

Fred Panuczak-Interviewed By Dawn Salvato-6-25-84

DAWN SALVATO: Today is June 25, 1984. I'm Dawn Salvato, and I am interviewing Fred Panuczak at YMCA. May I ask your name?

FRED PANUCZAK: Fred Panuczak.

DS: What is your age?

FP: Sixty-six.

DS: Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

FP: Well, my mother and father came over from Poland in 19-- not exactly sure the date -- of 1908, and settled in Black Rock and they went over to Bridgeport. And we lived in Bridgeport until they had both passed away and the children got married, and we all moved to different areas, and that's it.

DS: How many people in your family?

FP: Well, there was, let me see, there was seven all together, and I had one brother that died early, and so there are six of us left, and thank God, we're still living.

DS: Were you brought up in a close-knit family?

FP: Yes, we were very closely knit. We believed in [00:01:00] religion. We believed in closeness of family and love amongst each other and helping each other, and at that time, especially during the Depression there, it was quite

hard to get along, but we managed to, and we all cooperated with each other.

DS: Did your parents come here for reasons of employment, or...?

FP: That, I never have found out, be honest with you. All I know is, they both came here, and why they came, I imagine it was to better themselves, but as to, truthfully, and I couldn't tell you.

DS: What grammar school did you attend?

FP: I went to Saint Michael's Parochial School.

DS: What high school did you attend?

FP: Harding High.

DS: Did you go to college?

FP: No, I did not. I went to the service instead.

DS: Okay. When you were in school, did you go to dances or plays?

FP: Well, when I was in school, I went out for athletics quite a bit, went out for a cross country team, the track team. [00:02:00] I went to a few dances during the evening that they might have, or they had [stem?] classes also, but I never went in for that too much at that particular time, no.

DS: What kind of subjects did you take?

FP: I took English, geometry, French, (inaudible), of course, and history.

DS: Do you know anything about World War I and World War II?

FP: World War I, I don't remember too much of because I was born just almost at the very end of it in 1918. But World War II, I participated in, so that, I know a little bit about.

DS: Could you tell me about it?

FP: Well, war was declared on December 7, 1941. I enlisted in April, 1942, enlisted in Marine Corps; went down to Parris Island, South Carolina, then up to Camp Lejeune and North Carolina; and from there, we were transferred over to the West Coast. [00:03:00] From there, we took a ship over to -- I forget the name -- Samoa. And we stayed there for a month and then we went to Guadalcanal and helped the troops over there during the attack from the Japanese down there.

DS: When did you come back to Bridgeport?

FP: I came back at the end of the war in 1946, in April, the seventh.

DS: Could you tell me a little bit about the Depression (inaudible)?

FP: Well, during Depression time, my recollections are the fact that we're running around with holes in our shoes, mostly, and we're going down to the coal yards picking up coal to

bring home to heat the stove during the wintertime, and everything was just plain poor. There was nothing: no work, no money, nothing.

DS: Could you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood you lived in?

FP: I lived in, that time, over on Nichols Street in east side of Bridgeport. [00:04:00] The whole east side of Bridgeport was a conglomerate of different religions as well as different nationalities, different races, and we all managed to get along pretty well at that particular time. And it was very run-down neighborhood, but very well taken care of at the same time by the people who lived in it. The east side, I lived in a tenement house, about 20 house, 24 families, which is torn down now for a throughway they made, and they had a backyard about a hundred yards long, I guess, and we, all the children, played in the backyard. And right across from us was a manufacturing place: the Ashcroft Company, which was called Manning and Maxwell and Moore after that. It was called Dresser Industries when they moved to Stratford. On the other side, there was the Metropolitan Body Shop, Frisbee Pie Company up further down the street, and there was also a state trade school up on the corner of Pulaski -- and at that [00:05:00] time was called Sterling Street, not

Pulaski Street -- and right across from there was the school I went to, which was Saint Michael's, and... Anything else I can help...? We used to watch people working in Ashcroft, then we'd come back and forth from school, we'd look in through the open grated windows there, and looked in and watched the people worked there, and that was that.

