

(Interviewer's note: This is a B-type interview with a worker from Budapest. The main subject of the interview is the living conditions of the respondent and of similar workers in Budapest.)

I was born in 1908 and received 10 years of schooling. I have been working since the age of 16. In 1927 I got a job in a shoe factory and have been working ever since that time in the shoe business. I learned the trade and successively became cutter and finally designer. These were the 2 highest paid skilled jobs in shoe manufacturing and I had a good salary up to 1943 when I was drafted into the army. After many vicissitudes I came home in 1945 from the army and like all the other people I had no money. Seeing the situation in Budapest I decided to go into business for myself. I rented a small shop and began to manufacture children shoes which could be manufactured out of waste material and textile material. In spite of the many troubles because of the lack of raw material it was a good business. But in 1948 my permission of trade was revoked and I had to close down. Then I became partner in a shoe store in Budapest which I was able to maintain for 2 years. In 1950 the store was taken over by the state and I was left without any money. There was nothing else to do but to apply for a job with a shoe factory of the state where I got a job. I worked there up to the end of 1956 when I left the country.

In this factory I was a cutter again. The state factories produced so-called type shoes only which were^{designed by one}

central office for the whole country. In this system of production there was no need for expert workers or for good designers. When I began to work there, there were 900 employees in the factory. In the following years many improvements were made in the production. They tried to establish something like an assembly line. The production, however, encountered always some snags. For example, we received the model from the central office. Then we started to manufacture it without any experimentation. The old workers like myself tried to explain to the foreman sometimes even to the production manager that the model was no good. However, our voice did not count. In one season we were producing summer shoes out of linen. We saw right away that the shoes will be very poor, however, nobody heeded our work. The original price of the shoes was 110 forints. When they really came out at the beginning of the summer nobody wanted to buy them for their poor quality. Finally we had to sell them for 30 forints which was below the cost price. Our shoes were generally of a poor quality. The only important thing was to produce more. At the same time they did not allow the workers ~~to~~ to earn enough money. The time study man came into the shop several times. They measured the norm, then a week later they remeasured it again. If they saw that the working men can make 10 forints more than with the other model they sliced the norm. For example,

they took off one half of a minute. The working men could not do anything against it but slow down his work. Practically there was a silent sabotage going on. In old times the manufacturer designed the model of the next season in a sensible way. He called in his traveling salesman, his foreman, the experienced workers and finally they reached a decision. Under the Communist system the planning of next-season's model was done in the central office. Once we received instruction to manufacture a certain type of shoes with buttons. We saw right away that the design is no good since it is impossible to take on the shoes. Anyhow we had to manufacture 40 000 pairs, when production was suddenly stopped. It was a great mistake and it was hidden by the higher-ups. There were many mistakes in the whole production and the reason of the mistakes was that the important jobs could not be taken by experts. A former shoemaker was in the ministries giving us orders. At the same time one of our managers was a former tailor. There was one good thing in the Communist system: the employees of the shoe factories were not laid off but given work all year round. I know one period only when work was interrupted in the summer of 1956 when each department had to take a vacation of about 4 weeks because there was no raw material. Raw material meant a constant problem. It happened all the time that the foreman went around and told the fellows that

they now should work for quality rather than quantity. We knew that it meant that there was no raw material and we should not work so fast. There were days when the workers were walking all along the plant and did not work more than 2 hours a day. Once we got a big export order for England. As a matter of fact everybody was proud of it. However, we could never manufacture the export order because the necessary raw material did not come from Germany. By the way, this was the trouble by the whole economic system. For example, we had to import flour from France. It is ridiculous to think of the situation that Hungary is importing flour. What was worse, was that the house wife could not use the French flour. We manufactured shoes for export to Russia. It was a very bad business for the country. We delivered them very good shoes for 43 forints a pair. The Russians were haggling like street mongers about the price and the quality. They wanted the best shoes for the cheapest price. Concerning the ~~wasi~~^{home} market our factory made a great profit. The cost price of the shoes was 47 to 50 forints and in the stores they were sold for 250 forints. One can see out of these data how the Hungarians had to pay for the friendship with Soviet Russia. The workers of the factory fell into 3 categories: The first of them was the group of skilled workers such as cutters. Most of them were in ~~my~~ age or even older. Many of them had once independent in business. They were good

