

Autobiography of Oscar Neebe

I was born on the 12th day of July, 1850, in the city of New York. My parents went to Germany to give us children a good education. My childhood and school days I spent in Hesse Cassel. I returned to New York when I was 14 years old, and happy to be back again in the Land of the Free; then no more slavery existed, the bloody war was just over. I saw the sun-burned soldiers in their torn garments returning from the south, where they fought for freedom and liberty, and broke down the slavery of the black race to enter the slavery of the white.

From that period dates the time when a free citizen of the United States can work or starve in this glorious free country. After consulting my oldest brother it was decided that I should learn the gold and silver beating trade, and I entered a shop in Houston street, New York, and commenced with \$2 a week. I worked quite a while and had to give it up on account of pains in my chest (lungs). I noticed that this branch of business is very low. The older hands do not like to learn the younger ones. I don't know if it is that way in all shops of that trade. I only worked in one.

Horace Greeley said: "Young man, go west," and I, the 16-year-

old boy went to the Garden City, Chicago, but could not find work. After I had sold all my clothing and trinkets to pay my board during the time I was looking for work, and when I had nothing more than the suit I had on, the friendly (?) boarding-house keeper showed me the door and said I should look for another boarding-house, and I left. Hungry, I went to seek work, and when night came I went to a pile of lumber near the lighthouse and slept in open air. The next morning I went to the lake, washed my face, and drank out of my hand the water. I had 40 cents yet, and brought a loaf of bread and a newspaper.

Through an advertisement in the paper I had bought I got a situation as a waiter in the Lake house saloon, kept by Martin Keller, and later on I was promoted to bartender. I was treated by these kind people, Mr. and Mrs. Keller, as their son, and I never worked for better people. Here I had a chance to see and study the life of the working people. Mostly workmen from the McCormick Machine works stopped there, and many of them made good wages. I saw and heard how it was made; I saw that foremen received commission and royalty from the poorer workmen; saw how sneaks and spies watched every word the workman said, to report the same to the foreman, and saw good workmen sent away. Of course they were men, and no cowards, sneaks and spies, like a great many who work for McCormick today under those conditions, and are the first ones to stay like dogs, on the side of McCormick and others.

I saw the eight-hour movement in 1866-7: saw how bosses made contracts with the workingman, to break those contracts or promises with the aid of the police, and what profit did the workman have from it—none—more than now. Then they were talking of fighting about certain persons, of how high the wages should be, and the bosses knew their weakness and profited by it; the rich got richer, and the poor poorer; that is the tactics of harmony between capital and labor. McCormick's workmen know it the best; he gathered millions, is a millionaire, and his workmen got to be paupers and tramps, who worked and made the millions. Was it you workmen or was it McCormick? As it is with

him the same way it is with many other manufacturers.

I stayed with Martin Keller until 1868, when I went on a vessel of the lake as cook and stayed there and traveled the lakes during the summer. In the fall of 1868 our ship landed at Cleveland. I was tired of this life and left the ship and the west and went back to New York with the intention to learn a trade. I was fortunate to be an apprentice in a tinsmith shop. The owner was an excellent man and a good workman, and I learned the trade as tinsmith and cornice-maker to perfection in all its branches. Here I had the best chance to see in the tenement houses the life of the poor workingman, packed like herring in a few rooms. Many jobs I have done where it was impossible for me to take any money for work done, as I could plainly see that they needed the few cents for bread to keep the wolf, hunger, from the door. I knew what it was to be hungry myself, and when the poor wife and mother thanked me with tears in their eyes I was repaid enough.

One day my boss told me: "Oscar, I have a good situation for you where they manufacture milk cans. You can make more there than what I can pay you for work you can do. I can get along with a boy and I cannot pay you what you are worth. You can commence Monday." On his recommendation I started to work the next Monday. It was a new place. A new patent milk can. In a short time the business increased and there were fourteen workmen. We could make each from 25 to 30 cans a week, but some of the workmen were too greedy; that was not enough. They worked harder and made from 35 to 40 cans a week, and that was too much to pay a week, \$35 to \$40, to a workman by the company who worked said patent can, the price was reduced to 75 cents apiece, but the selling price was increased from \$6 to \$7 apiece. Now the workmen worked to their utmost strength, so as to make the same wages as before, and I told them they would, by doing so, reduce the price of wages furthermore. A short time after that the price was reduced to 65 cents apiece. A friend of mine, Barny Collins and I were appointed a committee to consult the company and let them know that the workmen would not make a can for that price. Collins and I went to Mr. Sheppard

and laid the resolution of the workmen before him. He laughed, and offered to bet that the others would work for 65 cents. We told him no. He offered us two, as we were his oldest and best hands, to give us 75 cents. We told him we and our comrades would not do so, would rather stop than to make those cans less than 75 cents; he went to one of the workmen and asked if he would rather stop than to make the cans for 65 cents. He said Yes, if the others would, he would, of course. Through their cowardice and breaking their word, Collins and I left. It was the first time I saw skilled workmen, who were wanted and needed, back down. It was in 1871. I heard later that the price was reduced to 45 cents. Mr. Sheppard got to be a wealthy man and his workmen poorer and poorer through the cowardice of the workmen.

