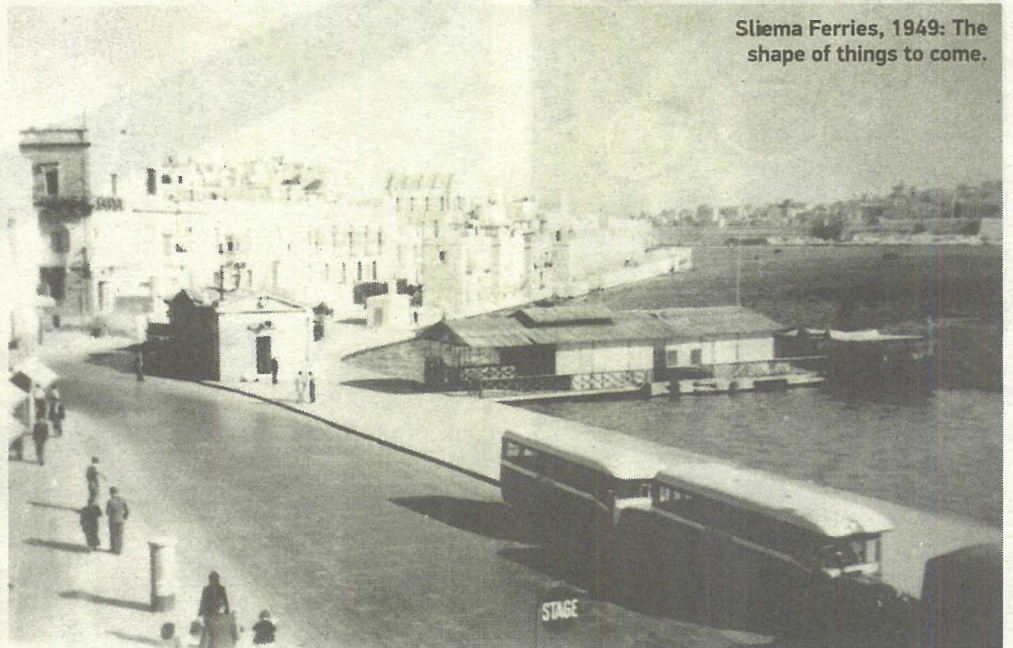


LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY

Extracts from *Connecting The Harbour Towns O. F. Gollcher & Sons 1897-1959*

Aurora was sunk at Sliema. Note the saloon on the other ferry.



Sliema Ferries, 1949: The shape of things to come.

The end of the line



MICHAEL CASSAR

By 1939, the Marsamuscetto Steam Ferry Service (MSFC) fleet had dwindled to two operational ferries. The National Steam Ferry Boat Company (NSFBC) *Emily P* was chartered briefly for the Mgarr-Marfa mail service from September 22, 1939. On the outbreak of World War II a limited service was provided in between air raids. Fares were doubled from half to a penny; in July 1942, they were again increased to 1½d., following an increase in the price of coal.

When the war broke out, several tugs were required to tow cargo unloaded from convoy ships on to lighters. On May 27, 1942, the Sea Transport Office requisitioned the harbour ferries for use as tugs. The MSFS hired *Maria* and *Neptune*, NSFBC and the Grand Harbour Steam Ferry Boat Company (GHSFBC) their entire fleets: *Admiral Mitchell*, *Admiral Beresford*, *Admiral Johnson*, *Fauna*, *Flora*, *Aurora*, *Ceres*, *Daphne* and *Emily P*.

Like other operators of harbour craft, O.F. Gollcher & Sons had its

share of war losses. *Admiral Johnson* was sunk by aerial bombing on March 1, 1942, while lying at Marsamxett. *Aurora* was sunk by aerial bombing on March 26, 1942, while lying at Sliema. It was declared a total loss on March 30. The ferry remained there until well after the end of the war; a storm broke up the wreck on February 3, 1949, and the engine was lifted by floating crane for dumping at sea on July 24, 1950. *Admiral Bromley* and *Ceres* were similarly damaged by aerial bombing on April 9, 1942, while lying at Marsamxett. Both were repaired at the Dockyard in March and June 1943 respectively.

