Il-Vjaġġ tat-T/S.S. Columbia

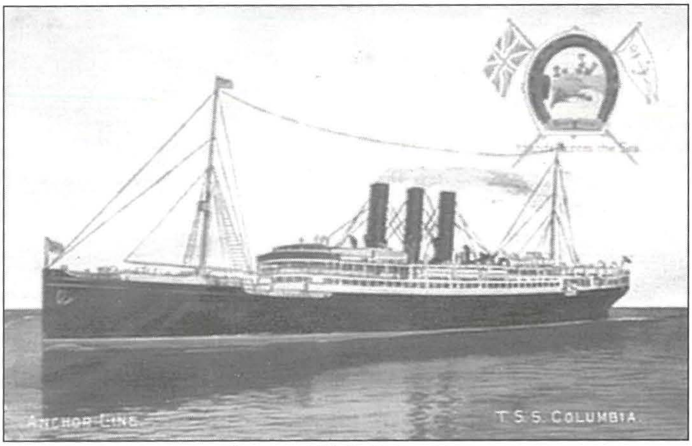
Monica Camilleri

Fuq il-kalendarju 2015 tal-Għaqda Mużikali Sant'Andrija nsibu ritratt fuq il-faċċata ta' wara nett - ritratt ta' grupp ta' nies fuq vapur. Dan kien il-vapur *TSS Columbia* li kien qed iġorr l-emigranti Maltin lejn l-Awstralja, fl-1949.

Dak iż-żmien, Malta kienet għadha kolonja Ngliża, u sfortunatament ma tantx kien hawn xogħol għall-Maltin. Ħafna min-nies kienu bdiewa. Oħrajn kellhom xi negozju żgħir, u wħud jaħdmu d-*Dockyard* jew mas-servizzi Ngliżi. Futur għal uliedhom ma

Grupp ta' minn Ħal Luqa flimkien mal-familjari tagħhom fid-Dwana tal-Belt qabel ma' mbarkaw fuq il-vapur.

kienx hawn wisq. Irrid ngħid li dak iż-żmien ma kienx hawn tagħlim biżżejjed, u għalhekk kienet teżisti injoranza kbira. Ħafna min-nies kienu illitterati, la jafu jaqraw u wisq anqas jiktbu. Minħabba fin-nuqqas ta' xogħlijiet, bdiet l-emigrazzjoni ta' eluf ta' nies li kellhom jitturruffnaw pajjiżhom biex ifittxu futur aħjar. L-akbar massa ta' nies kienu marru lejn l-Awstralja, art li għalkemm kienet mhux magħrufa ħafna, kellha potenzjal kbir ta' xogħol għal min ried jaħdem ta' vera.



Il-vapur T/S.S. Columbia

Niftakar tajjeb, fil-bidu tas-snin 50, meta l-ħarġa tagħna kienet tkun sal-Belt Valletta, u hemm joħduna fuq is-swar biex naraw xi vapur tal-emigranti ħiereġ mill-Port il-Kbir. Konna naraw xeni ta' qsim il-qalb, b'ħafna biki, tgħanniq u tixjir ta' mkatar. Familji sħaħ ta' emigranti kienu jittellgħu fuq dgħajjes żgħar minn ħdejn id-Dwana, u magħhom itellgħu bagalji kbar tal-kartun jew tal-injam. Il-barklor kien iwassalhom sa ħdejn il-vapur li kien ikun ankrat f'nofs il-Port. Konna narawhom telgħin ma' slielem għal fuq il-gverta, u hemm kien jibda tixjir sfrenat b'imkatar kbar bojod. U hemm, kif jixhed dan ir-ritratt, kien ikun il-bidu tal-vjaġġ lejn l-Awstralja ta' dawn il-pijunieri qalbenin.

Dan l-aħħar, ġie f'idejna rakkont, li ġie mniżżel minn fuq il-*website www.maltamigration.com* miktub minn ċerta Evelyn Spiteri. Din kienet bint Victor Semini, wieħed mill-*Welfare Officers* li kienu servew fuq dan l-istess vapur it-*TSS Columbia*. Hi kitbet li fuq il-vapur kien hemm żewġ uffiċjali oħra, Ugo Mifsud u s-sinjura Speranza Mifsud. Minn barra l-ekwipaġġ, kien hemm ukoll kappillan, Fr Micallef. It-*TSS Columbia* salpa minn Malta fil-21 ta' Novembru 1949, taħt il-Kaptan Coufoudakis. Dan il-vapur kien qed iġorr l-ikbar grupp ta' emigranti li qatt telaq minn Malta b'1,075 ruħ li jinkludu rġiel, nisa, u tfal uħud minnhom minn Ħal Luqa. Dan kien l-ewwel vjaġġ tal-massa li telaq minn Malta.