I commenced work in another factory where they made oil cans and tea-caddies. That was the first place where I saw children from 8 to 12 years old work like slaves, working on machines; most every day it happened that a finger or hand was cut off, but what did it matter, they were paid off and sent home, and others would take their places. I believed that children working in factories has for the last twenty years made more cripples than the war with the south, and the cut off fingers and mangled bodies brought gold to the monopolies and manufacturers. How often has the sweat of a poor man or child paid for the silk dress of a kept woman of these men, whose only desire is "to have lots of fun and a good time."

I want to say a few words concerning the curse of piece work. I have seen certain workmen get four or five boys to teach each one a certain part, and paid them \$3 to \$5 per week, and they themselves made \$60 to \$70 per week. The ever hungry manufacturers found out and engaged children themselves, direct, and such workmen would receive only a certain piece or part to make, and where they formerly, in their greediness, made from \$60 to \$70 per week they earned only \$8 to \$15, and now they are regular machines, work like a machine, and have hardly ten minutes to spare and rest, or they could not turn out a certain amount of work. That is the curse of piece work. Look at the workmen who work in the tin factories.

They all look thin and consumptive, but it is the fault of the workmen themselves, as they do not keep together. How long will it be before you will not find a good skilled tinsmith? Women and children take their places, and what becomes of the men? Paupers, tramps and jailbirds, they will fill the prisons, and by their prison labor will reduce the wages of the unfortunate women and children, and that is the curse of the modern times.

My brother Louis had removed to Philadelphia (to the City of Brotherly Love), where he was born. I followed him, thinking to better my condition. Here I made the acquaintance of a young girl, my wife, whom I married in 1873. We returned to New York, but as my wife did not like it we went back to Philadelphia, where I received work. Philadelphia is a beautiful city (if you have lots of money to live with), but for the workmen I think it is the poorest and meanest in the United States. There the workmen are more in slavery than our colored brothers in the South were and they are afraid to belong to a labor organization, as they might be discharged, and put on the so-called black list; but they must belong to a building association of which are many at Philadelphia. The ambition to have their own home makes them join them and by their wages, where they hardly have enough to keep hunger from the door, they starve to keep up the weekly payments; but you see it is so nice to have your own house before you die of consumption, or after paying for a few years to have the sheriff take hold of it and some rich man buy it for almost nothing, and as I have said before, making the rich richer and the poor poorer.

I have seen in 1876 that over 12,000 buildings of these unfortunate workmen were sold that way. I say the building associations are another curse and it will come here in Chicago the same way as in Philadelphia. Go and ask the stockholders and they will tell you how long they have to wait for their money, so that the building association can be paid; some of the workmen I presume will not believe me, but wait, you will find the truth of what I say. In 1876-1877 times were hard like now, and when the workman does not consume you cannot produce. I only warn you, workmen, it will

not be long and the crisis which destroyed thousands of happy homes will be felt here.

In February, 1877, I went back to Chicago and got work at Adams' Westlake Manufacturing company and was paid good wages until July 1, when I was discharged because I stood up for the right of the workmen and afterwards could not receive any work at my trade. I managed to live through the hard years, 1877-1879, and many times my family had no bread. I often felt discouraged, but the help and assistance and cheerful ways of my dear wife, kept me up.

In 1879 I got a situation as a salesman for the Riverdale Distilling Company, selling compressed yeast, and worked for them until 1881. Then I commenced with my brother Henry, Peter J. Leng, and Rudolph Bohn, the Acme Yeast Company. Since I am in prison, these three have managed to put me out of the firm and sell yeast under the name of Riedeberg & Co. I had my route on the southwest side, and I had an opportunity to learn how poor the workman here is in Chicago. In the neighborhood of the poor nothing but poor material for the food is sold. That part would be a good field for our health officers. These storekeepers buy up the poorest and oldest stuff and sell it at high prices, and the poor also get cheated by short weight and measure, but they cannot complain or the storekeeper will sell them nothing on trust in books as they have no steady cash, as they do not get paid regular weekly in cash by their bosses. I saw mothers cry, as they had to send their little ones (who by right belonged in school) to the factories or stores so they could live. I saw a little girl who had worked at Lehmann's Fair for \$3 per week who had frozen both legs, as the poor parents had no money to buy good, warm shoes and clothing; they needed the money for bread. How many thousands of these little girls are in the same way working in the South side for these human beings? You expect to raise children and citizens for this glorious free country. Idiots and prisoners you will raise, and their system will be punished in the coming third or fourth generation.

