The Aluminium Times profile: Maurizio Sala, President / Fulvio Sala, Chief Executive, Foundry Ecocer and Nuova Protecme S.r.l.

Milan-based Foundry Ecocer S.r.l. and Nuova Protecme S.r.l. hosted Aluminium Times in mid-December 2015 for a special event. Both Mr Maurizio Sala, who is President, and his son Mr Fulvio Sala, the CEO, kindly agreed to be interviewed.

Maurizio Sala, President

Q. For our readers, what is the difference between Protecme and Foundry Ecocer in the marketplace?
A. Today Foundry Ecocer is the holding company, but the name Protecme is important. It is a very old company, which started in 1942, so the history of Protecme is also the history of Foundry Ecocer. The Protecme brand is highly respected and recognised all over the world. Overall we are a very important non-ferrous company in Italy and we believe one of the best in Europe. Our range of products is applicable in areas from smelting operations to high pressure and low pressure die casting and permanent mould casting. We offer all products of the foundry for all types of foundry - not only aluminium, but also brass, magnesium, tin and zinc. For us quality is very, very important, almost more important than profit.

Q. Traditional foundry is sand-moulding and die-casting, but secondary production is now generally an activity within the casthouse. What proportion of your business is in the foundry sector on this basis?
A. There is some confusion in the marketplace here. Smelters make pure aluminium billets, ingots or slabs from aluminium oxide powder. They are more and more situated where the raw material is cheapest. Co-established extrusion and rolling businesses are common. This is all primary activity. As soon as ingots go into a foundry or casthouse, this is termed secondary production. Making parts of a car such as wheels or engines is termed casting, to create a final product. Further, some products are used in both areas, but more or less we have 40 per cent turnover in smelters (primary) and 60 per cent in foundry (secondary).

Q. What is the history of how you joined the company and developed the business? What is the present situation?
A. I was the youngest General Manager of Foseco Italy, Foundry business. Then I began at Protecme in 1985. We later set up Foundry Ecocer. The Group is budgeting for 50 million euros turnover in 2016. The Ossona (Mi) site presently spans 50,000 m² with 20,000 m² covered areas. The Arluno (Mi) plant, 10 km away, measures 5,000 m² with 2,000 m² of installations. Approximately 70 people are employed across the two sites. In the near future we intend to build a new building in Ossona to enable the production of new high-quality products as required by our customers.

Q. What do you find to be the main benefits of being essentially a family-run business? A. It is a family business but the management
team is a very close group, with many long-serving executives. There are also excellent younger members who are well-positioned to continue in the future. Some of them started with me and have been with the business more than twenty years. Looking to the future we have some very young people who might come follow me.

Q. What is your main market strategy and approach?
A. We are market-oriented so we are moving the company services where there are foundries. For example, the European foundries are established but reducing in number and new operations are establishing in the Gulf and Far East areas with cheaper power. Our Head Office is still in Ossona (Milan), but we have established agents in Europe, the Far East, the Gulf, and India. If the market is moving, we are moving with the market to protect our future. For example we are continually working with vehicle manufacturers on new products for new alloys, for example. Also we are very keen on continuous improvement. We offer service, installation and troubleshooting on a continual 24/7 basis.

Q. How international are your operations and which markets are growing?
A. Currently 20 per cent of our turnover is in Italy, and 80 per cent is export. We expect this to reach 90 per cent export ultimately. As I have said, foundries are moving to Eastern Europe, Russia and Turkey. At one time we had a sales split of 50 per cent Italy and 50 per cent export. In the future we are probably increasing the melting sector proportion. This is likely in both aluminium and copper, because brass is very important in Germany and Italy. Also magnesium use will grow in the future, in new alloys with lower density (Mg is 1.74 kg/m³ compared to Al 2.7 kg/m³), again perhaps in certain car parts.

Q. How is the Italian foundry sector certain car parts.
A. Yes I am aware, they informed me. I must discuss it in AMAFOND because it is going to affect everybody. GIFA began as a five-yearly event, then four, and now three, which will be very costly. I am also on the Board of METEF in Italy. We must run the METEF exhibition when there is no GIFA show and this will become harder. There will be already established agents in Europe, the Far East, the Gulf, and India. If the market is moving, we are moving with the market to protect our future. For example we are continually working with vehicle manufacturers on new products for new alloys, for example. Also we are very keen on continuous improvement. We offer service, installation and troubleshooting on a continual 24/7 basis.