DS: What church did you go to?

FP: Saint Michael's [National?].

DS: What kind of activities did your church have for the young people?

FP: Well, for the young people, at that time, actually, there weren't any activities, anything. All they had going on in the school: They did have sports to a certain extent. You had recreation in the parking lots out there, but the sports, they did form Saint Michael's baseball teams. They played our, and different in the Holy Name League, Junior Holy Name, (inaudible) like that. But, as far as sports itself is concerned, [00:06:00] no. They didn't have any, as far as that's concerned, just the baseball team.

DS: Did you go to Beardsley Park, Seaside, dances?

FP: Oh, I went through all those places, Seaside Park. Used to go down quite a bit in the summertime, just lay on the beach there. It was beautiful. And we usually laid right

around in front of the beach house up there, which they used to have dances up in the beach [community?] up there. And Beardsley Park, used to go down there quite a bit, walked down there from where we lived on Nichols Street, and went down there. We played ball, we played horseshoes, and just strolled through the park. Beautiful swimming out there, up on the reservoir. And the other park, what was that?

DS: It was Beardsley, Seaside, or just the dances, [I mean?] (inaudible).

FP: And dances, we went through. At that time, it was little children participated in the dancing. I was still going to school, [00:07:00] but after I got out of school, I went to quite a few dances, and I used to teach dancing for awhile, too.

DS: Could you tell me about the sports they had in Bridgeport?

FP: The sports, they had quite a bit of activity as far as sports concerned. They used to have the junior leagues, junior city leagues, senior city leagues, and they had sports from all the different organizations going on in the city of Bridgeport. They would have all the schools participate, all the churches, and a lot of also sandlot baseball was being played down the Seaside Park and Beardsley Park, and they had quite a few teams going on

like that. There was always something to go into, and they used to play down the waterfront over in the West End down there, and used to play baseball out there, football. Football was played down in Seaside Park; football was also played up in Beardsley Park. And the other kind of sports that they participate in: They [00:08:00] had some odd soccer going on. They had ice skating and sled riding over in Beardsley Park. You slide down a big hill over there where they got the zoo now. You slide right down a hill into the pond over there, the reservoir, when it froze over. And same thing down in Seaside Park.

DS: Were there any sports for women in Bridgeport?

FP: Now, going back to my early, early years, there were none as such. As I started to go to work and all, they did start participating in sports, as far as the factories were concerned. Bryant Electric used to have a softball team for girls, Raybestos Brakettes started up at that time, and there was quite a few sports, mostly in the softball, not too much in anything else at that particular time.

Bowling, yes, there was bowling also, I'm sorry, and that's it.

DS: [00:09:00] Did they have sports in school, in school schooling, or just the --

FP: In school, not participation for girls. It was only more or less just gym activities and that was it.

DS: Right. Could you tell me anything else? Could you tell me anything about, maybe, the circus, for instance, Barnum and Bailey?

FP: Well, the circus, when I was very young, we used to see the circus down at Seaside Park, and down on Went Field down there, and Barnum and Bailey used to have their camp over there, and we used to see carnivals all over the city. Carnivals were over on the foot of Honeyspot Road and Stratford Avenue, used to be a carnival over there, and used to have a lot of those, all kinds of carnivals and parades. We used to go to all the time. Used to be parades along, starting at Bull's Head in Bridgeport going up through, down Main Street, up to Fairfield Avenue, State Street, [00:10:00] up to Park Avenue down to the park, Seaside Park, and where they would disband after activities at the different monuments, and putting the wreaths over there for the statues, and things like that.

DS: Could you tell me, after you got out of the service, what you did?

FP: Well, when I got out of the service, well, for the first two months, I didn't go to work.

FEMALE VOICE OVER INTERCOM: [Al Furbish?], please [report?] to the manager's desk, Al Furbish.

