

# Object Summary

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## Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Vince

### Azzopardi

#### Date

10 June 2021

#### Primary Maker

Vince Azzopardi

null

#### Dimensions

55 minutes 14 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.AV0048

## **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. Vince entered the shipyard in 1978 as a Shipwright apprentice and during his apprenticeship he showed his interest in Manoel Island where he stayed for the rest of his apprenticeship. At the end of his apprenticeship, he returned to the boat house and joined the workers' committee and was elected as council member. In 1997, there was major changes in the formation of the dockyard council, and he was appointed Deputy Chairman. He left the yard in 2003.

## **Transcript / Summary**

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) It was not his initial wish to work at the dockyard, which might be from the fact that he came from a very religious family, in fact he had an uncle who was a priest. His mother was a very traditional woman and made him see the world from one perspective but as he started to grow up, he wanted to rebel against it. He went to a catholic school and decided he wants to leave and build himself his own way and it was then, why he considered the dockyard. (02:00) He sat for the dockyard examination, amongst 500 others, he passed and chose the trade of a shipwright, as he liked woodwork. When someone got a job in the dockyard, they would celebrate with a small party. This was different than the older days, where entering the yard signified that, that would be the last place they would work in. When he entered there, he started to see a totally different world to what his mother had always spoken about. (03:30) Although the Admiralty had left, its system was still present, hence why they had an apprenticeship where they learned the basis of all the main dockyard trades, no matter what they wished to specialise in. Furthermore, during this period, he showed his

interest in going to Manoel Island where they worked on small boats such as yachts, boat flags and masts. He stayed at Manoel island for the rest of his apprenticeship. Eventually at the end of his apprenticeship he returned to the boat house. (04:15) The boat house was the wood working shop and was split into sections-the joiners, shipwrights who specialised in wood and the patternmakers. (05:00) He liked the way the dockyard worked-especially when it came to its democracy and how power was treated (even it had its bad side too). In fact, he joined the workers' committee and eventually became part of the board as well, through the elections carried out within the dockyard.

Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (07:00) Then in 1997, there was a change in government, and he felt that there was going to be a new mentality in the dockyard. In fact, the new Prime Minister changed the system of the formation of the dockyard council. This was changed so that it is composed by 50% elected dockyard workers and the other four board members with the chairman and deputy chairman appointed by the Government. This brought about a lot of issues and conflicts within the existing board members, as most people never expected that this would happen under the Labour Government. At one point, the Prime Minister offered him to become a chairperson at Kalaxlokk but he did not accept out of love for the dockyard. However, he told him that in case he is re-elected, then he would assist with the plan how to go about this. After the election, there was quite a lot of unrest, however the new council was formed and they started working in the prevailing difficult conditions. He remembers that the Um El Faroud was still in the dock, which created a depressing atmosphere in the yard.

Family and Social Life-Religion(19:00) Healing the wounds-Being a man that was destined for the cloth he always tried to find ways of healing the wounds that formed between the labour party, therefore the dockyard and the church. He mentions two occasions where, with permission from the archbishop, he managed to get the statue of Christ the Redeemer and the Immaculate Conception to the dockyard and although the anti-clerical sentiment was still running rampant, people still showed up in large numbers to show their devotion. He mentions another occasion that for 6 months, new Jesuits trained in the docks as part of their novice training, where they offered their services for confession. Hundreds went to do so, and one Jesuit confessed to the interviewee that a great damage had been done to Maltese society when this furrow between the people and the church started. (25:30) Vince mentions meeting the

archbishop and how the subject quickly fell on the raid that had taken place on the curia. Vince expressed that he was no part of it, nor did he agree in any way. He explains that the fight had to be fought, but it was handled carelessly and with no remorse. Entering the dockyard-Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (29:30) Changing the constitution-One of the issues that the dockyard ran into, was after the Soviet Block fell in 1989. People had got used to Russian ships sailing to Maltese ports for repair. Once that 'sickle' disappeared from Maltese harbours, people quickly noticed that the dockyard was running out of work. There was the opportunity to do work for the US Navy, however the constitution disallowed allied Navy ships from using the facilities. This had a negative effect on business, as the work in the Mediterranean, as he puts it, was running dry, and foreign competitors were quickly taking over. (30:30) They went to speak to Edgar Mizzi, one of the people responsible for writing the constitution, to have these words changed, but no progress was made. He also tried to consult the yard legal advisor, but he was not getting any definite answers. Finally, the board made the decision to repair the Naval ship, as an auxiliary ship. (35:00) He remembers that he was present during the accident of Johnny Micallef that happened in No 6 dock on the Avar. Micallef was cutting off a plate from the ship's bottom, which moved and hit him mortally. Safety-Um El Faroud(36:30) He also remembers the Um El Faroud accident and the organisation required for the funeral. He recalls that the only church adequate was the Paola Parish Church, which at that time was practically fully scaffolded. The yard works dismantled all the scaffolding in preparation for the funeral of the nine workers and then the scaffolding was erected again. (41:30) The time he spent at the dockyard was something he will keep forever, even when he speaks with other people, he always ends up speaking about his time there. (42:30) The closure of the dockyard. The Maltese political parties have never agreed on anything but it seems as though that in this case they did, for which he deems that they have taken a decision without even considering anything and on this he will never forgive them. He feels that there could have been another way instead of just closing it; such as downsizing by dismissing the people that they felt were not giving enough work and not leaving the choice to the workers. Life after the Dockyard-Finding a new job (43:30) There were a lot of people which were very skilled that ended up leaving. He claims that the people who worked at the dockyard were the ones who spent less time registering at

Jobsplus than anyone else. Most of them ended up finding another job immediately, such as in the aviation sector, where the employer realised how skilled a person from the dockyard was, especially considering the amount of different types of work that a yard worker was able to do. He believes that one of the factors as to why the government changed from the labour party to the nationalist, was due to the change in mentality of the people in the dockyard who felt that they were betrayed by their own political party and a lot decided not to vote. Entering the dockyard-Reasons for joining (44:30) A lot of the people who worked in the dockyard were members of the MUSEUM because of the dockyard school as they discovered that there is a new world besides just the religious world. Furthermore, people who were not as good in school, which were mostly coming from the Cottonera area, with the help of the dockyard school and the Admiralty, most of these people were given a chance to learn and gain new skills.