and experienced workers, very conscientious in their job who wanted to stay there in the factory and tried to do the best work. The trouble was that the skilled workers belonged to the older generation and there was no replacement out of the younger generation. The factory tried to recruit youngsters around 20 years and to educate them to become skilled workers. In 1954 the factory arranged a special course for the would-be skilled workers and there we could see how the Communist trade education looks like. They wanted to educate a skilled worker during the course of 6 months. In our case we had to spend years and years in this business till we learned it. In one case the friend of the local Party secretary got a job as a cutter because of the money. Such a fellow wasted a lot of material and created many problems in production. The second category was the category of the machine operators. Some of them were young boys around 20 or so. The other ones were girls. ~~They~~ Their job could be learned within a few days. The trouble was, however, that they did not stick to their job. They came and left after a few weeks. Finally the third category of the workers consisted of the unskilled girls. Perhaps 3/4 of our labor force consisted of girls. Mostly the former domestic servants or country girls who selected Budapest rather than the cooperative. The factory work was still better than going in one of the kol-

khozes. The trouble was that the country girls were rather awkward with their hands. The city girls became much better in the factory. The workers were very dissatisfied with the system. We had to ~~subscribe~~ ^{subscribe} to the peace loans which were deducted from our wages regularly. If we wanted to get an advance on our pay, it was impossible. In certain cases one of the workers got mad and told to the personnel department: "We are supposed to help out the country. Why is it then that the country is not helping out us." The Party secretary and the manager of the plant received 3000-4000 forints a month. They liked their job and they were on the Party line. But ^{when} we workers came together in the tavern we discussed the system freely and just laughed at the Communism. The workers were really deceived by the Communism. The Communists promised everything and did not keep any of the promises. They promised shorter working hours, we did not get them. They promised less work, we did not get it. They promised more pay, we did not get it. The average worker in our factory made 800-1000 forints. I was in the highest paid skilled work. I overfulfilled my norm by 120 and sometimes by 150% and even so I made 1600 forints a month plus a premium of 200 forints for saving the leather. My take-home pay was 1500 forints, but I would have needed 2500 to make a living with my family without any luxury. I have 2 children, one of them 6 years old the other one 15 months old. We could

make a living because my wife was working too and making more money than I. She was working at home producing knitted clothing items and watch bands. She began to work as a MASZEK right after the nationalization of my store. First she was knitting baby shoes. Then she began her business of producing watch bands. I cut out the watch bands and she sewed them together. Working in such a way we could make enough for the family, but we lived under a constant fear. My neighbor reported of me to the police that I was producing shoes illegally. The police came out at night. Fortunately enough they could not find anything. Then the MASZEK permission of my wife was revoked. However, we could not afford to stop her work so she was working further and our fear increased. I worked in the factory from 6.a.m. to 2.30 p.m. then came home took my dinner and sat down to cut 10 to 12 watch bands. They were sewn together by my wife on the same night and next day she delivered them to the different store keepers. In the afternoon when we were working with the ~~watch~~ watch bands we were in a constant fear that somebody will come in since we had to carry out the trade secretly. We always purchased the leather for the watch bands in a legal way. Usually we bought waste leather which was good and long enough for the watch bands. I never stole anything ^{from} of the factory although the whole system consisted of stealing. However, I did not want to take

the risk because of my family. The security of my job was more important for me than those 20 or 30 forints which were the price of waste leather. The managers of our factory changed pretty often. Over 5 years we had 5 managers. The first one whom I had when I joined the factory was a Party member. Pretty soon it turned out that he was a poor manager and was fired. The next manager knew a little bit about the business but he could not achieve results and he was fired too. The third of the managers was an excellent expert but he was not a member of the Party. Somebody intrigued against him and since at that time we had some difficulties in production he was jailed because of sabotage. Then an elderly man came as manager. People said that he was a former shoemaker but anyhow he did not know very much about running the factory. At least he was willing to listen to our advices. Finally we got a former foreman from a shoefactory as manager. He knew pretty much about the trade and he was a Party member. He ran the factory when I escaped. I think it was a general policy of the Communists that nobody should stay on his job for a long time. Even the foremen were changed all the time. Although the foremen did not have a greater salary than my wage was, there was a constant intriguing against the foremen. Some of them were Communists ~~Communists~~ the other ones were not. However, if somebody was promoted to a foreman, he was immediately recom-

