

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown Project

Personal Experiences

O.H. 2059

Lorenz L. Schill

Interviewed By

Monica L. Mastran-Czapor

On

February 28, 2002

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INTERVIEWEE: Lorenz L. Schill

INTERVIEWER: Monica L. Mastran-Czepor

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown

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M-C: This is an interview with Lorenz Schill for the Youngstown State University Oral History project Lordstown by Monica Lynn Mastran-Czepor at the home of Mr. Schill in Austintown on February 28th at approximately 5:30 p.m. Mr. Lorenz we are going to begin. First, what can you tell me about your background, where you were born, where your from?

S: You want the date when I was born. October 10, 1926 in Vukovar, Croatia.

M-C: What can you tell me about your family?

S: I was the second youngest child from nine children.

M-C: When did you come over to this country?

S: In 1956, April the 7th.

M-C: Do you have any children yourself?

S: Yes, we have three children; one daughter and two sons.

M-C: Are you retired from Lordstown?

S: Yes.

M-C: Do you recall how you got your job?

S: Fortunately, I was very lucky. I put in an application and they called me for an interview and that's the way I got hired.

M-C: Do you remember the process to get hired? I mean, did they just give you a call and you were automatically hired. Did they interview you? What did they do?

S: I put in the application and then they called me. Then, they gave me a day for the interview. When I went for the interview that was the day they hired me.

M-C: Do you recall what initial job was? Can you describe it?

S: I worked in material.

M-C: What did you do?

S: I drove a tow motor and used to feed the lines.

M-C: Approximately how far from the plant do you live?

S: About three miles.

M-C: How long were you employed at Lordstown?

S: I was employed almost twenty-three years.

M-C: You mentioned that you had started off as a materials person. Did you retire doing that job or did you end up doing something else?

S: No, my group that I was in was very classified then. The two oldest guys could stay in the classification. A friend of mine and me were the two oldest guys, so I stayed at the work classification, which was a stock chaser.

M-C: Okay. So you were on one of those little carts that would go around?

S: Yes, I drove a three-wheeler and I stayed on that job until I retired.

M-C: Did you enjoy it?

S: Oh, yeah. I still miss it.

M-C: You miss it. [laughs] What can you tell me about the people you worked with?

S: Great people. I miss them. I made a lot of friends.

M-C: How do you feel about some of the misconceptions concerning autoworkers, particularly American autoworkers? How do you feel about those misconceptions?

S: Well, they don't know the truth, you know. If you work in an American car factory, then you know what it's all about. Any negative comments from anybody who don't know much about it. I don't know how to put it.

M-C: I understand that you weren't on the assembly line, but some non-assembly workers view the assembly at Lordstown and assembly work in general as monotonous.

S: I never worked on the line.

M-C: I know, but how did you feel about those non-assembly workers that view that work as monotonous?

S: You're talking about non-assembly line workers?

M-C: How they view the assembly workers at Lordstown and their work as monotonous? What would you say to them? What do you think about that?

S: I think you should be glad you have a job.

M-C: Can you explain what a typical day at work was for you? A typical day, what would have been an average day for you?

S: In my instance, the day went by too fast. To be honest, I love my job. I like the people I work with. I like the management. I got along with everybody and never got in any trouble.

M-C: So you didn't have to do anything to make the day go faster? It was automatically...

S: My job was challenging.

M-C: How so?

S: When you talk about chasing stock, a lot of people at work would say, "You got the easy job. You just ride around in the buggy," but there was more to it. GM wouldn't pay me my wages to ride around in a buggy. I had to know every part that went on the car in hard trim. That's half of the plant. I had to know every location and I had to go and get it. I had to know exactly where it was located. I brought it back; gave it to the repair men, so they would have enough time to put it on the car, whatever the part was. In a couple or three minutes, I would have to go and be back for this certain

part from the repairman's order. You had to have a good memory, because if you took off and don't know where you were going, even if you knew what you were looking for, the most important thing was that you had to know the location where it was at. That's why I liked my job very much.

M-C: I'm going to get more into the plant itself, beginning with the union. What do you think about the union, the U.A.W?

