

Need of a Container/Bulk Port

The influential "ECON MIST" during these last months has analysed the impact of "containerization" on industrial life in the 1970. Broadly it stated that a transport revolution is spreading rapidly throughout the industrialized world. The spearhead of that revolution is the cargo container, a simple aluminium or steel box with doors at one end. It measures 8 ft high and 8 ft across and comes in 10 ft lengths up to 40 ft. The idea behind the box is almost as simple as the box itself. The big container operators are now seeking to integrate road, rail and sea transport by moving containers rapidly and mechanically between each form of transport. They are replacing the hundreds of pairs of hands now needed to load and unload goods on their way today. The key to this through-transport system lies in the standardization of the containers, and more important, the standardization of the fixtures and fittings needed to carry and fasten the containers of each form of transport. The result is a radical reduction in transport costs and big improvement in transit times. But the impact of the cargo container is out of all proportion to the relative simplicity of the idea.

2. How is Malta facing this Container revolution which has now come to stay. Containers need big specialized ships and these in turn demand well equipped deep harbours to receive them plus feeder service facilities for the smaller ships. The old concept of cargo liners calling at several ports picking up and unloading several parcels of cargo is now giving way to the trunk rate where a highly sophisticated ship would only call at nodal points to load or unload large cargoes for certain localized areas and subsequently complemented by a feeder distribution service. This situation means that many ports would be unable to have the specialized container berth and deeper water requirements for these large vessels of say 20,000 tons having a thousand containers of heterogenous type of cargo. This type of vessel cannot afford to spend ten or thirteen days in port when it can effect a quick turnaround in only 36 hours. While Malta is blessed with deep water harbours, an immediate need exists to build and operate a Container berth. This type of service has already started by the American Export Isbrandsten Line from U.S.A. to the Mediterranean ports of Barcellona, Cadiz, Marseilles, Genoa and Naples. Malta cannot therefore complacently wait and see if she is not to lose her chance of becoming an international transshipping centre serving if not for all, at least for the Eastern Mediterranean basin.

3. Trieste has already plans for containerized agricultural produce and oil terminal to feed transalpine areas of the Adriatic while Genova at Riva Scrivalta is aiming at throughput for Northern Italy. Research has shown that several countries of the Mediterranean littoral could import a number of products such as textiles, iron, steel, electrical equipment, cars and spares etc. in containers. So much so that an Italian Company has already plans for building scores of small container ships with shallow draft, two hundred and fifty feet long and within the 2,000 tons range. These vessels would be capable of loading and unloading at virtually all small ports, that is they would act as feeders to the giant Container ship or port at a nodal centre.

4. Another project for a container port is at Cadiz where fully detailed schemes by Spanish and American consultants propose to start construction work soon on the Container Wharf and ancillaries at an estimated cost of £3 million. According to the Financial Times of 13 December 1968 actual works have started in Cadiz by the Spanish and U.S. enterprises who hope to have the big port ready in a little more than 3 years. Where does Malta come in? The prophets of doom may say that owing to the Suez Canal closure the position has worsened. At Cadiz the opposite view is being taken. There is an ever greater importance for container shippers from giant cargoes from U.S.A. to be broken down into small ones for small ports. What is being done at Cadiz for the Western Mediterranean could and should be performed by Malta for the Eastern Mediterranean where the need is now even greater owing to the Canal Closure. In fact the Senior U.N. Transport Econ. Affairs Officer in a lecture delivered at the Container Institute in New York and later published at the "Freight New Management Magazine" specifically mentioned that Malta has all the qualities for being developed into a major container and/or bulk cargo distribution centre. He further noted that if one studies the volume of type of cargoes which are destined to originate from points east of Malta as as Adriatic, Aegean, Black Sea, Levant and North America, rather than a fleet of transocean ships virtually acting as coasters, it would be more viable if a large fast container and/or roll on/roll off ship established a regular ferry service from New York to Malta and rely on local feeder or coastwise service shipping to ports in the Eastern Mediterranean.