mended to become a Party member and he had to join the Party. Few of them were real Communists. Once I too was asked whether I want to become a foreman. I answered that I was a nervous man and cannot get along easily with people. Actually only the pushing fellows wanted to become foremen. It was a dangerous job, I would not have liked it. Some of the foremen were later on promoted. They even became managers. The other ones, however, were soon suspended. In some cases they were transferred to another factory as unskilled workers. We had a so-called plant commission in Hungarian Uzemi Bizottsag the members of which were elected according to the Communist way. Their election meant that the Party secretary stood up with a list of members and announced them as candidates. Then they asked us whether we want to elect them. Everybody murmured something; whereupon he announced that the plant commission was elected. The trade union held weekly meetings where the secretary gave a short lecture on politics and then the different foremen had to report on the production in their department. The Party organization of the factory held monthly meetings. The Party secretary changed just as often as the manager of the factory. The first Party secretary in 1950 was a young girl. She came pretty often into the shops. She gave many advices. She was pretty popular, but she was transferred after a few months. Then in 1952 one of our unskilled workers was

appointed the Party secretary. He was actually quite a regular guy, not one of the enthusiastic Communists. He did not do anything wrong to the workers, but he was changed too after a few months. Then another girl became Party secretary. She did quite a good job and stayed with us for 2 years up to the Revolution. We had a sport instructor at the factory, a young fellow of 22 years, a former swimming champion who was of course a member of the Party. One day he came into our department and he began to talk with the different fellows. One of the fellows, a man ~~xxxxxx~~ in my age told him a political joke. The young instructor did not like this joke and slapped his face whereupon the fellow grabbed his cutting knife and thrust it into the shoulder of the instructor. A big affair came out of it. The Party secretary began a long investigation and heard many witnesses. The case was not turned over to the police since the young instructor was not wounded ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ seriously. It was closed down on Party line. The worker was transferred into another factory and he did not receive any punishment. This is the only case of an open insolence I have experienced from the part of the Communists. Of course, nobody dared to open his mouth in the presence of the Communists. It happened at one occasion that somebody told the Party secretary that he has not got the money to maintain the state. The next day he was arrested by the police.

There were spies in the factory who reported to the personnel department. We knew pretty well who the spies were. There was one spy in the cutting department. Some of the good workers told him openly: "You are a dirty spy." Usually, however, we did not talk in the presence of a spy. If somebody was transferred ^{from} ~~to~~ another department into the cutting~~ing~~ department we immediately became suspicious. Most of the fellows in the cutting department got together Friday night for a drink. We knew each other, we knew ^{each} other's feelings. During those meetings in the tavern even the Party members talked freely. One member of the factory commission was a regular companion for our Friday nights. He always told us what he heard in the office. He hated the system exactly the same way as we did.

Everybody had to join the trade union. It was his own interest because of the benefits given by the trade union. The trade union was directed by the Party. We had no voice in it. The secretary of the trade union was always a Party member. The trustees were freely elected by the workers. They were usually no members of the Party. For example, the trustee in the cutting department never made a secret out of his attitude towards Communism. He had many difficulties because he would open his mouth at the meeting of the trade union. Once he was charged with sabotage and he was called in the office of the Party. Our Party secretary threatened him with jail unless he keeps his big mouth

shut. However, nothing else happened to him. The trade union was in charge of sending the employees to a summer resort place. The summer vacations represented another sore point in the system because they were not done in a just way. The functionaries of the trade union or of the Party were sent away every year. The managers ^{For} ~~workers~~ had a great advantage too. ~~From~~ the ordinary people, however, it was difficult to get a week's summer vacation. There were 80 people employed in the cutting department of the factory, but a few of them were sent away. I was sent away over the 5-year period only 2 times for one week each summer vacation. We ^{complained} ~~complained~~ about the situation but nobody listened to us. The plant commission made the final decision concerning the summer vacation and if somebody knew how to pull the wires around the plant commission he got a week's summer vacation. The trade union had a rather good health insurance system, but I was healthy all the time and could not make much use of it. The doctors were rude to the patients and if a doctor did not like a patient he did not put him on the sick list. On the other hand, if somebody was put on the sicklist by a doctor he received his salary as specified by the law. The system of old-age pension is no good either. Up to a quite recent time people over 65 years received only 430 forints as a monthly pension. Recently this amount was raised to 600 forints. It is still not enough to make a living