I am a great friend of reading, and have been reading since I was a little boy, and have studied the history of all nations and the world

in general. I have read of the war of the peasants, the religious wars, etc., and have seen in the history of the world the judgment of the world's doings. I have read Thomas Paine and Jefferson and works of other great men. I was educated in the protestant religion and was taught to hate those who believed in another form or way concerning a God; my religion I was told was the only, the best.

As I read of the many wars and slaughters in the name of God, the thought came to me, what kind of a God that could be, who should not be kind and good and also almighty. As a boy, already many contradicting thoughts came over me. I read Thomas Paine⁹⁶ and I made up my mind that a God who was almighty and who would allow so many cruel and terrible acts to be performed in his name, could not be a just and a good one, and became a free thinker, but although a free thinker, I went to church, and when I heard the preacher describe how beautiful heaven was, I thought why not have heaven now here on earth. Hell we had already. I saw the sparkling eyes of the devoted, and how many poor, deluded workmen would think by the description of heaven which is for the poor; how his oppressor and slavedriver would be punished in hell and roasted, and all that for ever and ever. This delusion of the workman and promising of the glories of heaven is performed so that the poor workman should not think for himself, think that he might have heaven on earth, if he only wanted. Here you would be certain but what is behind the clouds is a fable. Here it could be set aside for a while if the pleasure would be too great to bear. In my 20th year I had cut myself off from all religious sects.

Then came the years 1870 and 1871; the war between French and Germans, and the murder of the workmen of Paris.⁹⁷ The communists of New York arranged a solemn death celebration in open air, but it was prohibited by the police, of course it was on a Sunday, the committee rented a hall and held the meeting. Here it was that I heard the first communistic speech and that all men are equal. I tried in my union to have a speaker, but the president said, we are no communists, we don't want to divide. I told them I had heard the speech and not a word of dividing had been said. I was over-

ruled and the union went on its old way and went to the dogs, through their more valuable employment of drinking beer and running one another down. The members all had fair wages and so they needed no union and no more meeting to discuss the labor question. I visited the meetings of the communists and joined them here in Chicago in 1877, from which time I took an active part in it until 1880. I have nothing to say about that as Parsons has said all I could have said.

The managers of the *Arbeiter Zeitung* reported in 1880 that if there was no money raised the paper could not be published, that if they were to publish it as a private business that they could borrow \$15,000 that way. The Socialistic Publishing society refused to do that and selected a new lot of managers, of which I was one. The business of the Socialistic Publishing society was almost bankrupt when August Spies was elected the business manager, and his doings and his work helped to build up the paper. The old managers and their friends done all in their power to destroy us. Many business men and working men will remember the time how certain parties (names I will not mention) worked against the new management and its doings. After the congress in Pittsburgh the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, *Vorbote* and *Fackel*, kept their work and designs within the sense and limits of the Pittsburgh programme and was selected as the organ of the International Workingmen's association. Often the remark has been made "we were working against the interest (*gewerkschaften*) of the Knights of Labor," but that was not so, we were not against them, only against the way these organizations were made and kept. Did not hundreds of our speakers speak to the workingmen to organize themselves, no matter in what form (as *gewerkschaften*) as unions or Knights of Labor, that in organization lay their strength? I have done my utmost to organize the Central Labor union and increase its membership and today it is the best labor organization in Chicago, with over 10,000 members. That is all I have to say about my life as a workman.

In May, 1886, I was arrested and accused of murder and sentenced to fifteen years in the penitentiary, but for what I have not

been able to find out up to the present time.

The man Grinnell, who wanted to make a new history of the world, told me personally a few days after my arrest that a few prominent Germans had told him I was a very dangerous man, and I can understand out of his remarks that these prominent Germans were a few German democratic beer brewers of Chicago, and to please them I received fifteen years in the penitentiary for daring to organize their employees. These brewers cannot forget that they have to pay their workmen \$15 more wages per month for only ten hours work, and should I have to be at penitentiary fifteen years I can still have the good thought that I have done my share to improve the condition of the poor workman and I am convinced that during these long fifteen years my three little children (two girls and one boy) will be taken care of by you. Doubly orphaned now that my poor wife was so suddenly taken from me—stricken down by the weight of anguish and trouble weighing on her tender heart—I call on all workingmen or working women of all nationalities and all countries to unite and down with your oppressors.

Your friend,

Oscar Neebe.

