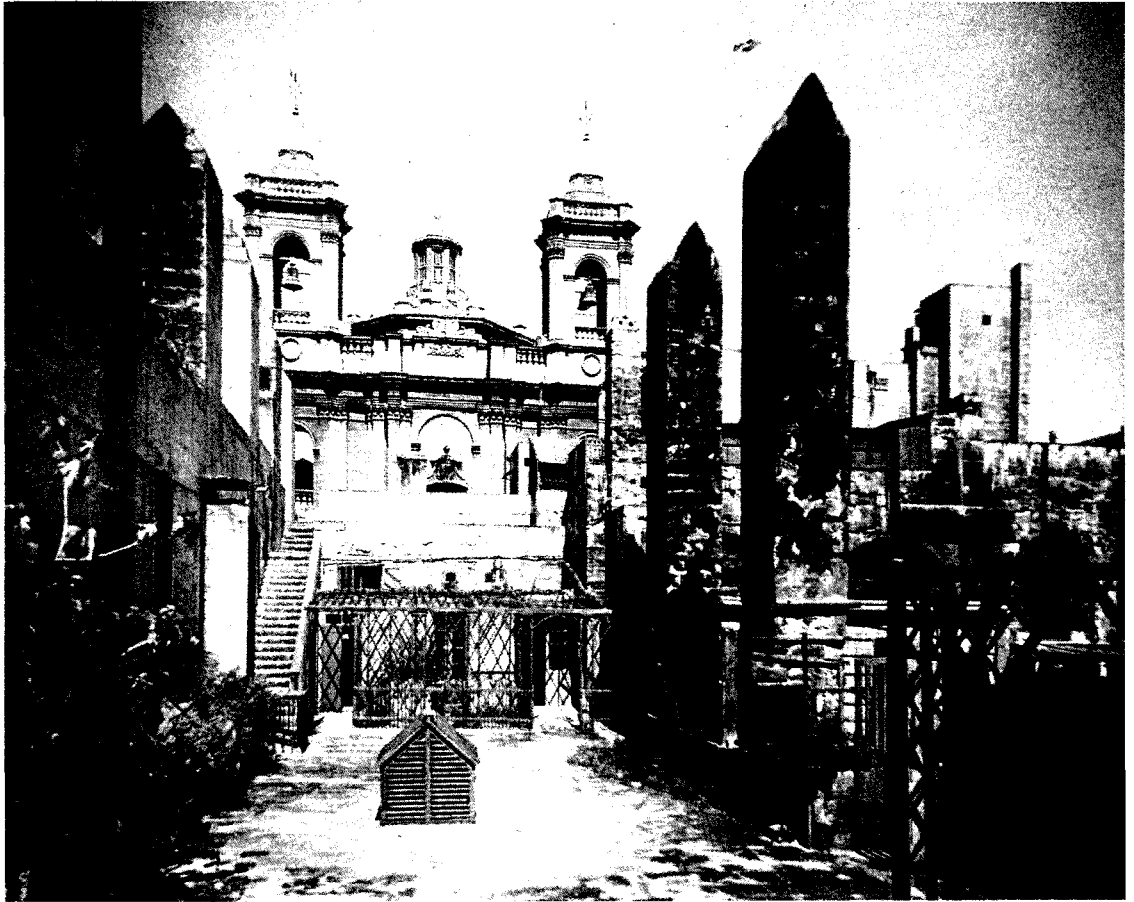


The ingenious Maltese method of storing grain in *fosse* or granaries is well known, the largest number being at Floriana. Wheat was originally ground to flour by windmills of which there were several in Malta and Gozo, including two on St Michael's Bastion at Valletta, still recalled in the name Windmill Street and in the more musical pre-war appellation Strada Molini à Vento. Mechanization did away with windmills, this particular flour mill at Mill Wharf, Marsa having been one of the first in Malta dating from 1851 and owned by the Rigo family from 1904. The equipment used to produce semolina was the most modern of its time. The mill was powered by electricity generated by its own dynamos and wheat was received direct from the adjoining quay. The building across the street from Transport Malta House, is now in a dilapidated state and is earmarked for re-development.



The old bakery at Old Bakery Street was a throwback to an even earlier epoch. Occupying a site opposite St Augustine Church, the *Forni della Signoria*, or Bakery of the Order, baked the bread for the hospital, prison, galleys, and troops. It continued in use as a military bakery under the British until Vincenti Buildings were erected.

