

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Michael

Parnis

Date

14 July 2021

Primary Maker

Michael Parnis

null

Dimensions

47 minutes 40 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.AV0060

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. Michael Parnis entered the yard as a shipwright apprentice in 1978, and whilst working on various fabrication and new building projects, he always showed interest in the wellbeing and work conditions of the workers leading to his involvement in Union activities during particular changing times throughout his working years up to his resignation in 1992.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) His apprenticeship was for four years long and they had to choose the trade they wanted on the first day of work. Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (01:30) He added that in 1980 a number of apprentices entered the dockyard with the same conditions they had, but with the difference that their apprenticeship was of three years and with a higher pay than they had. During his 1st year as apprentice the pay was of Lm 7.00 per week, whereas the 1980 entry had only three years duration with a higher 1st year pay. At that time, he was the shop steward for the apprentices and first fight for rights was to have the same pay and apprenticeship period as the 1980 entry. He got the apprentices concerned together and wrote letters and within a few months their claim was accept, however no arrears were given. He started another claim for the arrears and eventually their claim was accepted back-dated which meant that they were paid a sum of around Lm250 /Lm300 Maltese to compensate the arrears due. (03:15) He entered the dockyard at 17 years of age, after attending five years Secondary education where he got his 'O' Levels. After secondary school he went to the Technical Institute for one year and then joined the dockyard as Shipwright apprentice. (04:00) The apprenticeship was

divided into two main parts: the 1st year they were stationed at the training centre where they spent nine months training in different trades: woodwork, bench fitting, lathe work, electrical, pipe work, sheet metal, welding, gas cutting and smithery. At the end of each training period, they were given a test on the trade. Following these nine months, the remaining three months were focused on their chosen trade which in Michael's case was a shipwright, and received more specific training on this trade such as welding, gas cutting and sheet metal work.

Education-Interesting training and skills (05:30) The training including relative testing. For example, when they were training in woodwork, they made a wooden box, which was used for keeping their tools. The instructor would assess and mark their work, on the quality of their work, whether they followed the drawing correctly, its dimensions, whether it closed properly and so on. For sheet metal, they made a can made of sheet metal, that required shaping soldering, etc. Basically, they were tested by doing items/tools that they used throughout their work. During their specific trade training, they made a metal toolbox with internal compartments and lock. (08:15) The last 2 years of the apprenticeship were concentrated on the chosen trade. In his case, working in the pre-fab, plate shop, Manoel Island, drawing office and boilershop, for about 6-month periods in each location. Finally, at the end of the apprenticeship, they would have the final trade test, before becoming a journey man. For his test, he had to build a hatch cover-4 x 8 feet, water tight, following a drawing, cutting out the required material to the right dimensions, welding it and tested for water tightness by a class surveyor. When he passed his trade test, he was assigned to the No.1 dock where new building of the Chinese tanker was going on. (10:00) Unfortunately at that time, the City and Guilds course on Shipbuilding, was terminated and they could not obtain the certificate for the work that they did over the previous 2 years. At that time as well, he was enrolled as an executive in the GWU for the dockyard section, referred to as the Metal Workers Section. They spoke with the minister in charge, Philip Muscat who assisted by creating a 3-year course on Shipbuilding at the University of Malta. So, after the apprenticeship they attended this course. They were eight students from the drydocks and four from the Malta Shipbuilding. (11:30) After they became officially shipbuilders, they worked on various vessels and buoys in the drydocks. Apart from that they also worked on the Ta' Qali grandstand cover, the Marsa Shipbuilding workshop roof and the Marsa Power Station. (12:15) At

one point, newbuilding work at the drydocks started declining, where they spent around 9 months without having any work to do (This was Code 99). Until a project on the floating dock in the Malta Shipbuilding came up and they were sent to work on it. Following that, they were given the project of building the Kordin grain-silo loader and unloader. Afterwards, the chairman of the Malta Shipbuilding, who was the ex-general manager from the drydocks, contacted the newbuilding gang at the drydocks, proposing to them to move to the Malta Shipbuilding site, to start working on the newbuilding of the Russian vessels. All these agreements, were done while he was abroad on union business. At that time, he felt that he should have been consulted before these decisions were taken.

Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (14:00) During the period of building the Russian vessels, his position within the trade union was more stable to the point that he even worked as secretary in the union' s office. He transferred the shipbuilding workers from the GWU Parastatal Section to the GWU Metal section, which changed its name to Dockyard Metal Section. He also was involved to improve the conditions and salaries of the shipbuilders at Marsa to match those of the shipwrights at the drydocks. They organised multiple strikes and demonstrations until the prime minister of the time, Eddie Fenech Adami, agreed to their proposal. It was a time where a lot of changes, for the good, were being applied, for which he had a part in. (16:30) In 1989, the GWU opened a vacancy for the post of Executive section secretary. Considering his frequent participation in Union work, he was appointed the position. He was chosen with a colleague of his from the drydocks, John Mansueto, and three more persons as full-time employees with the GWU. He was then chosen as the representative for the Malta Shipbuilding workers.

Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (17:30) The story of the Malta Drydocks, the Malta shipbuilding and the GWU were all related to each other. The Malta Shipbuilding started with people from the Malta Drydocks which in turn involved the GWU. In fact, most of the GWU leaders came from the drydocks including the first 5 GWU general secretaries. (18:45) In 1992, he contested for a secretary of the textiles section within the GWU, which was a totally different area for him. Again, five out of nine people within this section were ex-workers from the drydocks.

Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (19:30) Going back in time, he was part of the work committees, which were elected by the workers themselves to represent the different sections and trades within the dockyard. He was chosen four years in a row to

represent the workers of the newbuilding section of the Drydocks. Their duty was to oversee the way the management was working and implementing things. In his opinion, these committees failed because of the conflict-of-interest between the union work and the work of the work-committees. In addition, he was also involved in the Drydocks council-fighting for the rights of the workers in general, not just in relation to the dockyard. They fought for the education, teacher strikes, even when there was a case of any disagreements, mainly to defend what they believed in. There was the one demonstration regarding the nuclear protest, where they closed off the harbour with a ship named Copper Mountain. Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (23:30) He used to travel to England for trade union work a lot, and one time the trade union there wished to speak with him after seeing the way he led various demonstrations here. They actually invited him and told him to visually explain, through a Maltese map, how he led the demonstration-closing of roads and certain ports-because it was big deal to manage to close of a dockyard with the union backing it up. Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (26:00) He remembers the time where they were even stopped by the police with tear gas, during the Luqa strike. He was arrested and interrogated a number of times, together with his colleagues, because of the involvement in various riots. (27:00) 1992, when he was no longer involved with the dockyard, he still followed what was happening in the dockyard. In fact, he contested to become the secretary within the dockyard but Tony Coleiro, took this position. (28:30) 1996, there was a change in the Labour government, and was even in disagreement with the prime minister of the time, Alfred Sant, on various proposals such as the one related to the increase water and electricity supply costs. At one point, a task force related to the drydocks and chaired by George Abela, ex-President of Malta, was formed. They produced a report on the drydocks, proposing that the drydocks council should not be totally elected by the workers. They proposed that four council members are elected by the workers and the Charman and the other four chosen by the Government. At that time the GWU accepted the proposal, however he opposed to this as he predicted that the yard' s situation would only deteriorate. Following this, in 1998, there was a change to a Nationalist Government, who practically left everything things as they were and after some time removed all the rights to the drydocks with regards to the council elections. Then, from then onwards, the plan of the government was to close the dockyards. Michael took

higher positions within the GWU and he was able to see and hear what was happening, even if he was not involved. When the government announced that the Malta Shipyards was going to be privatised, he contacted a trade union friend in Italy when he heard that it was being passed on to Palumbo. Through his friend, Michele Gravano, he planned for him a meeting with Palumbo in a Café in Naples, where they spoke about various things. He remembers Palumbo saying that a Maltese minister had told him, that if he is looking to be successful with the dockyard in Malta, he should keep out the GWU of the yard. All Michael asked from Palumbo was to give the GWU time to represent the workers and once the transfer is made, to give them the same conditions. Palumbo did not accept this proposal as he wanted to start everything from scratch. Although he did agree to meet with them, as a union, when they were in Malta for a discussion. (37:30) In 1980, they formed a group for young adults working in the drydocks uniting a number of young people from different groups around the island. It was a time as well where many people had made various studies about the drydocks, on the KTX system and on the union. (39:00) He mentions a point with regards to the management within the dockyard as some of them might have excelled in their trade but when it came to managing, they were not too knowledgeable. In fact, at one point, most of the services were being sold for less than what they cost. Even though there was a recession around Europe where there was a huge impact on work as well. At one point, some people said that the reason for the dockyard's downfall was because of the European Union but he still believes this was not the case as the EU had various incentives to help industries with new developments. He strongly believes that drydocks' downfall was due to bad management and that the GWU had also its part because they did not recognise the changing factors that were affecting the industry. (46:45) Seeing the way the dockyard ended up brings him big disappointment, especially since he was technically brought up in the dockyard. He did his best to try with all his power to save it but it all fell on deaf ears. He believes that what Palumbo is doing today was something the dockyard could have done.