COLUMNS: Why Malta should become Europe’s empathetic eye

“The only tyrant I accept in this world is the ‘still small voice’ within me. And even though I have to face the prospect of being a minority of one, I humbly believe I have the courage to be in such a minority.”

Mahatma Gandhi (Young India, March 2, 1922)

We all know how much the deeds and voice of Gandhi have meant for India’s democratic history and the world of civil peace movements. One proportionally tiny voice in Europe today is the EU’s smallest member state Malta, currently holding the EU Council’s Presidency. Also a state within the Schengen Agreement, Malta’s population enjoy travelling rather freely, seeking work in and even settling down in other European countries. We as EU-citizens share these privileges with at least 508 million inhabitants (europa.eu). We choose through democratic processes how we want to live, who to include and how we delegate our power to represent us. But, have great achievements ever come for free? The goals of a common market in the EU have been around since the signing of the Treaties of Rome in March 25, 1957. 60 years of exchanging ideas, implementing regulations and delegating decision-making has been realised through hard work, compromises and at times self-sacrificing policies for the common good. Although the last few years may have been shakier than ever for the common bureaucratic apparatus, the efforts so far have resulted in a reality where people, goods, services and capital can move more or less freely about. But, the realisation of today’s EU emerged from a shattered or even ‘hopeless’ prospect after World War II. Despite the havoc in our war-struck continent, where people had been forced to flee or face other poor consequences of war, we came together in a united vision built on peace and solidarity, lead by people chosen by people like you and like me.

If we look at the challenges Europe as a continent face today, it is clear that the global perspective becomes more and more relevant in considering our shared responsibilities as humans. If many of today’s 508 million EU-citizens have a direct relationship to or have seen someone in their family affected by the World Wars of the 20th century, how much impact will not war in our vicinity come to affect our future too?

Frankly said, what we have seen over the last years in Europe concerning the migration crisis in the Mediterranean and with people knocking on our front doors for aid is nothing new. Humanity has always been on the move, and war is but a generation or two away for many individuals even in our relatively peaceful part of the world. So what? Let me explain. Considering the vast impact of war on society as a whole, we [as a growingly globalised community] will likely have to face the aftermath of today’s conflicts in the world no matter where we turn our eyes or aiding hands. Additionally, in only a few years from now researchers predict that climate change will incite even more people to flee from their homes than the already 65.3 million forcibly displaced persons in the world as of today (UNHCR statistics). No matter the reasoning, the definition says that these people are forced to move, they don’t have a choice to stay. Also, the idea often spread by leaders who oppose migrants, that they deliberately choose Europe as their “destination”, is in fact debunked as a myth. An
international team of researchers from the University of Warwick, University of Malta, and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP, Athens) states this. The report, called Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat, builds on 257 qualitative in-depth interviews in seven European cities with persons that have been making or are contemplating making the dangerous journey by boat on the Mediterranean.

Like the situation was for Sweden and many other countries in the EU in 2015, one state had its own ‘migration crisis’, but as early as in 2013. Malta receive less boat migrants today than in 2013, which was a time when they were having the biggest number of asylum applications per capita in the world. Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat felt urged to call for Brussels attention, and managed to do so efficiently. With a population of 429000 the numbers of migrants arriving in total may not have been critical, but the small community was visibly transformed and surprised by the events. Sweden in 2015 similarly, when they were having the largest number of asylum seekers per capita, took the political decision to ‘pull the break’ to immigration. Yet Malta has managed to promote itself as an open and tolerant country over the last years and has become famous for being the EU/Schengen state where economic migrants and foreign companies can thrive on a generous tax rebate system. Since Malta is still (until the end of this month) leading the EU Council Presidency, time is nigh to work for Europe’s common future. Their leadership and community could, despite being in the midst of national political controversies, bring something of regional relevance to its conference table. Malta could, if governed wisely and immediately taken into account, become the Europe’s empathetic eye-land. Why? For example, Malta already serves as the territorial base for many NGOs and companies not only on ground, but also at sea, such as for the nonprofit search-and-rescue Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS). Since their launching in August 2014, MOAS alone have been operating with the first private search-and-rescue ship in the Central Mediterranean and have rescued over 30000 lives alone!

Ever since the EU-Turkey deal, enacted March 20, 2016, and other border policies were implemented over Europe to stem the number of asylum seekers, the Central Mediterranean route has become the main gateway into Europe. Many rescue missions have taken place in the international waters 12-30 nautic miles off the Libyan coast. So when recent reports of anonymously funded anti-far right initiatives to hinder search-and-rescue missions came the outlook for improvements look even uglier. Yet the zone within the 30 miles is where the EU/Schengen’s border control agency Frontex has actively chosen to withdraw from despite knowing that the number of woman, children and men to depart on the perilous journey by boat from Libyan shores have kept coming ever since Gadafi was toppled in 2011. Malta’s positioning used to be right in the middle of the route until EU-policies, a bilateral agreement between Italy and Libya, and changed ports of departure have redirected the boats from ending up in their waters. The search-and-rescue zones where many boats cross are now closer to Lampedusa and Sicily, and the latter is also where the privately funded anti-immigration initiative mentioned previously now wants to depart from. Frontex blames a ‘pull factor’ as the main decision for not patrolling the waters. They claim that reports have shown that simply the sight of international presence within the 30 mile zone triggers smugglers to continue with their activities. A spokesperson for Frontex even claimed NGOs in the area have been colluding with
smugglers, a report which in its entirety has been analysed by The Intercept (April 2, 2017) and was stated as vague. Most disquietly, Frontex’s vague allegations undermine the EU’s current border control credibility, and when recent news showed implications of a violent intervention on an NGO-mission carried out by Libyan coast guards, who are the NGOs, migrants and EU’s citizens going to trust?