Evelyn tkompli tgħid li missierha kien iżomm djarju bl-Ingliż tal-vjaġġ. Illum, jien se nipprova nwasslilkom xi siltiet minn dan id-djarju.

L-ewwel kitba saret fil-21/11/49, fejn insibu l-informazzjoni fuq xi membri tal-ekwipaġġ. Insibu wkoll informazzjoni fuq kif il-passiġġieri ġew allokati l-akkomodazzjoni fuq il-vapur. Kiteb li l-emigranti fl-ewwel klassi bdew jimbarkaw fit-8:00am. Fl-10:30am imbagħad saret laqgħa bejn l-uffiċjali u l-Kurunel Boyle tad-Dipartiment tal-Emigrazzjoni Awstraljana. Tkellmu fuq l-indafa in ġenerali tal-vapur, il-ħela tal-ilma, is-sħana meta jaqsmu t-Tropiċi, is-saħħa tal-emigranti, u wkoll fuq il-ħalib u l-ħasil tat-trabi. Bħal ma kien jiġri dejjem, kienu nqalgħu xi problemi, bħal tfal mitlufa fil-kurituri u bagalji nieqsa jew mitlufa. Is-Sur Semini kiteb ukoll li l-imbarkazzjoni kollha tlestiet sal-5:30pm. Il-Ministru tal-Emigrazzjoni J.J. Cole u xi uffiċjali oħra, akkumpanjaw il-vapur sal-*breakwater*, rekbin fuq lanċa tal-pulizija.

Hekk kif beda l-vjaġġ, bdiet issir

quddiesa kuljum filgħodu, u anke jingħad ir-rużarju. Il-kwalità u l-kwantità tal-ikel bdiet tvarja, tant li beda jinstema' t-tgergir. Kien hemm ukoll xi regolamenti li ma ntgħoġbux mill-emigranti, bħall-fatt li ma kinux isibu tè jew kafè filgħodu kmieni.

Il-passiġġieri allokati fid-dormitorju kienu jidħlu għall-ikla ta' nofsinhar fl-10:30am, filwaqt li dawk tal-ewwel klassi kienu jidħlu fin-12:30pm. Is-Sur Semini kiteb li kienu jinstemgħu ħafna avviżi minn fuq il-mikrofoni, biex jintwerew il-biljetti tal-kabini u tal-ikel, biex tinżamm l-iġjene personali u biex kulħadd jaġixxi b'mod ċivilizzat. Kien importanti li tintlibes ġakketta u jitneħħa l-kappell għal waqt l-ikel.

Il-kċina kienet tiġi spezjonata

Emigranti Maltin uħud minn Ħal Luqa fuq il-vapur T.S.S. Columbia fi triqithom lejn l-Awstralja fis-sena 1949. Carmelo Magri (Karmnu taż-Żebgħa) minn Ħal Luqa (li jidher immarkat 'il fuq) kien wieħed mill-passiġġieri. Il-vapur telaq mill-Port il-Kbir ta' Malta nhar it-Tnejn 21 ta' Novembru u kien qiegħed iġorr 1075 passiġġier fosthom tfal, nisa u rġiel. Dan il-vjaġġ ħa 34 ġurnata biex wasal fl-Awstralja. Dan kien il-bidu ta' emigrazzjoni ta' massa minn Malta.

regolarment. Ġew organizzati xi *sports* għal fuq il-gverta, ċinema u anke tombla.

Qal ukoll li l-emigranti ma riedux jikkkoperaw. Kienu jinġabru fil-kurituri ħdejn il-kamra tal-ikel minn ħafna qabel il-ħin, jistennew *bħal ilpup imġewħa.*

Is-Sur Semini, kiteb ukoll suġġeriment biex l-emigranti prospettivi jingħataw korsijiet fuq id-dixxiplina t'abbord qabel ma jsiefru.

Insibu wkoll li kien inħela•ħafna ilma żejjed bejn Malta u s-*Suez Canal*. Kiteb ukoll li minn Port Said ittellgħu 12-il banju biss għat-trabi u daqshekk ieħor bennieni.

Matul l-ewwel ġranet, inqalgħu ħafna diffikultajiet oħra. Il-baħrin ma setgħux isibu tarf it-tfal li kienu telgħin u neżlin bilwieqfa fuq id-*deckchairs* b'konsegwanza li bdew iqattgħulhom id-drapp vilment. Għalhekk kellhom jitneħħew. Kien hemm tgergir fuq it-tè, u qam diżgwid bejn il-passiġġieri u l-ekwipaġġ, tant li dawn tal-aħħar bdew jheddu li se jħallu l-vapur u ma jersqux iktar fejn ikun hemm il-Maltin. Kien qed isir xi serq ukoll.

