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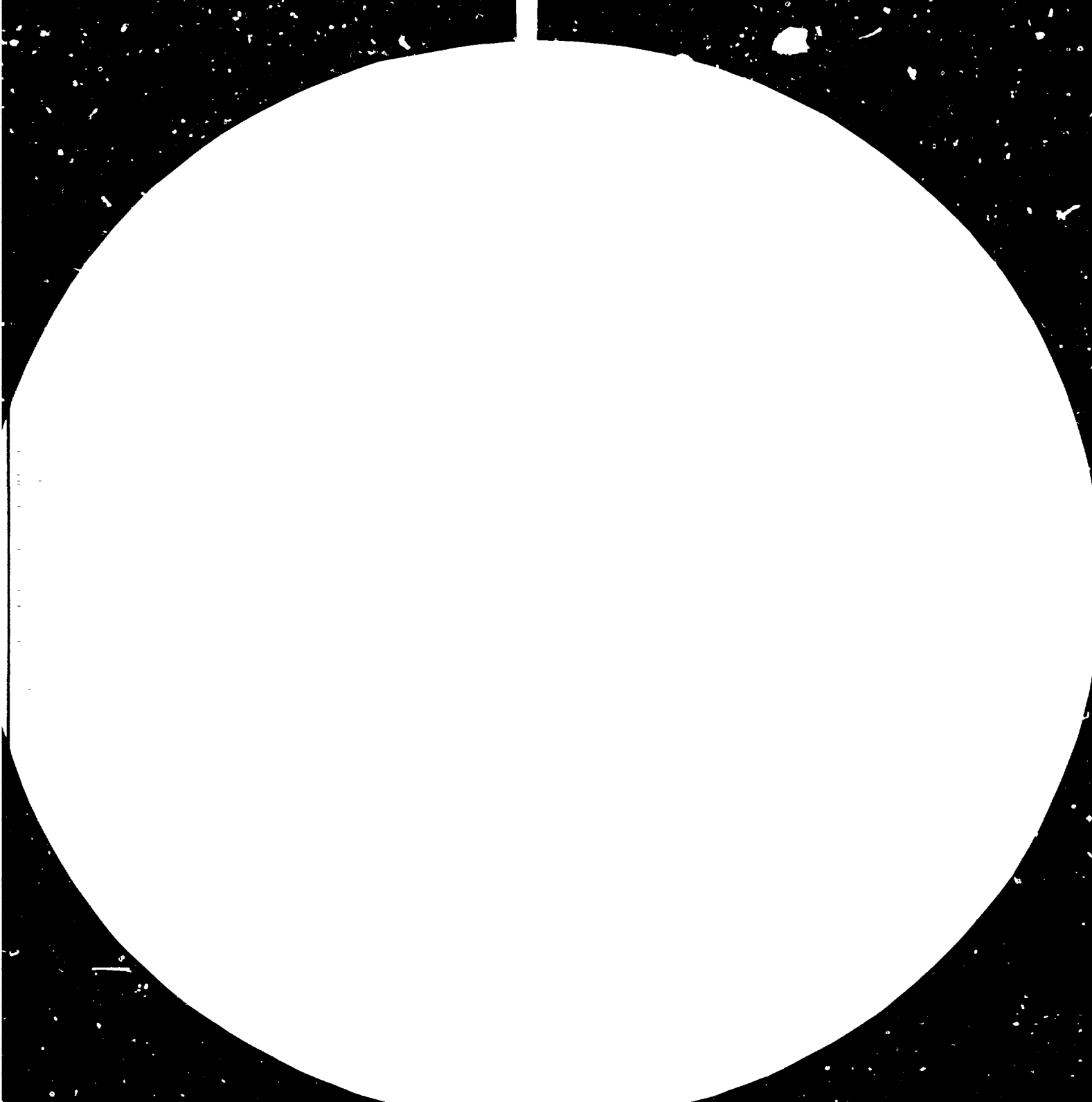
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The furniture and joinery industries in Malta ^{1/}

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The Maltese islands consist of Malta, Gozo and Comino, a total area of about 130 sq.miles. Situated in the Mediterranean, south of Italy and North of Libya. The climate is typically Mediterranean that is mild winters with warm dry summers. Then being in the centre of the Mediterranean it is moist. But the cool breeze from the sea helps to offset the dryness of the long sunny days. The population of Malta is about 325,000 and the rate of national increase is about 0,86 percent one of the lowest in Europe. Males account for 48.2 percent of the population, with 58 percent belonging to the 15-54 age group. The G.N.P. for 1978 was £M 294,6 million whilst 1979 it was £M 332,4 million, of this 34,3 percent was in the manufacturing sector.

The furniture and joinery industry in Malta, as doubtless in many other countries, is one of the oldest trades which has been passed down from generation to generation. The carpenter's corner workshop was, and still is, a prominent sight in Malta.

Many efforts have been made by the local authorities in the last fifty years or so to industrialize this trade. These efforts have been hampered by the lack of co-ordination between the parties concerned.

However, during the last two decades when the development of industry was given a big push forward, progress has become possible, and various furniture and joinery firms started to be founded.

The last ten years have consequently borne fruitful results and one can now observe that, medium sized furniture and joinery firms are among the most popular on the Island. Much more has, however, to be done to maintain this progress and it is hoped that the present structure of this trade will continue to develop.

Some of these firms are trying very hard to modernize their plant and machinery. Interested firms in the private sector are encouraged

and helped to make use of larger factories that are being built by the Government. Industrial Estates have been set up, for which future expansion has been allowed.

