

Mr. Jean-Claude Morel is perhaps the most experienced person I have ever met, given his long carrier in the transport and logistics business, which he led successfully in parallel to many other activities such as teaching, filmography, and photography. His involvement in the early days of containerization in Europe makes him a living memory of the time, as the container had been for him both a professional and personal adventure. He very kindly accepted to share with me and with PORTUS readers his memories, in his nicely decorated apartment of Rouen where his wife and himself welcomed me with the finest apple juice, made in Belgium.

This story then starts in 1965, which you are about to read. But the story of this interview started in early 2015, when Mr. Morel, who was then my landlord coming for the checking out of my former house in the same city of Rouen, claimed to be “the man who introduced the container in Europe”. I could barely believe such a thing but after a few minutes, it appeared so clear to me that we were already going “beyond the landlord”, to quote the very nice concept of Dr. Larissa van der Lugt (Erasmus University Rotterdam). Now the floor is his, and the story begins.

César Ducruet

Vitry-sur-Seine, 16th March 2015

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César Ducruet – Mr. Morel, what is your professional background and what brought you to the container business?

Jean Claude Morel – After finishing my Law and Economy studies in Morocco in the early 1960s, I had the project to work in maritime-related expertise. I first worked under the direction of my father in Casablanca, Morocco, where he was the manager of seven to eight companies (e.g. Sogema, Saget, Kirkegaard, Satcoma, Delmas, Mory) and represented the interests of many shipping lines. He often gave me advices on where to find the best opportunities. Since my childhood I could not avoid hearing about the sea and maritime affairs. In Morocco my father very frequently was receiving shipping line managers, giving me the opportunity to exert several training experiences, such as in the companies Keller Line (Switzerland), being very curious at the time about the possibility for Switzerland to have a merchant marine, and with Guido Grimaldi, who was launching a line with Morocco. Grimaldi was bringing many travel and news agents to Morocco at this occasion so that I

was already asked to organize meetings with Moroccan authorities for about 50 people to support this project.

It must be noted that my father had very important responsibilities in the reconstruction of the ports of Rouen and Le Havre. Being active in the resistance network during the war, he even was there to welcome the General de Gaulle in Rouen at his coming back. For instance in 1944, my father, with the support of Max Canu [1], president of the Chamber of Discipline, gave strong support to the landing of U.S. troops at the port de Rouen by hiring about 1,500 people locally. From a logistics point of view, it was imperative to free the port from German military materials to allow this landing, the port having become out of order after the destructive bombings. After my father passed away, several large enterprises in stevedoring and shipping told me how silent he had been about all these operations despite their strategic importance.

In 1965 I arrived in Antwerp, Belgium, and still thanks to my father's contact and network I started an internship at Furnes Shipping [2]. Back to France in 1968, I worked at the logistics company SATCO, created by my father, who was still in Morocco, and operated as liner agent for Finnska Line, especially developing new activities in the Indian Ocean with the shipping of 9 cubic feet boxes. Worms was one of their stakeholders and I was responsible for developing the commercial aspects of the company. I also worked at the Ocean Group, and later for the SCAC and their profit centre in Paris, also looking at commercial activities and the airline business. I taught course modules on transport, logistics, warehousing and packaging during 25 years as a consular teacher, and also at the Institut de Formation International (IFI) and the Institut Supérieur de Préparation Professionnelle (ISPP) both located in the Rouen Business School (NEOMA), at the Le Havre Technical College (IUT) during 15 years, the ASLOG (Association Française pour la Logistique), the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers (CNAM) in Paris, Interfor in Amiens... During my career and after I had a very intense filmography activity, making and collecting hundreds of photographs and documentaries of ports, terminals, and warehouses, sometimes on-demand such as for the Institute of International Transport Law in Rouen (IDIT). I was even the proponent of an emerging logistics cluster in the Normandy region to bring together all the port, transport, and logistics actors for educational and research-development purposes, but this never took off (Actipôle).

César Ducruet – Your career in Antwerp coincides with the eve of containerization in Europe: can you describe your action to welcome this innovation?

Jean Claude Morel – There were no well-defined directives for my new mission in Antwerp. My participation to this innovation stems from both a coincidence and an opportunity. But if nowadays a clear line can divide “before” and “after” the container, this was not the case back in 1965, even in Antwerp. The context was then favourable to novel ideas and the development of new maritime services between Europe and North and West Africa for instance. Another key aspect of the early days of containerization, barely known, is that maritime shipping companies in Europe were very sensitive to the U.S. projects of transporting military stuff and wartime food products during wartime. Such a transport only occurred using wooden boxes, with the advantage of being reusable after delivery, but with also many disadvantages, such as fragility, so that the U.S. had in mind to find a better solution.

This booming period was reflected in the intense activity of Furnes Shipping, which represented about 20-30 shipping agents. Mr. Jean Wauters, then the general manager, was a dynamic and skilled person; he was continuously expanding the global portfolio of the company through travels overseas, meetings, for many clients on the East-West routes and major markets. The contacts of my father in Holland with the Van Uden Company surely increased my chances as a young French man to be accepted in such a professional environment. I then got the task to develop the commercial activity of this company, well beyond the role of a simple internship. I had never heard about the container but had a rather solid knowledge of maritime life already.