Is the paradoxical development in the EU’s most southerly neighbourhood slowly becoming the Achilles heel we didn’t expect? As we dispute the immoral breaking of climate deals, shocking outcomes of general elections, or new corruption scandals in our backyards the courageous voices of life-saving NGOs work quietly in the Mediterranean as our true beacons of human hope. In the light of Libya’s growing civil unrest, warmer weather pressing more smuggler boats to depart and setbacks for rescue missions, what if Malta’s historical example of resiliency could awaken the crucial changes that the EU needs? It wouldn’t come to be without international support of course - but if they decide to proactively continue hosting life-saving initiatives and voice the insights from previous victories – Malta could become the empathetic eye of Europe and another such empathetic act of courage could be to push for, instead of pulling back on, legal seaways into Europe. • by David Johansson
FEATURE INTERVIEWS: Maltese Voices On Detention

by David Johansson

Hal Safi. “Mario Schembri? Who…?”

the soldier dressed in military green and

storm proof-looking glasses says. “He’s

Head of Operations working at the

Detention Services” I try as politely as I

can while handing him my passport. “We

have a meeting booked at 1pm, but I’m a

bit early so…” Mario Schembri’s office

is located inside the military premises of

Safi Barracks, a stone’s throw from

Malta International Airport. For the first
time in an interview setting I have to

register with my passport, and there’s an

escort coming to drive me. The white

minibus with DETENTION SERVICES

written on both sides arrives and the

driver in an olive green uniform stops

right in front of the gates, exchanges a

few words with the soldier, then gazes at

me before he tells me to jump in.

➢ Director Mario Schembri (part 1): “We are the keepers”

As we get out of the car and approach a

grey limestone building, a man in his

sixties opens one of the doors and invites

me inside. Apparently this is Director

Mario Schembri and his ground floor Head

of Operations office. The walls are light

and decorated sparingly. A mix of religious

icons, calendars, memos and what looks

like a photo of his wife. The background

layer of twittering birds forms a particular,

almost hypnotising, atmospheric

framework to the moment. Before the

interview begins I ask if may take photos

inside, which I may not. “But outside is

okey,” he says while I make sure it is still

fine that I draw and audio-record him
during our conversation. Schembri nods to

both. “The Detention Service, hold

immigrants who have either overstayed or have invalid or no documentation while being in

Malta. Obviously they are handled by Immigration Police and then they are brought over to

detention for a period of time. Until their papers are in order, or else, removal order or
deportation order is executed. So, their period of detention here can vary from 24 hours to a maximum of three months, which is rather long when you are here for the first time. But that is laid down by legislation and it is very rare that somebody, a detainee, stays here for such a long time. Because every three or four weeks they come up for review, every case individually. And usually when there are no reasons to keep the person any longer, he is given temporary status until all his papers are in order,” Mario Schembri says, seemingly at ease with answering such simple questions on the DS.

**Do you bring people here from customs at the airport, or who does that?**

“The Immigration Police does that job, we are the keepers. In fact, this is a closed centre, a closed accommodation centre,” Schembri continues.

**So are the individuals who stay here not allowed to come and go by themselves?**

“No. When they are given temporary asylum status for humanitarian reasons, they are transferred to Open Centres. Which are totally different from here. There are accommodation areas where they can come and go out as they please. Until such time that they find a place of their own. […] Some of them take up the voluntary return schemes that are offered by IOM and UNHCR, and they return back to their country voluntarily. They are even supported by means of money to set up a business when they get back home and things like that. […] We’ve only got 14 here now” Schembri says. “It’s been like this for the past two years. Why? Because the large influx numbers of ‘boat people’ coming into Malta’s shores have decreased,” he says referring to the typical news media coverage of vessels, or rubber dinghies, with migrants in the Mediterranean. “This is because routes have changed and they are leaving Libya from further up, or rather further west. So the present route now according to the GPS-directions that they are giving when they leave, go directly to Lampedusa or mainland Italy. It is their intention to reach mainland Europe, and then proceed to the northern countries. Germany, Holland, Sweden and Norway nowadays as well!”

**And how is this affecting Malta you mean?**

“Nowadays we have asylum seekers coming in differently to the country”, Schembri replies. “They come in via the airport with regular passports or sometimes false passports. Once they are here, they are obviously detected by the Immigration Police and held at Immigration at the airport. As soon as they are held they declare that they want to apply for asylum, then the Refugee Commissioner steps in and the process for asylum starts. If they don’t have proper documentation, they are brought into detention where they will await the decision of the Refugee Commissioner,” Mario Schembri says. “We also have others coming in to the airport on a regular basis from Turkey, Syria, Iraq. From varied places. They come in with regular visas, proper passports and once they are here they apply for asylum for some reason or the other. It could be economic, it could be because of battles or wars or any other strife in their home country. People that come in with proper documents do not come into detention, but they live normally here in Malta until they get their asylum papers or a refusal. We have a flow of 160 per month of these people.”
But if these people, with what you call proper passports, what if they are caught using false documents?

“That’s different! Because using false documents is a criminal offence. So they are taken up by the Immigration Police. Usually they are charged before the law courts here, and that’s usually a 24hr thing. The courts issue a removal order or a deportation order, and that’s why they end up here. Once they have a removal order, they usually apply for asylum cause they have a right to apply for asylum. And also they have a right to appeal the removal decision once within four days. But the hearing can be spread over a couple of hearings,” Schembri continues.

So, there are not just people from one country who stay here in closed detention?

“No, no, no. We’ve had people from Japan, Philippines, Eastern Europe, Africa, Syria, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and all the Western states of Africa. We even had one from America” Schembri says while I cannot help but reflect on how the conversation sounds like an interview with a CEO or a hotel manager rather than a public official. “We also have what we call ’Dublin returnees’. There’s a special legislation regarding that. When an asylum seeker starts the asylum process in a European country, he can only continue the asylum process in the first country that he applied for. Now, some of them do move about Europe and some of them end up here. When they are here they also apply for asylum, but it is easily found out through the EURODAC that they have applied for it in another country. Then the Dublin return procedure kicks off and they have to be returned back to their first country, the first European state that they applied for asylum in. […] According to international law you cannot deport someone to a specific country unless you have authority from that country that is accepting him or her. For instance, we have countries, in Africa mostly, that are difficult to deal with. Mali for example. Even though they send national delegations from Mali to interview people that are held in Malta - and they come up with a decision that ‘these are confirmed Mali subjects so we’ll be taking them back’ - months later we still have no documentation from them!”

Since you mentioned this, wasn't there a big thing in the media when some Malis were arrested recently?