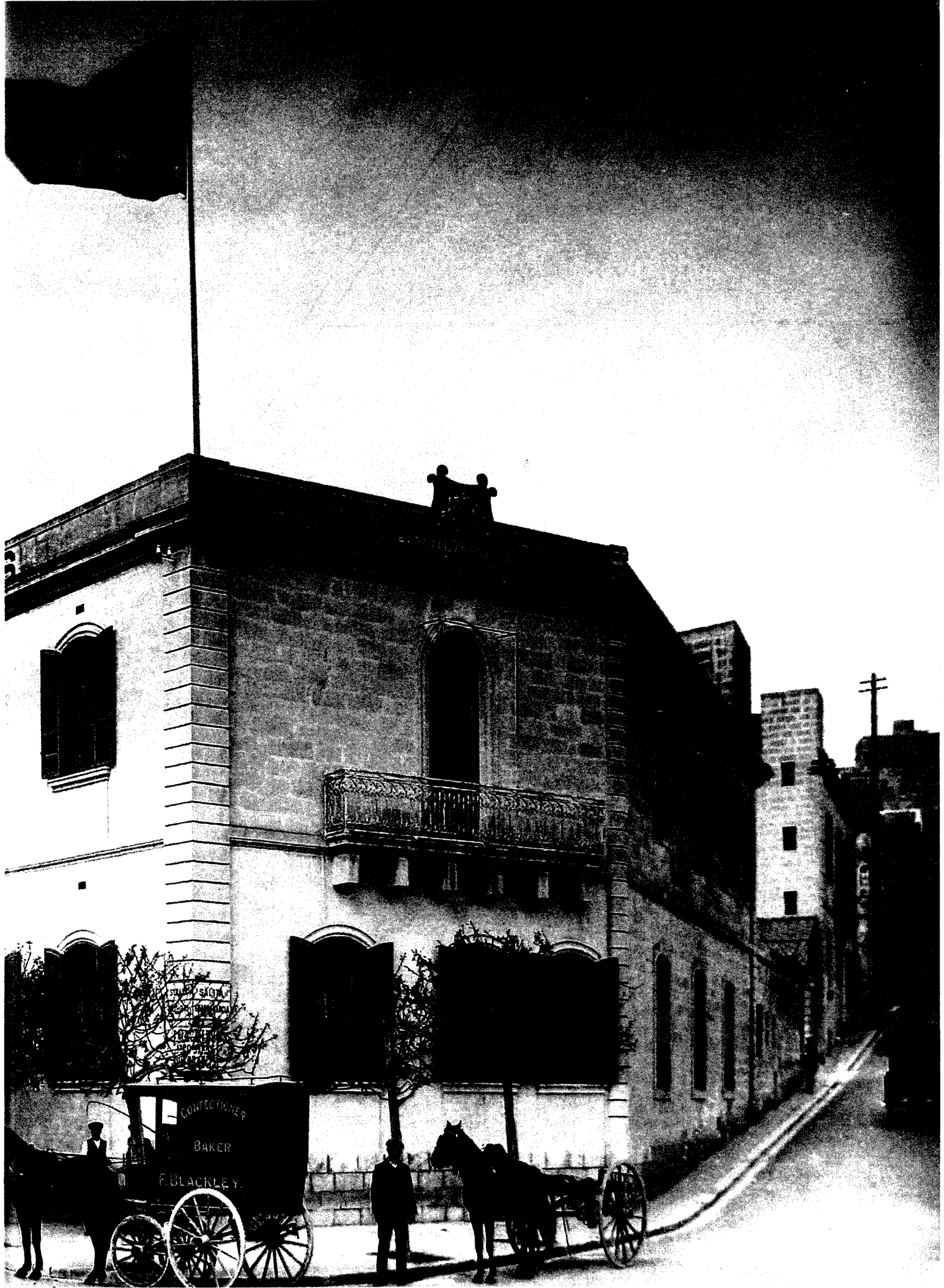




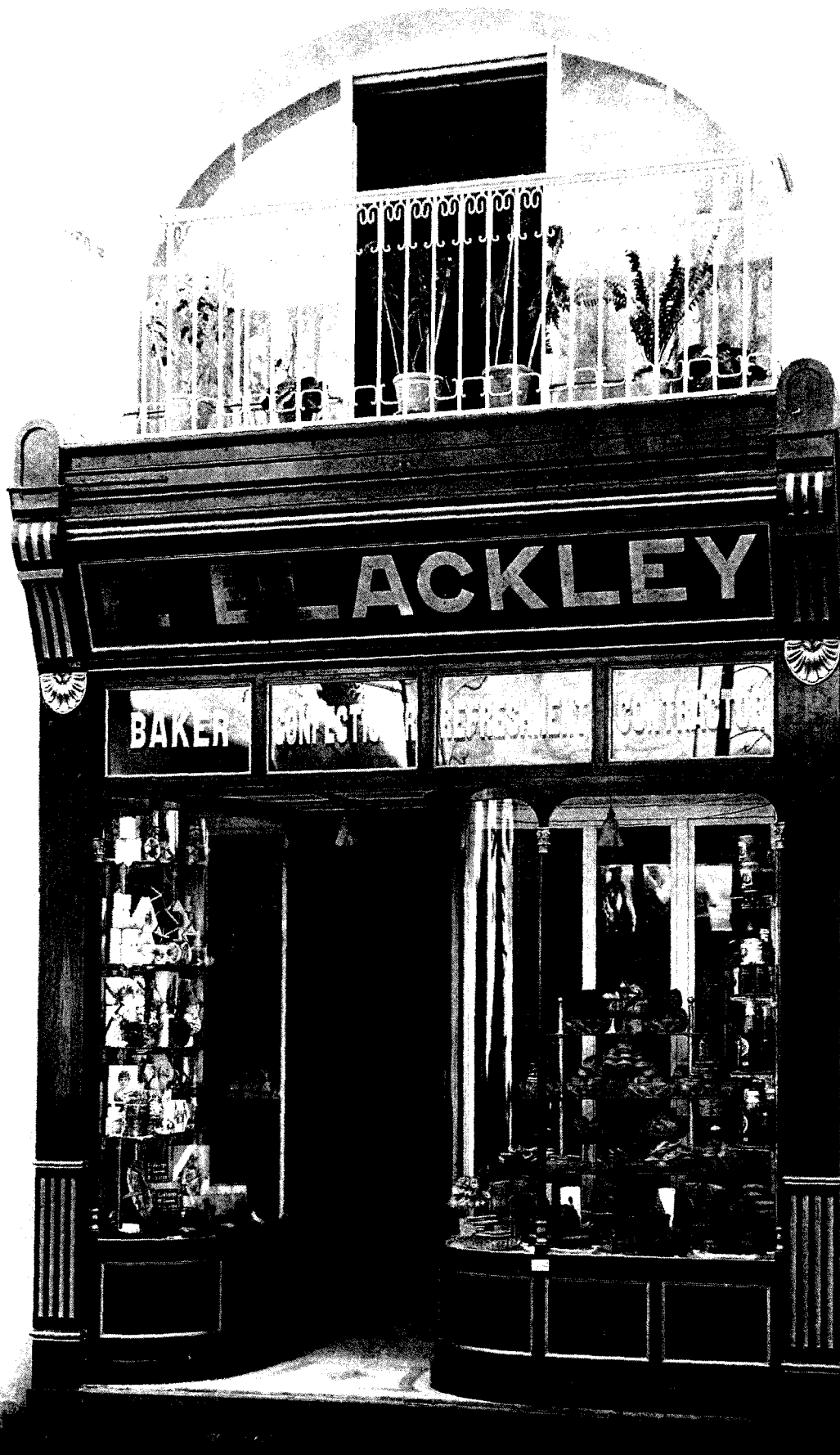
Right: In contrast to the Old Bakery in Valletta, the 'Model Bakery' purposely-built for Blackley's in Pietà, represented the very latest developments in modern baking technology and hygiene. Producing loaves of all shapes and French and Vienna rolls, it also baked a special brown bread called 'Maltaline', a light malt bread which was reputed to be very digestible.