FP: I didn't go back to work immediately. I went down to Arthur Murray School, tried out for dance instructor, succeeded in making it, taught dancing off and on either for them or myself at the time for about two years, and after that, I was recalled to fight, that you go back. And see, my wife got pregnant. Of course, we had a child. I had gotten married in the meantime, [00:11:00] and we had a child, and then, at that time, they were going to give you your seniority [kind of?] during the time you were in the service. So adding the time I had put into Bryant Electric before, then plus the time in the service, gave me an incentive in that particular time to go back to work, to have a more definite means of support for the wife and the children. And stayed there until, for about 26 years. After that, I left there and went to work over on Stratford for Sikorskys, and spent the next 20 years there until I retired.

DS: Could you tell me a little bit about what it was like?

FP: Well, as far as what, work is concerned? Well, I was in plastics all my life. I was plastics in Bryant Electric. We did some hand molding, compression molding, air molding, injection molding, and when I went to Sikorsky, I did the

same thing; it was only a different type of molding; it was still in plastics. This is laying down fiberglass cloth, cooking them in the [00:12:00] oven, and that's the only kind of molding, or the only kind of work molding. I did work myself up to lead man, was offered a job as a foreman, refused it, and then time came to retire, and I just retired.

DS: Well, is there anything, any events that maybe happened in Bridgeport that stand out in memory?

FP: Well, if you're talking about events, you're talking about things that stuck out in your mind, yes. One time, when I lived on Nichols Street there, used to walk back and forth to Saint Michael's School down the road about five blocks away, and a lot of the children at that time had nothing to do. They'd try to get home faster, would jump on the back of a bus or a horse-drawn cart, and one time, a fellow fell off and got run over by a bus. And used to go around; I used to take a ride once in a while, even though I was quite only about eight, nine years old at the time. Used to be this laundry man used to take me up to Myrtle Beach in Milford, [00:13:00] to help him, just for the ride, and to sort the laundry out in the truck for him, and that stuck in my mind. So I got to know a little about Milford, where I eventually ended up living. Bridgeport, the East

Side, is my particular type of -- [have to be my calling?] because I loved it. I was born there, I was raised there, and it was a beautiful place to live in, well taken care of by the people lived there, even though there was a conglomeration of races and creeds, but still, everybody got together very well. There was no animosity, no fighting. You'd be able to sleep at night with your window or door open. Nobody would be afraid of anybody coming in the store; they'd be down the street. They had no grates on the window, and not --

MALE VOICE OVER INTERCOM: Donna Olson.

FP: -- like it is today.

MALE VOICE OVER INTERCOM: Donna Olson, please --

FP: It just about --

MALE VOICE OVER INTERCOM: Donna Olson (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

FP: -- broke my heart when I went through it a few years back and saw what a mess they had made out of the whole East Side there, because the buildings are half gone, places are burnt out. [00:14:00] They got bars on the windows of the stores, and it's such a shame, and then, drugs, and the Father Panik Village is another example. It was a beautiful place at one time. When it was first built, it was well taken care of by the people who lived there. They

had little gardens growing in the side. They had the curtains on the windows. Everything looked frilly and nice. Matter of fact, used to play ball right behind there, next to the silver factory over there. And everything was just beautiful at the time, and there again, like I say, coming back to now and looking at it, and seeing the Father Panik Village over there with so much -- what I read in the paper, even the police and the firemen are afraid to go in there now because of being pelted by rocks and everything else. And seeing it now compared to then, then, you just wonder what the reason for it, or why the difference in people's way of behavior, you might call it, as to how they took care of the property they were given to entrust, more or less, [00:15:00] look after. And instead of looking after to the best of their ability, you see now as though it was just torn down, and then they were asking for more help. And if they were given more help, they tore that down. It's a pet peeve of mine, more or less, which I can't dwell on too much, because then they'll say I'm prejudiced now, which I really am not, because I was born, we had blacks living at the time I was a child there, playing with the same people in the neighborhood over there. Used to be able to walk down Stratford Avenue -- they had movies down Stratford Avenue, movies down East