L-uffiċjal Speranza Mifsud żammet ruħha attiva u organizzat il-ħasil tat-trabi, kif ukoll ħarrġet grupp ta' *Boy Scouts* u *Girl Guides* biex ikunu ta' għajnuna lill-ommijiet bi tfal żgħar.

Hawnhekk insibu silta fejn qal li kien beda jidher biċ-ċar li l-vapur ma kellux ekwipaġġ biżżejjed, u li l-apparat ta' ġol-kċina ma kienx adekwat. Instab li lanqas kellhom magna biex iqaxxru l-patata u l-magna tal-ikkapuljat kienet żgħira wisq. L-ebda *sauce* ma deher fuq l-imwejjed u kien hemm nuqqas ta' varjetà fl-ikel. Ħafna bdew jorqdu fuq il-gverta minħabba s-sħana u dawn kienu jiġu mkeċċija kull filgħodu biex isir il-ħasil tal-gverta.

Inkiteb li t-tempra bdiet tiela' bejn Colombo u Fremantle. L-arditá u l-vjolenza tal-emigranti ma kienux jitwemmnu, kiteb. Jgħajjtu, iwerżqu, iħabbtu fuq l-imwejjed u jitfgħu ż-żibel mal-art u fil-baħar. Is-servizz fuq il-vapur ma kienx mill-aħjar, iżda, skont is-Sur Semini, il-passiġġieri ma kienx jistħoqqilhom aħjar!

Sar notament ieħor fit-8/12/49, fejn inkiteb li l-uniku ħin fejn il-passiġġieri kienu juru manjieri ċivilizzati kien waqt il-quddies u xi servizz reliġjuż ieħor. Apparentament, minn wara t-tluq minn Aden, il-vapur sar qisu mandraġġ, bil-ħmieġ u ż-żibel mal-art. La n-nisa u lanqas it-tfal ma kkoperaw fl-indafa, minkejja t-twissijiet.

Fil-kitba tad-9/12/49, intqal li kienu mardu xi trabi bil-*gastro-enteritis* u bil-*pnewmonia*. Żewġ trabi mietu u ndifnu fil-baħar. Sar ukoll twelid ta' tarbija oħra. Sar magħruf bin-nuqqas ta' lożor, investi u xugamani mill-kabini, u nstab li l-passiġġieri kienu għamluhom ħwejjeġ ta' taħt.

Fl-14/12/49 kien inqala' xi ġlied li ntużaw xi mwies. Il-ħatja nqaflu fiċ-ċipp.

Fil-15/12/49 ingħatat il-Griżma tal-morda lis-Sinjura Darmanin u saret ukoll magħmudija. Il-film u d-*dance* organizzati għal dakinhar tħassru minħabba l-mewt ta' tarbija ta' 7 xhur.

Fis-17/12/49 kiteb li kienet dehret Fremantle. It-tobba ċċekkjaw il-passiġġieri u wara tħallew jinżlu l-art. Is-Sur Semini hawn qal li kienu daħlu jieklu f'restorant Grieg u b'nofs lira Maltija kielu ħamsa min-nies.

Fit-23/12/49 bdew deħlin fil-port ta' Melbourne, *Philip Bay*, għat-8:00am, u trakkaw mal-moll għat-3:00pm. L-emigranti rċevew merħba kbira mill-komunità Maltija t'hemm. Bdiet id-diżembarkazzjoni u sas-6:00pm kien niżel kulħadd.

Sar notament ieħor fil-25/12/49, jum il-Milied. Kienu bdew ir-rotta lejn Sydney, l-aħħar port tal-vjaġġ. Ġiet servuta l-ikla tal-Milied, ross il-forn, dundjan, ħut, frott, lewż, ħelu, inbid u xampanja. Ħafna mill-Maltin sikru. Xi Għawdxin bdew jiġġieldu fil-*bar* u għamlu wkoll xi ħsarat.

FEATURE

Reunion of largest group of migrants to leave Malta

Albert W. Agius

A nostalgic occasion was organised at the Parramatta Melita Eagles' Stadium in South Granville, NSW by the Maltese welfare group. It was a reunion of the passengers on the *TSS Columbia* who made the trip to Australia 50 years ago.

After a welcome by the MC, Mr Frank Zammit, who also read a poem, Mr Mark Caruana led in a prayer for the deceased passengers. He spoke of the historic significance of the particular voyage. He said that this was the first ship to take more than a thousand passengers on board. It was the start of mass migration from Malta.

The voyage started from the Grand Harbour on Monday, November 21, 1949 and the ship was carrying the largest-ever group of migrants to leave Malta, 1,075 men, women and children.