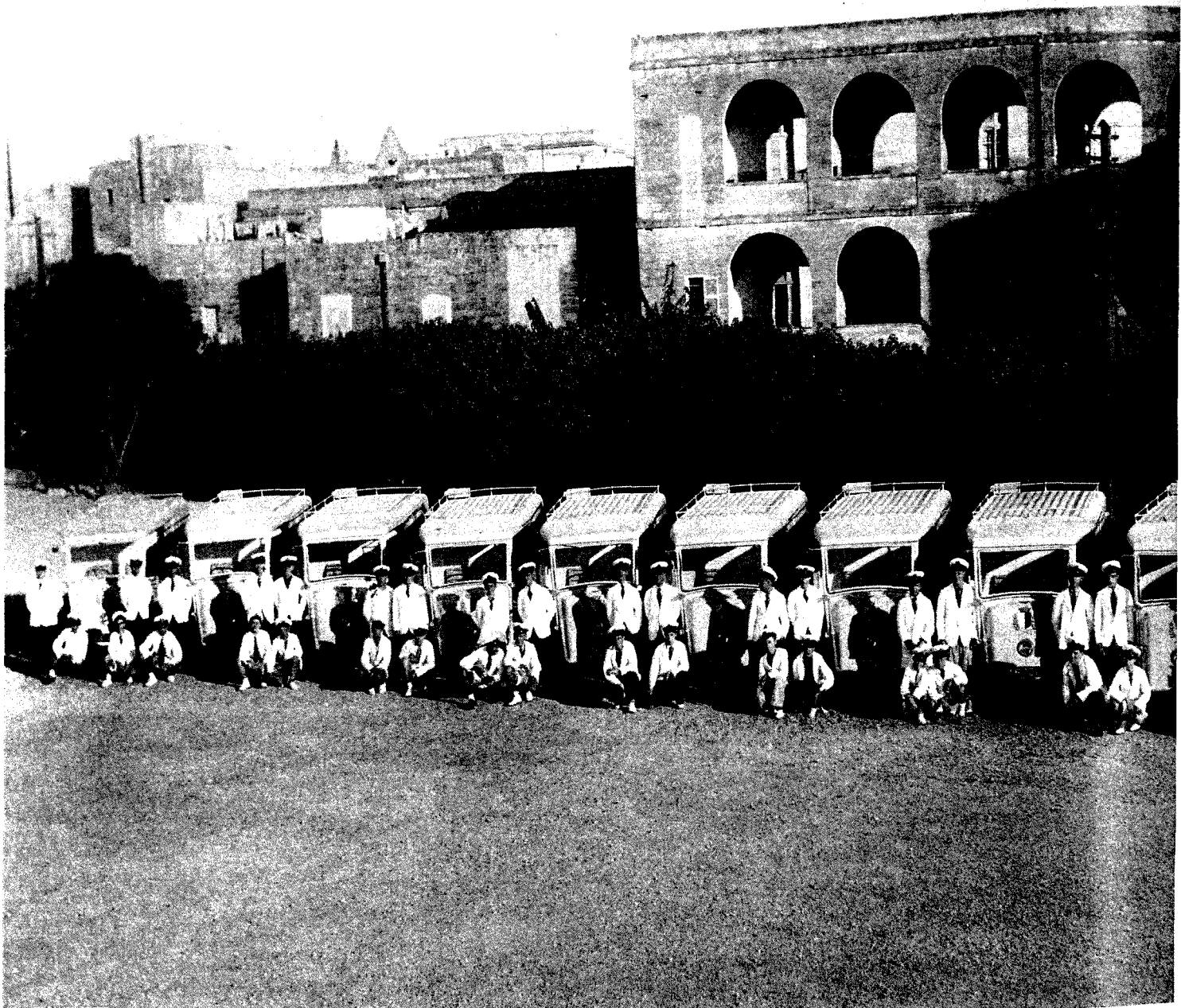
Overleaf: Blackley's retail confectionery in Valletta was the nearest thing to home for British expatriates. The shop operated until the early 1970s. For several years, one glanced wistfully at the shopwindows at Strada Reale or the side street, where it is still possible to read BLACKLEY in stone, the present chemists' shop having wisely decided to retain it. The company's model bakery at Pietà, still extant but awaiting redevelopment, has been extensively described in Allister Macmillan's *Malta and Gibraltar Illustrated*. Blackley was also an exporter of Malta oranges and candied peel. It prided itself on the freshness of its bread and confectionery and, for some years, distributed to the poor houses what remained in the shop when it closed. At Strada Reale it used to be remarked, with understated Maltese humour, that Blackley exposed his (Easter) eggs in front of St Francis (the church) and further down the street Cordina did the same for Queen Victoria.





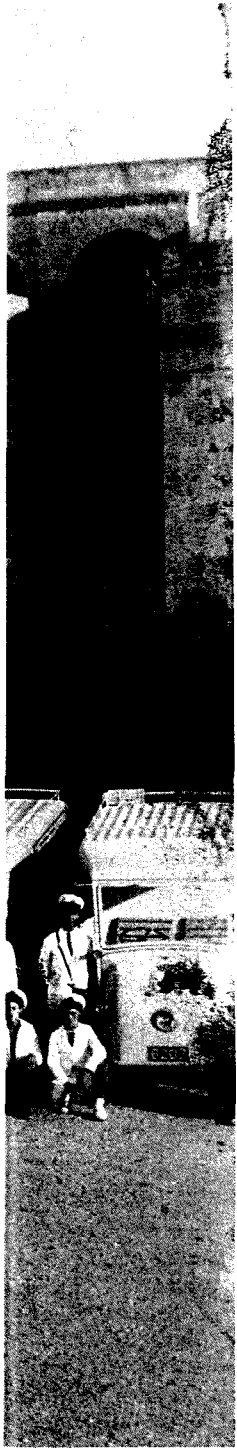






Above: The neat electric vans and their smartly-dressed crews of the Milk Marketing Department, subsequently re-named the Milk Marketing Undertaking (MMU), could not have provided a stronger contrast with the 'good old days'.

Right top and bottom: In the absence of refrigeration, milk was bought twice a day and as many as 5,000 goats were driven into Valletta every morning and afternoon to be milked in the streets. Low gates of brass or iron placed in front of doors prevented goats wandering into homes.