5. Now that it has been established that Malta can and should offer immediately the facilities for a container berth it should give serious thought to this major development. In addition to the ports already mentioned, Marseilles will soon be able to handle five roll on/roll off berths, a 200,000 ton tanker terminal and a Container berth equipped with 20 and 45 tons cranes. With container traffic developing faster than anticipated and ample space for industrial development around the gulf of Fos the French are saying that Marseilles will become the Europort of the South. Moreover, in the feasibility study of Medport it is stated that various ports mentioned above are aiming at becoming the super ports of the Mediterranean. Malta it is stated stands a chance of becoming one of these as soon as it is realised that a substantial risk can be taken by some party without a guarantee for commercial success.

6. The decision now is the selection of site which must either be in the Valletta Harbour or at Marsaxlokk. Certain quarters have been advocating a project for the establishment of a container berth in the Grand Harbour. In their view this could be developed in a relatively short time and at a lower cost. Bearing in mind that a container terminal is likely to cost around 7 million dollars, as estimated during a Seminar on the subject, great care must be taken about site selection. This berth must be equipped with two huge gantry cranes, 6 straddle carriers and other yard equipment capable of handling at least a million tons per year. Local topography and existing infra-structure of capacity to expand both on the landward or seaward side must be studied as roads on land, waterborne feeders, land in the region of ten to twelve acres to receive and marshal containers are a sine qua non.

7. Users of Valletta Harbour are aware that it is traffic congested. NATO fleets and cruise liners sometimes find it difficult to obtain desired berthing space when Drydocks are full up and need all wet berths or when several cargo ships enter harbour simultaneously. Moreover, large container or bulk carriers would have difficulty on turning circles and traffic flow in the fairway. Although it may be true that the Container ship or the new concept of L.A.S.H. (lighter aboard ship) would reduce the number of calls from conventional small ships, this would not be so if we "think big" and not only in terms of Malta oriented cargo. As Malta hopes to attract millions of tons for marshalling or repacking Boiler, Canteen and Parlatorio wharves would have to be encroached upon as wet berths. This would impede the further expansion of Malta Drydocks for larger docks; moreover, the development of Corradino heights as a marshalling yard is not ideal and would be costly. Finally if the Free Trade Zone venture at Marsaxlokk becomes a reality in the very near future, it would mean unnecessary expenditure.

8. This leads one to conclude that it would be more advantageous to operate a Container berth from Marsaxlokk where both uncluttered land and sea space are available and not scarce as in the Valletta Harbour. One must also bear in mind that Malta had two ports in the Grand Harbour and Marsaxxett but now that the latter is not any more usable except as a Yacht Marina it would be prudent to have another commercial port at Marsaxlokk. As the two ports should not be competitive but complementary towards the diversifying of Malta's economy there should not be any fears about loss of business in Valletta. What one should be after is not dividing the cake but increasing greatly the size of the cake in the interest of all to share in its increased size.

9. Medport have now submitted to Government a new financial plan, which was submitted to Cabinet, giving details of how they could finance the Port infrastructure at Marsaxlokk. Although the plan has some political overtones additional sales analysis by the Dutch partners forecast a throughput of 2½ million tons. Both bulk and container cargoes are envisaged and this means that the viability factor of new port infrastructure at Marsaxlokk to deal with giant ships complemented with feeder services has now been established. Once this is the result of studies carried out by people who have the know-how, there is now no point in the possibility of selecting a site for a Container berth in the Valletta harbour. What is now needed is a decision to ignite the first dynamite at Marsaxlokk which Medport envisage would really start actual construction works in March 1969. Capital and Engineering plant will be available at this date; an early deliberation seems to be called for as finance of the type proposed by Medport remains available for a very limited time and if an early indication of concrete and definite intentions is not expressed it would be allocated to other projects going on at the same time.