and they have to look for another source of income. By the way, the system of social insurance was used to strangle the private sector of the industry, the MASZEK. If a private barber had one employe he had to pay so much for his health insurance and old age pension that it amounted to another very heavy tax. Besides the trade union we had only 2 mass organizations in the factory. One of them was the Hungarian-Soviet Friendship Society. Almost everybody had to join it, but almost everybody dropped out after paying a few months membership fee. Particularly the young workers were against it. At the monthly meetings of the trade union the foremen often scolded the workers that they were not willing to participate in the mass organizations. The other mass organization in our plant was the KKK which did not have a greater success either. It announced a program and the young workers did not show up. The mass organizations had a shop window life. They were not filled with real life, with real activity, nobody had an interest in them. No wonder that they collapsed in the Revolution. There was a general discontent among the workers and it came out immediately when 2 people began to talk. The workers did not believe in anything the Communists promised them, because the Communists had cheated their promises so often. I remember one case only when the promise of the Communists was kept. At that time they promised that the price of the land will be

lowered. It was indeed lowered from 32 forints to 30 forints. It did not make any great difference. The main reason of the discontent was that after 1950 the average worker ate up what he earned and he could not save one penny. It is not true that the worker could buy motorbikes or anything similar. We could make a living and buy what was the necessity of life, but nothing else. In the average working ~~class~~ class family every grown-up member had to work in order to make ends meet. The family subsidy of the system is just as ~~poor~~ as any other part of Communism. They do not pay family subsidy after the first child. If a family has 2 children they receive 70 forints a month. The factories have nurseries or daycare homes for the children. For example, our factory had a nursery too and every worker could bring in his children; however, few workers did so because the general out-fit of the nursery was poor, and the kids did not receive the necessary care. The nursery of our factory was disliked because the kids picked up several sicknesses there. I did not sent my child to the nursery of the plant but to a private nursery. In our street children's a ~~children's~~ nurse got permission to open a private nursery for 8 kids. So we had a private nursery nearby and we sent the kid there. She did a good job with the kids but the authorities bothered her pretty much. They wanted to take away her permission. My kid was never sent by the factory to summer vacation, but the kids

of the Party functionaries were sent regularly. Once I spoke up at the meeting but no change came in the system of the summer vacations of the kids. In the summertime I sent my daughter to my brother's place who was living near to Sopron. It did not cost us money but we had to recompensate my brother. The Communist tried to develop the cultural life of the plant. A new auditorium was built in the factory in 1949 or 50. It had a stage and it was a rather elaborate room. It was mainly used for the different meetings but all other programs arranged in the auditorium failed. Dances were held there but without any great success. The turnout was rather poor. The old workers like myself did not go to a dance Saturday night. The young workers wanted to go to their own places. For about a year there was a folk dance group organized in our plant, but then it dissolved again because of the lack of interest. We had a theatrical group in the plant. It could have been successful but for the Party line. The people could perform only such plays which were approved by the Party and nobody was interested in seeing such plays. Our auditorium was often rented by other factories or groups but we workers could not make much use of it. When the Revolution broke out, it meant a great personnel ~~xxxxx~~ change in our factory. ~~When the Revolution broke out~~ ~~xxxxx~~ At that time we had a Party secretary, a girl who spoke up and said that I will sit down to a machine

and will work. So she did. She was not an enthusiastic Communist but wanted an easy job and so she became the Party secretary. She was unwilling to stand up for Communism in the days of danger. Then we came together to elect a Revolutionary Council. A good friend of mine from the cutting department became the president of it and we elected 6 other members. The chairman of the Revolutionary Council held a short ~~speech~~ speech where he declared: "We are not enemies of the Communists, but the Communists should not have any function." At the same time I spoke up too supporting his statement. As a consequence those few foremen who were Communists were relieved. Everybody else stayed in his job. Even the manager remained in his job and everybody got his salary or wages. It was a good feeling for one week or ~~xx~~ so. Then the Russians came in and the Revolution ended. The chairman of the Revolutionary Council escaped from the country right away. A few days later I too escaped. My main reason for escaping was that I had spoken up at the meeting of the Revolutionary Council. The other reason was that by that time I was fed up with the whole system. Now I would like to emigrate to the United States where I have many relatives. So far I have not had luck in obtaining admission, however, I think I would make a good citizen there.