

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
GM LORDSTOWN

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O.H. 2057

Edward J. Czopor
Interview
By
Monica Mastran-Czopor
On
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ARCHIVE
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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
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INTERVIEWEE: Edward J. Czopor

INTERVIEWER: Monica Mastran-Czopor

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown

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MC: This is an interview with Edward J. Czopor for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Monica Lynn Mastran-Czopor, at my home in Hubbard, on February 20, 2002 at approximately 7:30 P.M. Okay Ed, we are going to begin. What can you tell me about your background? About your family, where you were born.

EC: I was born on May 25, 1946 in Catsville Township. My parents were Mike and Rose Czopor, and that's where I spent my childhood and grew up.

MC: What can you tell me about your family now? How many kids you have, things of that sort.

EC: I have three children right now. My oldest son, Frank, he's married, he's my first boy. My second son, Mike, is twenty-two, he's at home, and I have a daughter who's just going to graduate from high school.

MC: Your wife, what does she do?

EC: She's a homemaker.

MC: A homemaker okay. Now getting into the job itself, you are retired from Lordstown correct?

EC: Yes.

MC: How did you get your job when you were initially hired at Lordstown?

EC: Initially I wrote a letter, well it was a rumor that the plant was going to be built, so I wrote a

letter to Detroit, asking if the rumor was true, to General Motors, if it was I would like to have an application. So in turn they did, they sent a large envelope with quite a few applications. At that time they were looking for people who were interested in employment at the plant. So they said if you have relatives or friends that you knew of, who may have been interested, to pass the applications out, which I did. That's how I got mine.

MC: Now considering you had just retired here in 2001, how had hiring changed since when you were initially hired to the guys coming in right when you retired? I mean was there a difference in how they hired?

EC: Oh yeah.

MC: How so?

EC: When you got hired you were called for a short interview then you were called to Lordstown, I don't know if it was the arsenal or barracks or whatever they had at Lordstown, and you had a partial physical there. Then they told you that they would call you, but then they didn't have the plant medical department completed yet. So in a month or so they did finish that, they called you to the plant and you took the rest of your physical, then they said you were hired. That versus today with all the testing and things, the pressure they are putting on people, it's really getting difficult I think. To be an assembler, I don't think you need a college education. That seems more or less what they are pushing for.

MC: Were there periodical drug test after the initial hire?

EC: No I never had to do that.

MC: Did they have them a little bit later that you know of?

EC: Possibly, but that was almost before I retired, maybe about five or ten years before.

MC: How would you feel about drug testing if you were made applicable that you had to do it?

EC: I have no problem, because I am not a drug addict.

MC: Approximately how far from the plant do you live?

EC: It was about twenty-five, twenty-eight miles.

MC: How long did it take you to get to work?

EC: In the very beginning, when I first started in 1966, it took almost an hour to get there because they didn't have the access to the freeways and things they have today. So that reduced the amount of time to about thirty minutes.

MC: Refresh my memory approximately how long were you employed at Lordstown?

EC: Thirty-six point eight years.

MC: Can you describe a little bit what you did?

EC: I worked in their company car garage. I took care the superintendent's vehicles, the staff vehicles, and company vehicles. We maintained their cars. If they had damage we had it repaired, if they had mechanical problems we had it repaired, and also every thirty days they would get another vehicle. I can't remember if it was thirty or sixty days. But they would get a new vehicle and you would take it and trade those vehicles in and provide them with another one, and transfer their personal belongings and things. Set it up for them, so it would be ready for when they went home.

MC: Was that always, did that start off being your job?

EC: No.

MC: What was your first job then?

EC: My first job was in final processing repairments. The final line, in final process, down there, you made repairs on the vehicle as they came down the line. If they had problems or faults that you could repair you took care of.

MC: What can you tell me about the people you worked with, and particularly the company car garage?

EC: The people I worked with, do you mean the people in the plant?

MC: No, the ones you worked with in the company car garage.

EC: I mostly worked with your supervisors and staff people. I don't think you could find better people to work with. It was a little different situation than what was in the plant. The type of pressure, you were in a non-productive group, and things were a little different. They could relate to you a little better.