“That is exactly what happened! And they were kept here for nearly four months. For nothing. According to European legislation they cannot be kept in detention because their deportation is not imminent. So they were given temporary humanitarian asylum status, which means you are free to move about in the country that it is issued. […] You cannot go to any other European state with that document, but you can work here on a normal basis and you can also have any other state aid that is applicable to European citizens. The only condition is that if your deportation is available, you will be arrested again and then deported. Which is a very rare occurrence. […] Or they have established ties here. […] There were 22 of them that were confirmed as Mali citizens (of 32 detained November 15, 2016). But documentation from Mali never arrived. So their deportation was no longer imminent” Schembri explains. “They are still staying here. They are all back to their usual way of life. In fact the oldest one living here had been in Malta for the past 11 years, and the one with the shortest stay was three years! So they had regular work, they had girlfriends and some of them even had children here,” he states and gives the impression of not being fully content with how these individuals were treated by the system.
Teacher/activist Jean-Paul Borg: Detention affects society, not just the individual

One Maltese person who visited Safi Barracks to see the detained Malis is Jean-Paul Borg (JP). I was recommended to get in touch with him through Dr. Maria Pisani, a university lecturer at the University of Malta. We had booked a meeting near the famous Mosta Rotunda on a sunny but windy afternoon. At the nearby Maltese bar we grab a table and JP begins to tell his story: “The Malis do not want to appear in public any more, they are busy with trying to get back to their lives…” JP explains. He’s dressed in a classic black and yellow-striped Adidas outfit, and the story he is about to tell starts on November 15, 2016, when his friend was suddenly under a detention order. JP has always been the engaged type, but wasn’t prepared for the “state of shock for everyone who knew them!” He describes how the Malis had become a given part of society, and all of a sudden they were just gone. “Like taken away from their everyday lives!” he states by recalling the events. “I was being a teacher, and involved with Integra foundation who work with creating inclusive activities for migrants, when I got to know this guy personally. We became good friends, and then all of a sudden he calls from the closed detention centre!” JP exclaims.

What was it like when you visited your friend in detention?

“If you visit someone who is being kept in detention it really affects your world,” JP says visibly dismayed of recalling the occasion. “As the guys were about to renew their proper permits, they were refused and a deportation order was executed instead! It was awful, you know, some even had family here… When I visited the center in Hal Safi it was very difficult to get access at first, because they usually don’t let people in. Perhaps since I was Maltese they weren’t so aware the first time, but after that time and since I had gone public with what I had witnessed inside, my second time was much harder,” he states. “They didn’t like that I had shared with the media on the conditions inside” he says and shows his Facebook status from a couple of weeks prior to Christmas. On the picture from inside the closed detention, was a very scarce meal, supposedly breakfast, consisting of a small baguette, one boiled egg and a white plastic mug of coffee. According to JP it was awful and when he heard that there were other migrants being kept in the center now he expressed himself in discontent: “Who are these people? How many are there? For what…?”
Director Mario Schembri (part 2): “One never knows what’s going to happen. We might have an influx of migrants this night!”

The Head of Operations at Safi Barracks, Mario Schembri, points once again to the development as a “vacuum” or social limbo for those who get a failed asylum. The effects of today’s praxis on international regulations regarding irregular migration is according to another locally acquainted voice “just stupid!”

Mark Micallef (portrayed in the drawing) who is a researcher on migratory flows and human smuggling in Libya, poses important concerns on the societal consequences of today’s policies. “The future in Europe, especially for those who have had their asylum rejected but who cannot be sent back to their home country for some reason, looks very dull! And I don’t want to judge if it’s morally wrong or right as it is now, but I do however feel like the politicians oversee a strategic perspective here! In the way they handle irregular migrants and failed asylum seekers today, how will the next generation relate? The authorities will have to deal with this sooner or later, so why not now? I honestly think it’s just stupid” Mark Micallef says.

“That is one big problem that the whole of Europe is facing at the moment” he says about the current praxis of asylum regulations. “Because, what is applicable to Malta is applicable to all the other European states, and they have the same problem. What shall we do with those that are denied asylum? According to the regulations we have to send them back but there are other regulations that require a ‘go ahead’ from the receiving country. […]They cannot remain in this sort of vacuum, you’re either going to be kept here or sent back! […]And asylum is only granted when you have a set of particular conditions. […] Others, who do not satisfy all or most of the conditions, are refused asylum but are still being kept here. Maybe they are given asylum after five years…so what shall we do? Which is the best policy? And that is a problem that the European states have to decide sooner or later. Because as it is, there is an open gateway to Europe.”

Where?

“Everywhere. Because once you are in, they won’t send you back. If your mother country doesn’t confirm that you are from that country, or does not confirm that they want you back, or are willing to accept you back with proper documentation – then you are stuck here. You might as well consider yourself as a European as it is. On the other hand, the European states do not want such a condition so they have to come up with something drastic I think. Or send everyone back” Schembri says with a curt voice.
Do you see the solution of having detention centres as something good?

“No, I don’t think so. It was in the past, but I don’t think it’s viable any longer. I mean, how long are you going to keep these people in detention? Let’s say you keep them for maximum 18 months, like it was three years ago for most people. But they are not granted asylum afterwards, and they cannot be deported. Because they don’t have necessary documentation, and the country that they claim to be from hasn’t confirmed it. So why do we keep them in detention in the first place if the outcome is going to be the same? It’s easier even on state finances, to help them and support them when they are in the streets along with the regular population, than catering fully for their upkeep here for 18 months at a stretch.”

So why do you think detention is still being used? It’s not just in Malta, right?

“Well Italy, according to the recent news, just built another 50 detention centres. After the fall of Prime Minister Renzi, the Italian parliament decided that all those that do not qualify for asylum were to be sent back. But that is easier said than done, like I have just explained! You can do it with some countries, but other countries are impossible. […] And at administering it keeping them there, apart from the financial burden. So, what’s the use of having more detention centres and keeping them with all the problems that you face? Obviously it is more popular with the population - not just the Maltese, with all the European populations - when these immigrants are kept segregated, rather than being with the community at large. But that doesn’t make sense; because somehow you’re still going to release them.”

Do people feel more safe when the migrants are kept apart?