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Q. What international exhibitions will you be attending in 2016?
A. We were recently at EUROGUSS in Nuremberg, Germany from 12 - 14 January, as some readers will know. The company exhibits in trade fairs in Italy and abroad with the utmost commitment to continuous innovation and excellence in its business sector. We plan also to be at landmark expos for Protecme and Foundry Ecocer such as Targi Kielce in Poland, ALUMINIUM in Germany, Arabal in UAE, and Ankiros Turkey in 2016, and the next METEF exhibition in 2017. Foundry Ecocer is a serious, refreshed young enterprise, and wants to expand its asset base of people and products. We wish to be known everywhere in the world and the exhibitions are useful in that way.

Q. All the products you have involve chemistry, the chemistry of the metal. Do you have R&D facilities here where you test new products?
A. We have a well-equipped in-house laboratory for developing and testing new formulations of products with qualified technical personnel. In addition we have a collaborative agreement with the University of Milan (Politecnico di Milano) and the largest technical university in Italy and with a lot of small local foundries that allow us to complete product testing directly in their production field. Moreover we plan to open a new laboratory with furnace facilities in 2016. We place an emphasis on developing and providing, as much as possible, environmental friendly and non-dangerous products.

Q. Can you pick two or three products from your range that you think are more important?
A. We believe Foundry Ecocer has the biggest and best such plant in Europe for granulated products. For instance, our ECOSAL AL is a series of granulated fluxes for covering, drossing, deoxidising, grain refining and modification of aluminium and its alloys. We would also say our coatings range and ceramic items areas are at the top level globally. For example, PLASTCOTE is our protective coatings range for ceramics and refractory surfaces. For GDC and LPDC applications it features a long life primer. For risers and casting launders it has high insulating properties. Then there are our standard and tailored low density pre-cast ceramic shapes (ECOSOL and ECOSIL ranges), which reduce thermal dispersion in the casting line.

Q. Much of what you supply is in the form of consumable items, but do you also make the degassing machines in Ossona?
A. The installations of degassing machines are an integral part of the metallurgical processes in the field of non-ferrous. We started this journey 27 years ago, with the first patented machines as at that time, we realised the importance of offering new sophisticated and automated machines, with simultaneous grain refining, or modification or cleansing and chemical fluxes addition to the melt, that would allow an automatic and repetitive metallurgical practice in the foundry melting shop.

We are co-projecting these machines with three different Italian suppliers who specialise in foundry machines production. We produce all consumables, like fluxes, ceramic impellers and special devices to be used with the machines. With the same philosophy, we have continued to extend our proposals, building new equipment and other control instruments, like CCF heated filter box, injection flux machines, complete transfer launders systems, transfer ladles, RPT porosity instruments, automatic coating mixer machines. All these systems are designed to facilitate the consumables' use.
Fulvio Sala, CEO

Q. You are the future for your company. What is the unique selling point of the company? Why should people do business with you?
A. I think the only way is to closely support our customers so we can help them wherever they need to go. We must know what they are making and trying to achieve. Also we give a good price and rapid delivery across the range. We have our own lorry transport company to ensure a 7 day delivery service. This is what the Italian market demands. Thirdly we are the only company in Southern Europe that can give 100 per cent of the requirements for aluminium production.

Q. Do you look to expand your product range in extrusion and rolling?
A. Our core business is foundry, but sometimes we also give support to foundries or extrusion plants to find a new supplier of extrusion machines, furnaces or other equipment, because they know we will give them impartial advice.

Q. You deal with foundries all over the world. Are there any exceptions?
A. The only two places we don’t currently do business in are North America and China. Our staff of engineers (Italian and foreign ones) is dedicated to giving specific assistance and problem solving, and is present every week all over the world to give a tailor-made service to: billets, ingots and slabs producers; continuous casting foundries; wheels producers; copper and brass foundries; and diecasting customers.

Q. What is the story of your time with Foundry Ecocer?
A. I began here nine years ago, starting in Production. I spent some time at customers’ sites. Later I moved to the Purchasing Department. As CEO I visit and attend to major customers in certain product areas, and similarly maintain the key supplier relations and orders.

Q. Do you see the Italian market for Foundry Ecocer getting smaller?
A. No, that is not really correct. Five or so years ago the construction sector began to decline here, and this was a market for our customers. The automotive sector has also shrunk in size, but the businesses we work with are all still there.

Q. Can you give an indication of the product innovations you will deliver in 2016?
A. On the people side, we will have two new engineers joining us in the first part of the year. Secondly, we are starting a production line for a new kind of flux which we will present at one of the first exhibitions of the year.

Note: A Company Profile and interview with Research and Development Manager Mrs Emanuela Uccellatori will feature in Aluminium Times April/May 2016 issue.