The Sliema-Marsamxett service resumed in July 1943 with *Admiral Beresford*, *Ceres* and *Daphne*. The first two returned to Grand Harbour when service there resumed on August 4. *Daphne* was joined on the Sliema run by *Neptune*, recently purchased from the MSFS. The NSFBC offices at Tigné were destroyed by bombing. All requisitioned vessels were returned to owners by 1945.

The MSFS *Neptune* was returned to MSFS manager Alessandro Mattei in July 1943 but was sold at once to the GHSFC; their remaining ferry *Maria* was returned in January 1944 and was broken up soon after, bringing an end to the Mattei presence in the business. It was a time for taking stock by the remaining company.

After the *Flora* was scrapped, the joint fleet consisted of five ferries: *Daphne*, *Emily P*, *Fauna*, *Admiral Mitchell* and *Admiral Beresford*. *Bellona* and *Ceres* were valued for scrap at £50.

After the war, the Services sold surplus small craft including several Motor Fishing Vessels (MFVs). In 1949-1950, faced with the prospect of a return to peacetime service with obsolete coal-fired ferries, the oldest of which was 53 years old, Gollcher bought three MFVs. MFV 54 was bought as *Revelry* from Major General W. R. Revell Smith. MFV 59, the *St Mary*, was bought from John Edward Gibbons. The third MFV was the *St Joseph*.

In 'Malta's New Ferry Boats', the *Times of Malta* of July 6, 1950, gave a glowing account of the marked improvement in the harbour ferry service: "After the *dghajsa*, the most familiar craft plying the Grand Harbour waters is the ferry boat. Since the inauguration of the National Steam Ferry Boat Company, the general public has been making use of a fleet of coal-burning steamboats.

"Now, after 50 years of existence, the company has started replacing the steamboats with a fleet of diesel-driven ex-MFVs. The first of the newcomers - the *St Mary* - made her bow in the Grand Harbour in August last year. According to reports, the *St Mary* has been an outstanding success.

"The *St Mary* covers the trip from Valletta to Vittoriosa in just over five minutes, allowing for a short stopping at the Senglea stage. It took the old boats from eight to 12 minutes to cover the passage. Besides being more economical, the diesel-driven boats have accommodation for over 200 sitting and standing passengers."

"The Times of Malta of August 31, 1959, reported that the Valletta-Sliema ferry service was discontinued some months ago. It went out without a whimper, unnoticed and unsung, swept away by the bus service"

By the beginning of the 1950s, ferries left every half hour, except for the morning and late afternoon rush hours when they left every 20 minutes. After the Suez Canal fiasco of 1956, Britain wound down its overseas bases. In 1959, part of the Dockyard was leased to C. H. Bailey, a Welsh ship repair firm. By this time, most Dockyard hands lived outside the Cottonera and got to work on buses. The ferries were losing custom and money and there were credible rumours that, without a government subsidy, services would soon be suspended.

