

MartinezElizabeth\_19920722

RICHARD SHARPLESS: This is an interview with Elizabeth Martinez. 204 Rock Street, Easton PA. It is July 22, 1992 and it is approximately 7:30 in the evening. The first question is always the most embarrassing. (laughter) Do you mind telling me how old you are? (laughter)

ELIZABETH MARTINEZ: (laughs) Forty-five.

RS: Forty-five. And where are you from?

EM: From Easton.

RS: From Easton, you've lived all your life here?

EM: Yes.

RS: Did you go to school here?

EM: Yes I did.

RS: Easton High School?

EM: Yes.

RS: And when did you leave there?

EM: I graduated in 1964.

RS: Nineteen sixty-four, okay, fine. Your family from around here?

EM: My mother and father were from Nazareth, and when I was three months old, we moved to Easton.

RS: And what did they do? What did your father do?

EM: Well, my father was in the service, and then when he came out of the service [00:01:00] -- well, before he went into the service he was working in the cement mill in Nazareth, then he went in the service. And then when he came out, he had worked at [Federal?] on 13<sup>th</sup> street. And my mother had worked in a factory also. I don't remember the name of the factory, but she had worked in Nazareth.

RS: So, your parents were factory workers in industrial factories.

EM: Yes.

RS: When you got out of high school, what did you do then?

EM: When I got out of high school, I -- through my mother, she had worked at Strongwear, and got me a job at Strongwear Pants Company. I had started in 1965, in January.

RS: And you were 18 years old I assume? Seventeen, eighteen...

EM: Nineteen.

RS: Nineteen, okay. And what did you do there?

EM: I had started out where I was on the floor doing different jobs and things, but then I ended up working on a [00:02:00] sewing machine. And that was what I basically was on there for years, was the sewing machine. My machine was automatic. I had sewn the labels into men's pants.

RS: Sewed the labels into men's pants. You said years. How many years approximately?

EM: Well, I had 15 years in Strongwear and, oh, I'd say at least 10 years on the label machine. At least 10 years on the label machine.

RS: At least 10 years. How did you like that work?

EM: I loved it. I loved my job.

RS: You did. Why?

EM: Working at Strongwear was very relaxing because it was like one happy family, but I enjoyed the job because, one thing is I made piece rate, and I was making very good money when I was there.

RS: Do you remember about what you were making?

EM: Before Strongwear closed, I was making \$7.42 an hour on piece rate.

RS: On piece rate. And that was a good wage for that particular time?

EM: Yes.

RS: What else did you like about the job?

EM: Well, I [00:03:00] don't know, I just enjoyed doing my job. I just liked getting up and going in and just doing it. I knew where my work was and what I had to do.

RS: You felt management was very good to you?

EM: They were fine. They were very -- well, very -- I had no problems. If I had a problem, and I went to management, we

discussed it and worked the problem out. So it was, things had got solved. I never had really a big bad quarrel about not going to management if I had something on my mind or something wasn't working right.

RS: Now during all those 15 years, did you work more or less continuously? In other words, were there periods where you had layoffs, strikes, anything like that?

EM: The only time when they -- right before they closed up in 1979, we were slowing down with work, and then we were getting laid off, we weren't working steady. We weren't quite sure what was happening, we weren't sure if it was just that it was, you know bad [00:04:00] timing or if -- we really didn't realize the place was going to close down.

RS: So for most of that period of time it was steady --

EM: Steady work. Steady work. Forty hours every week and a lot of time overtime. So, we never had any problems.

RS: Now were you a member of the union?

EM: Yes, I was.

RS: What union was that?

EM: That was the Amalgamated--

RS: Clothing and Textile Workers Union.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RS: And how did you feel about the union? Did you feel that they were a positive force there?

EM: Yes. Yes. I was glad that there was a union.

RS: Why do you say that?

EM: Well, right now I am working for a place that is nonunion and I feel that a union shop you have your rights protected and your job is protected. And that means a lot.

RS: Did that union actually make its presence felt that strongly?

EM: Yes, it did.

RS: In what way?

