

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: George Kozak

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: Fall 1998

Location: Edmonton

I was born here, just the other side of Swifts, way back in 1920. I've been here a few days. I'm one of the originals. That's why you can call me senior citizen. I'm not imported. I was born here, grew up here.

North Edmonton. Where I used to work, just the other side of the Swifts fence, they used to have a quarter section, not like it is now. The other side of it just east of there they used to call Industrial Heights. There was no industry there. It was strictly you plant a garden and eat your potatoes. That's about all we did over there.

Dad worked there. He worked for Griffith before Swifts bought it. He worked in the freezer there. When Swifts bought it, then he was working there. They used to shovel coal, used to burn coal instead of gas. He took the contract of shoveling coal, and shoveled 2 boxcars a day for the operation of the plant. They got 17 cents an hour. Out of that he had to pay 2 men. Usually hired my mother's brother, and most of the time they weren't there. So everything dad had to shovel himself. So he did that about 10 years or so. He came over when he was 16, from Romania. So did my mother. They met here at Swifts and got married way back in 1918. He was shoveling coal, had the contract to shovel coal in the back there. Mom was working in the trimming room, they trimmed meat there. You worked in a department. You might be loading things, unloading things, but it's referred to as the freezer. That sort of stuff. When they stopped, about early '30s, the company put in gas instead of coal, so then dad didn't shovel any more coal. So he was out of a job. Things were pretty tough for a while. Then he got a job back at Swifts to work in the pork guts. He was cutting hogs with a big cleaver. He kept the whole pork gut gang going, cutting them hogs. That was in the late '30s already.

Hog kill, beef kill, lamb kill. They had a chicken kill. They killed everything there. In the '30s we had some cows and calves out there. You brought in a cow and a calf, you walked it in. They give you 50 cents for the calf and told me to take the cow home. That's the way it was then. Out this other way, everybody had cows, chickens, pigs, geese, everything. It was all bush just like out in the country. 50th St. was the dividing line of Edmonton. So that was that. Dad worked there. Then they got upset and in 1937 they decided to go on strike. I worked there a couple of years later. They decided to go on strike cuz they didn't like the way things were running there. Some went on strike, some didn't. Those that went on strike stayed on strike. They never did come back. But because my dad was big and strong, they called him back. He worked there for a while.

They were trying to, but there was a union from the outside. So it never amounted to nothing. Some went on strike, some didn't. That's the way it was. In the latter part of 1938 I got a job there. You'd go down there to get a job, and 66th St. was all cinders. That building across from the parking lot, that was the general office. It was where the cars are parked now, they moved it across. That was the general office. So you went out there and waited in the morning so you could get a job. You couldn't get through for people waiting for work. Dave Cotton would come out, he was the personnel manager. He'd come out and feel your muscle and back and neck. He'd turn some away, those poor skinny guys flexing their muscles. They had no muscles, times were tough. He'd say ok you come on, not you... Take you in there and put you to work. Some guy they didn't like they'd call him in and tell him, we have to let you go because we have to cut down on the staff. He'd let you go and put another man in your place. These guys that are talking about discrimination now, they don't know what discrimination is yet.

I started in the pickle cellar. I worked for over a year, they laid me off. The war started, and they called me back. That year before the war, they didn't count that in my seniority. So anyway no matter. I was there before there was a union or anything.

I guess you'd call it fertilizer. All the condemned stuff was ground up, and it went for fertilizer. They also had a big chicken killing place and turkey killing place in the back, that they tore apart already. They had a lake out in the back there. When things were slack around just before Xmas, everybody was out cutting ice. They had a great big saw

sawing. The guys with horses would mark it out, and they'd take it up this conveyor. The blocks were about 3 feet by 3 feet. When they came sailing down there you got out of the way, because if it ever hit you that was the end of that. Everybody was there. Swifts was a good company to work for. They looked after there. Individuals were not very good...

You were there to work, so you worked. That's what you were there for.