S: I'm glad we have the union. It started out with a bad name.

M-C: How so?

S: [Laugh] All those radicals, but in reality it wasn't radicals. Like any new plant when you work in the union there are ups and downs. They fought for our rights. Most of the time, they got it. The company was satisfied and union members also.

M-C: Now, that was early on?

S: Early on, yeah.

M-C: Did it maintain that through the years?

S: Well, it was rough. We went on strike and signed new contracts one after the other. It worked out good. In my opinion, if it didn't work out good, the plant wouldn't be here today.

M-C: You had mentioned strikes. Were you ever involved with any of the strikes?

S: Not personally but as a member of the local union you don't cross the picket line, which the company never asked us to do.

M-C: Did you work the picket line or were you given a job by the union in regard to the strike.

S: They called me on duty. I stood a couple of times on the picket line, which is a union member's duty. Everything worked out fine.

M-C: At present I know reading the papers and so forth and I think they started this in the late 1980s. What do you think about the trend towards more concessions by the union?

S: I think it got to a point of being too much. The company wants more and more. I go to the plant every year around Christmas time to see my buddies and can tell you one thing. They work more now than they ever did. Talking about working the assembly line. The company wants the good quality that we achieved. There's not any other country that builds a better car than we do in the U.S.A. and you can achieve that only

if you give the person enough time to do the job that he is required to perform. In my opinion, I think they gave enough concessions, even when I was still working. Since I retired, they made concessions one after the other and the company still wants more and more. Talk about that new product for Lordstown that scared the people off. Not only if you don't agree with us you might not have a job. I hope and I pray in the future that everything is going to be okay.

M-C: Who among your union representatives was particularly effective from who you can remember and why would they have been effective?

S: Effective in what?

M-C: Effective as being a union representative, I mean, they are supposed to represent the workers and so forth. Who sticks out in your mind as being the most effective?

S: Al Alli.

M-C: How so?

S: While he was our shop chairman for many years, I respected him. He passed away several years ago, but I think in my time they had several shop chairmen. I think Alli, in my opinion, was the best.

M-C: Backing up a bit, during the 1970s, what did you think of Marlin Ford as a union leader? Did you have an opinion on him?

S: I don't want to criticize anybody, but you couldn't compare him with Al Alli in any way.

M-C: How so? What did he do differently?

S: I don't think he was in touch with the membership and never fought for what the people expected him to achieve for the membership. He is a good friend of mine. I don't dislike him. I know why they voted him out. I don't think he spent enough time on his job as chairman, but he should have. For instance, Alli was there day and nights. Before he passed away, as we all know, they were working three shifts. Alli was there day and night, whenever needed. You gave him a call and there he was.

M-C: During the 1980s, there were offsite meetings between the union leaders and the management. What did you think about these meetings? Did you ever attend any?

S: We have a union meeting every month on a monthly basis, so they informed us if there was any progress made or vice versa. [Laughs] I'm embarrassed to say that I was never big on that. I'm happy and proud to be a union member, but I was not a fanatic or anything, you know. By the way, I pay my union dues every month.

M-C: [Laughs] On that same note and sort of bringing back in the strike question that I had asked earlier. In 1972, the infamous wildcat strike occurred, do you recall this strike?

S: I sure do.

M-C: What do you remember about it?

S: It was scary. It was long. When they signed the new contract everybody was happy. I know the union members were and I guess the company was satisfied too.

M-C: Did you have to work picket lines for that strike? Is that the strike you had the lines for?

S: Yes, that's the only time I was on the picket line. You have to. If you're picked from the union and you're a member, you better show up. That's like jury duty. I would have never refused it.

M-C: Well, of course. During the 1970s, the plant supervisors were called Gestapo? How did the workers feel about the supervisors? Why would they have been given that nickname?

S: [Laugh] I wouldn't call them that name.

M-C: Why not?

S: I don't know why, but as far as I know, there wasn't a supervisor I didn't get along with and I worked with every one of them. My job required me to work with every supervisor in our trim. In my opinion, the way you respected them that's the way they respected you.