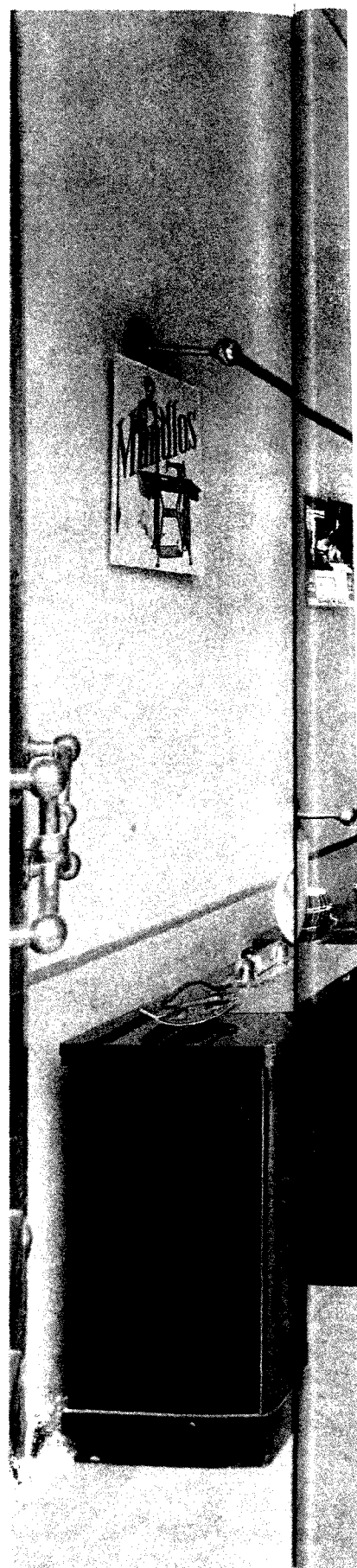




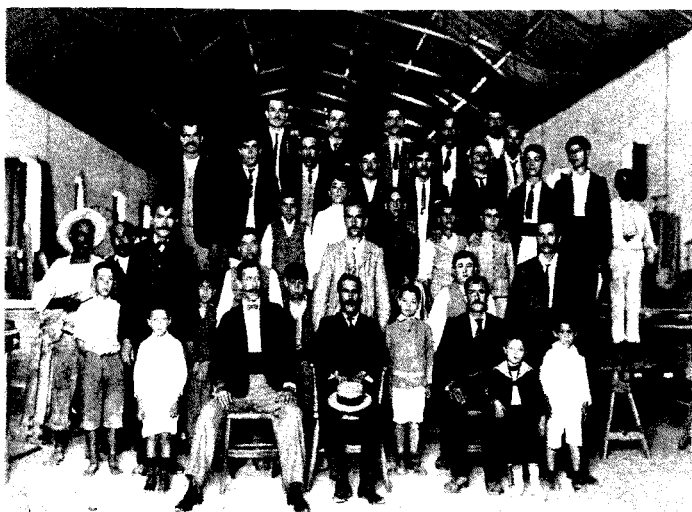


Previous page, above, and left: Although bobbin-lace-making dates from the time of the Knights, it seems to have gone into decline until it was revived by an Englishwoman, Lady Hamilton-Chichester, who re-introduced the practice based on the Genoese style. After the First World War, there were about 6,800 Gozitan women working lace from home, earning threepence to a shilling daily. While most lace was manufactured in Gozo, it continued to be known as Malta Lace, to indicate the country of origin to foreign buyers. About 1846, Gozitans created their own designs based on samples that had been imported by Don Giuseppe Diacono and developed by Marianna and Genesja Attard. Both women passed on their skills and designs to willing apprentices. Production was handled by middlemen who crossed over to Malta by ferry with suitcases bulging with lace to sell to souvenir shops. Before the First World War, cheaper machine-made lace caused a decline in sales, something that continues to this day. That said, connoisseurs are not taken by cheap imitations – they can tell the difference from the way the lace is made.

Right: Many Maltese women continued sewing their own and their families' clothes until quite recently and a hand, pedal, or eventually electric-powered sewing machine became an aspiration of many housewives.