One can say that the structure of the furniture and joinery industry in Malta has never really been properly assessed as the industrialization of Malta is a comparatively recent feature. Figures of 1977 show that 121 establishments manufacture complete, single and double bedroom suites, 25 sitting room suites, 27 dining room suites, 46 kitchen units, 28 separate items for different suites, 2 study room suites, 9 establishments manufacture arm, deck, high and other chairs, 3 wicker furniture. 16 are engaged in upholstering, 7 in the renovation and restoration of antique furniture. 4 manufacture venetian blinds 4 spring interior mattresses. 5 office, school and church furniture, the remaining 34 establishments are engaged on other work connected with the trade.

For the same reason given above, it is very hard at the moment to analyse the number of firms, their employees and the value of production. However, the tabulation given below, drawn up from the 1977 survey, can be used as a guideline on the size of establishments.

Range of employees	Nc. of responding establishments	Persons gainfully occupied	Gross output (£M 000)
1 - 5	278	547	1,152,0
6 - 10	22	185	353,9
11 - 19	17	256	874,4
20 - 29	7	161	409,9
30 - 39	4	137	968,7
60 - 69	2	132	
70 - 79	1	77	
150 -199	1	165	1,497,1
200 -299	1	261	
Total	333	1,921	5,256,0

It has also been stated in the same survey that the total furniture

exported amounted to £M 247,100. This figure has definitely doubled or even trebled by the present time, as the number of small firms has expanded considerably since then, mainly because of export contracts. To my knowledge one firm alone has successfully completed a contract for export worth over a million Dollars. Joint ventures with countries like Libya and Saudi Arabia are also helping to increase the amount of furniture exported.

As stated previously private firms are endeavouring to expand a measure which entails modern machinery and skilled labour.

However, knowing how to select the most economical and useful modern machinery that is best applicable for a firm's operation, could mean the turning point for that firm. It is felt here that Malta could benefit from advice by the more experienced countries and international institutions such as UNIDO.

Naturally the use of modern machinery alone cannot make one successful. Getting the best possible results, together with the best possible turn over, need good technical knowledge, practice and advice. The labour force, being the most important factor, must have good leadership to be able to reach its goal. One must always be sure that the right man is put on the right job, after he has been given proper training. Yet it must be here explained that for a country as small as Malta, seeing that in the past most of the labour force was employed by the British Armed Forces, this entailed a difficult task for the private sector to face up to. A good effort for training workers is evident, both by the private companies and the Government. These last few years have seen a number of Technical Institutes and Trade Schools being set up. However, there is room for even further improvement. Practical experience in mass production methods is badly needed namely practical experience in the seasoning of wood, in marketing, management, machinery, labour relations, the human aspect of labour, flexibility and future planning. All these points are already well known to the Maltese woodworkers; what is needed is to master them and to be able to utilize them fully.

In Malta we require our workers to attain the same skill and experience enjoyed by their fellow workers in other countries so as to be able to realize and judge what contribution they can make to local industry.

They must learn that for the good of the economy of the Island, producing only for the local market is not enough. Venturing into the export market is necessary. Again to do this Malta has to study how such industries in developed countries solve their marketing problems, say, by producing in large quantities, by being competitive in our prices and at the same time producing the best quality furniture.

The raw material situation in Malta is at the moment quite a sad story. We do not have our own resources, and we have to rely on imports. Attempts are being made to import the logs and trees, and saw and dry the timber in Malta. The Government has now started a bulk buying system of nearly all raw materials connected with this industry.

Although we are still at the first step to compare our product development with that of other countries, it is obvious that a fast pace will be achieved. One or two of the larger companies are going to great expenses and efforts to establish modern drying systems, to improve their design systems and set-up, and even their marketing department. Here also the Malta Development Corporation gives a helping hand not only in theory but also in practice with its contacts overseas. This help comes in handy when it comes to standards, since so far the Malta Board of Standards has not yet dealt with furniture. It is hoped that the efforts being made by the parties concerned will help to enable the establishment by the Malta Board of standards for the furniture and joinery industries.

The industrial infrastructure is mainly based on the courage shown by our predecessors who made considerable efforts to start some kind of

industry in Malta. These people's names can, as a matter of fact, still be found to be connected with organizations such as the Federation of Malta Industries who has a special committee that looks after the interests of the furniture and joinery industry and even helps to promote exports. Also the professional and manufacturers' associations play an important role. The trade schools and technical institutes are Government run. These cater for young students and two, three and four years' courses are run leading to exams of the city and guild level.

One needs to take measures to improve our training systems as we do not need just good craftsmen. But nowadays we need first of all good production managers with a mind educated and prepared for expansion into modern factory layouts and machinery, educated in at least semi-mass production techniques. It would also be of advantage to these students if instead of being employed elsewhere in the summer period, they would be compelled to work in the furniture and joinery factories. It would of course be even better if these youngsters were to be sent on some kind of scholarship abroad, even if it is just for the summer periods, and this could apply both for management and for skilled labour.

The various federations and corporations should stick more to their demands and use more pressure to achieve their end results both with the Government and the manufacturers.

And last but not least a greater effort must be done to improve our export promotion system. Joint ventures must be given as much importance as we give our tourist agencies if not more. We don't have to look far to realize that we are situated in the middle of a gold mine, with countries from Europe flying over our head with furniture they are exporting to our neighbouring countries in the African continent. It must be explained more clearly as it was in the textiles case, that Scandinavian countries and European countries have much to gain in entering joint ventures in our little island. One only has to look back to see how strategic Malta was, and still is. This time as a stepping stone to where the future money really is, even in furniture and joinery industry.

I do sincerely believe that in Malta we have a high standard of individual craftsmen, who can also produce well finished products. I am therefore confident that with the right help and practical experience these craftsmen can also become good leaders in larger concerns - rather than remain running small workshops and grow in size and strength, so that eventually, with the right guidance our furniture and joinery industry can also compete with the big firms of other nations.



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