M-C: How did your fellow workers, the guys that you worked with, how did they view the supervisors?

S: I know they never viewed them as Gestapos.

M-C: Let's move into the 1980s here. In the 1980s, the union negotiated the J car production. How did the workers feel about this?

S: Happy.

M-C: Happy.

S: Yeah. They were happy they got the car. There were a lot of changes. A lot of things were unpredictable. We didn't know what was coming, but in the long run it worked out pretty good.

- M-C: How did the influx of the small imports impact Lordstown? I know like Hyundai coming in Mitsubishi, Honda. Did the compact cars impact the plant any?
- S: The way our quality is now and in the last several years, we got them beat now. The foreign countries, small cars you are talking about don't make a better car than we do in Lordstown.
- M-C: Do you think with the small compact cars coming into the country that it improved working conditions at Lordstown, in other words, gave the workers initiative to work harder?
- S: Exactly, that's what it is. We have to compete, you know, with a lot of sacrifices. I think we achieved what the company wanted us to do, but I hope that it could stop asking for more concessions. Letting them put more work on the people that are still there. One thing, I'm happy whenever I see a Cavalier on the road. It's built in Lordstown. I'm proud of it and I know that's a good car.
- M-C: Were you affected at all by the unemployment during the 1980s? Did you ever get laid off or anything?
- S: No, I was never laid off.
- M-C: No. Okay. Now, during the 1990s, moving in here to the next decade and I know you had retired in 1989, but as you know the van plant closed. How do you feel about this? What were your thoughts on it?
- S: I have two sons that worked there and I was really concerned about not only my sons but the people with less seniority. I was concerned they might lose their job. I'm thankful to the company and the union. They worked things out good for the company and for the membership. Nobody got laid off. Everybody was happy ever since.
- M-C: From what you remember, what are your views concerning the quality of life programs when you were there?
- S: What do you mean?
- M-C: The quality of life program that the company had passed to the workers.
- S: I was satisfied.
- M-C: How do you feel about the General Motors plants in Mexico? I know this is a touchy subject, but what are your feelings on the plants down in Mexico?

- S: You always get what you pay for. I don't want to criticize the Mexican people, but I think the best work force in the whole United States is right here in the Mahoning Valley in Lordstown, Ohio.
- M-C: I'm thinking they started it in the 1980s. What are your opinions as far as the installation of robots in production versus workers?
- S: I still wait for robots to buy a car. [Laughs] That's advancement in technology. I was there. I watched the first ones when they brought them in the plant. It was very exciting and it was challenging. I know the corporation needed to cut costs, but in my mind I doubt that when they brought the robots in they were going to ease up on the people working on the line.
- M-C: Did they?
- S: Not so far. They still demand more and more and more. As far as quality goes, I don't think they can ask for any more. I think the profit is the bottom line.
- M-C: Did the installation impact your job in particular?
- S: Not really. I still drove my buggy around.
- M-C: [Laughs] What did you think of General Motors' employee benefit package, in other words, the benefit package that you had had, what are your opinions on it? Did you think it was a good one?
- S: Excellent.
- M-C: How so?
- S: I was really satisfied and I think I was the happiest person in the world to have an opportunity to work for General Motors. A lot of people criticize this and that, but they don't realize what it means, especially me coming to this country with a wife and two children. I couldn't speak any English. I had a brother in Europe who wanted to send me a plane ticket to come back. He could feel that somehow something was wrong. I couldn't find a job when I came here, but when I came I thought to myself I'm going to make it. This is the country where I'm going to raise my family. It was hard. I was without work. Before I started at Lordstown at GM, I wanted to move to Chicago. Thank God I didn't.
- M-C: How well do you think the company handled layoffs like when they were laying off? How well do you think that the corporation itself handled that?
- S: I think they were fair. They went by seniority and I don't intend to discriminate against the agreement with the union.