Then after that half-assed strike, they decided to have an assembly. I was our representative to the assembly. They had these meetings whenever you felt like calling a meeting. There to listen to complaints. If you had a complaint, somebody complained to you, you took it up there. They solved it within a day. They went down there, notified the foreman, the foreman wrote out a pink slip, you went to the cashier, you got your money, and you could walk towards the transit. The problem was solved. Then up in the washrooms there were no doors on the toilets. The foreman come up there, walk down to the end. When he come back you'd better be pulling up your pants. If not, you got down there and your slip was ready for you. There was no coffee time, there was no rest period. The whistle blew twice, 5 to 7 you gotta get on the job, 7 o'clock you gotta be working. You worked and worked until the boss told you to go for dinner. Sometimes it was 5 after 12, sometimes it was quarter after 12. Five to one you're back again. You went home when the boss told you to go home. There was no overtime. So that was the way you worked.

The workday in theory was about 60 hours. I got 18 cents an hour. It was a job. Some people were working for \$5 a month in the country. You'd ask the boss for a raise. Okay I'll give you a raise, half a cent. You got a raise.

No, all the same. Unless you were the mechanical guy. I was a machinist. I didn't go in the morning for a job cuz you couldn't get in. I went in the afternoon. I was a big fellow, so they told me, well you come in and work in the plant. When there's an opening in the machine shop we'll put you in there. Well that was good – 46 years later I was still in the plant. So that was that. So that's the way it was. There was no rest periods of nothing like that.

In the beef cooler when I first started, instead of being straight they were worn down so bad, the switches were worn out. They wouldn't touch nothing until one rail with all the

beef came down on the floor. They're supposed to have safety catches on the end of the rail. If you were in the way and that came off the rail and hit you, too bad for you.

Knives, they give us knives with tiny guards on the. One of my fingers cut here where I hit the side of my knife up the blade and ... I had an awful time getting them to give me one with a big guard. I had to go to the manager for that.

You went to the nurse and she patched it up, and you went back to work. That was that. That's about all before the war. It was bad. Then the war came along and I went away.

When I come back they had a union in. It was the AFL, local 78. But it was a very soft union. You'd get into a grievance and first thing you know you think you've got it solved, and one of your guys says, we've got to look at it from the company's point of view. Then that was finished. The discussion was over, you lost. We wanted more of a militant union, so we went to the CIO. We got a bunch of signatures. It was a more militant union. I guess I'm the last one left of the guys that got the thing in there. We got that in, and that was a little different.

The thing is this. Well the company didn't care because of wartime. The war was still finished and they had contracts to finish up. They didn't care, as long as we got the work done. So we went around... We got this thing. We went to see Mr. Manning and presented him with this. If people don't care much for Manning, I think he was a very good man. He come up through the depression and he could understand how people were. He did very good for us. Any time we went up there and bring up something, we didn't get everything but we got something. He'd send you to Mr. Adams, Minister of Labour. First thing you knew you'd get this and you'd get that. Sick pay and stuff, rest periods, we were fighting for that. A lot of things, he says, I can't make them do that, but we won't oppose you.

We used to have meetings in the old fire hall. It was across from the Alberta Hotel on 99th St. upstairs. Sometimes there were 5 at a meeting, sometimes less. But no matter. They decided for the company forced us into a strike in 1947. They figured there's not many people, people are not interested in that, so they wouldn't bother backing a strike. But everybody came out. There were 5 or 6 guys that went back in to work. After a day the superintendent called them in and told them to go home. He said they can't operate a plant on 4 or 5 guys. And he says, we don't want any trouble. We were concerned about

these older guys that had been working there for 30 years. They didn't know how to read or write. We were concerned about them losing their jobs. We made mistake. When they went on picket line, ... they carried canes, pieces of poplar. I don't think I would've cared to try and get in. They were very good. That was settled.

What were the main issues at the time?

It was wages, conditions, holidays. But mostly wages and conditions.

Slippery floors, improve the rails, better conditions on the docks. The dock was wide open and the blizzards come through there in the wintertime. The complaint was ammonia pipe breaking, filling it up with ammonia. Things like that. Holidays, shorter hours so people would have more time to themselves. And money of course. That was the main issues.

