

## Maltese-American Oral History Program

Transcription of Interview with:

Eleno (Leno) Sammut

Date: October 24, 2015

Location: Detroit, Michigan

My interview with Eleno took place at the Maltese-American Benevolent Society in Detroit, Michigan on October 28, 2015. Leno was gracious enough to allow me to come into the club early while he made pastizzi and meat pies for the day and interview him during the process. The meat pies were delicious and a nice lunch for our trip back to West Virginia. This also explains the kitchen noise for some portion of the interview.

*On discussing Salvino Flask and Eleno's immigration:*

Marc: So did you two (Eleno and Sam Flask) know each other in Malta?

Eleno: No, just came the same year. You know like he said, his wife she was born in New York. But then they moved to Michigan.

M: So that is where you two met, here?

E: Yea, we met each other here.

*On Eleno's time at the Club:*

M: How long have you been doing this here at the club (cooking and running the bar)?

E: Cooking and doing this, uh...about fifteen years. I took it by mistake. There was a, one of the bartenders, he quit you know. Carmen she was the president and I was going out at the time with her. So I told her don't worry I'll stay....and uh I think I stayed! You know, because I got hooked. I was on the board at the time too. This last year I didn't run, because of my health. I had the cancer, prostate cancer two years ago in August and then this year they found another three more tumors. On January 26 they operated on me and took them off. So far \*knocks on wood\* so good. I just went last week for a second follow up and he told me I will see you in six months instead of three. So that's progress.

*On family in Malta and coming to the USA:*

M: Do you still have family in Malta?

E: Yea, I have my brother and cousins you know.

M: He never came here to work did he?

E: Oh yea, he did. He came in 1964. Before me, he came and stayed for three and a half years. He went to work at DAC (Detroit Athletic Club).

*Returning to the conversation about the Club:*

E: I stayed on the board (Maltese Club Executive board) for thirty years. I went off like this time and I think another time only, like in 2000 something maybe 2001.

M: So you have been on it since you came?

E: Yea I joined it when I came, I started coming here. And my dad told me "Are you going to still come to the club?" And I said "Yes, why not?" Then he said "Then you will pay your dues!" I said, what is that? He told me, it's your dues! He told me, I forgot what it is in Maltese, *missata*, I told him what do I have to do? So he said you have to do an application and I did that. I came in 1978 in January and I came a few months after and became a member.

*On Eleno coming to the USA and his Father:*

M: So the first time you came was in 1977?

E: Yea I came in '77 for vacation. I met my dad for the first time. You know, pictures are ok but that was the first time.

M: Did he write you guys a lot?

E: He wrote us and we wrote him and so on. He supported us when he was working. He would always send something, money and clothing.

M: Did he work at Ford?

E: Well no, he worked there for about a few months you know, six months or so and they laid him off and he never got hired back. I'm not sure if that was the first job like he had, but he was a butcher, his trade was a butcher, back home. Then he went to work, I think it is still a slaughterhouse on Michigan Avenue by what used to be a hospital. There is a building you know? It is like one, two, three, like a four lights there is the freeway you know. He worked in there and then he worked, the most work he did was at the Depot (Michigan Central Station). That is what he worked the most.

M: What was he doing for work there?

E: At the train station he was a, what do you call it, a...like a janitor.

### **Start of the "formal" interview (demographics):**

M: What is your full name?

E: Eleno, E-L-E-N-O, Sammut. But they call me Leno you know, its more easier.

M: How old are you right now?

E: Right now I'm sixty-six, well, I'm going to be sixty-six next month. November 11, 1949.

M: So we already said you came in '78. Do you want to talk about how when you came in '77 that was the first time you met your dad and what you thought about the US?

E: Ok. Well do you want the whole story?

M: Sure! Yea.

E: Well what happened, I had a friend of mine. He came you know to the United States the year before, '76 it was. His name was uhh...Lolli. Lolli Camilleri. He visited here and he had his uncles and so on and he saw my dad at the club. So when he came back to Malta, he told me "Leno I saw your dad. I talked to him and so on." And so, he told me why don't you go see him? I said, well I had plans and stuff to do and he told me "My dad is going to in there (The USA)." So, he encouraged me more. So I talked to his dad and I told him "When are you leaving? What did you did?" He said, "Go to the Dar-Immigrant" you know the home of immigrants in Cassilla, Valletta. Let me go talk to Father Calleja, I remember and I told him, "I have my father there and I would like to visit him." And he told me, Ok, he told me you need a visa from your dad and so on. I said, ok. When is the plane gonna go? Is it going to be this year? He said yes, there is a plane, a charter plane, going to go to be in Toronto. I said ok. He said all you have to do is have transportation from Toronto to Detroit. So I said ok I'll tell these things to my dad.