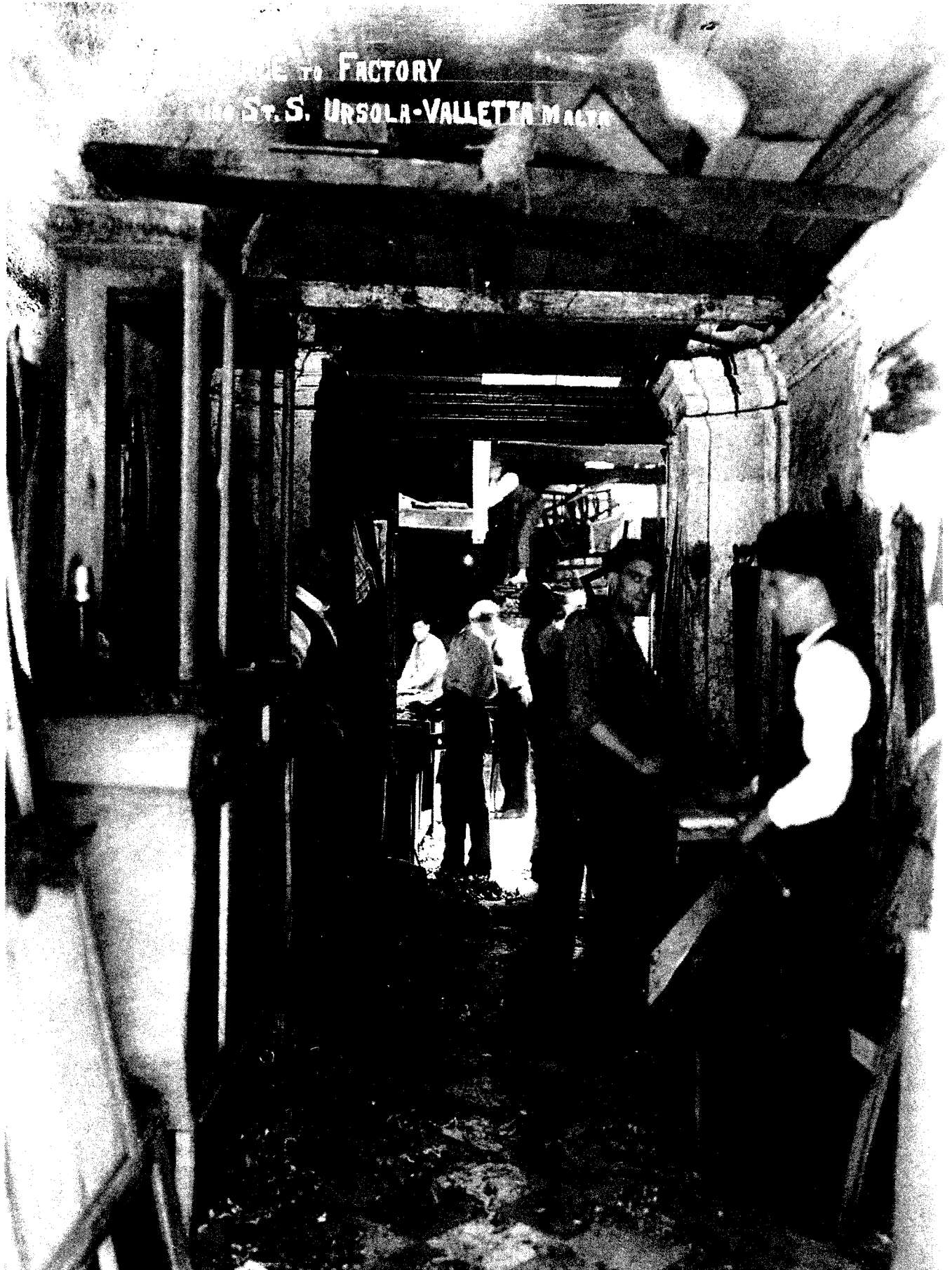


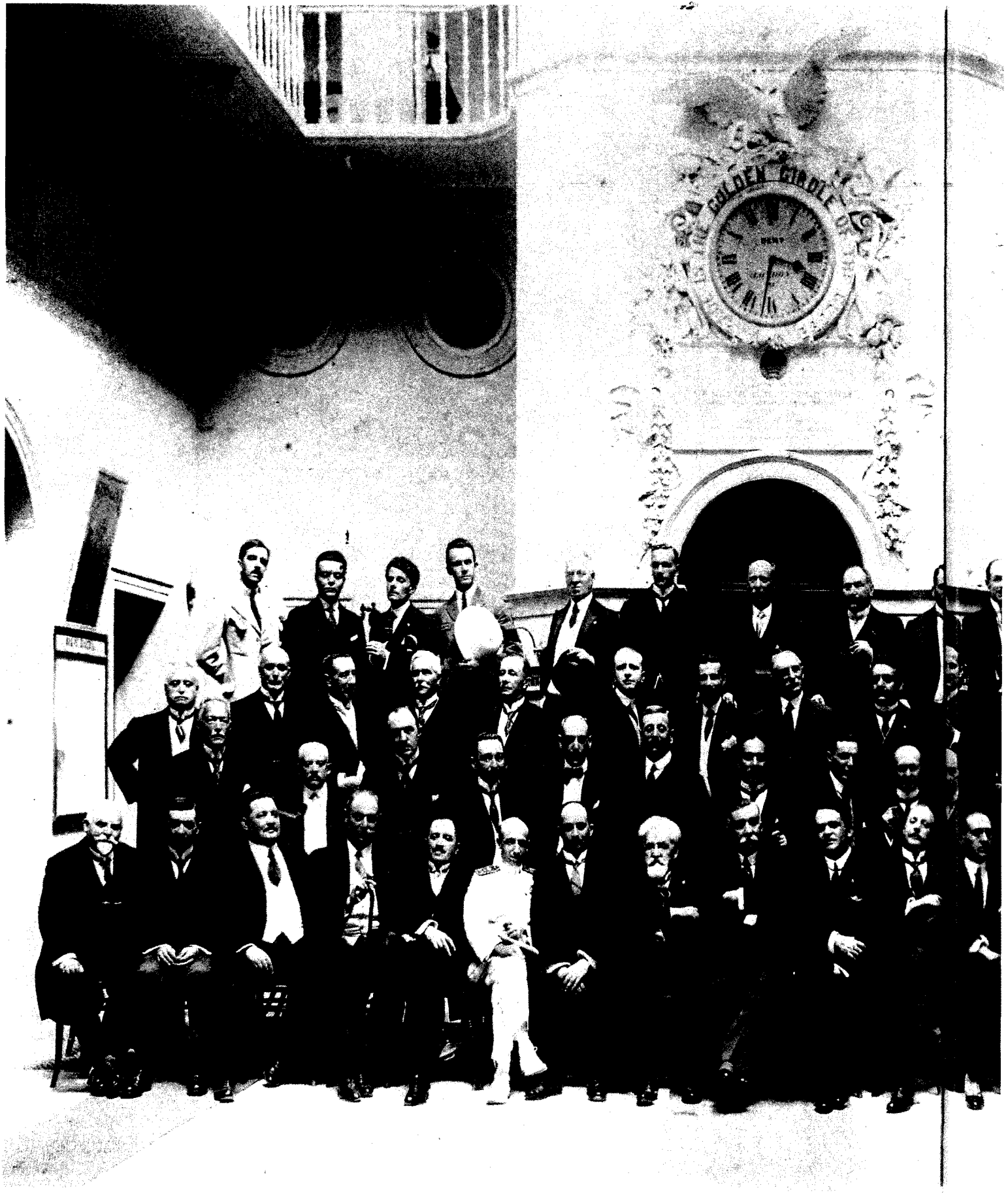


Above: The Ellul factory produced apertures at a time when most of the work was done by hand, the only piece of machinery being shown is the bandsaw at left. Interestingly, the workers are of various ages, showing the importance of apprenticeship at the time, when a senior carpenter would have a young boy under his tutelage in order to learn the trade.

Left: A group photo of Mr Ellul and his workers.

Right: Until the fairly recent removal of tariff barriers, much of the furniture made for the local market was made in Malta. Carmelo Delia & Sons was established in 1890 and the sign over its Valletta furniture factory declared it to be 'The best equipped Furniture Factory in Malta'.

