

A VIOLENT BEGINNING

JUST how basic a basic industry is was brought home to me one May morning in 1929. I was five years old and neighbors had a few moments before cut down my father's body from a limb of a cherry tree in the backyard of our home in Kingston, Pennsylvania. A Lithuanian immigrant, my father had brought his family to this northeastern Pennsylvania coal region town where he could work the mines.

But the mines fell a victim to the Depression, and, at age thirty-nine, my father fell along with them, defeated in spirit and weakened in body by the coal damage to his lungs. His sole hope, my distraught mother told her children, was that his \$200 insurance policy would enable us to join relatives who had settled near Bethlehem, where lay the mecca of Bethlehem Steel, fulfiller of a need so basic that it would forever provide employment to those fortunate enough to be hired.

The relatives who took us in were, alas, not much more

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fortunate than we, but from their wooden porch we were at least in sight of steel country. At night we could even see the horizon light up as flames shot into the sky from the blast furnaces at the Bethlehem plant some twenty miles away.

For us, and for thousands of others, those flames meant the hope of a paycheck. When my mother's new husband moved us closer to the city, I learned how a job at "the Steel" was highly coveted even though, for the men, it often meant brutal working conditions. If a daughter was taken on in the office, the family was indeed well blessed.

My brother landed a job in the Bethlehem steel plant as soon as he became of age. I was considered less lucky. I was hired by the city's daily newspaper after high school, and early in 1941 became a night reporter on the draft-depleted news staff of the Bethlehem *Globe-Times*.

To a newcomer, Bethlehem had all the characteristics of smokestack America. Clouds of smoke puffed incessantly from the five-mile-long complex of blast furnaces, open hearths, forges, coke works, and varied mills where twenty-one thousand workers made steel, shaped steel, and shipped steel in forms ranging from five-hundred-ton generator shafts to lightweight building angles you could lift with a finger.

But in a short time, I discovered it was the people in this city of seventy thousand that gave it character. Settled in 1741 by the Moravians, a peace-loving Christian sect, Bethlehem originally was a tight, church-controlled community. Then, during the industrial revolution, waves of immigrants poured in when iron foundries were built and the Lehigh Valley Railroad linked the coal regions to the north and west with metropolitan markets in New York and Philadelphia.

Many evidences of this legacy can be seen in Bethlehem. A handsome complex of preserved and restored buildings from the early Moravian settlement has become the town centerpiece. The impressive campus of Lehigh University, meanwhile, is a living tribute to Asa Packer, the Lehigh Valley Railroad pioneer who founded the school.

The middle Europeans who came to work in the mills

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added their own special touches—as you discover by visiting the row homes of their descendants. Many stalwart housewives still sweep their sidewalks early in the morning. And nearly all the backyards contain a plot of black, mulched soil. In summer each yard overflows with flowers and vegetables, and is often bordered with an arbor of trained grapevines under which a family can sit in the shade.

The dull red dust that escaped from fired-up open hearths was nearly always evident on the windowsills, but was not as repulsive as a visitor might imagine. When I first came to town, the depth of the dust on the window ledges used to be an indication of how much steel the mills were producing, and how much overtime the men were earning. Old-timers insist they could tell from a glance how fat or lean the next paychecks were likely to be.

As the home office of Bethlehem Steel, the city always had a generous mix of white-collar workers. The steel company attracted people who gladly supported the Bach Choir, who restored and lived in regal old Germanic homes built by the founding Moravians, and who patronized the steady fare of cultural and athletic events at Lehigh University and Moravian College, both located within the city.

There also was an opulence about the Saucon Valley Country Club, the lush, steel-subsidized sanctuary that grew to fifty-four championship holes of golf, plus a six-hole practice course, and enabled steel executives to reserve secluded villas well removed from the central clubhouse for private drinking and dancing. Naturally, there was plenty of town gossip about these activities, and never a shortage of people seeking the right introductions to break in.

