

October 1996



How AA STARTED IN

Malta

From what old-timers recall, it seems that during the couple of years preceding 1966, there were various attempts to start an AA group in Malta. The main protagonists mentioned were three women who had a problem with drink but evidently had a desire to stop. One of these was married to a doctor in the RAF; one was Irish, married to a Maltese; the third was an English woman working with the British forces in Malta. It doesn't appear that they ever managed to set up a regular group but they used to meet regularly in the private residence of one of them. In the November 1965 Grapevine, the "Maltese Islands, Malta" are listed with the "countries where AA meetings are presently held."

In 1966, a veterinary surgeon from Northern Ireland living in Malta had a serious drink problem. Every evening he had to be carried home, many times by the local police. He'd tried many

times to control or stop his drinking but had never managed to do either. He finally decided to seek the help of AA, about which he had heard when still living in Northern Ireland. He wrote to the General Service Office in New York.

At the same time another Irishman, a writer, was also residing in Malta. He'd been sober in AA for about two years but prior to that he'd had a long history of alcoholic insanity in various countries. He was very keen on staying sober and he too wrote to GSO in New York. In a very short time the two Irishmen met and immediately planned to start a group.

The first meeting of the first international group in Malta was held at the end of March 1966 in a private apartment in Mosta where the veterinary surgeon used to live. Up to the year 1976, the group consisted mainly (at times solely) of the two Irishmen.

But regular membership kept slowly increasing, the majority being British, either in retirement or working with the armed forces. Sometimes meetings were attended by Americans working with oil firms in Libya who used to spend their holidays in Malta. After some time meetings began to be held in a room adjacent to St. Patrick's Church in Sliema. In 1968 a Canadian who'd played a prominent part in the start of AA in England took up residence in Malta. His involvement in the local group helped considerably to give AA the strength and the stability it needed at that time. Maltese nationals were rarely seen at the AA meetings. The very few who went usually disappeared after a couple of weeks. The exception was one lady from Marsa who, after a period as a "drinking member," decided to stop drinking and became a regular member of the group.

After 1976 the group began to attract more Maltese with genuine intentions. Up to 1981 there were five such members — all men because the woman from Marsa had to leave Malta with her family when her husband was transferred for duties in the UK. One of the Maltese members didn't understand English and another member used to translate for him there and then. Many times he himself shared his own experiences and another member gave a simultaneous translation. He particularly attracted the attention and concern of the other members because

he was still drinking and was obviously finding it hard to stop.

With a lot of encouragement from various members of the International Group, mainly the writer co-founder and a Scandinavian who had achieved sobriety in Malta about five years before, the Maltese members started thinking of setting up a Maltese group. CARITAS, a church social work organization, was asked to provide a small room in its headquarters in Floriana. The first meeting of the first Maltese group was held on July 7, 1981, in one of the smallest rooms in the CARITAS premises. All five Maltese members of the International Group were present. The drinking one was still drinking but he obviously had the desire to stop because he kept going to meetings. After a few months the membership went down to four but the drinking member stopped drinking and became actively involved in the group activities.

Following a public information campaign, a few more members joined the group. Some of these also started showing special interest in service and later participated in a variety of activities organized to carry the message to other Maltese alcoholics in their own language. This small nucleus of Maltese members with the right kind of sobriety gradually managed to lay the foundations on which the future of Maltese AA could be built.

July 7, 1981 was a Tuesday. Up to this day there hasn't been a Tuesday on which the first Maltese group hasn't

met, practically always in the same building but in bigger rooms. Space had to be increased because members kept increasing. After a few more years, CARITAS, evidently with great pleasure and satisfaction, made available the largest room in their premises. Their spacious conference hall, complete with loudspeakers and recording equipment, was also used many times for the periodical public information meetings organized jointly by the International and the Maltese groups. These meetings were increasingly attended, mainly by members of families affected by alcoholism but also by professionals, students, clergy, and government officials interested in the many related problems of alcoholism and the AA program of recovery.

In February 1983, Malta was represented for the first time at the European Service Meeting held in Frankfurt, Germany every two years. From then on, Malta has sent two rep-

resentatives regularly. Maltese speakers also took part in conventions and service meetings in other countries. The year 1983 saw other important "firsts."

Maltese members participated for the first time in a popular TV program (with anonymity fully safeguarded), the first translations of basic AA literature were approved by AA World Services, and a series of talks to audiences with a special interest in alcoholism was initiated.

On March 30, 1987, at its twenty-first Anniversary open meeting, the AA Fellowship in Malta launched its own bilingual magazine FLIMKIEN/TOGETHER. It is still issued quarterly. In September 1988, the General Service Office was first

opened in a small room in Strait Street, Valletta. The Health Authorities made available this room which had formed part of the Government District Clinic. Ironically, Strait Street, which at one time had the largest concentration of bars and barmaids in Malta, has an

*One of the
Maltese
members
didn't under-
stand English
and another
member used
to translate for
him there
and then.*

interesting history of heavy drinking by members of the British armed forces, mainly sailors from Royal Navy ships anchored in the Grand Harbor in Valletta.

In April 1989, the first meeting was held at the correctional facilities. In June 1989, a public information meeting was held in the sister island of Gozo, and later on, a Gozo group was formed which meets every Wednesday and Friday evening. This was also the year in which AA extended its cooperation to a drug abuse rehabilitation service. Ever since then, AA members have been holding periodical meetings for residents of a therapeutic community who have problems with alcohol as well as drugs. On October 4 of that year, the first open meeting was held. These meetings are still held every Wednesday evening at the General Service Office in Valletta. They are always well attended not only by alcoholics but also by family members, relatives, and friends. Very often there are also present members of the press, students, social workers, doctors, priests, nuns, and others interested in the role of AA in the treatment of alcoholics.

There are now five Maltese groups, one Gozitan, and five international. The total number of members attending meetings regularly is eighty. Fifty-three of the present eighty members are Maltese; the remaining twenty-seven are of various nationalities. The writer co-founder is now the oldest

member of the Fellowship in Malta. There has definitely been an increase in the number of members genuinely interested in service.

Many Maltese also go to meetings of the international groups, two of which have Maltese secretaries. All meetings in Malta, English and Maltese, are listed in the AA International Directory, and in almost all the meetings of the international groups there are visitors from abroad. When such visitors attend Maltese-speaking meetings, it is the local practice to allocate fifteen minutes at the beginning or the end for the visitors to share their experience, strength, and hope in English or in Maltese, if translation can be arranged.

Members of the Fellowship in Malta accept the Twelve Steps for personal recovery and the groups follow the principles of the Twelve Traditions. As they consider themselves part of the world service structure, both the groups and the General Service Committee acknowledge the Twelve Concepts for World Service. In its public relations activities, the Fellowship in Malta has adhered to the principles of "attraction rather than promotion" and "cooperation but not affiliation." Besides the cooperation with the church and the government, there has been close cooperation with the press and all other forms of communications media and with the very large majority of voluntary organizations.

Paul V., Valletta, Malta