... All the people were good. They were all depression people. That's why it was a good union. ... I don't know the guy on the other end of the plant, but if he's got a problem I'm willing to walk out for him. There was a lot of cohesion there, one would stick up for another. We had a president after that strike, Jim Sessford. He's the one who started the whole thing. You had a complaint, he'd drop his knives in the vestibule there and his apron down the steps, and he's in the superintendent's office. You so and so, what do you think you're doing? Fix everything up. He was such a thorn in their side that they created a department for him to go over and gather bones from all over the butcher shop and get him out. Then Solmanson came along, he was another one of us. Same thing. He'd cause them trouble. They made him a foreman. Then everybody looked around, I want to be a president because I want to be a foreman. But they got the wrong idea. Anything the company wanted, they'd take the company's side thinking they were going to get a better job. But you know as well as I do that if you do a good job, I'm not going to promote you because you're doing a good job. Why should I train somebody else? So the union was good. First of all, when I came back from the war, people looked down on you because you worked in a packing plant. But through our union and stuff, we ended up in the best paid job in the city. Pretty soon everybody wanted to work in a packing plant. Then they made the mistake, which I was against all the time and I'm still against. They decided that they were going to go into politics. So they came along with the NDP. The next time we

went to see Mr. Manning he said, go and see your party. That's what I was afraid of all the time, and I kept telling them that sooner or later that's going to happen. At least we got something. But when this came along, that's where we were. Then again, once you're a working man associated with the government, you become a communist. They call you communists. Although they didn't know what communist was. They said Russia is a communist country. But Russia was the biggest capitalist country in the world. Because a few people wanted to run the place, and everybody worked for them. Once they start to back up a political party, things start to go down.

When I came back I went in the beef cooler. They wanted me down in the pickle cellar and I said, no I'm going back to the army. I came back early, before everybody else did. I volunteered for Japan like a stupid fool. They sent a bunch of us back early. When we got back here VJ day came along. So we didn't go no place. So the company called me back. I said I'll go back to the army, I don't want to work in the pickle cellars.

They used to have Wilshersheizer hog. It's pigs the size of hogs, and they'd pickle them. They'd pump pickle into them, then they'd throw them in the vat for a week. Then they'd take them out of there, bundle them up, and send them to Europe. I used to pickle that up and load them into things, send them upstairs to be bundled up. Wet, wet, you're in the wet all the time. So they sent me up in the beef cooler. Sent me up to the beef boning. Then they called and put me into beef cooler. I enjoyed that better. You lift sides of beef and stuff. That was that. When I was young, the beef was smaller. Then they got these exotic breeds. Over 40 some years they get bigger and bigger beef. They had a 430 lb front of beef there when I left. The sides of beef weren't that heavy in the old days. But then I was old already. Of course I didn't do much more my last few years anyway, because I ended up being a calf skinner. And I worked in the office for a while. I boned and cut beef. But mostly I liked to work in the beef cooler. I was the oldest man there. They started to put new foreman in and they didn't know nothing. Anybody want to learn anything, they sent him to me. I didn't do too bad the last few years.

Everything went by seniority. I'd always get into an argument with them guys. They'd come up and we'd sit in the office there. They'd say, so and so isn't doing as much work as this guy is. I'd say, no I believe this. As long as the guy makes the effort. You've got a

big man and a small man. But if they put the same amount of effort, they should get paid the same. But they didn't see it that way. Who was I to quibble?

No it came before. The last years of the war. We worked our way up, then after the strike came back. Day by day. Until '82 and '83.

There was. They were improving everything and adding on and changing everything. They tried to put machines in to skin the beef. They tried to skin the calves. But it ended up that I skinned the calves in about a minute longer than the machine could. But then you put two men on the machine, and I was alone. So then they took the machine out. I was good at that, even if I say so myself.

Tattooing? No, not me.

After the strike and they went into politics, the union started to deteriorate. After 1947 strike, Tommy Dane, he used to be my foreman in the pickle cellar, then he got to be the head man for all of Canada. He'd come down, visit the plant. He'd come talk to me as if we were old buddies. He said, there won't never be another strike at Swifts. He said, whatever Canada Packers give you we'll give you. So that was fine. But then one year there Canada Packers fooled Swifts. They said everybody was going out, so Swifts went out. That was the last strike Swifts had. Canada Packers didn't.

