OUR TOMORROW?

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Toronto's Maltese community is old and closely knit, and hosting guests from home and embracing them as family simply runs in its blood.

But the party that the community is throwing for the tenor Wednesday at the Ambiance Banquet Hall also sheds light on an immigrant community in decline – with its immigration to Canada coming to a halt, an aging generation passing and descendants becoming full-fledged Canadians.

"It is part of our culture to greet any Maltese visiting here," said Vella, 68, who came here with his wife and three children in 1977. "But to be honest, we try to find any excuse to get the community together to celebrate our affiliation with Malta. We are still part of Malta."

The first documented Maltese arrived in Canada in 1826 and the majority came after World War II. In the community's heyday during the 1970s and 1980s, there were more than 45,000 Maltese in Canada, though the 1986 census reported a population of only 21,855. In the latest census, only 4,675 people in Toronto identified Maltese as their mother tongue.

While most Maltese immigrants came earlier in the last century as economic migrants, Toronto Maltese historian John Portelli said the last wave, arriving here between 1977 and 1982, fled political instability back home.

Migration from the small Mediterranean country has literally ended since, as its own economy thrived.

"The older generation started dying gradually, no more immigrants are coming and some have returned," said Portelli, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University

of Toronto.

“The community is definitely declining. The language is lost among the second generation.”

The Maltese’s success in integrating into Canadian society also contributes to its own decline, said Portelli, who came to Canada in 1977 with a Commonwealth scholarship for his graduate studies at McGill University.

Up until the early 1980s, the old Maltese Village in Toronto’s Junction area was home to more than 8,000 Maltese Canadians, who now have spread across Greater Toronto.

The number of social clubs in the Junction has dropped from nine to four. Just a few years ago, the community’s monthly newspaper, L-Ahbar, also folded, apparently due to declining circulation.

“There is still the colonial attitude and influence that ‘you’d better speak English than Maltese.’ The bias is still there today,” said Portelli, 56. “Integration can help you economically, but it kills you in terms of maintaining your identity.”

Joe Sherri, president of the Maltese Canadian Federation, said the group was made up of 20 social clubs at its inception in 1980; today only 12 are left.

“If you go to any of our clubs on Fridays or Saturdays, you won’t find any young people there,” said Sherri, 63, who came here in 1965 for job opportunities and now runs his own food distribution business. “Our biggest challenge is to get our young people involved.”

These days, young Maltese only show up at big community celebrations such annual Mnarja, the festival of light, in June. The only hope of closing the generation gap is to draw youth in through groups such as the Malta Band Club or its popular soccer club, said Vella.

“Something that concerns us a lot is where to find the new blood to replace the old blood,” lamented the retired banker, whose three adult children, all professionally employed, speak very little Maltese. “We don’t have an answer yet.”