So in the mean time, his father, Lolli's father he told me, I went and I have the tickets, everything you know. Ok I said, tomorrow I'm going to go and get the tickets and then by the time the visa will come. So I went there and I paid them and everything. They said you need the visa and I said no problem I will get it. So I got in touch with my dad and I told him we are going to come this day and I forgot what day it was. Well I saw Lolli's father you know, and his name is Calleno (Michael) and I told him, "I went and I have booked everything and paid them." But he told me, "I was joking with you, I wasn't going to come!" I said, "What??" He said "Well ok, I haven't seen my brothers in a long time so I will go."

And we came together, we came to Toronto you know. We are travelling here and that is where we met my dad in the airport. Crying you know, big hug you know and so on. That was the first time [they had ever met]. So we was coming the freeway down and I said "how big is the Untied States?" He said, "We are not in the United States!" I said, "Where we are then?" He said "We are in Canada." I said, "Oh yea, Canada. Yea they told us we would land in Canada" HE said "Oh we still have to go more, we have about 150 more miles."

So well we came in here [Detroit] and so on. And he had some property up north and we went in there, too. I was plowing it for them because, like I said, my dad he was a butcher back home, it was his trade. He liked the lifestyle, because he was a farmer and so on. So they start buying, him and his partner Joe, they was buying livestock and so on. Then I found out that he was sick, my dad. I didn't knew that. He didn't look like he was sick, you know? I mean I was sick too, it could happen tomorrow and what so ever [referencing his own cancer]. I told his friend, I said "If you guys know my dad is sick, why are you buying? You had a heart attack too." He said, "Well that is what we love."

One time we was home and he told me, "Do you like to come back?" I said, "It is beautiful weather!" It was summer you know. I remember I was plowing the field for them, August 16, 1977 and Elvis died. I remember that day because his partner Joe he came from the cottage out and he was hollering like this .... "Elvis died! Elvis died!" and I'm on a big tractor, you know not a small tractor. It was a big John Deere tractor so I couldn't hear. I thought, "Oh my god, something happened. I didn't see my dad anywhere so I saw him and I went down there." I said, "What happened, Joe?" He said, "Elvis died, Elvis died!" He was crying and all you know. I said, "You brought me from down there because Elvis died?" And then he started hollering at me, "You don't know who was Elvis, you don't know. He is a hero of the country." I said, "Yea but don't get upset, it's ok you know." HE said "No it's not ok, he is dead!"

Well like I said, he told me, "how do you like the USA?" I said, "It is beautiful weather, like Malta in the summer." He asked if I would like to come back and I said I would. So he said ok, we went to Paul Vella, who was one of the presidents of the Maltese Club and an attorney and the Maltese Consulate too before

Larry Zahra. So he made me the affidavit and everything and in October, or September, September 7 or September 8, 1977 I went back home. And within a month my visa was done. So I was home and so on and I told my dad, the visa is here, but Dad I'm going to stay here until January. I will come in January so I can spend Christmas and New Years with Mom. He told me okay.

On January 26, 1978 we came. We came back and we stopped, not in Canada at the airport but they transferred us to LaGuardia, New York. After that, I gave a buzz to my Dad and I told him we are stuck in here but we landed and we are safe. I said, so I'll come with the train but he told me,

"NO! Don't come with the trains there is a lot of snow all over. So when they tell you that they are gonna start flying, just give me a buzz." I said Ok. I had, I don't know if you ever met Paul Borg, the President of the other club (Dearborn). We came together on the same plane, he, his wife, and myself you know. The same day.

M: Did a lot of people who were immigrating come on the same flight?

E: It was a few. Just a few of us. At least that day, but there was a few other immigrants from Malta that they came in the same year. But we, myself and Paul and there was another group you know like Monica, my friend, and her husband they came in '78 too. And Sam Flask, he came in the same year too. There was Noel and Tony Attard, they came that year and a group, a family, from Qala, Gozo (SP?). I believe those are the last immigrants that came here. One of the last ones to come, '78-'79.

E: WE were one of the last immigrants to come from Malta, because they closed immigration you know. The United States was occupied with a lot of people coming from the Arab countries and stuff like that.

M: Did they close immigration in Malta?

E: Yes, you had to wait a long time. My brother, he started getting upset in there (Malta). He was a police officer. He was here before me, in 1964 and he stayed 3 ½ years, but then he met this girl in there (Malta) and married. Then after a while he wanted to come to [the USA]. I made the visa for him, and they told him "You have to wait 10 years."

M: Was that 1980?