In the beginning we negotiated here for our own plant. But then after that they negotiated down east. What they decided, you abide by.

Oh ya, after that we got longer holidays, shorter weeks. Coffee time, dinnertime, stuff like that. The last strike that Swifts had, I was down at their office one time and asked them how things are. Okay. The plant is still working? Anybody in the plant? He says, only the maintenance people. That upset me. So I told him, how about these young people, they got kids and stuff to raise, they're on strike. But you're worrying about Swifts beef and pork not freezing? Call them out, I want them out. Whether they called them out or not, I don't know. But in 2 days the strike was settled. I don't know if it did any good or not. There was only 2 strikes in Swifts. '47 and this other one. Then Pocklington took it over. I couldn't take him. He brought a bunch of his guys in. You'd be

working and 5 minutes before the hour they were all gone. Where the devil are they? One time I was up the stairs and see they're smoking. Every hour on the hour they're gone. They put in a bunch of young kids. They didn't know a thing about it, but they're foremen. They started to get all excited so I told them, give me my pension. And I left. But to work for Swifts, it was good in my time. It was a different type of people, those people that came up through the depression. Although they were the management, if you went to them and explained things, they'd listen to you. These other young people, no they couldn't be bothered. So I packed her in.

When they had this strike over here against Gainers, Swifts would never have allowed that. But we had good relations with the company. There was no hate or anything. You had a problem, you went to solve it. You know you had to work. They tried to make it as easy as they could for you.

Most of them did, yes. After you worked, you went your way. It wasn't a case like we're all one gang together. If you had a problem in the plant, the whole plant would back you up. But as far as on your own time, you were your own. When you're young you think you can do everything. Now you're old and sit back and say, it was all for nothing. All for nothing. Maybe it helped a little, but who knows?

I was fortunate. On account of my dad I got a lot of privileges I wouldn't have had. When my dad was shoveling coal there was a bunch of young fellows and they liked to smoke. If you get caught smoking you're fired. So they'd go in the back, up in the boxcar to smoke. The watchman would come around. He said, somebody's smoking in there. So dad told him to get out of here. Dad was a big man, much bigger than me. Get out of here, he says, I'm the boss here. Get out, I don't want to see you here again. He had to be big and strong because they had to unload 2 boxcars of coal a day. His 2 helpers, being relatives, they didn't come very much. One of these young fellows was an office boy. His name was JC Peters. When it came along years later, he became the plant manager. When I cut my finger, I went down for a big guard. You can't have one. I went to see the superintendent,...I went to see the manager. He said, are you Nick Kozak's boy? I said ya. What do you want? I told him. Well why can't you get it? I said, boss and superintendent says I can't. He called the superintendent into his office. He started on the

superintendent and said, give this boy what he wants. I went upstairs and John Klinton was the boss. He said, what happened? I said nothing, why? He said here, take these 6 knives, go to the machine shop, tell them what you want. It was on account of my dad's good name that I got all these privileges, privileges such as they were.

That's true. When I started in the packing plant... Then through the union we worked our way up, getting high wages. Everybody wanted to work in a packing plant. Now I see it all collapsed. But anyway while I was there it helped a little bit I hope.

All the buys that brought in that CIO, they're all dead except me.

There was the AFL, that belonged to one group of unions. Then there was the CIO, Congress of Industrial Organizations. J Lewis had that in the mines in the old days. They were a very militant union. We appealed to them and they helped us, to advise us of different things. In Chicago they made the decision. I don't know who run it, maybe the Mafia. They said it was. So that was that.

The building, there's nothing wrong with the building. It was only the part on that end and the machine shop that were old, that belonged to Griffin before Swifts bought it. That was from 1900 something. The rest they added on. They say a 90 year old plant. No, it's not a 90 year old plant. Another thing they say is they're losing money all the time. How can you lose money? You take an animal, 52% of it is byproducts. You get that for nothing. You pay the farmer for the animal, the rest is free. How in the world can you lose money? But like I say, they say we're gonna win, we're gonna make \$100 million this year. We only made \$90 million, we lost \$10 million. But they don't say they made \$90...