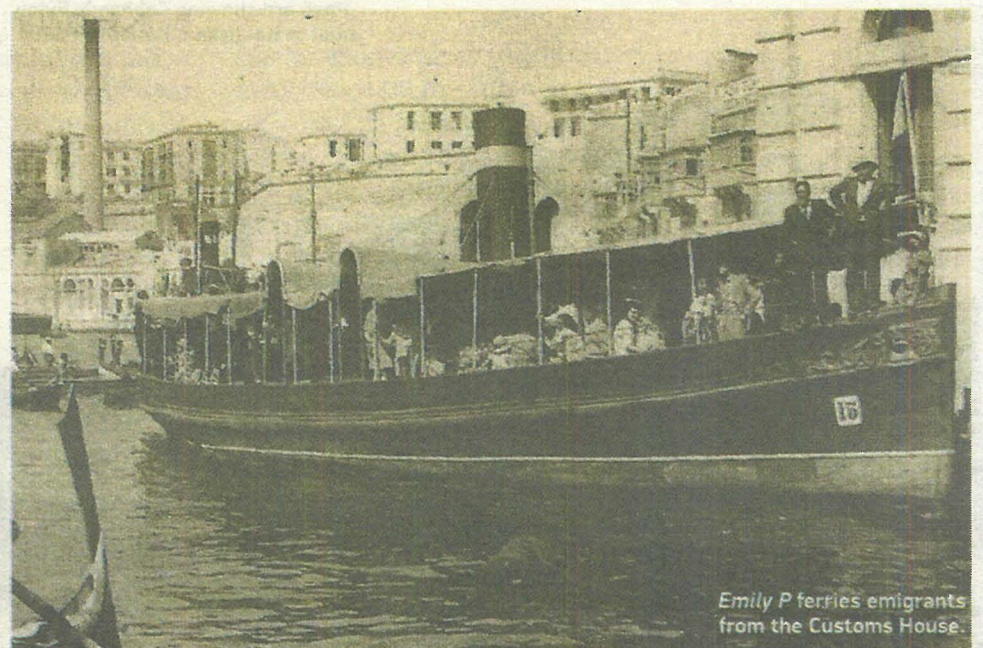
The company looked in vain for entrepreneurs to take over its assets, comprising the operating licence, four ferries: *St Joseph*, *St Mary*, *Revelry* and *Emily P*, the landing stages and pontoons at Sliema, Marsamxett, Customs House, Vittoriosa and Senglea, the slipway and ancillary facilities at Hay Wharf, and stores at 13/2, Tigné Wharf and Gzira. The service to Sliema was suspended after no company was found to take over by May 15.

The *Times of Malta* of August 31, 1959, reported that the Valletta-Sliema ferry service was discontinued some months ago. It went out without a whimper, unnoticed and unsung, swept away by the bus service.

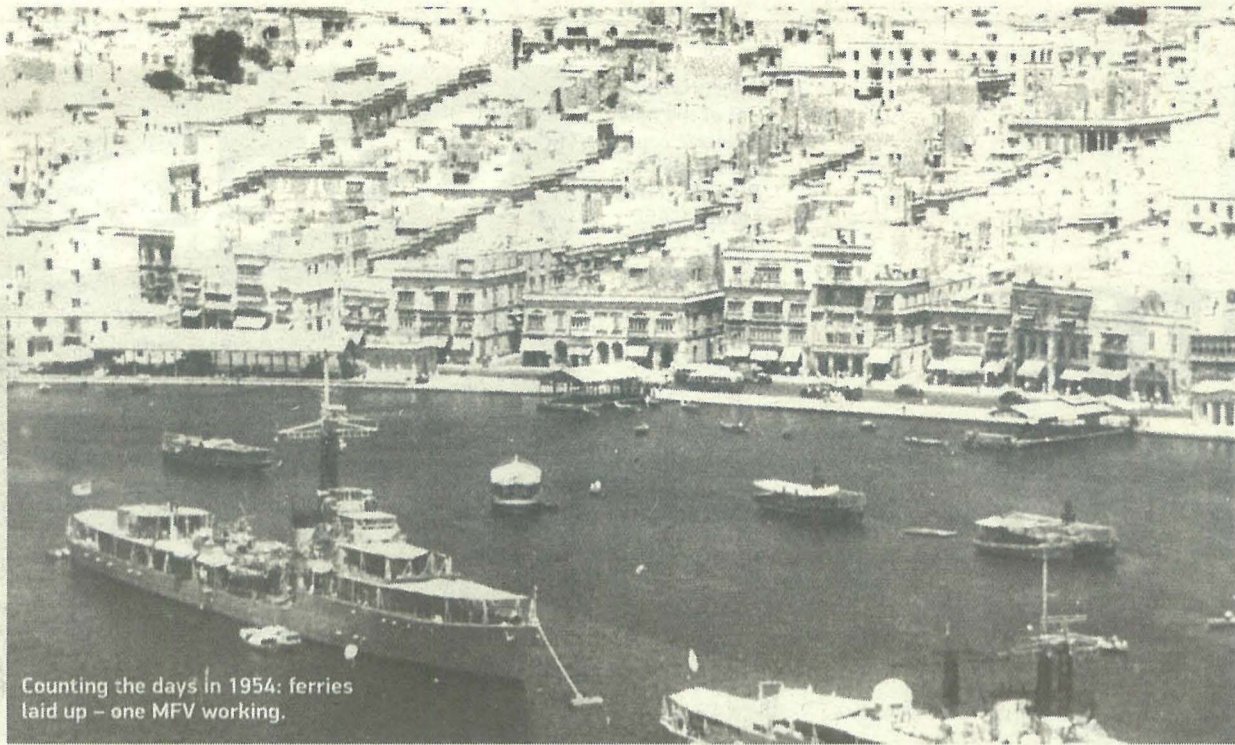
The public sale by tender was advertised in *The Sunday Times of Malta* of June 14, 1959. On July 24, the company's legal adviser informed