Main Street, movies down on Main Street, further down the street, movies all over the place -- and every place you went to, you weren't afraid to walk. You'd go in the movies all over, and today, they're all gone. They're all razed. The neighborhoods look like they've been torn down, and dilapidated, and I, I can't honestly say it's the city. I cannot, because I think a person makes a place what they are themselves. If they're...have any pride in themselves and the neighborhood, [00:16:00] they'll take care of it. If they don't have any pride, they'll let it go to pieces or even help to tear it to pieces and then blame somebody else. So, I know it was, like I say, at one time, there used to -- we were kids. We had a lot of fun. We were able to go anyplace in a city, more or less, and there'd be no harm done to any of us, and used to be able to go down Water Street. Used to be a place called [Evis?] Lane, and back of that, there was an Acorn Boys Club, or Acorn Club, rather, where they used to have fighters. And some of the best fighters came out of there, like Pinky Morris came out of there, went over to New York, and Boys Club, where I spent a lot of my time at the age of 11 and 12, and on Middle Street Boys Club. And everybody seemed to get along well. They all mingled, they all cooperated, and you never had any trouble that you would have as far as shootings or

like that was concerned. There might have been; I can't say, but let's say they weren't known; they weren't publicized to that extent. It might be that the media today is bringing it out too much, I don't know.

[00:17:00] But whatever it is, it's a crying shame, because people basically are what they are brought up to be. And I lay a lot of that to the parents themselves, because if the parent brings up a child and spends the time and love with them, that child will grow up to respect other people's wishes and also realize that they should be dealt correctly with. But if a child is left on his own, because the families are too preoccupied by themselves, or like -- since the Second World War where they had the Front go out and make a living because the people working during the war. And they got used to the materialistic things in life where they wanted more money, so the first thing you know they spent more time and money on inconsequential things rather than on their own children. And the people who felt that other people owed them something that was their cry: "You owe me something, so I'm entitled to it, so you should give it to me." And instead of bringing the children up to try to get ahead, they instill that into their children, and when they grew up in turn, they [00:18:00] felt they were owed something, and nobody's owed anything. You are

what you are inside. You can become anything you want, if you bother to stop and think and strive for something. If you have no goal, then you're not going to get anywhere. But if you strive for anything, I don't care if you're [coming dirt to meet?] or there's no such thing as a ghetto. A ghetto is there because you made it a ghetto, not because of the fact it's there. It became that way by itself. People themselves make a ghetto. I can call any place a ghetto. Look back to the argument of that, and you'll find out that the ghetto is made up through the succession of years because of the condition, plus, and the people put the condition that face themselves, that's what makes it that way. And it bothers me, because like I say, I used to be awfully proud of Bridgeport, being born and bred there more or less, and when I see it today, well, it tears my heart. And it's not only one side. It's not only the East Side; it's not only the South End. You got one of the nicest shopping places in Bridgeport there, if it was built, it was intended to be that way. It was Lafayette [00:19:00] Shopping Center when it was first made, but then your environment around the -- across the railroad tracks came over there, and people were afraid to go shopping, because they were afraid of being ripped off. They were afraid of cars being broken into while they're shopping.

Well, makes like that, like I say, it's -- who knows? I still say it's on account of the people themselves who are being brought up. The children, they're brought up with the right ideals and the right thoughts and the right words, and shown a little bit of love and guidance by the parents, they'll be all right. Otherwise, there's no hope for them now or ever. Today, a lot of the children don't have any hope, I guess, for the future. You say it's, "Well, we're liable to get hit by a nuclear bomb and that'll be the end of that." But, you got to realize, you don't look at things that way, because the Lord made you what you are. There's a future, whether in this life or another life, but what the Lord made you is what he intends you to be. If you just lay back and don't believe in God or anything, then you're asking for the other [00:20:00] alternative, hell, and you'll end up there. And you can say, "Well, Lord, I was brought up this way," or "I had no religion," or "I had this and that." No, you don't have to have religion to believe there's a supreme being. How else did you get here? How else did the first person ever get here? There is a supreme being, otherwise nobody would be here. So if you go along and believing in something, regardless of what it is, but believing that there is somebody at the head of all this, you're going to have to

account to Him sooner or later for what you were put here on earth to make use of. You're given the body; you bring that body back to Him in as good a condition you can, whether it's fat, whether it's thin, whether it's anything else. Well, that's what you make out of it. That's not going to condemn you, but that's what you make out of it. But you have to live up to the ideals and go, "Lord, I did the best, I did, with what you gave me. It's up to you to judge me if I did right. If you didn't judge me, if I did wrong, I deserve to be punished," whether it's going to hell, or whether it's going to in between, or whether it's going to heaven, and that's up to you.