It was very bad. When I was a young man, even then it was bad. Some of these guys, I'd see them on there. You couldn't get by 66th st, it was all full of people. This young small fellow came in with glass. He'd come up and feel your muscle and back. Like buying an animal. Ok come with me. You'd get in there, a guy working his heart off, come along, you come with me. I was in the office many times with the work I had to do. He'd tell him, we've got to cut down. Let him go. But he'd put another man in his place. Another

thing, if you had a complaint, they solved it within a day. No problem at all, just tell them. They give you a pink slip, you went around and collected your money, and out to the Transit. Problem solved. Even did better than the union did. And there for a while the companies used to say it's a good idea to have a union. Because we have a complaint, we go to one man, not bother with the whole plant. But the union went haywire because when they started to go to these conventions and started spending money on stuff that had nothing to do with the welfare of the people at all. As long as they kept the welfare of the people in mind and worked for the people, it would've been a real good union. But then, like I say, our union dues at first were 50 cents a month. Where could you go for 50 cents a month? When they went into politics, that finished it. We went a man to the government. People thought, oh we did a great thing. He got elected. We went to him with a problem. You know, he says, you guys don't understand. My heart is with you but my hands are tied, I can't do nothing. He didn't get elected again. But Ernest Manning was a good man. He understood poor people. Like he said, I can't give you everything. We'd present a brief to him. He said, I can't give you everything, but I can give you something. Then he'd refer you to Mr. Adams. He'd chat with you and as soon as you said Mr. Manning said it's okay, then it was alright. People say he was no good, but he was a good man for the poor people. Now what you got in there is a terrible man. Any other questions you'd like to discuss?

People talk about discrimination and stuff. They don't know what they're talking about. I was the top student at the technical school, and industry used to ask for the top. Send me to the city waterworks. Got down there once, the place was used up. Two weeks later they sent me again. They said change your name, work on Monday. In them days that was that. A lot of the young people changed their names to get jobs. We have one fellow in Swifts, Phillips. His name is Fillupchuck. He's Ukrainian. I grew up among Ukrainians so I can talk a bit of Ukrainian. He said, I can't understand you. What's the matter George? You're Ukrainian. He said ya, but don't say nothing. And the boys I grew up with, most of them you don't dare call them names in Ukrainian. They got English names, but they had to get jobs. That's the way it was in the '30s. You grabbed what you could.

That's why I ended up in a packing house. But like I say, people always have to eat. But now they don't have to eat anymore

Just about everybody was Ukrainian in the plant. The management was Swedes. Old Gus Swift was Swede. They had Swede, Norwegian, Danes, they had the preference. Until the war came along. Then they had no more to make foreman, so they started making anybody foreman. But the foreman knew what he was doing. When Gainers came in and Pocklington, he put his young fellows to be in charge. They didn't know one end of the thing from another. The last grievance I had there, I was working with the grader for about 40 years, I was grading beef then. They took me off that job so I put in a grievance. Not that it makes that much difference one way or the other. Got it up as far as the superintendent's office grievance committee. One young fellow started to talk. I asked him who he was. I said, how many sides of beef have you lifted in your life? He said none. I said, keep your mouth shut, you don't know what you're talking about. When he met me in the hall he called me Mr. Kozak. But that's just a humorous incident. When it was all over he said, ok go back on your job. I said fine, give me my pension, I'm all through. So they were upset because I didn't go earlier. Now I'm an old man, all I can do is go fishing. Hope I don't catch anything, cuz I'd have to clean it. That's after you spend your life in a packing house. So I've lived through it all. Good times, bad times, the war, good times again, bad times. Sickness, everything else. One thing we got sick pay, we fought for that. We got that. That's a benefit. And the fact that you can go to the washroom without getting fired. Coffee time, 40 hour week. It was 45 then 44. Well it was 60, there was no limit before the war. Then 40, that's when we took up with Manning. He said, we can't force it but we won't oppose it. Guaranteed time is another one we put in. Increase in wages. More holidays. The main thing bad was breaking ammonia pipes, flooding the place with ammonia in the colder places. That was bad to work in there. Then in later years they told you get out, don't go in there anymore. Had it been before, you'd have to go and work. That's the beginning and the end.