“No. [clearing his throat] Not safe. They are more at ease, or they think that something is being done. Because most of the Europeans do not want Africans, or rather non-Europeans, living with them and taking most of these security money, the social services money from them. They have been supporting the system for such a long time. Even their forefathers and any other relatives, so they feel that it is inappropriate. […] Some of them come - not ‘some’ of them - quite a lot of them, come from Sicily to Malta. They work here and have a residence permit in Sicily. And every two months or three months they go back. They renew the ‘Permesso di soggiorno’ [residency permit] issued from Italy, and they come back here to work. […] They are within Europe, and they have a right to move about, so that is a problem that Europe has brought about on itself. Because of this Schengen procedure,” Mario Schembri says.

What would be a better solution according to you then?

“At least to record their movement. The Schengen process does away with all this. That you are no longer required to fill in immigration disembarkation or embarkation cards, like it used to. […] At least it should bring back that situation. Literally remove the Schengen procedure!” […] “Look at what happened in Sweden years ago. They declared that it was prepared to give asylum to all third country nationalities that arrived in that country. Nowadays it’s impossible to stop them! Because you cannot move the clock back. The damage has already been done…”
In what way?

“…that those given asylum have every right to stay in Sweden. And because of their right to stay, they can also bring in relatives.” A bit surprised by Schembri’s unprovoked rage on a UN-defined right for refugees, I tell him how Sweden changed its reunification policy a couple of years back. “Good!” he says. “At least that is one step in the right direction. It used to be a common practice that if you managed to have a relative of yours in any one country, because of family ties you were granted entry into that country and eventually asylum. That is one step in a positive direction. Because it limits, like a sort of damage control. I’m mentioning damage in a figurative way, because no actual damage is being done. But the perception of the European population is that we should no longer accept any more immigrants” Mario Schembri says convincingly. “Let’s keep what we have, cause they are here to stay! They have settled, but no more. But it’s easier said than done.”

If we return to what you do at the DS - how do the detainees experience their stay here?

"It’s a very difficult situation for them. First of all you can easily see that. And like I mentioned, most of them come from a long way. They leave everything behind, and they work their way up through the African continent with a final stop, quite an active stop, in Libya. Where they await in different camps for the opportunity to cross over to Europe. Obviously it costs money and, lives…lots of lives, in fact. And so they end up in detention here. But, I don’t think they mind it that much. The migrants themselves, they are sort of oblivious. Their way of reasoning is that - at least from what we manage to understand from talking to them - ‘If I stay in my country, I will die for sure, because of this and this or If you don’t do this they will kill you!’ Whether that is true or not, one has to be in their situation to decide, and then they say ‘if I stay in my country, I am dead and If I try and cross over to Europe I might do it. I might die, but I might do it’ Schembri states bluntly.

So what can they do when they are inside, is there anything to do?

“Yes!” Schembri says with certainty. “They can exercise some sports. Like basketball, netball, football and they can watch TV all day if they want to. They have a library with books to read. And they have music to listen to, but also some board games or computer games. Soon they’ll be able to - here in this centre - use Facebook as well. For a short period of time, not the whole day!” Schembri says while tapping with his fingers on the table.

Can they use their cellphones?

“No cellphones, no. They are not allowed. For security purposes though, but they have access to telephones. Fixed line telephones and anyone can answer them. It is not filtered in any way. It’s quite free, you can say anything you please on it. But cell phones nowadays are computers, they are not simple phones. So they are a security problem, whereas a normal computer connected to the internet, can be protected security wise. On the other hand, we do not think it is feasible to block all cellular communication. Because that would create a dead zone, not just for the immigrants, but for a larger part. […] Even if you don’t have any wifi in the vicinity […] at least they are considered to be a security threat, up till now. So it’s better to control them,” Schembri argues. “We also have visits by the Red Cross Malta. They offer communications via controlled mobile sets that are simply phones. They don’t even have a camera in them. And they provide a free service once or twice a week. They go to the
immigrants, speak with them and offer [...] free telephone calls up to five minutes per person to anywhere they please. [...] We have other NGOs that come in here and offer various services, mostly they offer legal aid.”

But how come journalists are not allowed access to the detainees?

“They used to. We used to have journalists from all over Europe, but they were coming in at such a rate that the immigrants themselves were complaining about it” Director Schembri states. “This is what they used to say: ‘Are we zoo animals? Why are media people from everywhere coming to take photographs of us to make money and we are still kept here in detention?’ Their message was not being sent out properly. [...] So they weren’t getting the freedom they wanted from these media coverage and interviews. [...] Hence we decided,” Schembri hesitates. “The government of Malta decided. That no media will be brought into detention. [...] Only occasionally we have a request from the media, and apart from that we don’t have the numbers that we used to have. Up till 2013 the place was full, and we had about 2900 here. Nowadays, like I said we have only 14 today and last year the largest number we had was 26 or 25 at one time. So, why would they want to come here?” Director Schembri chuckles.

How do you know if they are not happy here?

“Well I speak to them every day. My staff are on the lookout for things like that. We have social workers that come in here and work with them. There’s a ‘detainees board of visitors’ as well, who supervise this, the system. The immigrants have legal aid any time they want to, there’s an appeals board, something that wasn't there two years ago. They are visited by a doctor and nurses each day. [...] So if something is quite not right, we are alerted immediately. [...] However, when the place was completely full it was nearly impossible to manage it. You couldn't go in for these details like I mentioned. Now because of the limited numbers you can offer a better service.”

Did you see a reason for having a detention centre before?

“In those days, yes. Because detention was considered to be a deterrent so that immigrants would know that they were going to be kept in detention for a year and a half. So they would try and keep away from Malta, but nowadays that’s no longer applicable because the route is totally different. It is straight to Lampedusa or to mainland Italy, so one cannot say it is a deterrent any more. In fact, detention is minimum now.”

So, why not close then?

“One never knows what’s going to happen. We might have an influx of migrants this night! We are quite close to the route, and even though the immigrants themselves do not want to come in here, bad weather can easily throw in here. Or they might have to be rescued. In fact when we have emergency rescues, like that people are injured or in imminent danger of their lives. Then they are brought over here, not to Italy, because the hospitals here are closer.”
And then some of them apply for asylum here?

