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Article

MEMORIES OF ROLLEI SINGAPORE

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Introduction

Although its heyday was in the 1970s and over 30 years have passed since it wound down in 1981, Rollei Singapore remains what historian Raphael Samuel termed a ‘theatre of memory’ among older Singaporeans. Samuel viewed history as ‘a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands’.¹ A theatre of memory encompasses a broad inquiry into areas of little interest to many historians, including heritage, memory and nostalgia.

Rollei Singapore is a theatre of memory — a long-defunct place which remains close to the hearts of older Singaporeans. In August 2017, Loh Kah Seng posted in two Facebook groups on Singapore nostalgia a short note and photograph of the main factory of the renowned German camera-maker at Kampong Chai Chee.² Industrial memory is infrequently encountered on Facebook but there were numerous responses to the Rollei post. These fell into two groups: someone had worked for the company or owned its ‘Made in Singapore’ cameras, such as the popular miniature Rollei 35.³

The idea of a ‘theatre of memory’ fleshes out Rollei Singapore, and by extension Singapore’s industrial heritage, as a site of dramatic and richly-textured memories.

This article draws upon Loh’s oral history interviews with several ex-Rollei employees, and a public oral history sharing session by three ex-Rolleians titled, ‘Memories of Rollei Singapore’, at the National Museum of Singapore in April 2018, which Loh facilitated.



(From left) Mr. Lim, Mr. Chong and Mr. Kamarudin at the ‘Memories of Rollei Singapore’ sharing session. Photograph: Loh Kah Seng.



Rollei Optical factory at Indus Road. Source: Rollei, International Rollei Press Conference and ISEAS Seminar in Singapore, March 19-24, 1973.

Rollei in Singapore

Rollei’s decision to relocate to Singapore in 1971 appeared typical of multinationals at the time: it was beset by high labor costs in Europe while Singapore offered affordable workers, good factory sites and tax

¹ Samuel, Raphael 1994, *Theatres of memory: past and present in contemporary culture*, Verso, London, p. 6.

² This was part of a heritage research project led by Loh Kah Seng and supported by the National Heritage Board titled, ‘Theatres of history and memory: industrial heritage in 20th century Singapore’.

³ On a little street in Singapore, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/183252211695508/permalink/1510221705665212/>, Nostalgic Singapore, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/48000673979/permalink/10155637687823980/>

holidays.⁴ Its arrival was hailed in the local press as a 'big leap forward' for Singapore to become a modern precision engineering center.⁵ Rollei Singapore operated factories at Kampong Chai Chee (the main plant), Indus Road, Alexandra, Kallang, and Benoi Road — all of which except the last were located near residential areas. The factories made cameras, notably the Rollei 35 and Rolleiflex SL35, lenses and shutters, cine-projectors, and flashlights. It employed a thousand workers in 1972, which rose to 4,700 by the time it closed down.

Rollei Singapore was keenly followed by the press, through which the company announced substantial sums of investment, production targets, turnover, and (more ominously) training costs.⁶ Much of its social memory today is shaped by its image and symbol as an industrial spectacle in 1970s Singapore. The first few years told a narrative of expansion; subsequent developments were, however, more difficult.

The global oil shocks of 1973 and resulting recession forced the company into 'consolidation' and brought fears of major retrenchment, though this did not materialize.⁷ A new chairman, Peter Peperzak, admitted issues with marketing and sales.⁸ A *Straits Times* report on 2 October 1975 painted the picture of a company fighting for survival, beset by the competition from Japanese single-lens reflex cameras and high costs of training

Singaporean technicians.⁹ Peperzak predicted the company's recovery in 1977,¹⁰ while press reports two years later alluded to new product lines. But the narrative turned increasingly constrained in the final years, with news of further changes in leadership, sales policy, and an unexplained drive to improve teamwork in the factory.¹¹

Rollei Braunschweig went bankrupt in June 1981, and the Singapore operation soon followed suit. The company attributed the failure to three factors: the Japanese cameras driving down demand for Rollei's products, the strength of the Singapore dollar which made the parent company pay more for its subsidiary's products, costing a loss in foreign exchange of \$1 million a month, and the rise in interest rates worldwide.¹² Notably, though, the last two issues, or the cost of training Singaporeans, would not have been factors without the first.

