

Factory Classroom

A few days ago I accidentally dumped some barley grains into the rice container. While separating the barley from the rice, on our kitchen table, I thought of the similarity to working at my first factory job. In June 1936 I graduated from Cleveland's East High School. For the next four or five weeks I harassed, daily, the employment office manager at the Dill Manufacturing Company. That relatively small factory seemed to be the most pleasant environment among the larger industrial factories—all within fifteen or twenty minutes' walking distance from our home. The building overlooked one of Cleveland's city parks.

During my senior high school year, I never thought of going to college. Not one friend or relative went to college. Like our parents' generation, mining, if in southern Ohio, and factory work if in Cleveland, were our foreordained destiny.

One morning in August, the Dill employment manager smiled and said "Emil, you can work for us, starting tomorrow. You will earn thirty-five cents per hour." I sensed that he was relieved to no longer face me every morning of the work week.

The following morning I began my first career within the factory's sunlit corner room on the first floor. It resembled a classroom, with two rows of five large metal desks and the boss's large, wooden, roll-top desk at the front.

Besides the bespectacled, mild mannered boss, Bill, I can picture only three fellow workers—Nick, Chuck, and Fred. Nick was a handsome, sturdily structured Italian with sleek combed black hair. Chuck, of Anglo descent, had wavy reddish-brown hair and a slender body. Both dominated our daily constant conversations. Fred, of Slovenian background, was good looking, strong and well built. He became my closest friend, and in time, married my sister, Wilma. After I reached drinking age, Fred and I went dancing at ballrooms and night clubs. He excelled at jitterbugging and I attained a degree of competence at polka and ballroom-style dancing. Fred and I certainly were not as verbally verbose as Joe and Chuck.

We could talk freely due to the nature of our work and the lenient boss. The factory produced thousands of small metal parts for car or truck tire inner tubes, plus others such as ferrules for wooden-handled screwdrivers. Our work, picking out defective parts, consisted of dumping metal pieces from miniature wooden barrels onto our desks, then using our fingers to sort the good products into an empty barrel on the floor. After a few disastrous attempts and spilled contents, we developed a skill of rolling a full barrel on its edge with one twist of the wrist. It came to rest near other full barrels a few feet away.

Inspecting thousands of pieces per day would have been dull work without stimulating conversations. Telling jokes or sports talk couldn't compete with relating sexual experiences. Nick and Chuck were hypersexual when compared to virgin me. On Fridays, planning sexual conquests dominated conversations. On Mondays the vivid details would flow. My inferiority complex and sexual deficiencies intensified during those periods.

In place of sexual experiences, I attended socialist meetings, went to the downtown Public Square and listened to radical speakers on soap boxes. I also took long, solitary nature walks along Lake Erie and the city's Wade Park and Euclid Creek Park. My experiences in sociopolitical interests and the wonders of nature were steadily nurtured while working at the Dill Company. They remain key ingredients of my psyche. The Dill Company was the locale for dramatic changes in my life.

About three months after being hired, I shocked my nine fellow workers and the boss. This shy, quiet worker came to work one morning wearing a large badge stating, "I belong to the CIO." I was one of the earliest members of Local 263, United Auto Workers-CIO. That red badge of courage had a great impact on my life. From then on, union membership and policies became a runner up topic to sex talk—but only when the boss left the room. In time, every member of my classroom joined the union. I was elected to the executive board of Local 263 and became the Chief Shop Steward.

After a sit-down strike demanding sole bargaining rights for factory workers, we gained the right to negotiate financial and working conditions with the company. I'm not sure how many we represented—somewhere between one hundred and two hundred workers.

After one year with the inspection department, I applied for the job of assistant operator in a row of Brown & Sharpe automatic screw machines. I can't remember who my supervisor was, but I can still picture the entire second story of the building filled with rows of Brown & Sharpe and Davenport screw machines. They took long rods (10-12 feet) of brass or steel and automatically turned out hundreds of pieces in one day. In time, I became an independent machine operator of four machines and learned to set up new jobs. My work during WWII was designated as essential to national defense. Consequently, I could have maintained that deferment status for the duration of the war. I also had an almost unrestricted auto gasoline supply—instead of typical individual rationing. Yet somehow, in 1943, I decided to forego deferment even though I was a pacifist and against the war. In another essay, I have described this situation in greater detail.

The seven years at Dill Manufacturing are among the most pleasant and psychologically enriching of all my life experiences. They may be as significant to me as were my thirty positive years of teaching.

Emil Abramovic 10-13-07