MC: You feel that was a definite benefit to the...

EC: It was a definite plus.

MC: Interesting. Now how do you feel about some of the misconceptions concerning autoworkers? That, particularly, American autoworkers they're lazy, they're this, how do you feel about that? You being in the plant and seeing what goes on.

EC: I think that's false.

MC: Why so?

EC: Because most of the people that were employed at Lordstown, through those years that I was there, came from hardworking families. Their parents worked in the mills, they were talked to work. They were taught, if you didn't work, you didn't eat. How this got started, that they were lazy and people do this and people do that, that's a falsehood. I don't know how that ever even got started.

MC: Now some non-assembly workers view your work as monotonous. What do you think about that? As far as the assembly line, think back to when you were working with the repairs. Some non-assembly line workers view the assembly line work as monotonous. What do you think about that?

EC: Assembly line work probably would be monotonous since your doing the same job over and over repeatedly on a vehicle in a few minutes. Where I had a little different point of view, because you were repairing cars. Each car, not every car, had a problem. One car may have had one problem, then the next car had another one, something different. So you had kind of a variety. It was the same thing, but you had a variety of repairs.

MC: Now your job in particular, can you describe, what a typical day for you at work was, within the company car garage?

EC: How do you mean?

MC: A typical day, like an average day.

EC: You want me to describe what I did?

MC: Yeah.

EC: First thing I would come in and you would have to clock in. Then you came down, into the company car garage, I would get myself a coffee, because I usually came to the plant and I was there a half an hour early. I always wanted to be early because you never knew when you were going to have a flat tire or a car might have had a little problem or something, some delay because of traffic or trains or whatever reasons. I always allotted a little extra time to be at work, so I was always on time. So I was able to get a cup of coffee and sit down a little bit and kind of compose yourself. Then your day would start. I had a voice messages that were left on my teletag. So the first thing you would do is check that, because you had superintendents that worked on second shift and they also worked on third shift, and they may have had a problem with their vehicles. So they would describe their problem to you and it would be up to us to make arrangements to get them set up with a new vehicle or a temporary vehicle, and leave them a message so they could leave their cars and we could take it and get it repaired. The same process went about when they were getting new vehicles, when they were turning the old ones in and getting new ones, they did the same thing, set them up with another vehicle temporarily. You can't forget the people on the other shifts. Day turn was easy, because you were right there. Just time consuming

in that area.

MC: More specific, as far as the plant itself, what do you think about your union in particular?

EC: I think we have one of the greatest unions.

MC: How so?

EC: Because I wouldn't have the benefits, that I have right now, if it wasn't for my union. Strikes, or Walter Ruther, who started the UAW, who went out on strike, his life was threatened many times, because he was starting the union. It gave you health benefits, it gave you retirement programs, it gave you a good wage, it provided a good income for your family.

MC: How active were you in the union?

EC: Just a general member.

MC: General member, okay. How do you think the union has changed over years, from it's establishment to when you retired?

EC: The union, right now, I think is afraid to move on anything, because of the pressure being placed on them, of being promised a new product at the plant, and this has been going on for years already. Any other time you already knew what products you were going to get, and it was put in place. But I think General Motors is trying to cut down their work force to the barest minimum, and they have got some changes they are going to make, probably change wages too.

MC: This is sort of still within that. what do you think about the trend to more concessions by the union? What's your feeling on that?

EC: I think the unions and the companies should work together. I think the companies, General Motors, should look at people and listen to people, because people are the ones doing the job. They are putting these cars together and I think they ought to start listening to people when they are out there. Even if it's a small person that can give them incentives and ideas and ways of improving things.

MC: Who in particular, among your union reps, do you think was particularly effective? Take a second and think about it.

EC: Well there were several of them.

MC: Can you name a couple?

EC: We had Ryan Price, Al Alli, they were all effective members.

MC: And why, I mean why were they effective, what makes them stand out?

