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Press Releases

SHARED MEMORIES BETWEEN MALTA, FRANCE AND TUNISIA

An all-day conference on shared memories between Malta, France and Tunisia was organised by Dr. Vicki Ann Cremona, the Maltese ambassador to France, together with the French Maltese Society Le Cercle Vassalli in Paris on Saturday 24th March.

This event, the first of its kind to be held in France, was a follow-up to a similar conference organised by Dr. Tanya Vella during the Malta Month held successfully in Tunis last January, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Tunisia and Malta.

Previous to that was a conference on Tunisia's Mediterranean communities organized in March 2000 at Tunis University by Prof. Habib Kazdaghli. Dr. Vella and Prof. Kazdaghli also attended the Paris conference, which provided an opportunity to celebrate the memory of the once thriving Maltese community of Tunisia, and to examine ways of preserving the links with Malta, now that the majority of its members live in France.

The event was placed under the patronage of HE Michael Frendo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is keen to promote and maintain links between the Maltese communities abroad and their mother country.

The conference was held at the University Paris Dauphine, one of the leading French schools of management. The opening speech was given by Professor Elyes Jouini, Vice President of the university, and himself a Tunisian citizen with many reminiscences about the Maltese community in his country, who was particularly happy to open a meeting devoted to Tunisia, particularly since the University, which has recently opened a branch in Vietnam, will be setting up another branch in Tunis in the coming months at the request of the Tunisian government. Prof. Jouini renewed his establishment's interest in signing an exchange and cooperation agreement with the University of Malta, which is currently under study by the two sides.

HE Dr Tanya Vella thanked the university and expressed her pleasure that her initiative had aroused an interest in France and more particularly among the members of the French Maltese community originating from Tunisia. Such an interest could but strengthen the necessary links, friendship and cooperation between the three countries.

HE Dr Vicki Ann Cremona expressed the interest of the Maltese government, and particularly her minister's interest in the Maltese Diaspora overseas. Several initiatives involving the French Maltese community, which is very active and dynamic, will be taking place this year. The Minister had suggested a general convention of all the Maltese associations in France and this will probably materialize in Toulouse or Marseille in the autumn.

Ambassador Cremona also spoke about the praiseworthy national campaign, launched by Le Cercle Vassalli (now Société Maltaise de France) to celebrate the memory of those Maltese immigrants who fought, notably in the Two World Wars, for the defence of France's territorial integrity. The embassy has been actively helping out in this campaign. More and more French citizens of Maltese origin are sending their registration forms to the embassy and thanks to this, the embassy's database has grown considerably.

Ms Patricia Sitruk, Director General of the recently set-up National Centre for the History of Immigration, herself of Tunisian origin, expressed her hope to be able to devote an exhibition to the history of Maltese immigrations to France.

Patrice Sanguy underlined the fact that the conference was the first of its kind within a French university to be dedicated to the history and memory of a community of Maltese immigrants on French soil. He also pointed out that the former Maltese community of Tunisia, although now largely in France and of French nationality, was far from being the only component of France's Maltese community which numbers some 200,000 persons. This number possibly makes the community in France, the largest community of Maltese origin on the European continent outside Malta.

The Maltese community from Tunisia has always shown great dynamism in maintaining links with Malta through the important role its members have played in the French Maltese associations.

A series of papers were then presented, all stressing the interaction of the Maltese in Tunisia with the other communities, ethnic and religious groups then living in the former Regency of Tunis. The papers were grouped in four round tables.

The first two round tables were devoted successively to the history of the Maltese in Tunisia and to the Maltese artists and intellectuals at the time of the French protectorate (1881-1956). Another two round tables focused on Maltese life in the Tunisian capital, and on the importance of place and permanence of memory among the descendants of the Tunisian Maltese in France.

The papers were followed by lively exchanges in which both Ambassador Vella and Ambassador Cremona intervened to explain how Malta could help the French Maltese to rediscover their roots and maintain their identity. Professor Habib Kazdaghli, in his general conclusion insisted on the importance of comparing and collating the data collected by all researchers, both professional and serious amateurs. He also expressed his confidence that this was only the beginning of a fruitful cooperation between the Tunisian, French and Maltese historians for a better understanding of the scope and importance of migrations within the Mediterranean space in the 19th and 20th centuries.

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