One key happening soon gave me even more responsibilities. Furnes Shipping became accredited as representative of the company Sealand, which just had been famous in the U.S. with the shipping of 30-feet containers by sea (cf. the Malcolm Mc Lean adventure). Sealand was then planning to launch a container line with Rotterdam, as the European port system was already dominated by Antwerp and Rotterdam. Furnes Shipping was a logical choice for Sealand’s representation given its fame and efficiency. The new mission of my company was to motivate the Antwerp port community and beyond to use the container, that maritime transport “could” use containers, and advertise the advantages of the box towards local businessmen.

The mailing was ensured by the commercial department of Furnes, but one idea emerged that was to do more advertising by participating in large-scale sport fairs, such as the famous European jumping of horse racing where world champions were coming. My own mission was to contact no less than a hundred of companies, with an introduction note in my hand from Mr. Wauters, and an assistant to collect all the names of famous people and organisations who showed an interest in the container and to whom we had to give a leaflet of our company with some pictures of the U.S. project for the new container service. This public relations function had nothing to do with nowadays practice! Our document contained all the modalities on how to adopt the innovation. It was destined mostly to shippers (importers), and as general manager, Mr. Wauters himself was doing the advertisement towards the shipping and stevedoring companies, as this was more of his responsibility. We also participated regularly to cocktail parties, almost every day, and each time we were spreading the word, collecting addresses and names. Soon I had a private car with driver [3].



The first ever containership entering the Port of Le Havre in 1966. (© Grand Port Maritime du Havre - Pôle Logistique Documentaire)

César Ducruet - How did you manage to convince the port community? Were there facilitators, obstacles to the adoption of containers? Was the trend identical in Belgium and France?

Jean Claude Morel - We advertised the container as a module detached from the ship to be used by clients for their own business. People often were looking at us strangely,

sometimes asking whether they would receive a boat in their plant. Our message was not always understood. Of course gradually businessmen could appreciate the advantages of containers in terms of cargo security and packaging. One recurrent question was still: why do we need to package the goods if we put freight in containers? Because companies were not that close to the port area, packaging was still important, for instance for the group *Merlin Gérin* with whom I was working, situated hundreds of kilometres from the port. Everything depended on the distance between the port and the final destination customers. Many transfers from one mode to the other still forced companies to use packaging [\[4\]](#).

One crucial factor had been the favourable business climate of the time, supportive of technical progress, which was necessary to modernise the old school handling business. Another crucial factor was to take into account the road access of port areas. French port terminals had enormous problems due to single road access for trucks and cargo picking, whereas in Antwerp, each terminal already was planned with multiple entrances. This already motivated truck drivers choosing Antwerp instead of Le Havre for instance, to avoid congestion and delays. The parallel development of computers and information technologies has also been crucial, as the box is not an isolated entity but a traceable item. One obstacle was that many stevedoring and cargo handling companies, especially the smaller ones, did not have the critical mind and size to modernize, to invest or to plan a merger with others. So they were less able to tackle new problems emerging from the new technology over time, remaining in the old system, more and more outdated.

Of foremost importance has been the political support to the development of containerization. This was particularly the case for preparing the multiple entrance system of port terminals. A lot of money was invested by the political world in new infrastructures, such as terminals, cranes, etc. in Antwerp, where one same ship could benefit from 2-3 cranes against only one in France, thus speeding up productivity. France was already very late to adopt containerization in the late 1960s and did not much contribute to improve the existing platforms.

In terms of labour relations, Belgian dockworkers happened to be a very flexible, multi-activity population, so that any of them facing physical burdens could be shifted to a less tiring task based on the system of black and red tickets and a kind of passport internal to the port. This did not avoid the existence of labour unions in Antwerp, of which a Christian

one. In France the situation was catastrophic, as dockworkers were the masters of the game, almighty in their decisions, able to assemble the whole population of the docks rapidly to strike and block port operations, inside or outside port areas. The political world did not much react to such a state of affairs, so one could even talk about the sacrifice of France's past glorious maritime activity. Shipping lines soon started to shift their activity to Antwerp to avoid cost and time (almost a black-out) and despite a much more favourable transit time in Le Havre port to access the European market, as it took one more sailing day to reach Antwerp or Rotterdam, and it is still the case nowadays. Also, Le Havre did not have sufficient water draught to welcome the new large ships.