“They apply for asylum here. Although the system has changed, that there are no longer immigrants coming in - the boat people - are no longer brought into detention first. Now there is an Initial Reception Centre (IRC), which is a cross between an Open and a Closed Centre. You are kept there for medical purposes only until medical screening is undertaken. This is to make sure that you are not sick with TB, AIDS, HIV or things like that. It usually takes three days. This entails that unless the Immigration Police have a valid reason to keep someone in detention, they are sent out to Open Centres instead of being brought to us. […] A new IRC is being built in Hal Far, but it will be ready in two years. It’s going to be big, and it’s going to be a one-stop-shop really for immigrants. They’ll have Immigration Police, Refugee Commissioner, doctors, health services - everything in that place!” Schembri says with eager anticipation.
GRAPHIC REPORTAGE: Marsa Stories

by David Johansson

Getting around and enjoying the EU’s smallest member state is easy due to the common use of English and a truly dazzling summer vibe this season of the year. For not only birds migrate to the Maltese Islands, but numerous tourists and expats travel and reside here too. Its current EU Council Presidency has however put the nation into the political spotlight besides the official EU agenda. Recently the Malta Files were revealed by the European Investigative Collaborations (EIC). Beyond realities of polished yachts and a successful image as ‘one of Europe’s most tolerant countries’ lurk speculations of political corruption, linkages to Italian mafia and allegations of a system that is serving as a tax evasion haven for thousands of foreign individuals. Another topic that could possibly benefit from the scrutiny posed around the EU Council Presidency is the current situation for migrants. Project Awaiting went to see how people in one of the Open Centres for migrants were living and socialising during the busy months of international presence on the Islands.

Not far from the capital Valletta, an old shipyard town called Marsa is situated in between the motorway and spacious industrial buildings. It is also where one of the Open Centres for migrants has been located for some years. Not yet knowing the scope of the Malta Files unveilings by EIC, far from all overstayers in Malta are subject to thrive on a tax rebate privilege. One of the marginalised groups are the Middle Eastern and African migrants. In comparison to the economic migrants from Europe these men (because generally there are just men) are less likely to meet you in the tourism services, or as customer services for betting firms in St Julians. Neither are they given much public attention on their own terms. A visit to Marsa’s Open Centre for migrants changed my understanding of the ‘migration crisis’ on the Islands.
According to local lawyer, Neil Falzon, Marsa’s previously strong reputation as a kind of red-light district still brings about some uglier sides of island life. Higher rates of drug abuse and dealing, but also poverty are prevalent. Nonetheless, this is where the government decided to place an Open Centre for asylum seekers and refugees a few years back. This was a controversial choice which wasn't well received by Maltese NGOs (like aditus foundation), nor the public.

**Marsa Stories (1): New Tiger Bar**

The journey to Marsa takes more than an hour from the densely inhabited and commercial parts of Spinola Bay and St Julians. Getting off at ’Moro’, the nearest bus stop in the area, then following a triangle-shaped green in between the crossing roads soon reveals a shipyard and faded warehouse exteriors. Supposedly the gentle and sunny afternoon light played its part in appearing warm and welcoming. What appears as an old pump station and some abandoned cargo ships are situated along the water-courses’ sides. A gate into the backyard of the Open Centre is reflected on the surface, while some uniformed men glare passively at the men passing in and out of the compound.

“Hello man, what do you want? Hashish?” a pushy guy tells me as I encounter New Tiger Bar on the grounds. The small kiosk-like bar just around the corner from Marsa’s Open Centre is a vivid place this afternoon. A few men are standing or sitting outside. Chatting, or in silence. An old man is putting some chicken on the grill to sell from his stall. In the background the music is streaming out loudly from the bar. Located on the ground floor of a blueish building, the site reminds one of a saloon in any given Clint Eastwood movie, and from one of the upper floors, a woman is heard calling for someone.

”No, thanks, I’m fine,” I hear myself reply. “What do you want? Are you looking for someone?” the pushy one continues.
The Open Centre in Marsa is one of eight open centres for migrants who seek asylum, are awaiting renewal of some status or endure international protection in Malta. Since October 2016 the one in Marsa is completely cared for by The Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS), a governmental agency. In practice what this means for visitors or access for journalists is that admission has be determined by AWAS at least 24hrs in advance and you must apply by email. Requests are not always answered, nor approved. Placing the centre in the heart of a notorious area wasn't undisputed by civil society. “The red-light district in Marsa was quite serious. It was famous for teenage prostitution. And trans-prostitution. It was quite a drug abusive area related to all of that. So when the government placed the Open Centre there, we were very worried. That obviously, it was going to fuel even more the difficult situation in the area,” locally conversant Neil Falzon says. “The government said it was the only space they had. That’s what we were told!” he explains as a moment of pensive silence follows.

“My name is Walid, where are you from? Italy? Want to grab a drink, come inside and have a look… I can show you to the bar!” Walid – an African guy, acting more relaxed than ‘the pushy one’ – had now welcomed me. Perhaps simply because of his not-so-pushy approach I decided to follow his advise. Inside the music was pounding out loud. There were two bartenders working. “Can I have a Coke, please?” I said, and “Do you have change?” as I handed over my 20€ bill, unsure whether they would accept my cash bill or not. Then a guy from the computer keyboard next to the desk abruptly interrupts the music from the speaker system, and brings on a YouTube-clip. A song from 2Pac’s “All Eyez on Me” album… Without an audible word, the bartenders give me my change. The reputation as a problem area obviously still makes up noticeable challenges owing to the vicinity.

Refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from West African countries, Somalia, and Libya are residing here at the centre. They are offered a roof over their heads and some basic amenities while awaiting better opportunities on the Islands or elsewhere. One Pakistani man I meet outside the main entrance seems disappointed: “Europe is not the paradise I dreamt of. I came here when I was 21 with high expectations. I lived in Norway for six years, I had some difficulties there too with employers who didn’t pay me, but I enjoyed life. As the government found me without a working permit I was put in detention right away, and then I was deported back to Italy. No I’m banned to go back to Norway for some time, and they sent me to Italy since it was the first country I arrived to in Europe. My life in Europe has turned out to be such a struggle you know? I’m thankful to have a working permit, job and being able to travel freely here but… I miss my home nowadays,” Ali says (not his real name because of private reasons). “Hadn't it been for being caught in Norway, I would still spend my life there, but after all these years of struggle in Europe it’s not enjoyable anymore. And I miss my daughter - all I want to
do now is to save some money for a one-way-ticket home!” Ali says while sharing something looking like a cigarette with his friends who are now sitting next to us on the wall next to the conduit. “Look at that guy!” he says while shaking his head dismissively. A tall guy, probably a resident here, is walking aimlessly on the road in front of us. Seemingly ill or high, he gives a strikingly hollow impression. “Heroin?” I ask about him to Ali. “No, no, no! It’s the government here, they gave him an injection to calm him down. And now he’s suffering from a psychosis since some days back,” he rebukes. “It’s not like in Scandinavia here…” Ali continues. “If someone causes trouble here, or is too noisy, the authorities may take him to a mental hospital where they give those sedative injections!”

A couple of days later, an ambulance with its blinking blue lights on arrives outside the New Tiger Bar. I’m watching it from across the street as it stops just in front of the street corner. A few minutes later, a stretcher carrying a motionless man is brought out from the bar by the ambulance personnel. The scene is however not overly dramatic. When a Pulizija [local police] car soon arrives it appears more like they want to make sure that everything is under control. After exchanging a few words, both the ambulance and police cars leave calmly. Curious to find out what had led to the man being picked up by the ambulance, I approached some of the spectators closer to the site. “Some guy just had too much smoke, you know,” a man presumably a regular to the site bluntly replies.

“I actually stay inside the Open Centre now” Ali says just as I am about to leave. “It was too expensive to rent an apartment by my own. So I went back to Block C, and the office there helped me to get housing here at the Open Centre again.” he confesses. “The friend I told you about, who had just arrived from Italy and who didn’t have his own place? Well he shares it with me here“ Ali says and points to the building behind him. A few minutes ago he’d just explained about a friend who sometimes stays in “his” apartment.

A bit confounded about Ali’s sudden change of story, I sense a feeling of shame or sensitivity on his behalf regarding his current living conditions. But is he ashamed of failing his own expectations, his fellow countrymen’s and why? Or perhaps he’s just fearing the judgment of other Europeans?

Marsa Stories (2): Hummus and homeless

On the other side of the bridge crossing the shipyard’s conduit is what looks like another meeting point. The numerous visitors, joyfully chattering among the red parasols outside, unite despite the grey and rainy day. “The Tavern” is crowded with male visitors inside who are immersed with board games, watching sports on the TV, or playing pool. The only woman around is taking orders from the customers at the till.

A group of men gathered by the plastic tables and chairs outside predetermine my interactions. “Where are you from?” one happy-looking guy says. Acting familiar to the other men, he chats and greets others notably well-acquainted around the Tavern. “Germany?” he says. “I lived in Germany for one year when I went to high school, just before coming here,” the guy soon to be known as Timo continues.
‘Timo’ is a Somali word for hair. Upon Timo’s arrival as a refugee to Malta, he had big hair and thus he got his nickname among the Somali community here. Describing willingly where his everyday life is concentrated around the neighbourhood close to Birkirkara, he borrows a pen and paper to illustrate it as he speaks. He describes how he shares an apartment with three other Somalis and that he works as a helper when he’s not socialising here. “These are some apartment buildings on the same street where I live…and over here [sketches a rectangular square in one of the corners] is a football playground,” Timo says. “We only play with the Somali community around, there are not many locals involved,” he says and doesn’t express any further hope of blending in to society. “We are hummus and homeless!” he scorns and explains how the expression means that there is “no future” for them on Malta. “Before I came to Europe I wanted to become a doctor, but I have given up on that dream. I am 25 years old, and I’ve been on Malta for five years. I speak English, Arabic and some German apart from Somali. But still there hasn’t been any other opportunities opening up for me as a Somali guy around here,” he says and puts away the pen and sketchbook. “So, are you trying to become an artist?” he continues as I start sketching his portrait. “No, I’m using the drawings as a way to do interviews,” I say. Timo looks skeptical. “But shouldn’t you be taking notes all the time then, like typing on a computer?”

“Abdullah Yusuf”, whose name is a moniker because he doesn’t like the publicity, is less outspoken. Also from Somalia, Yusuf acts more cautious under the parasols on this grey Thursday afternoon. His reversed, black, baseball cap, a black/white chequered shirt and loosely hanging earphones gives a hip and street style-conscious impression. “I travelled from South Sudan up towards and through the Sahara desert to Libya before I arrived by boat here,” he says hesitantly. “I feel bad when I talk about my experiences from the last five years, so I usually don’t…” Yusuf has experienced more pain than he feels ready to recall. Before arriving to Europe he went to the university one year in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, and dreamt of going to the US. When fights broke out they had to flee. “They decided to go after us, and I couldn't go back to the even poorer conditions in Somalia, so I didn't have any other choice,” he says. Truth be told, Yusuf looks much older than his 21 years. “The life I’ve lived, it’s been rough... So I’ve aged quickly since I fled to Europe,” he replies. “At least if there was hope [here]… There’s no hope! And if you are lonely, you will not make it on Malta,” Yusuf explains while a troubled look in his eyes wanders among the community in sight.
Back at the entrance of the Open Centre the uniformed gateman is busy sorting things behind the window. A couple of minutes waiting later, then ‘the Gateman’ (looking like of a mature age) with a huge, but well-trimmed, moustache shows up: “How can I help you?” he asks. “I was just wondering whether I could get inside and talk to the migrants…?” I say. “I see, you want to come inside, to ask them what? Hold on a second,” he says and goes to get something from inside his booth. “This is an Open Centre for the residents only, but you can call the number of the one in charge at AWAS. She can accredit your admission here, because I do not have the permission” the Gateman dutifully says, while handing over a stale business card. Meanwhile, he continues talking, seemingly content with just getting attention from an outsider to his responsibilities. “I used to work for the police You know, and I even went on a special mission to Libya once. So I have seen the migrants on the ground there,” he says. “I’d say you should believe only 30% of their stories. The rest is made up for some reason or the other,” the Gateman states. “But call AWAS, they can give you the go, okay?”

