

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Mario

Portelli

Date

13 July 2021

Primary Maker

Mario Portelli

null

Dimensions

57 minutes 12 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.AV0058

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. Mario joined the yard in 1980 and following a shipbuilding apprenticeship and relative courses as well as on site training. He was engaged as a draughtsman during the initial shipbuilding projects at the Malta Shipbuilding and participated on most of the shipbuilding projects, until his retirement in 2010 when the yard closed down.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) When he was young, he was obsessed with the arts and creativity, to the point that at 14 years old, he had already reached to an 'A' level certificate on the subject. Then when he was about 17 years of age, he was offered a 5-year scholarship on art anatomy in Firenze. At that time, his family were telling him that a career in art was not an option to sustain him in the future. He had to give up his dream and moved into the maritime sector, where he entered as an apprentice with the Marsa shipbuilding. (03:15) He remembers the interviewing board, Angelo Cassar, who represented the Malta Shipbuilding and Joe (maybe Salvu?) Attard, who represented the training section of the Dockyard. On starting his apprenticeship, he was sent on a shipbuilding technology course which was a very demanding 3-year course. He successfully completed the course and obtained a Higher National Diploma. Education-Apprenticeship process(05:15) Meanwhile he had started the apprenticeship, where he attended lectures and practical training at the same time in the Malta Drydocks. During his time there he was trained by various experienced tradesman at the plate shop (Charlie), the pre-fabrication/assembly hall with Guzeppi Azzopardi, the boilershop with George Schembri

where they taught him how to interpret, develop and adapt drawings to the fabrication requirements. He then went to the drawing office and assigned to Philip Dimech, who was a leading draughtsman. At the drawing office, he felt at ease and in a way was complimentary to his passion towards art. After three years, he was then sent to work at the Malta Shipbuilding, where he sat for the trade test, which was the building of a barge, which they successfully completed and was extensively used for quite a long time. (12:15) During the trade test, they were about 30 to 40 apprentices and were monitored throughout the process and assessed on the various processes involved in the building of the barge such as: marking, measuring, assembling and so on. They were under the supervision of a foreman and two German representatives, who were very strict when it came to work quality. They were not all assessed for the same work; In his case he was assessed on fore-end of the barge. After they carried out the trade test successfully, they were then qualified in the trade and started working there as a steelworker. Here he assigned to do the marking out of the plates in the workshop. The work was quite challenging, and he had the responsibility to interpret the drawings, checking thicknesses and plate orientation and basically seeing that the work done according to the drawings. (16:45) After a while in 1985, an opportunity opened up for a position in the drawing office position and he was accepted as an assistant draughtsman. He looks at the move as the start of his career, where he started to work with Chinese consultants. The only set-back was the consultants spoke only Chinese, and they had one interpreter. He remembers that there was one particular Chinese that was not being involved in the work, so Mario took it upon himself to try and teach him some basic English in order to be able to communicate directly with him instead of through the translator. He even recalls the time when he asked that the Chinese consultant accompany him on a job at the Malta Drydocks drawing office. Even if his English language was poor, the consultant enjoyed it, especially when he took him to see the Red China dock. While they were there, the consultant noticed a Chinese vessel, which was designed by the consultant himself hence, which actually meant that he was a naval architect. (29:30) He also remembers when he had was working on the base of the grain silo crane and there was a part he could not figure out. He asked the Chinese consultant for some advice, who took only a two-minute assessment of the problem to solve it. (30:15) After the Chinese consultants left, he was chosen to form part of a new

marketing unit, where the objective was to make a common effort between the two shipyards, to prepare proposals for newbuilding work. He asked whether he was going to do the same work, since he felt comfortable doing drawing work. He opposed to this move, but unfortunately, he had no other option. He and three other colleagues were transferred to the Malta Drydocks to work in this new section. (32:45) Here they were receiving and assessing quotations from various manufacturers of machinery and equipment in preparation for the signing of the signing of the Russian contract for newbuilding of ships. Sometime after, they were moved to the Malta Drydocks drawing office. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (34:00) He was involved in a lot of work at the Malta Drydocks drawing office. The shipbuilding project basically started from scratch, whereas at the Malta Drydocks, the projects involved repairs on existing ships, which was more challenging. Here he was involved in various repair works such as structural repair work on oil rigs, structural modifications on coamings, bulkheads, etc. At the end of the day, he enjoyed doing this work as he was working back on the drawing board. At the time, computers in Malta were not yet available and all the work was done manually. He spent about two to three years at the Malta Drydocks drawing office, until English consultants from Appledore arrived at the Marsa Shipbuilding and he was transferred back to Marsa. (38:15) Another point he mentions was, while he was still at the Malta Dockyards, he was still in communication with Guzeppi Azzopardi, of the pre-fabrication, who used to come and discuss with him about lofting, which required a lot of attention, accuracy and responsibility for the cutting, bending, rolling and shaping of the steel material for whole project. He was so fascinated by this procedure that he used what he learned, when he returned back to the shipbuilding. (39:30) The English contractors noticed that he was knowledgeable on this particular technique, which formed part of their plan. (39:30) There was a call for a position of a leading draughtsman, and he applied and was awarded the position of a leading draughtman of the lofting section. Education-Projects (41:00) Here the work on the Russian vessels started, followed by the Norwegian chemical tanker, then came the two Chinese supply vessels and two large Norwegian fishing trawlers. In between, there was also the building of the Freeport cranes, bunkering tanks, the Bay Street Project steel structures, building of omni-barges and the fabrication of a 90-ton anchor for an oil rig, which had to completed in three days. For this

anchor, a representative come to approve new alterations to reduce certain fabrication work such as welding, to reduce the duration of the fabrication. Another major project was the new building of the Gozo Channel vessels. He was assigned the work of the ramps. They carried out fabrications of offshore buoys and the floating power station from the company Agip, who assisted with the survey of their equipment. After this last project, the Shipbuilding yard was merged with the Malta Drydocks and he was transferred back to the Malta Drydocks. In the drydocks, he was involved in various projects, involving drawings on super yachts, oil rigs, etc. Looking back-Reflections (50:45)

When the yard closed down, for him, it left an empty gap, that would never be recovered. The knowledge and experience on so many trades accumulated was lost. For him, the closure, was a huge disappointment, especially considering what the shipyard taught him. It is something that we can see happening nowadays where foreign labour to do work such as the breakwater bridge, the Marsa flyovers, pedestrian bridges, etc. Such projects were easily made by the tradesman who worked in the shipyards.