The retrenchment axe arrived for over 4,000 employees in Singapore, while its factories and machinery were auctioned off and sold. Soul-searching was called for; a *Straits Times* article underlined the need to adapt any product to world demand, irrespective of its brand or production technology.¹³ Another article suggested that the training of locals in precision engineering was a decent trade-off for Singapore.¹⁴

In the second volume of his memoirs, the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, who was Prime Minister of Singapore at the time, told his side of the

⁴ 'Rollei will invest \$40 m to build three new factories in S'pore' 1971, *The Straits Times*, February 19.

⁵ 'Precision industry's big leap forward' 1971, *The Straits Times*, March 21.

⁶ 'Rollei to go public next year' 1972, *The Straits Times*, November 17.

⁷ 'Rollei acts to avoid layoffs' 1974, *The Straits Times*, November 17.

⁸ 'Rollei store's big boost' 1975, *The Straits Times*, July 15.

⁹ 'Rollei tries out a strategy for success' 1975, *The Straits Times*, October 2.

¹⁰ 'Rollei well on its way to recovery' 1976, *The Straits Times*, September 11.

¹¹ 'Rollei plans to double production at S'pore plant' 1981, *The Straits Times*, May 23.

¹² 'Everything rests on finding new markets' 1981, *The Straits Times*, June 27.

¹³ 'What we can learn from Rollei' 1981, *The Straits Times*, July 5.

¹⁴ 'A survival plan that failed to save Rollei' 1981, *The Straits Times*, November 26.

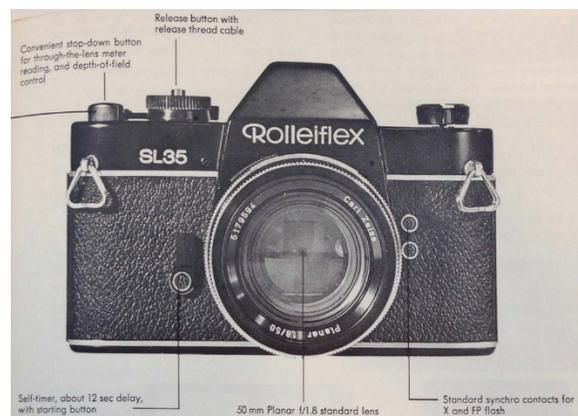
Rollei story. He attributed the company's failure to shifts in technology and markets within the industry and to its inability to coordinate its research and production in two different countries. The failure was not due, he emphasized, to the Singaporeans Rollei had trained, as many European investors alleged at the time. Quite the contrary, as Lee pointed out, 'One consolation was that the 4,000 workers trained in precision engineering became a valuable base for the disk drive industry that arrived in Singapore in the 1980s'.¹⁵

Lee's reflections form a positive interpretation of history: despite Rollei's failure, Singapore benefited from the collaboration. He situated Rollei within the narrative of Singapore's transition to a technology-intensive and skills-based economy in the 1980s.

Skills transfer was in the government's mind from the start. Speaking at the official opening of the Rollei factory at Alexandra in 1971, Minister for Finance Hon Sui Sen urged young people to take up a career in precision engineering. This was an industry which depended on product design and development, and the skill and productivity of workers.¹⁶ Two years later, Rollei and the government jointly established the Rollei-Government Training Centre to train locals in precision mechanics and optics, and tool and die-making.



Mr. Chong's Rollei 35. Photograph: Courtesy of Juria Toramae.



Rolleiflex SL35. From Rollei News, Vol.1, Nos. 1-2, 1975. (PublicationSG)

¹⁵ Lee, Kuan Yew 2000, *From Third World to First: the Singapore Story 1965-2000: memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, Singapore Press Holdings: Times Editions, Singapore.