But Bethlehem was also a scarred city in 1941. The industry that had changed it from a quiet, church-owned community into an important manufacturing center was caught in the turmoil of labor unrest. Bethlehem Steel had become a major target of the union movement that began organizing basic industries after the National Labor Relations Act was passed in 1937.

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The union's efforts to gain a foothold at Bethlehem Steel began on June 12, 1936, when twelve trade unionists met in Pittsburgh and founded the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). Philip Murray, on loan from the United Mine Workers of America (UMW), was chairman of the committee. Its announced goal was to unionize all steelworkers. At first, many assumed the effort would go the way of previous futile efforts, notably the violent, unsuccessful steel strike at the Homestead Mill of the Carnegie plant in 1892 and the general steel strike of 1919, which ended in bitter defeat for the workers. Those setbacks had established the steel industry as the citadel of business resistance to unionism.

However, two new elements were present now: the clout of John L. Lewis, boss of the United Mine Workers, who assigned top aides and advanced organizing funds from the UMW treasury to help the steelworker organizing effort; and the growing presence of the fledgling Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which recruited some 150 organizers from its various unions and sent them out to conquer steel.

Much of the nation was surprised when the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, the No. 1 producer that became United States Steel, met with Lewis and signed a contract without even a day's strike in March 1937. However, "Little Steel," which included all other steel companies and then represented about a quarter of the nation's steel production, vowed to resist. For one, Tom M. Girdler, chairman of Republic Steel, announced that he would resign and grow apples before signing with the union.

Republic stockpiled great quantities of pistols, rifles, and tear gas to prepare for a showdown, according to the LaFollette congressional investigating committee. An inevitably bitter strike broke out on May 12, 1937. It reached a bloody climax outside the Republic Steel Plant in Chicago, in what union historians refer to as the "Memorial Day Massacre." Police fired on a parade of strikers and supporters, killing ten and wounding ninety others. The plant managed to keep operating, but the bloodshed did not slow the union tide.

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If the unionists were going to be beaten back, Bethlehem Steel, the biggest member of "Little Steel," was seen as the company most likely to do it. Its home office and most of its plants were geographically well away from the agitators stirring the masses in the big cities. Bethlehem was also one of the more benevolent companies. An internal union, known as the Employees Representation Plan (ERP), had been in place for nineteen years, and Bethlehem had led the way in the industry with a company-financed pension plan for blue-collar workers.

However, Bethlehem's biggest protection against outside organizers was its ethnic workers, who valued their jobs and feared to offend their employer. They were not inclined to do anything that might endanger their chances of a better life.

Michael Skertic, now seventy-eight, his wiry body bent over from years of hard labor, was one of Bethlehem's fiercest unionists in that era. He became president of Star Lodge, the first American Federation of Labor (AFL) chapter organized at Bethlehem Steel, thinking every worker with a gripe against the company would flock to sign up after the National Labor Relations Act was passed. He found out how badly he had miscalculated when he tried to pass out union literature to Bethlehem steelworkers.

"They'd see me coming at the gates and would duck inside the plant," he says. "They were afraid to be seen talking to me. They were afraid of getting discriminated against. Afraid of getting a dirtier job. Afraid of ending up with no job."

About the only ones who showed an interest in signing up, Skertic says, were those steelworkers in the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs. Many of these were Mexicans and Portuguese working as chippers, the laborers who chipped defects from steel billets.

"They worked with an air-driven chisel," Skertic explains. "You moved it back and forth on the billet. If you didn't hold the chisel firmly in place, it would fly off. Some workers got hit in the back. Some got hit in the leg. You had no idea when a chisel would come flying off a billet."