The MFV St Joseph at Marsamxett.



Emily P ferries emigrants from the Customs House.



Counting the days in 1954: ferries laid up – one MFV working.

the Treasurer and Director of Contracts, the Commissioner of Police and the Collector of Customs: "I am directed by the National Steam Ferry Boat Company and the Grand Harbour Steam Ferry Company to inform you that as notwithstanding their prolonged efforts there has been no improvement in the situation they have reluctantly come to the decision to discontinue running the service after August 31, 1959."

On August 31, the *Times of Malta* published the ferry epitaph: "The Last Ferry – Grand Harbour Service Will End Today. On the following day there were photographs of the *St Mary* leaving Valletta, the last passengers who disembarked at Senglea, and an interview with the coxswain, Joseph Baldacchino; thus ended a public amenity that had served the island loyally, cheaply and efficiently for 77 years.

The *Sunday Times of Malta* of September 6 advised that blasting works were to be carried out at the landing stages which had become skeletal eyesores. The cutting up of the steel structure with acetylene torches was reported in the *Times of Malta* of September 17. The demolition was cause for celebration: "What a difference the removal of the Gollcher Sliema ferry landing stage has made! It is hoped that the other (Mattei's) will follow suit without more ado."

The remaining company assets were sold in the following months and the NSFBC and the GHSFS became a footnote in the islands' transport history. In a twist of fate, the Mattei company title was revived with minor alterations when the service was re-started in 1991: Marsamxetto Steamferry Services Ltd.

There is more to the ferries than the popular ditty *Lanċa ġejja u oħra sejra*; it is interesting that such an insignificant

human activity as a short, daily trip by ferry should be immortalised in a popular song. Nevertheless, nothing could be more idyllic than a short trip by ferry in summer to enjoy religious festivals in seaside towns, as recalled in this July 17, 1915, advert in the *Daily Malta Chronicle*: "The feast of St Joseph will be celebrated at Msida. The civic bands Duke of Edinburgh of Vittoriosa and San Giuseppe of Hamrun will participate in the secular proceedings comprising the ever popular greasy pole. There will be a quick service of steam launches from Marsamuscetto until late in the evening."

It was not always that idyllic; winter weather was a perennial problem. Marsamxett was very much exposed to the gregale, or northeasterly wind, whose unpleasant, rolling swells lasted long after the energy of the storm had abated. On such occasions, landing at piers was tricky and the ferries suspended the service. This would have been obvious to Sliema commuters but it was frustrating for people in Valletta to walk down to Marsamxett only to find there were no ferries.

Complaints were resolved by the posting of notices as reported by the *Daily Malta Chronicle* of September 2, 1905: "Not so long ago, when the steam ferry boats are not running between Valletta and Sliema on account of foul weather, everyone who wished to cross the Marsamuscetto Harbour had to go down to the landing place and receive there from observation of facts the knowledge that he could not pass the water.

"He had often in the rain and the gale to make his way to the seaside, and there take his disappointment and go whither he would. We agitated, and at last on the square of Valletta a public notice was posted up to warn the public

when the sea was too stormy to permit of the ferry boats passing."