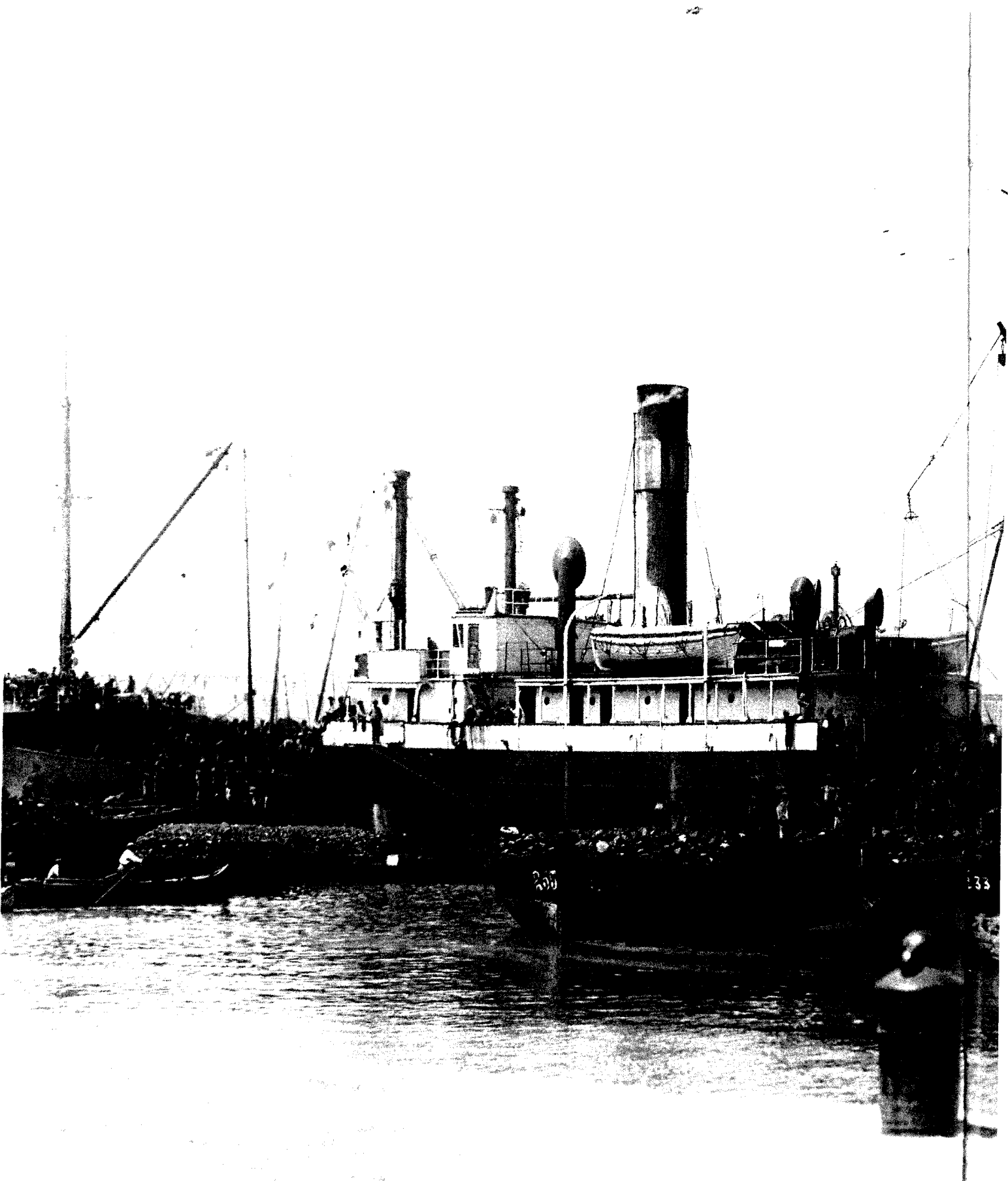






A photograph taken in June 1921 on the occasion of a lunch hosted by the Chamber of Commerce for an Italian commercial delegation. It was a trying time for the Chamber, both as regards the threats to the livelihood of its members and as regards criticism of its involvement in politics.

Overleaf: The coal trade, or bunkering, had at one stage involved the importation of nearly three million tons of coal per annum in the early 1880s. This meant jobs for thousands of coal-heavers and considerable profits for coal merchants. By 1920, imports of coal had dropped to just over 100,000 tons, a pale shadow of its former self.