¹⁶ 'Precision industry's big leap forward' 1971, *The Straits Times*, March 21.

Memories of Deindustrialization

Lee Kuan Yew recalled the past as a political leader, but if we consider oral histories of deindustrialization in Western contexts, former workers of small industrial towns have remembered similar events in diverse ways. Although Singapore has not experienced deindustrialization, arguably the closure of industries or their relocation elsewhere due to market or policy changes was a similar type of experience for workers.

Deindustrialization was a difficult experience, especially in small towns where industries provided work to locals and forged a strong community. In Beverley, East Yorkshire, England, the growth of manufacturing after the Second World War kept young people in the town to work, while the industries also built sports and social amenities which locals used. Deindustrialization had an adverse impact on the community of Beverley.¹⁷

Similarly, in Sturgeon Falls, a milling town of 6,000 people in Canada, the mill was a major source of jobs, providing stable employment for local families. When it closed in 2002, it precipitated widespread anxiety about having to travel long distances to work. Just as 'everybody knew everybody' was a common frame of reference in people's memories of the mill, its closure brought about a rupture in the social fabric of Sturgeon Falls.¹⁸

However, memories of deindustrialization can also be more optimistic. Long-time

residents of the industrial town of Castleford, Yorkshire, England, spoke positively about pride, gratitude and hope in remembering their jobs. Such 'progressive nostalgia', while not ignoring the difficult aspects of industrial work, was imaginative and oriented towards a better future.¹⁹

In Point Saint-Charles District in Montreal, Canada, nostalgia has become a defence mechanism against socio-economic disruption. It was fondly remembered by long-time residents; as one person warmly recalled the change in shift, "it was black with people in the streets." Their tough manual jobs were proudly recalled by many residents, who were unhappy with the gentrification of the neighborhood and influx of middle-class families.²⁰

These reminiscences illustrate the nature of oral history. As oral historian Alessandro Portelli found in his study of Terni, a steel town in Italy, oral histories of the working class should not be read for their veracity alone. It is rather their inherent subjectivity and emotion that make them interesting. Workers' oral histories express 'judgment, dream, desire' to an external audience and are thus public and creative narratives.²¹

This was also the case with our interviews with ex-Rolleians and their sharing at 'Memories of Rollei Singapore'. As a historian, Loh Kah Seng posed questions and facilitated the sharing, but it was the interviewees who decided what they said, how to say it, and whom they said it to. They

¹⁷ Ramsden, Stefan 2016, 'The role of the industrial workplace in working-class community, 1945-1980', *Family & community history*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 34-49.

¹⁸ High, Steven 2015, "'They were making good money, just ten minutes from home': proximity and distance in the plant shutdown stories of northern Ontario mill workers", *labour/le Travail*, vol. 76, pp. 11-36.

¹⁹ Smith, Laurajane & Gary Campbell 2017, 'Nostalgia for the future: memory, nostalgia and the politics of class',

International journal of heritage studies vol. 23, no. 7, pp. 612-627.

²⁰ Chatterjee, Piyusha & Steven High 2017, 'The deindustrialization of our senses: residual and dominant soundscapes in Montreal's Point Saint-Charles district' in Katie Holmes & Heather Goodall, (eds), *Telling environmental histories*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

²¹ Portelli, Alessandro 2014, *Biography of an industrial town: Terni, Italy, 1831-2014*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

were not merely recounting the history of Rollei, but interpreting its memory and meaning to a wider audience.

Training in Germany

The oral histories of the ex-Rolleians can be divided into three chronological frames: initial departure of technicians for training in Germany, work and play in Rollei Singapore and closure of the factory. The technicians recalled training in Germany as a milestone event for themselves and Singapore.

One such trainee, Chong Nam Soy, joined Rollei Singapore as a production technician in December 1971 upon graduating from Singapore Polytechnic. He was part of a group of Singaporeans who spent seven months at the headquarters of Rollei-Werke in Braunschweig and at a camera shutter plant in Calmbach in the Black Forest. Chong returned to set up a shutter production line in Singapore, supervising a group of female production workers.