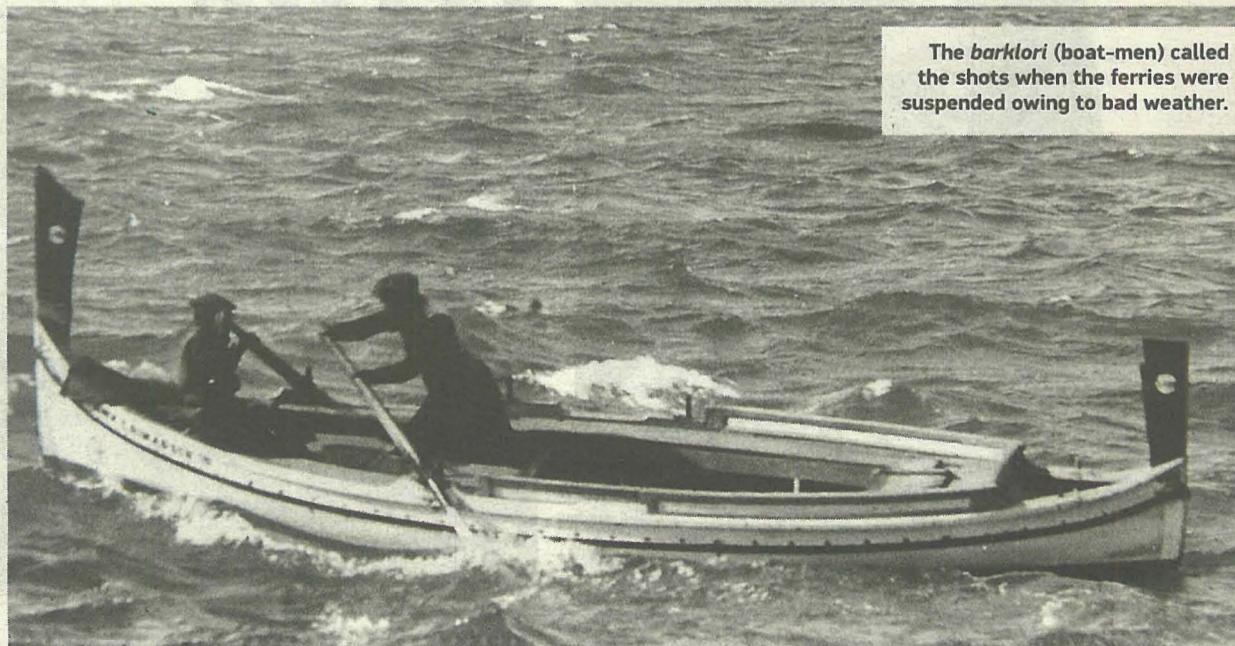
In 'By Land and Sea in the Nineties' in *The Sunday Times of Malta* of March 31, 1963, Dunstan George Belanti (1891-1967) described life on the ferries: "In the early 1890s 'Red' flag steam launches carried passengers from the (Strada) marina in Sliema across to Marsamxett. Each bore a name, one of which was *Maria*. In and around 1897, however, another fleet of steam launches came on the scene: these wore a 'Blue' flag and bore such names as *Daphne*, *Aurora*, *Ceres* and *Euterpe*.

Rivalry between the two fleets was extremely keen, so keen that, on occasions a master of one of the craft shouted wholly unprintable expressions to the master of a rival launch.

"When a gregale started blowing and huge waves commenced rolling into Marsamxett with a bewildering crescendo, the rival fleets, abandoning all signs of mutual hate, sought refuge and shelter and almost hugged each other, well inside the basin between Gzira and Fort Manoel.

"It was then that the *dghajsaman's* courage and hardiness shone for everyone to bear witness, for wholly unperturbed by the waves which smashed against his tiny craft, would, with his companion, ferry a load of 10 passengers across Marsamxett Harbour; that is, from the marina in Sliema to Marsamxett. When the size of the waves assumed dangerous proportions, the *dghajsas* withdrew inwards and carried passengers travelling to Valletta from the other side of Fort Manoel where the yacht marina is now between Gzira and Marsamxett."

To be concluded



The *barklori* (boat-men) called the shots when the ferries were suspended owing to bad weather.