A clipping from the *Times of Malta* of the next day was produced at the reunion. The report recorded that "It all began at about 4 a.m. when crowds began to arrive at the Customs House. Yes, 4 a.m. they started and at noon they were still there. Public organisation and Emigration Department arrangements made the task of embarking over a thousand migrants – to say nothing of keeping their many thousands of relatives and friends away from the sphere of operations – a simple and efficient function."

According to the report, "Traffic was held up and diverted from the road alongside Customs House. The cars would have never been able to get through the packed mass of humanity which thronged the street in any case.

"Ashore everything went like clockwork. Papers had been prepared, docketed and sectioned in advance; migrants passed through the formalities in families, onto one of the ferries for transportation to the ship."

Members from a number of families that made the trip recounted their experiences. The Portelli family, formerly of Tarxien, who were among the organisers of the reunion, started the ball rolling.

Mr Charles Glanville, the architect of a number of projects including the grandstand at the Melita Stadium (named, incidentally, after my late brother, Donald), spoke on behalf of his parents. Charles was only two years old when the family migrated.

Mr Alan Flores was another speaker who was only a child at the time.

Mrs Joan Sacco, *née* Pulis, spoke about the hardship they had to endure on board and about the way that the Greek captain ignored the passengers' complaints.

A souvenir pamphlet designed and compiled by Mr Godfrey Sultana, was distributed and a special key ring and a lovely photo of the *Columbia* were given to those present. Some extracts from the welfare Officer's report are reproduced in the pamphlet.

'The quality of tea that is served is frightful: everybody complained that the milk was far too diluted and looked like water,' is one of the annotations. Others include 'inspecting the kitchens. No improvement in the making of tea which looks and tastes like dish water'. 'Broadcast once more regarding the necessity of conserving water. The master of the ship has radioed Aden for a fresh supply of water. Emigrants have been asked to use salt water for the washing of clothes'; 'No porridge was served today to the children (who) protested most vehemently'; 'some women are found washing clothes in the tubs issued for the washing of young babies. Demonstrators meet vehemently with them, and told them how unhygienic this was for the tender skins of such young children'.

There were other positive elements in the report such as 'A boy scout and girl guide troop has been formed under the charge of Mrs Mifsud Speranza and their main object is to do their daily good deed in assisting women with children'; and 'Arrangements have now been concluded whereby all pregnant women will be issued with one tin of condensed milk each day'.

Mrs Rita Piscopo was one of those pregnant women on board. In fact, she gave birth to the only child born during the voyage. Her son, Joseph was born on December 13, 1949 and his birth certificate shows the exact position. Lat. 19°30' S and 102°40' E. At the reunion, Mrs Piscopo recalled that she did not have any professional medical assistance during the birth of her son.

Members of the Zahra family from St Julian's were the last speakers. The parents Joe and Rose [illegible] children.

The Consul General in NSW, Mr Lawrence Dimech said that "these reunions are bringing many migrants together again. Those two young arriving on these ships through these reunions are reliving the traumatic experience of their parents. The feeling of helplessness followed by sheer determination that are so evident in the Maltese character. We are saying to those that want to listen, yes we are proud to be of migrant stock, the backbone of this city, the salt of the earth, the country we have embraced, the country we have adopted... Finally let us resolve that for the new millennium we will raise our children to be proud Australians and equally proud of being of Maltese descent".

This was not the first time that such a reunion was organised by Mr Mark Caruana and his group. So far, they have all been quite successful and plans have already been laid to have similar ones in the next year. The voyages made in 1950 and 1951 by the *Ocean Triumph*, *Ocean Victory* and the *Florentia* are in their sights.

Sar l-aħħar notament fis-26/12/49 mal-wasla tal-vapur Sydney. Fit-8:00am għaddew minn taħt *Sydney Bridge*, u trakkaw mal-baċir Nru 16. Telgħu l-awtoritajiet abbord u sal-11:00am kien żbarka kulħadd... U spiċċa vjaġġ ieħor lejn l-Awstralja. Fl-aħħar ta' dan in-notament is-Sur Semini spiċċa bil-kliem *Deo gratias*.

Din il-kitba hija xhieda tat-tajjeb, tal-ħażin u tal-ikrah tal-vjaġġ, iżda hi wkoll storja ta' tama', ta' frustrazzjoni, ta' biża' u tal-aguniji kollha li kienu jgħaddu minnhom l-ewwel emigranti lejn l-Awstralja.

Ħafna minn dawn il-pijunieri Maltin ħadmu, stinkaw u rnexxielhom jagħmlu futur għalihom u għal uliedhom. It-triq kienet iebsa, iżda smajna ħafna stejjer ta' suċċessi għal min kien vera determinat. Ħafna minnhom għamlu isem tajjeb għal pajjiżna, u baqgħu stmati sal-ġurnata tal-lum.

Ħajr lis-Sur Carmelo Magri tal-informazzjoni u ritratti li għaddielna.