EC: Because they upheld the contract. They stood behind, you local unions is going to be as strong as what your international is. If your international union has a strong standing on things, then your local union will follow. But you still have to work with the company, because you have to remember that's their product. They are the ones that's investing the money, providing the job for you. We had quite a few effective members. I was in Local 1112

MC: Sort of flipping the time clock back a little bit, particularly during the 70's. What do you think of Whitney Ford, as a union leader?

EC: He was okay as far as I was concerned. I mean he didn't hurt me in anyway. Benefit wise or money wise.

MC: But nothing spectacular?

EC: No.

MC: Now during the 80's in particular there were off site meetings between union leaders and the management. What did you think about those meetings?

EC: I didn't like them. Everybody _____.

MC: Did you attend any?

EC: No, you weren't invited, that I can remember.

MC: Were you, at any time, ever involved with any strikes, and if so which ones?

EC: Yes I was involved in several strikes. I can't recall the dates of the strikes. I know it was back in the 70's.

MC: 1972, the Wildcat Strike?

EC: Yeah that was probably..

MC: That was a big one. Do you remember anything about that particular one?

EC: No, not off hand. It's just too may years after. You probably participated in, I won't say for sure.

MC: Were you on the picket lines?

EC: I probably was yeah. You were assigned picket duty when you were on strike.

MC: Ok, well that's interesting.

EC: So either that or you had classroom duty, or you had something. You had to do something.

MC: So each worker was assigned, or each union member rather, was assigned a particular duty concerning the strike?

EC: Yes, because you received strike benefits. If you didn't work for your money you didn't get it.

MC: I remember one time, that may have been back in 1972, that I participated, I had to picket at McGuffey Plaza. I can't recall what grocery store it was, but it was over Ice burg lettuce. They had picketers down there, but it was my duty to go down there and show support for them.

EC: Well that's interesting, so you would support other unions that were on strike.

MC: Yes, right.

EC: Any other strikes that seem to stand out, that you involved with in one way or another, or even weren't involved, but just remember them?

MC: We had a lot of little mini strikes, as for the major strikes, no. I can't really remember any.

EC: Have you ever heard of the Lordstown Syndrome?

MC: I've heard of it, but I don't know what it is.

EC: It's pretty much fatigue. It's the fatigue, going to work.

MC: Well that's pretty much like every job.

EC: Yeah pretty much.

MC: Any job is new and interesting when you first get it. But as time passes and you grow older it gets old, it gets boring. Just like anything in life.

EC: What do you know about the plant's history of labor relations? Or do you have an opinion on that?

MC: Back in 1966 and '67 we had, the Assembly Plant belonged to Chevrolet Division. The Body, that was the mechanical part of it, belonged to Fischer Body. So you actually had two companies. Some people were Fischer Body people, they belonged to that union, and they were separate from us. There wasn't too much friction between Fischer Body, but some of the supervisory personnel, and then most of the people at Chevrolet had gotten the

supervisors, they brought a lot of them as imports. They did not take people from here, they may have taken a few, a handful, but most of the them were brought in from California, Van Ises, California, different plants, probably because of the experience they had. A lot of these people, that they brought as supervisors were really hotheads. Boy they thought they had the world, they knew everything, and they treated people kind of in a derogative way. Not all of them, but there was a lot of them that did that. That's what caused a lot of friction, because like I said most of the people that worked at Lordstown came from good families, good working ethics. When you had people who came in there and started to treat you like that, you just got a negative attitude toward them. You kind of got hardened. You would get promised that they wouldn't keep, that they would break. You had contracts that they would sign, they would turn around and do some of the opposite things, not everything but some things. It caused a lot of problems. You've always seen in the paper, in the publicity, that it was the labor force that caused the problems. But your news media never puts in that paper or puts it out public what management does. It's always your union, the working person. If they would dig into that they might find out a whole lot of information. They might find out maybe it's both sides, or maybe it's more one side than the other. But it's always blamed on your union.

MC: That's interesting. Not during the 70's, this sort of goes back once more, during the 70's, plant supervisors were called Gestapo. How did the workers feel about the supervisors?

EC: Just the Gestapo.

MC: How so, I mean why were they give that name?