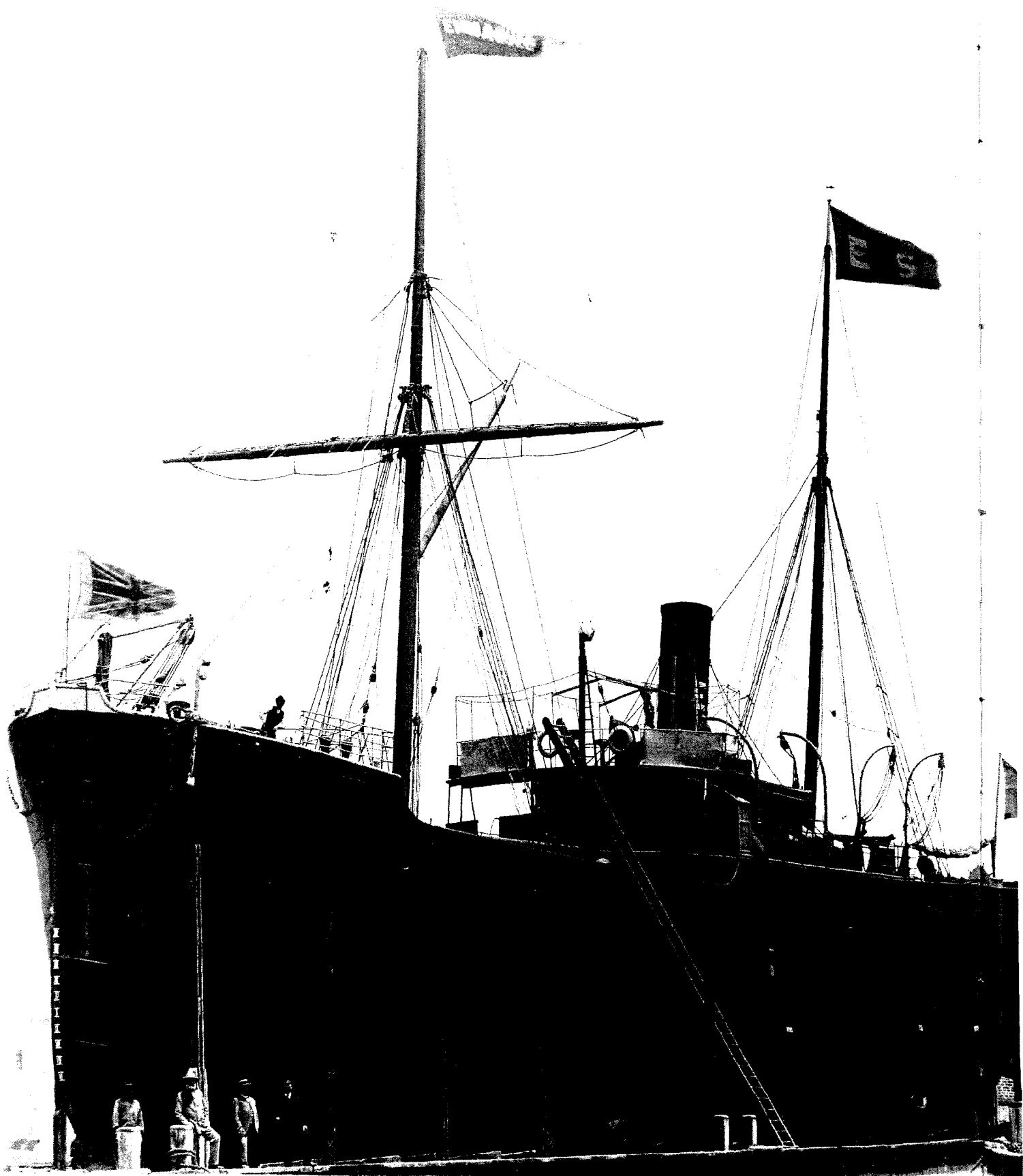


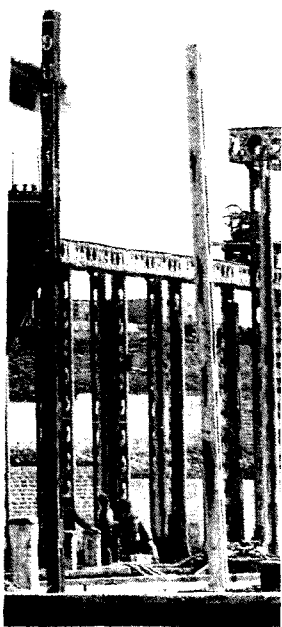
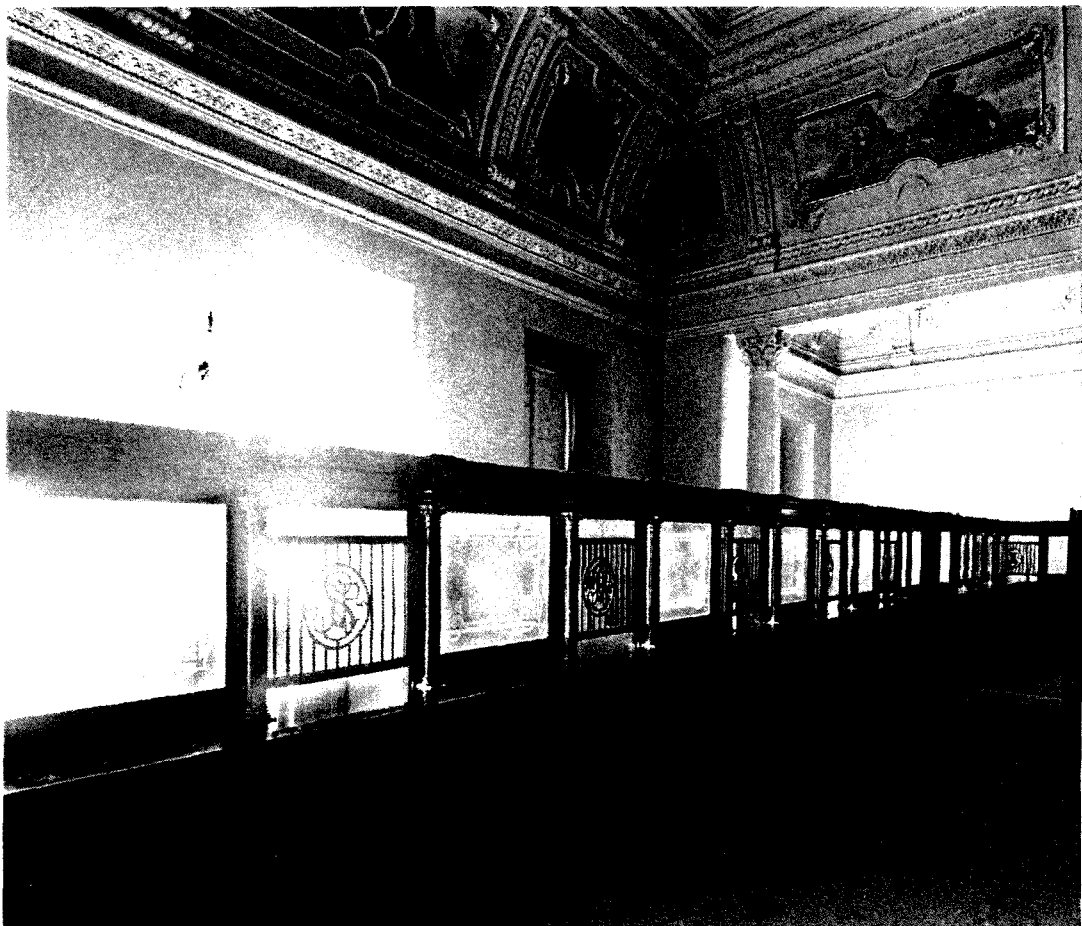
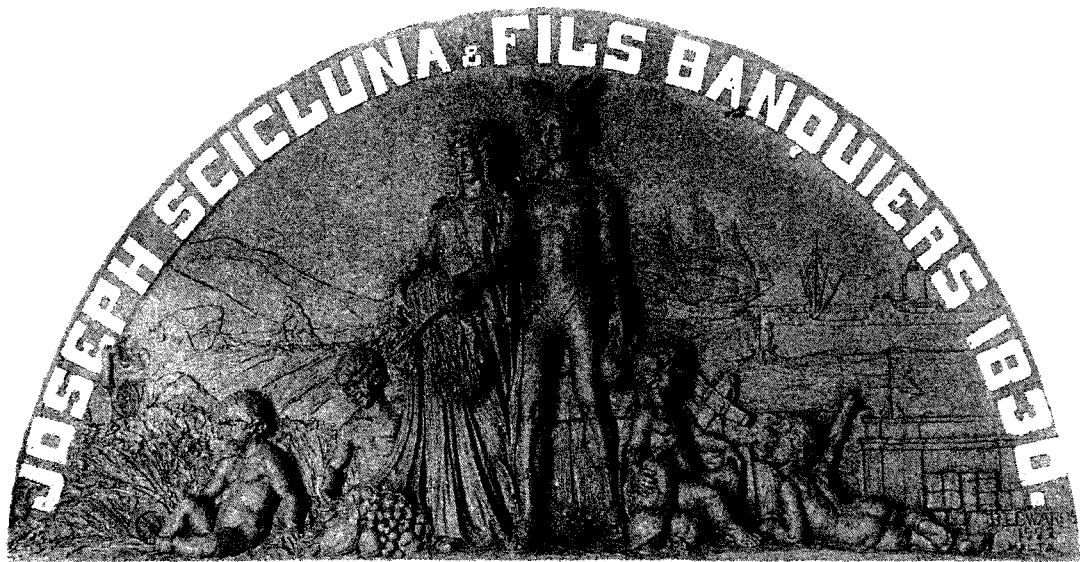




The Anglo-Egyptian Bank apparently set up shop in Malta in 1881 and at one stage issued its own bank notes. In 1925, Barclays Bank merged the Anglo-Egyptian with two other banks, the Colonial Bank and the National Bank of South Africa, to form Barclays Bank (Dominion, Colonial, and Overseas).

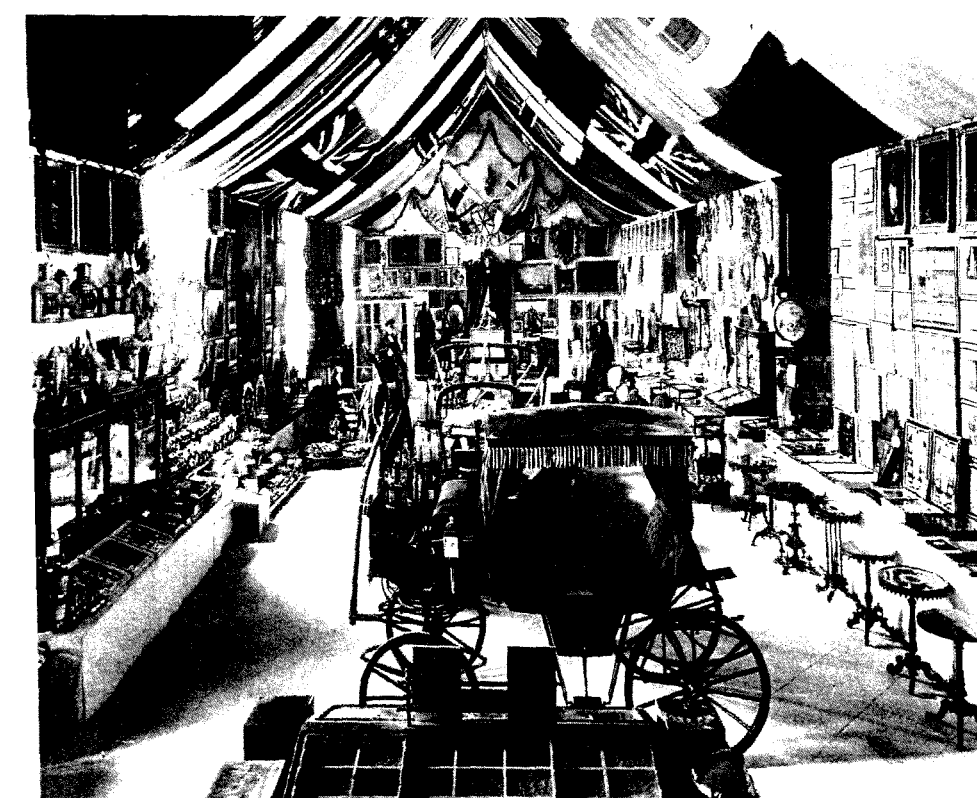






Joseph Scicluna et Fils was the fourth bank proper to be set up in Malta in the 19th century. Owned wholly by the Scicluna family, it opened for business in 1830 in premises at 122, Old Theatre Street, Valletta. In 1949, Scicluna's Bank amalgamated with the National Bank of Malta, formed three years earlier by the fusion of Malta's first two banks, the Anglo-Maltese and the Banco di Malta.