E: I became a US Citizen in July of '85. That was after six years of being here and so on. So then I made him the visa. That was how strict it was, the immigration. He didn't, well then the kids after ten years they started to go to college there and he told me, "I think I'm going to lose my visa." I asked him why? He said, "You know Chris, he is in college and so on, and I don't want him to exchange him boom just like that the schooling." I told him "It is up to you, it is your thing that you have to think about it."

Well then they never came. They came to visit and so on, but from immigration that's how it was. It was really strict with Malta, and I don't know why with the Maltese. It was just a few of them going, it was not like it was before World War II. After that then a lot of people immigrated.

M: How much English did, let's start with your dad, but your dad or you know before you came?

E: Well my dad knew less English than me, because like I said he was a farmer you know. I think schooling it was not too much [too important] for him. He didn't have that good education. You know for me, I knew that education was good but I didn't go neither. In Malta, they teach you English; English is the second language. So Maltese first and English second and then if you start going after high school, even in the stage under six, grade six, they start teaching you other languages if you want. They was

teaching us Italian too in school. We read English, and Maltese, those are the two languages that they taught us in, in school.

M: So when you came did you feel comfortable...?

E: With the language?

M: First the language, and then overall?

E: Well....not really, first of all I was not comfortable with the snow first of all. It was 36 inches of snow in front of the house, I thought oh my god! What did I did?? But after a while you know you start to feel like home. I missed my friends in there and so on.

M: What did you do for work in Malta before you came?

E: In Malta, I worked lots of different jobs. My first one was in a grocery store. I was in a grocery store and cut the meat, sliced ham and stuff like that. Stayed maybe, maybe a year. I was really young, I still was going to school at that time. After that, I still was going to school and I went to work as a panel beater, you know? That means...panel beater, that's what they call a panel beater or fixing cars.

M: Mechanic?

E: Not Mechanic no, like body shop. Here they call it body shop, there they call it panel beater. They call it that because its an English version because you are going to beat the panels [of the car] so they call it panel beater. So I used to work for that. While in school, the trade that they gave us was carpentry so I have lots of knowledge of that, of carpentry. I went with a carpenter after I went out from school and I worked about maybe, a year with him and we had the feast of St. Helen coming and I told him, "Tomorrow I'm not going to come. It is the patron Saint and so on." So he told me, "If you don't come then you are going to be fired." And I told him, "Ok, then I'm going to be fired."

I went to work after that and he told me, so I left. Then he called me, not called, he saw me passing by and told me, "I want you to come back" I said, no I'm not coming back," so I didn't go to work with him.

Well, my skilled trade...I worked as a masonry too in plastering you know? I was working for this guy, Charlie Changura (?) and he told me, "Do you want to start working in this factory that we are doing? Because I don't have that much work" So I said "yeah, ok."

They were doing ceramic tiles that was what the factory was going to be. So I build them these wells. I made the pattern of the wood for the framing and then I put the concrete and everything in there and fix it up for them. Then they hired me, they knew that I was skilled and so on. And I start working in there, and we...I didn't know about it, they didn't make the system the right way for the drainage of the water. So then the neighbors they start receiving water, so they stopped them and closed them. They closed them out so I was out from that job.

Then I had a friend of mine, and he told me, "Why don't you come work with us?" I said, "Where?" He said "We are working at the Hilton Hotel right now." And this was the funny part about it...

I said "Okay, I'll come and do an application there." So I went there and did an application, and he asked me, "What did you do?"

I said, "I worked as an electrician"

He told me, "Do you have a license?"

I told him, "No, but next week I'm going to have it." I remember I was still about 17, something like that, going to 18. Then at 18 you get the license, the driving license, but he was asking for the electrical. I told him, I am going to get it next week.

He said, "Oh, you are? Are you going to school?"

I said, "No, I'm not going to school for it."

He said, "What do you mean? You have to go to school to get the license!"

I said, "No, it's in Valletta by Floriana. They give you the test there and if you pass they give you the license!"

He said, "I'm not talking about the driving license!"

I said, "What license are you even talking about?" I didn't know that there was something like an electrical license.

He told me, "I thought you said you were an electrician?"

I said "Yes I did," I used to cut the trenches to put the conduit in and then they hid it. There was a house we built, and worked in it, and then my boss he told him would you please help him cut the trenches? So I learned by looking at him, so I was learning how to bend the conduit and everything from him. So I said "Yea I do conduit," to the Mr. LaFranco, the guy that was interviewing me. Well, he told me if you want to work then you know we are going to send you with another supervisor and if you want to work you can go tomorrow.

I said, "Okay what about the wages, how much is it?"