EC: They were missing the SS signs on their arms, because of like what I told you. Some of came there and they weren't very nice to people. Some were, some were very nice people. So you kind of had a very nice mixture of relationships there.

MC: But the supervisors were viewed in a clique of their own?

EC: Yeah they were. You were looked down upon. You were like a step down individual.

MC: In the 80's, the union had negotiated the J-car production, how did the workers feel about this?

EC: They were happy about it.

MC: Why?

EC: Well you got a brand new product that meant you would work for quite a few years, providing that this product would sell, which it did. It became popular, and it created a lot of economy for the Valley. It created good income for the families. I think it was just a great thing, and I know everybody else was happy about it.

MC: How did the influx of small imports impact the Lordstown Plant, like Hyundai, Honda? I

mean did they have an impact, and if so how did they have an impact?

EC: It probably had an impact on sales, competitive sales, but I think Lordstown produced a fine product.

MC: Even after Whitey Ford left in the 80's, did the union seem to still support the quality of Ford Life Programs?

EC: Sure, I'm pretty sure they did.

MC: Do you feel that General Motors forced acceptance of the quality of the Ford Life Programs on the plants? Do you think it was forced?

EC: I think it was discussed between the union and management. They came up with the solution together.

MC: Now during the 80's, were you affected by unemployment, any of the unemployment during the 80's, were you laid off?

EC: No, because you were in a non-productive group, you weren't part of the assembly plant, the assembly workers. Most of the time before, if the plant was shut down or let's say the plant had run out of parts and they closed down early, a lot of the assembly line workers would go home. Your job still was there, and that's the way it was most of the time. I said probably within the last three or four years they would urge people to save money. Everything is about saving.

MC: During the 90's the van plant closed, how did you feel about that?

EC: I was shocked, when you have a product and you are assembling one of the best products throughout all their plants, GM really had no business to just shut that down and move it out of there, and move it to some place else where they produced a little inferior type of car. The vans at Lordstown were number one.

MC: What do you think about the Quality of Life Programs, as you remember them, before you retired?

EC: I think they were good.

MC: Has it changed people's jobs?

EC: Probably somewhat.

MC: Has it changed people's jobs?

EC: Probably somewhat.

MC: You don't know in what capacity?

EC: No.

MC: How do you feel about the General Motor Plants in Mexico?

EC: I don't think it's a bad idea for General Motors in other countries, but I don't think it should be imported here in this country. I think we should buy our own products that are manufactured here in this country. Let Mexico buy General Motor products in Mexico.

MC: Now on that same note, how did you and the workers feel about the NAFTA agreement?

EC: How did I and the workers feel?

MC: Yes.

EC: I think it is one of the worst programs that the government could have ever come up with, because all that it is doing is taking jobs every day, away from American people, and giving them to foreign countries who pay cheap labor. At one time, I think I heard, that General Motors was paying like a dollar or a dollar and a quarter an hour to Mexican workers. I can't say that is true, it's a rumor that I had heard. But that's kind of shocking to believe that.

MC: So it's still a tender subject?

EC: Yes.

MC: Now how do you feel about the changes in management in 1996, do you have any opinion on that?

EC: I think as it changed from Herman Moss, Herman Moss was a good plant manager. He was interested in product, he was interested in people, and he was interested in jobs. The new plant manager that we have, I think she is also probably standing behind the same principles.

MC: Given the particular situation with Firestone in Ford, how has the incident impacted the plant or has it?

EC: I don't think it has.

MC: You don't think it has?

EC: No. We have a different type of tire manufacturer. We never had any problems.

MC: Were the guys talking about it when it happened?

EC: In general, people did talk.

MC: But nothing in particular that affected production or anything?

EC: No.

MC: What do you think the responses by both Ford and Firestone, do you think they were correct in their responses?

EC: I think Ford had a problem and was aware of it, and tried to sweep it under the rug a little bit, try to cover it up. I think Firestone was just as guilty as Ford, and they didn't do anything about it, so as a result they got problems.

MC: What do you think about the installation of robots in production? Now I know, that you were not particularly on the assembly line, but what is your view on this?