- M-C: Moving back to you in particular. Do you recall what you did at the end of your last day at work? Did you go out after it? Did you come home? What did you do?
- S: It was heartbreaking, you know. They had a party for me. I never did know I had so many friends. At lunchtime, they started up the line ten minutes later because nobody was at the line. They all came in the area where I worked. On my last day at the plant, I just celebrated. I never did know I had so many friends. [Laughs]
- M-C: [Laughs] Did you notice changes in the management's style over the years from when you began to when retired?
- S: Very much so.
- M-C: How so? Can you explain?
- S: The company puts too much pressure on the supervisors. In my days, when I worked there, they worked as a family. What the company does is they hired people off the street or put new hires as supervisors. They have no idea what it's all about. The company's main thing was for the supervisor to be tough on the people. That's not the way to go. When I worked there, we worked as a team. When we saw the supervisor was in trouble and they'd asked if everybody could help him out. They didn't call them Gestapos. We tried to help them out, but there are things going on in the plant now. All this time they had the old-time supervisors. The new generation, most of them, if not all of them got the wrong attitude. The first thing is that you have to know how to treat people and how to get along with people. Just tell them what to do and they could do it.
- M-C: What changes, if you can recall, did you notice when women were introduced as co-workers, because initially when the plant opened it was all men? Women were introduced a bit later. Did you notice any particular changes when that occurred?
- S: I will never forget. It was the biggest disappointment in my life, when they started to hire women. They used come to work with false eyelashes [laughs] and they thought if they were women they don't have to work like men. I think they were wrong. Same pay, same work. We're talking about in my time. I didn't have much to do with women because I worked day shift all the time. There weren't too many on day shift because they didn't have the seniority, but now so many retired and these women gained seniority to join the day shift and all three shifts. I don't want to say all of them were like that, but the majority were. [Laughs] They wanted special treatment. If a man would say I can not do the job, they would fire him.
- M-C: What about the women that did work, that could do the work that the guys did? What are your opinions on them?
- S: They are just as good as the men.

M-C: If you were in management, how would you do things differently or what would you have done differently?

S: Well, I was in management before I came to the United States and I don't want to brag about it, but the way the management operated when I was starting there, it was quite similar. When I was in supervision... It's hard to compare Europe and United States because we used to have our own union in supervision and supervisors at Lordstown in my days did not.

M-C: Would you have done anything differently from what they did?

S: Yes, I would have done different than some of them did. You have to show the people who is the boss. You don't have to baby anybody, but just show them you're a human being. I'm here to work with you. If you have any trouble, I'm here to help you. As far as I am concerned, I never, never once had any dispute or trouble with any supervisor. Even now, if I met them on the street as a retiree, like best friends, we're happy to see each other, but it's too bad a lot of them passed away.

M-C: Obviously, you weren't born in this country and you speak with an accent. Looking right now at your particular job, do you feel you were treated differently on the job because of your background, where you are from?

S: When I got the interview at my job and the supervisor who interviewed me, he said "Lorenz, you might have one trouble with GM," and I asked him why. He said, "They might tease you because you don't speak good English. I said I'm not concerned because the Germans used to give me a hassle too. They asked me if I would be able to do my job and what my job required because there was a lot of math and reading and calculating. I was in charge of all the parts. In my area, what I was handling, putting them on the lines and so forth, and inventories and make sure all the parts are sufficient for first and second shift. We only worked two shifts then. My writing wasn't one hundred percent but math isn't a language, you know. My supervisors were very satisfied and I was proud with what I did. I always thought they paid me to do the best I could and I think I achieved what I was supposed to do and it was gratifying.

M-C: Did any co-workers ever say anything against you because of your accent?

S: I don't want to mention it. That's just the character of individuals. I never took them seriously, but all in all I was satisfied with the way they treated me nice. We were like a family.

M-C: Over the years, they learned to accept you?

S: They might have joked around, but I know how to joke back. [Laughs]

M-C: [Laughs] Good. One final question, then we are through for today. Any regrets working at Lordstown? With your work choice?

S: Never, never in my life. I think anybody who works maybe they don't know how to appreciate it. You work, you bring your paycheck home, you raise your family, but if God's willing, when you retire then you really appreciate what GM really means. All your benefits, medication, insurance and support are never late.

M-C: Well, Lorenz, thank you very much for spending some time with me today.

S: You are very welcome.