

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Joseph

Bonnici

Date

27 January 2021

Primary Maker

Joseph Bonnici

null

Dimensions

18 minutes 48 seconds

null

Extent

1 digital audio recording (WAV)

Object Type

Oral history

null

null

Collection

Malta Dockyard Oral History project

Museum

Malta Maritime Museum

Registration Number

MMM.AV0011

Description

This recorded interview was made as part of the Malta Dockyard Oral History project by the Digitisation Unit, Heritage Malta, under the direction of Joe Meli. Joseph entered the dockyard in 1965 as a foundry-worker apprentice. He had a good number of family members that also worked in the dockyard. In 1981, he moved to the Shipwrights' section, where there was the need for more workers. He left the yard in 2008 during the process of closing-down.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) He ranked 83 in the dockyard exam, and at the time only 80 people entered but three of them were not interested anymore and he managed to join the others, starting out working in the foundry, till 1981. A number of family members that had worked in the dockyard as well- his father, uncles, his own son, his sister and her husband, and other family members. His sister's husband had died on the job. There was not a lot of overtime and being at a young age, he needed a position where he was able to sustain the family better, financially wise. He spoke to Sammy Meilaq, who was the chairman, who suggested that he joins the shipwrights. Looking back-Relationships formed(02:00) They might have had their differences as colleagues, but he sees his time there as being with family; helping one another not just on the job but even on a personal level. (03:15) Working in the dockyard is nice but had its difficulties and its dangerous sides as well. People who work at the dockyard were known for being knowledgeable about almost everything. They were able to learn trades such as tile layer, electricity, plumbing, and so on-one was able to learn, should they wish to learn, unlike when he worked in the foundry. Trade Union-Strikes(04:45) He does not remember one happening, similar to the

one that occurred in 1958. There were other minor strikes that took about one day because generally it was talked with the management and union and managed to arrive at a solution. He took part in the trade union, in fact, he was a shop steward—a mediator between the worker and management while also being able to check and make sure that overtime to the workers, was fairly distributed, giving that he would have discussed it with the management first.

Safety-Um El Faroud(06:00) He and his son, who also worked in the dockyard, were on night shift when the explosion on the vessel Um El Faroud, (No.3 Dock), and 9 people died. At first, they were not aware of what was happening since they were working in a tank, and on nightshift, they had to get the work done so they could go to rest. It was only when they arrived near No.4 dock that they noticed what was happening. (08:45) He also remembers a passenger vessel that went on fire affecting the whole dock. He was not sure on the name, but thinks it might have been from Cunard (Cunard Countess). He also recalls another accident on the dock arms, where four people had died due to the collapse of one of the dock arms. He adds that a number of small accidents happened almost daily. Personally, he even had an accident and had to have some stitches on his head, a fire accident, and a steel plate falling on his finger (the scar is still present). **Looking back-Relationships formed (10:45)** Working in the dockyard, he was able to meet a lot of different people, with different trades, cultures, politics, religions, and so on, more so due to the foreign vessels that came in. Adding how they had to be careful how to speak, especially when vessels from Iran and Iraq docked there, due to certain powerful people in their country. **Entering the dockyard-Reasons for joining (11:00)** He mentions that he had a lot of family members that worked in the dockyard such as his father and various uncles, adding how many people wanted to work there as people were getting paid well and the job was secure, which could be felt more due to the presence of the union that was always present when there was the need to protect the worker, once the worker's claim is fair. (11:30) He remembers some of the worker's representing the metal-workers section. (13:00) He was also an executive in the union **Safety-Accidents (13:30)** Apart from him working in the dockyard, he also had his sisters' husband, who died in an accident in the dockyard when he fell from the vessel Olympic Fame, adding how his sister had been married to him for three weeks, he had changed shifts in order to go buy a TV in the morning; While he was working in a tank of the

ship, he fell and ended up on the heating coils of the vessel and died, this was October of 1978. The dockyard had the policy that when one of its workers died on the job, they offered to employ his next of kin and employed Mr. Bonnici's sister (wife of the worker who died at work) with the IT department. Safety-Accidents (16:00) Working at night-once he almost fell in a manhole but fortunately, he did not fall in but just one leg, as he would have fallen 300 feet (probably he meant 30m). They had lights while working but some might have been used for other works around the vessels, hence light would be scarce. (17:00) When they worked a night shift, they would first find a wire and gear for the welder to work with and find a light to use; they used to be a team of about 3 to four people - 2 shipwrights, one welder, and a grinder, if necessary-they used to help each other, more so during night shifts, to get the job done and then rest, but there were occasions where they would have to stay to complete the work till the morning.