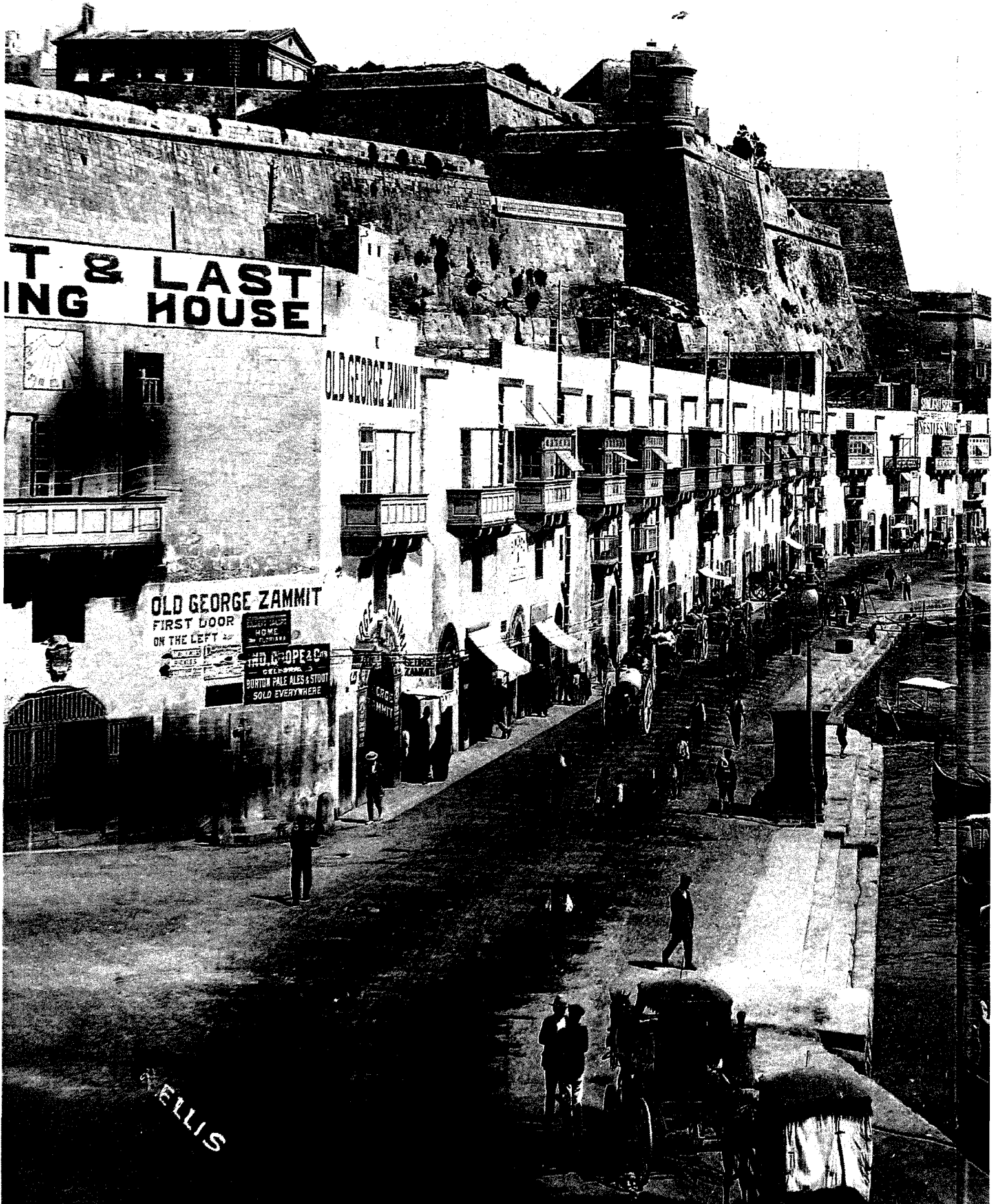
Left: The *Emmanuel Scicluna* is shown on one of the pontoons adjacent to the Clarence Hydraulic Dock at Msida, which was inaugurated on 23 January 1873. In the foreground from right are, the ship's captain, Marquis Scicluna, the manager of the hydraulic docks, and a dock worker. The ship was built in 1884, one of three owned by the Sciclunas, famous amongst other things, for introducing the cheque as a method of payment. As a result, the marquis became known as 'iċ-Ċisk', from the Maltese vernacular corruption of the word 'cheques'.



Founded in 1852, the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce was obliged to lead a transient existence until 1894 when it was granted the use of Palazzo Xara (opposite St John's Cathedral). The 1896 Industrial Exhibition was the first activity to be organized at their new premises. The Society moved to 76, Old Theatre Street in 1904 and then on to its present premises Palazzo de la Salle in 1923.



46 R. ELLIS PHOTO, MALTA



T & LAST HOUSE

OLD GEORGE ZAMMIT

OLD GEORGE ZAMMIT  
FIRST DOOR  
ON THE LEFT

TRID & OPE & CO  
BUNTON PALE ALES & STOUT  
SOLD EVERYWHERE

ELLIS



At the foot of old Crucifix Hill, on one side of the First and Last Lodging House, was the Le Strange erected in 1892 by the mother of Captain Charles Le Strange, RN. The memorial consisted of a floriated cross and pillar adorned with Tudor Roses and bearing an armorial shield with two lions couchant. On the pillar was the dedication: 'Given to the Maltese in memory of Charles le Strange, RN by his mother 1892'. Water flowed from carved dolphins into bowls on each side of the pillar. Chained, scallop-shaped cups were available for a thirsty public. Above the drinking bowls were *quaterfoils* bearing the Imperial Crown and the fouled anchor, symbol of the Royal Navy. The fountain was destroyed when the lodging house received a direct hit in the Second World War. A new, gentler gradient Crucifix Hill was built there afterwards and the Le Strange Fountain is all but forgotten. At right is the Gozo-Malta steamer *Gleneagles* which ran the service between 1885 and 1914. Above the balcony of the First & Last Lodging House was a sundial. Crucifix Hill descended steeply at this point.