EC: I think a robot could assist an hourly worker, but I don't think it should be replacing an hourly worker, because you need somebody there that can control that machine.

MC: What do you think of General Motors employee benefit package?

EC: I think it's great.

MC: Why?

EC: It's terrific.

MC: Why, do it give you a sense of...

EC: It gives you a sense of security for what you have. You have hospitalization, medical, dental care, eye care, prescription drug program. There's no place anywhere else in the world, really, you can have it better than that.

MC: Has it changed through the years?

EC: I think the government has made them make some changes. The worst part of it is, where they are given you these choices for hospitalization and that. It was better before when your benefits were with the company and the union together. Say you have Blue Cross, that was it. Now you have all these choices, and one counteracts the other, and you don't know where to stand. It's just a way to confuse people, I think. I think they ought to go back to the old way.

MC: Which was?

EC: Which was them saying, we have this insurance by this company, this is what you have. That's it.

MC: Now how well do you think the company handled lay offs?

EC: Most of the time they followed within union guidelines mostly.

MC: Were you affected in anyway?

EC: It would be a general lay off, where everybody was off.

MC: So it wasn't specifically towards the company car wash?

EC: No.

MC: Now back to your job in particular, what did you do at the end of your shift, like when you shift was over with, what did you do?

EC: I would lock up my desk, shut my coffee machine off, lock the telephone up, lock our office up, and get ready to go clock out.

MC: So you would go home right after, you really didn't go to any particular place where workers would gather?

EC: No.

MC: Were there any places to gather with your fellow workers?

EC: Well they had bars.

MC: Most of them would go to bars?

EC: A lot of fellows did. Then you had the union hall, they may have had an activity or Something after work, plus they had their meetings on Sundays.

MC: What changes have you noticed in management style over the years? Specifically occurring to the various divisions, Saturn, GEO, things of that sort?

EC: Could be a little more specific with that?

MC: Has management changed, the management style from the beginning when you were hired to when you retired? I mean was management, management or had they changed?

EC: They've changed, they've mellowed a lot.

MC: They have mellowed?

EC: They have mellowed.

MC: How so?

EC: I think they have come to the realization that you are a human being. You're not that animal they have pictured in the beginning. It may be because of a difference in leadership that they have. Things are starting to change.

MC: Just a few more questions. What changes did you notice when women were introduced as coworkers?

EC: What changes?

MC: Yes.

EC: Nothing really.

MC: Nothing in particular?

EC: No. We had, the female workers, worked just as good as the male workers.

MC: What was the, what were the sentiments of your fellow workers, did any of them have a problem with it?

EC: It might have been a little bit of a shock in the beginning, because you were used to nothing but guys, then all of the sudden you have girls. Overall, people had accepted it. I don't think there was too much of a problem.

MC: What are your thoughts concerning a woman General Manager? Have you noticed any particular differences with, and I know we had mentioned this before, with Moss, with him leaving going into the present GM? What are your thoughts concerning a woman General Manager?

EC: I think she should have a chance too. The plant manager we have Maureen McGily, she's kind of family oriented, so was Herman Moss. There's not too much real difference. You've got to have leadership.

MC: A couple more questions then we're through. If you were in management explain how you would do things differently?

EC: If I was in management I think I would listen to people a little bit more. I've always had the belief that if you give a guy enough rope he'll hang himself. So I think I would listen to people a little better.

MC: So that's your biggest gripe about management now, they don't listen enough?

EC: Well they do and they don't, at least that's they way it was when I was there. Some will, some won't. You can tell them certain things, and they just blow it off, and not follow

through with it. Not all of them though, but some do.

MC: Last but not least. Do you have any regrets concerning your work choice?

EC: No. I'd like to thank General Motors, Maureen McGily, and Herman Moss and all the other plant managers for providing me with an income for my family, and a good job. Even though the problems you had, but I think you're going to have problems wherever you go, no matter what job you have. You'll always wind up with little skirmishes and problems, but they provided you with a fantastic benefit package and retirement, and I would like to thank them for it. I thank God and General Motors both for being there for me and my family.

MC: Thank you very much for spending some time with me and I'll get back to you then on this. Thank you.