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The pounding chisels generated dust particles that kept the chipping room in a constant haze, and respirators were unknown. Skertic continues: "One Spanish guy came in from the chipping mill. He had cancer or TB and told me the company was taking away his health benefits, ten bucks a month or whatever. I wrote to the health department in Harrisburg and got him a hearing. I showed up and dumped twenty-five pounds of chips, crust, and dust that the guys had collected for me at the foundry. 'This is what he was breathing,' I said."

The company decided to keep the ex-chipper on health benefits until he died, which was not long after. Skertic's intervention was much appreciated by the rank and file, he says, but it had no noticeable effect on influencing them to join his union.

Discouraged, Skertic went to the AFL convention to plead for organizing help. When the financial report read from the floor disclosed that the union had only \$18,000 in the entire international treasury for organizing, Skertic returned home even more dispirited and remained that way, he says, until help came from John L. Lewis and the CIO. He gladly abdicated his AFL base to join the better-heeled CIO.

Joseph Mangan, sixty-eight, a slight, peppery, leather-faced survivor of the union organizing days who became a union local president and a city councilman, started work at Bethlehem Steel in the coke works, a hellishly hot place where the air was dirty, the noise ear-shattering, and a misstep on a hot coke oven could be fatal. He remembers that his first job in the early 1940s was to stand by as a stretcher-bearer while workers "pushed" batteries of coke ovens, which bake coal into the coke that fuels blast furnaces.

"The heat goes up to 190 degrees when they push an oven. A guy wearing wooden shoes walks on the roof to open the oven door. A second guy pushes the coke onto a car, another guy catches it. They push thirty, forty, maybe fifty ovens . . . they push until they keel over. That's where the stretcher-bearers come in."

The hardship of those almost unbearable working condi-

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tions was compounded for many workers by the knowledge they would never advance to a better position. "Someone came up with the idea that Hispanics could stand the heat better," Mangan recalls. "Once assigned to the coke oven, that's where they stayed."

Mangan says he became a union activist when he found that newer employees who were white were being assigned to safer and cleaner jobs in the coking operations, bypassing such veteran pushers as Gil Lopez, a respected member of Bethlehem's Mexican community. When Mangan asked the foreman whether seniority counted, he was told all job assignments were at the supervisor's discretion.

Mangan persisted with the foreman, and his intervention did lift Gil Lopez, whose son later became a Bethlehem school principal, up from a hellhole and into a cleaner job at the coke works, but it was only because of Mangan's powers of persuasion. Seniority had no standing as company policy. In fact, favoritism in job assignments at Bethlehem Steel was an open scandal tolerated by the company.

"Jobs were distributed ethnically," Mangan says. The formula and presumed justification went roughly as follows: the Germans (smart) became the machinists. Hungarians (tough) were sent to jobs at the blast furnace. Slovaks (diligent and religious) went to the small mills where Slovak was spoken. The Irish (gutsy but lazy) generally got jobs with the plant patrol. The Mexicans, Portuguese, and other Hispanics (boat jumpers) were put to work where it was hottest and dirtiest.

John Wadolny, a spry, angular veteran of forty-six years in the steel business, reinforces Mangan's recollections.

"At the Bethlehem Steel entrance off Emery Street, there were about twenty small wooden lockers reserved for foremen. The men who worked under them would come to work with eggs, chickens, half a hog, and so on and place them in their boss's [lockers]. It was expected at the time. If a guy wanted a better job, he was told to take care of his boss. And he did.

"But the one thing that turned me strongly toward the

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union didn't happen at the plant. It happened outside. Now remember, I'm eighteen. I come from a good Catholic family. I'm working in a section with a bunch of guys mostly in their thirties. I was invited to a party at the Holy Ghost Club where they had bowling. What I saw turned my stomach.

"Two or three of the foremen were there. They were getting all their drinks free. The steelworkers' wives were there too, several of them really beautiful girls. The foremen would feel them up, right in front of their husbands. You know, fondle their breasts and everything. No one would say a thing. I thought to myself: 'Is this the goddamn way you have to get ahead in the steel company?'"