DS: [00:21:00] Is there anything else about Bridgeport you'd like to mention? Anything you remember of anything else?

FP: Bridgeport, I remember going to the libraries all the time when I was young. There was another thing that a lot of the children can do today if they want to: go to the libraries. They're open. Go in there, if you have nothing to do, read your books, get the knowledge into your head. Another thing that bothers me so much is the emphasis on sports. Now I'm a man who loves sports myself, and I cannot see anybody using sports more like just to try to go to college because they're seven feet tall, and then they go out there, for a million dollars a year, they quit

college before time, because they say it's a hardship case. If they're a hardship case, how'd they ever get through the first two or three years? So that, to me, is just an excuse. Use that as a stepping stone for a million dollars, which I have no argument against, but as far as the children are concerned, they have to look up to somebody. If they look up to somebody here and see this man going through school and quitting after three years of college [00:22:00] to get a million dollars for playing basketball, and that man had nothing to show after that, no education, and after his years of playing basketball or football or anything else are finished, he goes, he can do is just sit back and do nothing because he has nothing else to go into, because he's only 45 years old or 40 years old, and he's already been beaten down to where he can't get a job anymore. He's going to live off of that money. In the meantime, he doesn't have any money to live on, because it all going for taxes or for anything else, and it bothers me on that basis. I mean, what else is there? Of course, I can only talk about Bridgeport. I remember going down through from Bridgeport, going up to New Haven a lot of time for a pizza up there, and going along the Post Road, which is only a one-road street, more or less, playing a lot down in the green over on Boston Green. And I lived on

[Arden?] Street at one time, and everything was well taken care of. They used to have signs up there. There was once one little building there that had a sign saying, "George Washington slept here" [00:23:00] in some such a time; it was years and years ago. I went by the other day. I didn't see the sign anymore. What happened to the sign? I don't know. That was something to be proud of; you had a heritage to look back on, and that's all gone. So it seems to me, instead of people progressing forward, they're more or less turning themselves back down then using the excuse that they need help. You don't need help. You can do it yourself; you try. People just talking about the fact of lack of jobs. I look in the paper, every day. I'm retired. Let's say, they should have hired somebody retired to take my place after I retired, and so many other retirees that are now leaving, but, you look in the paper every day, there's thousands upon thousands of jobs all over, if you bother to take them. They use an excuse, "Well, I can't get a job that's comparable to the money I was making before." If you want a job bad enough and you're proud of yourself, you will work for the little money you get, and then in the meantime, look for something better. And during the Depression, they should do now what they did then: get [00:24:00] the people a bucket, the ones

who are on welfare. Give them a little garbage can on wheels, with a push broom. At least they would keep the streets as a city clean, make us something to look for when people ride through, they will say, "Boy, look at this clean city." It's something to be proud of, instead of sitting back and saying, "Well, the unions more or less would fight against it, saying, 'The fight, that, well no, they're taking our jobs away from us.'" If they're taking away the jobs away from you, then why aren't you doing it? You know? That, to me, isn't an excuse. I'm a union man, I always have been, but I cannot see being so biased in one respect that you cannot see both sides of the question. In order for you to have a job, somebody's got to pay you. In order for that person to pay you, he's got to make some money. If he doesn't make money, he can't live on it; he can't enough to support you as well as his business. So he's going to have either drop the business or let you go. So it's all a combination of meeting together and cooperating. And if you can't do it, if you only see one side of the coin, then God help us all. That's all. And what else can I say? That's about it.

DS: Okay. [00:25:00] Well, thank you very much for your time.

FP: Mm-hmm.

END OF AUDIO FILE