He said a pound and a half a week. I said, "WHAT? A pound and a half, no way. I'm make six pounds a week right now." Well he told me, that is what it is.

I said, "Ok, well thank you very much good bye."

So I was going down the stairways and this was with Mamo Brothers, the company. He was a car salesman and I was going down and there was the driver of Mr. Mamo and he told me "Young Man!" He tapped me, his name was Savor, he told me, "Did you get the job?"

I told him heck no he wanted to give me a pound and a half. He said, "Young man, he tapped me on my shoulder. Don't you think it is better a pound and a half in your pocket instead of an empty pocket?"

And I said you are right. He said, "Why don't you go back upstairs."

So I went upstairs, knocked on the door at his office. "Oh you came back!" I said, "Yes Mr. LaFranco, I need the money, I need to support my mom, It is better I stay and give my money to her and I will stay with a few."

He told me, "I tell you what. If we find you are good, we will give you a raise after a month. How does that sound? We will give you a half a pound raise." So I said okay, and I went to work there. At that time, that was 1967. They were building it there, when I saw it I thought oh my god, I'm going to get lost in here.

I went there and they told me to go to the office down there, and I went there and found Mr. Joseph Camilleri, who was the foreman down there. I told him my name and this and he told me, "Ok, so he said, you do electrical eh?" I said yes. And he, well he send me with a supervisor, his name was Lolli, too, Lolli Gatt. I went with him and I told Lolli, what do you want me to do? He told me, see all these rooms we need to wire them. Some of them they were ready for electrical some of them were not. It was huge. It was HUGE. It was like here to this building. I don't know if you've ever seen it. It was like two wings, and the middle was a kitchen and bar room, and stuff like that, huge. Then over the water, there was the swimming pool and stuff like that.

So I went in there and I said "Lolli, I have....I have to discuss somethings with you."

He told me what? I said, "I don't know nothing about the electrical."

He said...What? And he knew. He knew about it too, because my friends they were friends with him too, and they told him man he don't know nothing. He told me, you "I'm gonna tell."

I said, "NO please don't tell Joe, don't tell Joe. I will do the trench just for you."

I didn't tell him that I knew how to bend the conduit, you know. And...they didn't know neither, my friends, that I knew how to bend the conduit, so we start laughing and so on. He told me, "Its ok. You don't touch nothing in the trenches, we have labor for that to do that." So he told me, "Let me show you how we do this." I didn't tell him nothing, that I knew how to do it. He told me, "Holy MOLY!" He said, "You bending them like, eh, like you knew!"

I said, "I told you, I was an electrician!"

Then I start working, the foreman liked me. Within, not within one month, within two weeks they gave me another half a pound raise and then within a month I was getting three and a half pounds.

*Asking about his mothers works.*

E: She worked as a seamstress, but on her own you know. They used to come, the ladies, to her and at that time, they would say things like "Could you please fit me a dress, and so on." She used to make some money like that.

M: Was it your father supporting you?

E: Yea, it was my dad.

M: Did she make lace?

E: No, my grandma. I believe she knew, I believe she knew how to do it. But Grandma, I used to remember her doing the lace you know? She, that was all girls just one boy and she taught them how to do the clothing and stuff like that. She had a small shop you know selling yarn and drapes and so on. She made, grandma, made more money at that time. Her husband, my Nannu, was a soldier, a sergeant soldier in the war and so he was making money from that and it was good money for the time. So he started

investing in property and he bought about 14-15 properties, we still have 2 properties from them in Malta. They are not that big but you know, its ok.

M: Your family likes to invest in property huh?

E: Yea, my dad when he came (To the United States) that is what he did. My dad he was always on the side of the business, he was a butcher, but he was a business minded guy. With the livestock and he buys and trades to make the money and so on.

M: So the last question for today. Was there ever a moment that you felt more American than Maltese, or that you are both, or do you still feel like you are Maltese?

E: Well...it's...it's a little bit of a hard question. The way I see it, I spend 27 years in Malta. Now, I spend more years in the United States, it's going to be close to 39 years I believe, or...I think 38 or 39 years. So I feel like I'm more Americanized than Maltese but Maltese, Malta, is still in my heart. I became a US citizen but I still kept the Maltese citizenship too.

M: I asked Sam that last night, and you can probably guess the answer.

E: His answer was Maltese

M: Oh yea, it is an interesting question.

E: He is more fanatical I believe you know, than me. I love Malta. I want to go, go and live there. Because I love sports, I love soccer, I could go relax, watch soccer and I love horses. Those are my number 1 sports. I could go to the race track there. I like swimming in the summer, and I like a little bit of drink. I believe I would enjoy it.