John Posivak, tall, erect, and ruddy, is seventy years old and a master tradesman. He does all the plumbing, carpentry, and even wiring at his neat double-story brick home in one of Bethlehem's middle-class neighborhoods. He risked his job for the union way back in the 1930s, he says, because he was making only 41 cents an hour working ten hours a day in the billet yard. He was attracted by John L. Lewis's call for \$5 a day and forty hours a week for all steelworkers.

"I started with swoc in 1936," Posivak says. "We set out to eliminate the company union. It was rough. [Bethlehem] had pushed us around before, and [now] they made it tougher. We couldn't complain to anyone because we didn't have a friend on the upper levels. What saved me was I caddied for a lot of the golfing bosses at Saucon Valley."

The sons of immigrants—the likes of the Skertics, the Mangans, the Wadolnys and the Posivaks—sought to change the workplace injustices that their parents had learned to accept. For years, they were the ones who passed the union word, urged and at times coerced workers to sign a union card, and risked jobs and promotions to achieve the organizing goals. However, the unionization drive did not succeed until the national political climate changed.

In 1940, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), a key agency established under the New Deal, ordered Bethlehem Steel to decertify its Employee Representation Plan. The

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NLRB ruled, in effect, that the ERP was an arm of the company and not a bona fide union. The steel workers organizing committee immediately asked that the company enter negotiations toward an NLRB election to select a collective bargaining agent.

The company declared it would appeal the ruling. The steelworkers insisted on immediate recognition. "We had four thousand workers signed up in the plant by now," Posivak says. "But the company wouldn't recognize us with a card check so we told them we would strike." Six months later, on March 24, 1941, after their repeated threats to shut down the plant had been ignored, the steelworkers struck.

During the next four days, I was appalled at the hatred that exploded in Bethlehem. I also became ashamed of the *Globe-Times*, the newspaper that I would someday run as editor. As ugly as the demonstrations were and as much a newcomer as I was to the business, I could sense serious inequities in coverage, and was soon convinced that the newspaper had become a willing company partner in a conspiracy to undermine the strikers.

At the behest of Bethlehem Steel, the city sent police in cruisers to protect nonstrikers trying to enter the gates. The cars were pelted with bricks and stones. Police responded by firing tear gas into the crowd. A police car was overturned, and several officers were taken to the hospital.

The *Globe-Times* nonetheless featured a company statement on page one that day, proclaiming that all men were working. A companion story ominously pointed out that the strikers were jeopardizing \$1 billion in defense contracts at Bethlehem Steel.

Pennsylvania Governor Arthur H. James ordered all state liquor stores closed, and the police shut down taprooms in steel neighborhoods. The Northampton County sheriff notified the governor that he could not control the situation with the men at his disposal and asked for state police reinforcements.

"Riding high on prancing horses and swinging skull-crack-

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ing riot sticks with abandon, a squad of state motor police started breaking up pickets at the Main Gate," read the next day's lead story in the *Globe-Times*. The paper now featured a company statement saying that the plant was running with 80 percent of the men on the job. A sidebar story quoted Rep. Martin Dies, chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee, as saying he had evidence that the steelworkers organizing committee was communist-infiltrated and that the strike was a conspiracy to halt the war effort.

Violence escalated as angry mobs overturned an estimated two hundred cars, mostly owned by nonstriking workers trying to cross the picket lines, and dumped many of the vehicles into the Lehigh River. Yet the newspaper continued to report that company operations were virtually unaffected.

A federal mediator, meeting with both sides throughout the night, settled the strike on March 28, 1941. An NLRB election was held at Bethlehem Steel in August, and SWOC, which shortly afterward became the United Steelworkers of America, CIO, was handily certified.

Bethlehem, the last major steel producer to resist, had succumbed to the organizers. Such was the humble and violent beginning of a union that would go on to win the highest manufacturing wages in the country and become labor's pacesetter for basic industry.