Last but not least, the team of Furnes Shipping was composed of 10-12 managers with lots of contacts abroad. France then did barely speak English, or too little, so that the French port community could not compete in terms of norms, impacts, knowledge, of the global maritime world. In 1967 already, strong interests for containerization were felt in Antwerp. This process had been slow and fast at the same time. A "container family" was then emerging, connecting even more shipping lines with shippers and forwarders. Another problem in France had been the transport contract complexity. Shipping lines were approaching importers to make them sign routing orders, and already could select their ports of call based on their own requirements. On certain routes it was not so easy to organize the transport chain. For instance with French Guyana, exporters with about 300 kilograms of cargo should be consolidated with others before being stuffed in containers on the same voyage, which modified the whole shipping culture. Dates of departure and arrival were fixed, with about 8 days to prepare one voyage, notwithstanding issues related to customs, etc. On these aspects, the port of Rouen was the first one in France to create a single shipping document (*Ordre de Mouvement*), and then followed by Dunkirk and other ports. It was absurd to have a growing efficiency on the sea leg and to lose so much time inland for delivery and pick up. But Antwerp long ago already adopted simplified administrative procedures. Still, it was relatively frequent to see in Antwerp containers coming from Marseilles by train for being exported to the rest of the world. The problem of French freight forwarders was the impossibility to offer a round trip with full containers, compared with the Belgian forwarders, so that their prices were far more competitive.

As a result, Mr. Jean Wauters one day told me that when foreign companies needed efficient port agents, because we are a renowned company and attract many lines for their representation, due to our outstanding reputation and know-how, we are the ones to

recommend them which company in France they should contact for their business. Antwerp was (and is still) not only a main port for French trade but the focal point for many decisions regarding French logistics in general, due to its pivotal intermediary role with the outside world. According to Mr. Jean Wauters, “you in France to only micro-economy, but we in Antwerp have contacts with the whole world, we are recognized”. Conversely, the French Chamber of Commerce and the Port of Le Havre often asked me contacts in Belgium and Holland due my ties with Furnes and the port community there.

On the personal side, my own family had long ago developed very close relationships with the Mayor of Antwerp, Mr. Léo Delwaide, whose daughter Floreta was close friend of my wife; they were living in the house in front of ours, and Floreta was present at our wedding. Due to these links I never had problems to find contacts in Antwerp and Rotterdam for my students, later on, when organizing field trips to the port areas; we were received with champagne and private boats, I think my students still remember those times. Mr. Wauters also told me someday that labour unions were killing French ports, although it is not something so true nowadays but it was at the time. My own movies of certain events involving the *Union Industrielle et Maritime* (UIM) were long forbidden to the public, showing dockworkers asleep or playing cards, in a bad mood, along quays with ships standing still. Mr. Jamotte, director of the *Lloyd’s Anversois* [5], told me one day during an evening reception that labour problems in French ports are very beneficial to their own business in Belgium, but the day when these problems should stop, the Antwerp community shall fear important modifications of the entire business. Hearing this from such a top authority was quite meaningful. Lastly, Mrs. Delwaide herself also told me during a family meeting that during labour movements in Antwerp, especially serious ones, her husband in person, Mr. Delwaide, was discussing with the workers’ delegates and very quickly everybody was back to work. Note that the Dutch on their side were the only ones to launch a school of stevedoring. Still in France, dockworkers were more efficient than in Belgium or Holland in many aspects, especially in terms of the quality and efficiency of their work. The profit-oriented and short-term philosophy of the Antwerp community was sometimes reaching aberrant situations, with trucks filled to the maximum with parcels for delivery, to such a level that they were about to explode at the customers’ door. I had such a feeling when visiting the warehouses of ECU Line in Belgium, asking my students to carefully stay close in order to avoid accidents. But still in ECU Line, dockworkers did not wait for repair companies to help when their engine broke down on the way between two terminals; they actually did the repair themselves, something which almost never happened in France, unfortunately.

César Ducruet – You had an intense activity of filmography and photography, is your collection accessible to the public?

Jean Claude Morel – Yes of course, I would like to share my field observations with anyone interested, such as students and experts. My collection of pictures and movie documentaries were taken in all European ports over the period 1990-2010 and cover all aspects of port operations, all types of container ships, etc. with about 300-400 photographs and slides. I also would be glad to share my course modules, such as on packaging, security accessories, i.e. very detailed aspects of daily transport and logistics operations. All of this is the fruit of my long-term lecturing activity during which I travelled to so many ports with my students to show them the practical side of things.

Rouen, France, 10th March 2015

(Transcription and translation by César Ducruet)

Notes

[1] Mr. Canu is the author of a book about the port of Rouen in 1959, and a report in 1932 to the Rouen Chamber of Commerce.

[2] Established in 1912, the company is now named Newman and Co. A short history is available on their website: <https://www.newman.be/?q=history>

[3] But one day as I was circulating with my own 2-CV car, without the driver of the company, it broke down in front of the French embassy in Brussels. After an unsuccessful repair, I had my hands covered in black and hid the car between two Cadillac, entered with the invitation flyer, and was wrongly announced to the nicely dressed crowd by Mrs. Delville “Mr. and Mrs. Jean Wauters”. People approached me and told me softly in the ear that they could not recognize Mr. Wauters; I then asked for the lavatories to be at least properly hands clean.

[4] I also had the opportunity to film a documentary in Niggers Point, Southern Africa, where one of the biggest French sinister

occurred for a barge, which had sunk, involving up to 40 insurance companies.

[5] The oldest Belgian newspaper started in 1859 but ceased in March 2011. For more information (in French) see:

<https://www.francophonie.be/upfb/main/fr/pgartfr/art245fr.html>

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