For Chong, the German stint was not merely a prelude to his work at Rollei Singapore but an important part of his life story. Although he took photographs of the trainees outside their training – including their trips to the Black Forest – the training experience was the most formative. The idea of being a pioneer was central to his narrative: he was among the early trainees (though not of the first group) who went to Germany. He also viewed Rollei as Singapore's first multinational, vertically integrated to make an entire product from start to finish locally.

The other significance of the Rollei experience for Chong concerned productivity — one of the major official themes in Singapore's industrialization, as Hon Sui Sen had emphasized.²² Most of the production workers in Germany were Yugoslav women while some were physically-challenged war veterans (possibly a cost-cutting measure). Chong found them to be disciplined, unquestioningly obeying their supervisors and taking immense pride in their work. In Germany, he learnt about the importance of nimble hands and productive work.²³ At the sharing, he highlighted industrial values such as discipline, punctuality and pride.

The recollections of Mr. Lim Hong Hin, a technician from the pioneer batch of trainees, were however more offbeat and independent of the Singapore Story. He joked about taking a flight to Germany as soon as 'the next morning', and when Rollei wanted to extend his training, he rejected it for his wife in Singapore wanted him to return home! Both Lim and Chong agreed on the intense training in Germany and having to meet production targets. Both also remembered the food — Chong missed having rice in Germany, while Lim found that the locals drank coffee without milk. But Lim went a little further, recalling how some trainees were caught using the Singapore 20 cent coin, which was similar in size to the Deutsche Mark \$1 coin, to buy beer.²⁴

²² Economic Development Board 1965–1968, *Annual report*, Economic Development Board, Singapore.

²³ Loh Kah Seng's interview with Chong Nam Soy, August 10, 2017; Chong Nam Soy at the 'Memories of Rollei

Singapore' sharing session, National Museum of Singapore and Singapore Heritage Festival April 14, 2018.

²⁴ Loh Kah Seng's interview with Chong Nam Soy, August 10, 2017; Lim Hong Hin at 'Memories of Rollei Singapore'.



Rollei headquarters in Braunschweig, Germany. Photograph: Courtesy of Mr. Chong Nam Soy.



Training in Germany. Photograph: Courtesy of Mr. Chong Nam Soy.

Work and Play at Rollei Singapore

Returning to Singapore, Mr. Chong implemented what he had learnt. He had no problem setting up the shutter production line. His real difficulty was in supervising the ‘girls’ — the young female production workers who were mostly recent school-leavers. While his assessment was generally balanced, he found them frustrating at times. They learnt quickly but were not disciplined — they ‘can’t compare with the Germans’, he said.²⁵

At the sharing session, Chong remarked how challenging it was for a young man like him to ‘take care’ of the girls, drawing laughter from the audience. It was not a question of age, though the women workers in Germany were middle-aged. The real issue was discipline, for ‘when they worked, they didn’t talk so much, and even if they talked, they would talk softly and they did not turn their heads to talk’. But the Singaporeans, energetic and talkative, stopped work when they talked.²⁶

Mr. Chee Chin Seong was a technician who was on the same plane to Germany as Chong and returned to set up another shutter production line. Some supervisors, he remembered, attempted to enforce National Service-style discipline on the operators, showing the line to be a site of contestation between official and worker notions of productivity.²⁷ The former was important to the company. As Mr. Lim recalled, at his flashlight control department, there were literally ‘4,000 orders’ to meet every night.²⁸

There was, however, another side to history. The oral history of Ms. Maryati, an ex-Rollei operator, stands in productive tension to the memories of the supervisors. She was

²⁵ Loh Kah Seng’s interview with Chong Nam Soy, August 10, 2017.

²⁶ Chong Nam Soy at ‘Memories of Rollei Singapore’.

²⁷ Loh Kah Seng’s interview with Chee Chin Seong, August 10, 2017.

²⁸ Lim Hong Hin at ‘Memories of Rollei Singapore’.