Abdullah Yusuf eventually looks at me, but still appearing a bit anxious as he speaks. “They pay us €4.20 an hour for a normal job. And that makes a maximum of €500-600 a month, which is barely enough to pay your rent in a shared apartment and to have enough to buy food for,” he explains with a reasoning similar to other migrants that I’ve met here.

Timo, Yusuf and other migrants in Marsa subsist on a scarce livelihood and even the attention from their everyday acquaintanceship seems low. And how could it be any different when a person like the Gateman, who allegedly has worked with asylum seekers and refugees for a number of years, still believes that he ‘knows them all’? What is the image that he transmits to those around him who don't even have an opportunity to make up their own mind on migration, and are even less likely to build everyday relationships with them?

As I went on from Marsa to that afternoon I could still hear a voice echoing in the back of my head: “At least if there was hope [here]... There’s no hope!”
What happens in one of Europe’s many camps for migrants on a Friday night? What can you expect to hear from someone who has risked their life in the Sahara desert, resided in Libya during its current upheaval, and eventually survived a boat crossing on the Mediterranean before coming to Europe? Project Awaiting’s reporter decided to find out what the inhabitants of Malta’s Hal Far Camp are doing while many others on the islands have just started off their weekend...

On the bus to Hal Far that Friday afternoon, I met ‘Jerome’, a so called undocumented migrant who for personal reasons doesn’t want to share his real name. The acronym for Hal Far camp is HTV, which stands for Hal Far Tent Village, and it has remained longer in popular memory than the actual tents have. Some of the migrants I talk to don’t even recognise that name. Possibly it’s because the tents were superseded by big grey metal boxes, or container barracks, as those that may be seen after an earthquake on TV... The Hal Far camp is anyhow where many migrants coming through Malta from the Middle East and Africa seem to reside, temporarily or for some years, while waiting for their process to resolve. Simple housing is provided for example to those with proper documents or those who have been given temporary humanitarian asylum protection. The camp here and the Open Centre in Marsa are the sites where most migrants appear to have experience from.
Jerome took the initiative to our conversation on the bus, probably since I offered him a seat while he and his friends were standing in the aisle. “Parlez vous francais?” he said. “Oui, oui, je parle un peut du francais!” I answered. And so our conversation began in facile French. It turned out that Jerome had lived in Europe for the last number of years ‘sans papier’, without proper documents. He was going to visit someone in Hal Far, at least according to what I understood. “Cool, that’s where I’m going too!” I explained as I stopped typing on the document called ‘Interview with the Director Mario Schembri’ in my tablet. Jerome continued the conversation quietly while keeping an eye on my document. Conscious of his wariness I said, “I’m not here to report for anyone, like the government,” and for a second he looked relieved. But I continued and asked him where he was from, and what he was currently doing in Malta. Looking a bit more at ease, Jerome brought up his phone and showed a picture from his job in an industry – boxes that were going to be used for some beverages, with Arabic writings that suggested the company’s intended market was likely elsewhere. “How come did you come to Europe without proper documentations?” I said not knowing if this was too much of a nosy question to him. “Because, when I was living in Senegal, which I left 11 years ago, unrest back home forced me to go.” He claims that a proper passport is very difficult to get, and that society in Europe makes life for people like him worse. Every now and then he has to move somewhere in order to not get caught.

As the bus had reached Hal Far, Jerome and I got off. There had been additional people on the bus who I perceived as his friends or acquaintances. As we got off there was however only one other person left. His name was Ousman (drawn one picture below). Dressed in a black waist-long leather jacket and a t-shirt with a diamond print on it he gave an impression of being a fashionista. We greeted each other as the three of us - Jerome, Ousman and I - continued across the street. “I’m David, a journalism student who spoke to your friend Jerome on the bus,” I said. “Do you mind if I join you in to the entrance of Hal Far?” I continued. “Okey, no problem,” Ousman said as the three of us got closer to the back entrance of the camp. After passing through a big space trampled down in the fence, we kept talking in English. A block consisting of numerous grey container barracks towered up in front of us. 10-12 metres long and about 2 metres wide. As we got to the one street dividing the rows of barracks Jerome hasted inside one of the doors nearby. He didn’t say a sound after Ousman and I had began to converse. Now we were left outside. “Have you registered at the reception?” Ousman asked. “Cause if the staff see you here they might not like it, but they are usually friendly anyways,” he said, acting as if he knew a lot on life in the camp. However, it soon turned out that Ousman doesn’t reside here at all. “I live in Milano, and I’ve lived in Italy over the last three years,” he said. “It’s good in Italy, and they’ve taught me about life in Europe and how to talk to Europeans” he continued. “I only come to Hal Far occasionally. To see friends” he said. “But how come you don’t stay all the time in Italy…?” I asked, a bit confounded. “Because I like it here, Italy is great, but there isn’t much work. Although I’ve gotten lessons for three years and speak Italian fluently now,” Ousman explained. “What do you want to know? I can tell you anything you want to know,” he continued kindly. Astounded by his generous approach I looked around the barracks to where
some other men stood chatting. “That guy over there is from Algeria, and this one right here [a guy came riding on a bicycle near us] is from Libya, but he didn’t come here by boat, like many of the other migrants who pass through Libya do, like me. I’m from Niger. Not Nigeria, do you know where that is?” Ousman said as if he was used of having to explain African geography. “I know of it, but I didn’t know that you speak French?” I answered. “But there was no future for me in Niger, so in 2010 I decided to leave for Libya by the long travel through the Sahara desert.”

“Salaam,” I said to an old man passing by in a foot length robe. He looked like he would appreciate a greeting phrase commonly used among the other migrants around here and from the Middle East or North African regions. “Wa aleykum as-salaam!” he replied friendly. “So you are Muslim?” Ousman commented after my whim in Arabic. “No, but the word means peace, right?” I replied. “Yes, that’s true” he said, as if pleased with my answer. “How much longer will you stay here…? If you are around for some time after my prayer we can sit down outside and talk,” he suggested while nodding towards the direction of the fence where we had entered with Jerome earlier. Suddenly a noise broke the stillness of the camp. A singing voice calling from inside the barrack behind us. Soon a couple of men entered through the door, and Ousman left too. I began to draw something inspired of our conversations earlier.