19 years old, having just completed her secondary education, when she applied for a job at the Rollei factory in Chai Chee in 1973. She lived nearby, a short bus ride away, as did many women employed in light industries in the 1970s. Compared to the German-trained technicians, it was a mundane start to working life for Maryati.

As she conceded in her oral history, Maryati was 'playful' when she first started work in the final control department, which conducted quality-checks of the cameras. Discipline at Rollei was strict, and she was sent down to a shutter production line as a result (although she did not know Chong or Chee). She married four years later, after which she became more serious in her work and earned promotion to a lead girl, overseeing a group of 15 operators. In 1979, she was selected to go to Germany for a training course, which she turned down as she was pregnant.

This narrative arc appears to parallel Chong's but has crucial differences. Maryati emphasized that she did not enjoy production work, which she found to be dull. She remained at Rollei (until it closed) only because of her colleagues, who became her close friends. She mentioned a particular Patricia, with whom she has unfortunately lost touch. For Maryati and possibly other 'girls' on the line, social relations underpinned, rather than hampered, productivity.²⁹

At Rollei, Maryati met her future husband Mr. Hassan Abdullah, a security guard. Interviewing them together was fruitful, as they weaved together an oral history account which transcended the accepted conception of work. Hassan had numerous stories of Rollei Singapore, having worked in

the different factories. As Maryati pointed out, while operators knew production, security guards knew the people. Hassan told me about checking employees' bags for items and other interesting incidents in the factories.³⁰ But some of them were personal or sensitive, so the couple asked me not to divulge these stories. This limitation of oral history highlights its nature as a public narrative.

Most other aspects of employment at Rollei Singapore unrelated to production were remembered without issue. At the sharing, Mr. Kamarudin, a member of the planning department, highlighted the role of sports and cross-cultural relations. While, as he said, 'the Germans were very serious, work-wise they were serious', they regarded football to be as important. Kamarudin was a member of his department's football team, which had German players and played hard against teams from other departments of Rollei and other companies. Sports were part of the corporate culture nurtured by big companies in Singapore. But, as Kamarudin related, locals also invited their German colleagues to their homes during Hari Raya.³¹



Ms. Maryati with colleagues at Rollei. Courtesy of Ms. Maryati.

²⁹ Loh Kah Seng's interview with Maryati, August 27, 2017.

³⁰ Loh Kah Seng's interview with Hassan Abdullah, August

27, 2017.

³¹ Kamarudin at 'Memories of Rollei Singapore'.



The 'girls' (and many 'boys') of Rollei Singapore at the Alexandra factory. Photograph: courtesy of Lim Hong Hin.



The Planning Department's football team. Photograph: Courtesy of Mr. Kamarudin.



Singaporean Rollei employees with a German colleague. Photograph: Courtesy of Lim Hong Hin.

Closure and Aftermath

Mr. Chong left Rollei Singapore in 1977 to become a training officer at the German-Singapore Institute of Production Technology and the Brown Boveri-Government Training Centre (successor to the Rollei-Government Training Centre), using his technical knowledge to train skilled workers and craftsmen.³² Of Rollei's closure, he mused, 'I felt sad for Rollei but I didn't feel sad'. The company, he explained, produced many entrepreneurs, sometimes inadvertently: former employees bought standing and moulding machines from Rollei to set up a successful plastic moulding company.³³

His colleague, Mr. Chee, remained with the company till it folded. As he related, it was 'very easy to find a job', almost akin to being jobless for only a day. He became a supervisor at General Electric's factory in Kallang, which made resistors and transistors — quite a change from camera shutters. A year later, he moved to Tandon, where he set up a production line for floppy disks, which heralded the birth of the disk drive industry in Singapore.³⁴ As Chee and Chong pointed out, while the industry might be different, the technical processes were the same.

The experience of abrupt unemployment did not seem to have troubled the other interviewees. Maryati left Rollei when she had a child. Years later, she joined Seagate, another company in the disk drive industry. She worked long hours under strict discipline on the production floor.³⁵ Her husband Hassan, the security guard, remained with Rollei till the end when it sold off its assets. He was not overly worried

³² Loh Kah Seng's interview with Chong Nam Soy, August 10, 2017.

³³ Kamarudin at 'Memories of Rollei Singapore'.

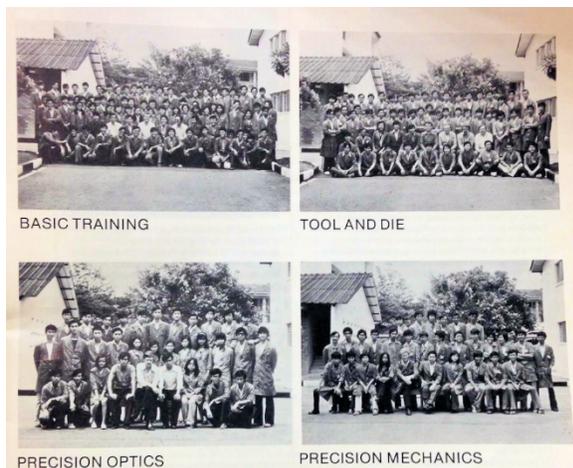
³⁴ Loh Kah Seng's interview with Chee Chin Seong, August 10, 2017.

³⁵ Loh Kah Seng's interview with Maryati, August 27, 2017.

about employment, becoming a delivery driver afterwards.³⁶

Mr. Kamarudin from the Planning Department found a new job at inventory control in Micropolis, another disk drive company; having Rollei on his CV helped, he said. But Kamarudin's oral history also pointed to a different slice of history:

"When we heard that Rollei was in the Court of Liquidation, everyone was shocked. It was announced after lunchtime. Girls were crying."³⁷



Trainees of the Rollei-Government Training Centre in 1975, from Rollei-Government Training Centre, Annual (Singapore: Rollei-Government Training Centre, 1975).



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Auction Notice, from Rollei Singapore ephemera collection of the National Library Board.

Conclusion

Oral history tells us much about history and memory. Three themes in the oral histories of Rollei Singapore stand out. First, like those of deindustrialization elsewhere, the oral histories contain diverse recollections. For the technicians, the opportunity to train abroad was careerdefining. Returning to Singapore, they implemented a demanding work schedule which encountered practices on the factory floor. Chong would likely have found Ms. Maryati's initially unserious, talkative behavior at work annoying, but the social buzz and closeness between female operators, engaged in what was otherwise mundane work, was an important pillar of productivity in the Singapore context.

The second theme is connected to the first: if the work was unremarkable, Rollei Singapore nonetheless formed a vibrant theatre of memory. Maryati's chats and gossip with fellow workers come to mind, but also important was Mr. Hassan, her husband, a key person in the company despite his lowly occupation. He was someone who knew people well and has numerous stories to tell today (though some

³⁶ Loh Kah Seng's interview with Hassan Abdullah, August 27, 2017.

³⁷ Kamarudin at 'Memories of Rollei Singapore'.

he would only do so privately). These small tales of people and incidents may not impinge on the big history of Rollei, but are central to its role as a memory site. The same applies to Mr. Kamarudin's recollections of football and Hari Raya with German colleagues. Such memories of fraternity cultivated a continuing attachment to Rollei Singapore long after the company closed down. We hope Ms. Maryati will find her lost friend, Patricia.

Finally, oral history offers insights into what and how people remember. Singaporeans often tell the history of the nation and the state when they narrate their own stories.³⁸ The ex-Rolleians often returned to the theme of productivity. But our interviewees were also able to convey other narratives of work, friendship, play, and departure; humorously, Mr. Lim subverted our assumptions of how the past would be remembered, much to the joy of the audience at the National Museum. The official and personal stories could largely co-exist. The familiar tropes in the Singapore Story are perhaps not so much boxes into which Singaporeans have to fit their stories, but scaffoldings by which they can find ways to recall their memories alongside the official narrative.

³⁸ Loh, Kah Seng 2013, *Squatters into citizens: the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire and the making of modern Singapore*, NUS Press,

Singapore.