“Can I draw something too?” a guy wearing a baseball cap and pony tail said. He’d been walking around the block of barracks as Ousman and I were talking. Observing my sketchbook he commented, “it’s true, and I respect that man a lot!” he said about the portrait. When Ousman was back Salim (as seen on his self-portrait to the right) and I had already began sharing the activity of drawing. “It’s been so long since I last drew!” Salim said. “What are you guys drawing guys?” someone else walking by expressed while chuckling sarcastically. “At least this guy gave me a chance… Perhaps I should start doing this as my job?” Salim answered the person, half-jokingly.

Ousman, now back from prayer, watched us drawing as he lit a cigarette. Salim kept his focus on the drawing for a long time, a man looking like a portrait of someone he knew began to take form. “This is me in 10 years,” Salim chuckled. Possibly he was referring to the stressful livelihood he had nowadays. “Do know of the Sahara? I used to go there when in Libya,” Salim said while continuing with his portrait. Nowadays he lives with his brother Yayha in one of the barracks at Hal Far. “Yayha came to stay with me recently because he couldn’t stay in Norway anymore. After 17 years he was suddenly deported to Malta and now we that barrack over there and I have to cook for him, because he works all the time” Salim said with a sigh. His brother Yayha would soon join us at the camp to share his story. “In my language [Tuareg] we write like this” Salim said and marked the top of the drawing with some geometric symbols. “It’s a Berber language, and it wasn’t allowed to talk when Gadaffi had the power in Libya. My father was a teacher and he wasn’t afraid of standing up for our people. Gadaffi’s people didn’t like him, so one day he was killed” Salim told sentimentally. “Life in Libya has become too risky for everyone now. Since the uprisings in 2011, if you don’t have a gun, they will kill you!” he

Courtesy of Salim, April 21, 2017.

The hours outside went by and the temperature got chillier. Since we had become more acquainted, Salim suggested we should move on inside to his and Yahya’s place. The discussions kept revolving around Libya and how the citizens there had opened up their houses for and gave people jobs during their stay in 2010. “But after Gadaffi was toppled in 2011, the soldiers [rebels] could stop you if you were at the wrong place at the wrong time outdoors. People then tried to avoid being outside most of the time. Once I was very scared, because the soldiers stopped me and found pictures and a film in my phone. They told me to delete everything or they would kill me!” he said. “They treated us migrants worse than dogs.” Once at the hospital they even took my blood, because ‘somebody needed it’ and in my position I didn’t have a choice,” Ousman said emotively. “Nobody would believe what I’ve been through in Libya. If you haven’t seen it for yourself you won’t believe it, because there are no proof” he said stressfully. “This is Tinariwen, the Tuareg band you had heard?” Salim said now seated on a bed inside his and his brother Yayha’s crib. He was humming along while showing a music video with the Saharan landscape in the background. “And this one here is Benghazi, a very good Libyan rapper!” he continued while showing another YouTube-clip. Benghazi’s sound was energetic and raw, a bit reminiscent of the Palestinian hiphop group DAM. In this state of living, it seemed as if YouTube functioned as great tool of escapism for him, and who wouldn’t agree nowadays?

“Hello, my name is Yayha,” a man who’d just arrived inside the barrack suddenly interrupted us. Salim’s older brother, whom he had mentioned before, had just come back from his work shift and wanted to have a chat with me. “I was deported from Norway just a few months ago, after 17 years in the country, then they sent me here” he charged desperately. “I have two children and a girlfriend there,” he said while scrolling through some pictures carefully. “I was deported because they accused me of falsifying documents and that I didn’t have a proper driver’s license - Halooooo!? Not a driver’s license? I did have a real one - but they didn’t believe me. After three days in detention I was deported to Malta with a condition to not come back in five years, or they would put me in prison. They said Malta was informed that I was coming, but at the airport they didn’t know that I was coming at all” he said. “I’ll be put in prison for two years if I get caught in Norway again. I can’t go back and I don’t know when I will see my family next time…” Yayha and I kept seated on the edge of his bed while talking for about half an hour or so. He spoke in Norwegian, and I in Swedish. When the topics demanded further explanations, we switched to English. A cosmopolitan, yet absurd experience in the parallel lives of Hal Far. “So what do you do meanwhile you are awaiting asylum here then?” I asked. “Well I work and
I stay here with my brother Salim. I must work, or I’ll go mad. And because now I have a debt of 200000 NOK, sjekk her [‘Look here’ in Norwegian]! I’m back on square one. Haloooo!?” Yayha said again, even more dejected from telling his story.

The evening in the barracks continued... Jerome, the undocumented migrant, still wasn’t to be seen. Not since we arrived earlier to the camp. Perhaps Ousman had been seeing him during his slalom of the barracks? As I was reflecting, a sun-drenched frame made its entrance to the group. “Kompis! [pal in Swedish] someone called Mohamed said. “Can you draw me too?” Mohamed said with his broken English and sat down on Salim’s bed. His manners and request were nicely put. “I have a sambo [Swedish word for a co-living partner] in Scandinavia” Mohamed said while freezing his posture for me to draw. He and his sambo were hoping to live together again, like they used to. We never got to why Mohamed ended up here, but he told me of how he had lived, travelled and worked in several countries since arriving to Europe in 2009. While being at Hal Far he practised his language skills and worked out at the home-made outdoors gym in between the barracks.

Sharing life stories and meals, discussing hopes and common longings with each other... This Friday evening surely came to imprint on my memory on what it might mean to live as a migrant on the borders of Europe. If only the camp wasn’t so distant from everything else on Malta, there wouldn’t even be much of a difference to our parallel lives. “By the way, we think the last bus from Hal Far just went. How are you planning to get back home tonight? The cab is €20, and it’s raining so you can’t walk anywhere from here now” one of the guys said cutting in abruptly on my precious moment. “What? “But isn’t it just past 10pm on a Friday night?” Bewildered as I was, I said to myself: “How is this even possible?”

The end.

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