EM: Well, if you -- well, like you say, if you had seniority [00:05:00] and if they wanted to put somebody else on your job, and put you on another job, you know you couldn't do that. You just went there, and go to your union representative and tell them, "Hey, this isn't fair, I want something done about it." Or if you felt that your [price was unfair?] depending on different things that you had do, sometimes your job -- when I had to put a label on, maybe I had to put two labels on a pair of pants and sometimes three, so I said, "Hey, I want a raise. I want more money. I don't want to just put three labels on and get paid for putting one on."

RS: You didn't feel the pace of work was too much?

EM: No. No.

RS: Was there a certain of amount of production you had to put out? You were expected to (inaudible).

EM: They really didn't say too much about production. You just basically knew about how much you should put out in a day or how much you should put out in an hour. You just got into that routine that it came naturally, that you did that. So, there was never [00:06:00] any qualms or quarrels about production. As soon as I started the job, I picked up very well. I had no problem.

RS: Most of the people that worked there were women. Is that correct?

EM: Yes. We had men but mostly women.

RS: Sewers, at least right?

EM: Yes. Yes.

RS: What was their attitude toward the company?

EM: They loved working there. (crosstalk) They enjoyed working there. Like I said, it was like one happy family. If you had a problem and if somebody -- you know, if I didn't know how to start my machine, they would be more than willing to come over and show you how to do it. You know like when you first start, there was no problem. And people would always bring things in for lunch; share it with one another. You know, if you got to know their family, if there was a problem you felt sad. You know, you want to

know if there was anything you could do to help them, you help them. The same thing with me, if anything went wrong they always wanted to know [00:07:00] what they could do for me. My husband had gotten sick and he missed work for a while and people would come stop by at the house; wanted to know what they could do for us and help us in any way.

RS: So generally a good feeling.

EM: Yes it was.

RS: You felt that way about them too.

EM: Yes I did.

RS: How about the machinery itself? During the course of that fifteen years, did the management upgrade the machinery? Did they improve the technology, so to speak?

EM: Not that I know of. Not on my machine, I know. They had old machines, but I don't think -- I mean, they broke down, but I don't remember any really breaking down that it was excessive, but they were old machines. Like I said, mine was an automatic and I didn't have too many problems with it, but when I did, well then I would have to get the machine --

RS: When you say it was automatic, what do you mean by that?

EM: [00:08:00] Okay, the sewing machine -- a regular person that sews, they call them single needle machines. You have to, you know, really work with that presser-thing. My job

on my label machine was, I just pressed the pedal and it went down one side of the label and then you press it again and it came back. So, I didn't have to do anything, the machine itself --

RS: You didn't have to guide the cloth through the machine.

EM: Right, the machine did it on its own.

RS: But these were old machines, generally.

EM: Yes.

RS: Did you think you were going to stay there?

EM: Yes, I felt that I was going to retire from there.

RS: From the very beginning?

EM: From the very beginning, from day one because they said there was always going to be a Strongwear. It would never shut down.

RS: You say they said that. Who is that?

EM: Well, that was our boss, Morton Levy, and his father had the factory before him.

RS: So this was a family owned company --

EM: Yes.

RS: -- that went back at least another generation.

EM: Yes.

RS: And you had no doubts that this was a secure -- [00:09:00]

EM: I felt I was very secure.

RS: What other kind of benefits did they provide?



EM: Hospitalization, I mean, if you went into the hospital and had a baby they covered for that. Or, any kind of an operation, if you were out sick or anything like that. So, hospitalization was good. If you went in and you had a hospital bill, they paid for it.

RS: I assume you had a pension too.

EM: No.

RS: No? OK, you didn't --

EM: They didn't have that. Did they? Did they? You're correcting me? I don't remember that.

RS: The union, I guess, had that.

EM: Well he knows and I don't know. That's terrible.

PAUL MARTINEZ: [What do I get when I retire?]

EM: Okay, all right. He got me. Okay. You're right. Yes they did.

RS: Did everybody feel they had -- that their future was with the company?

EM: Yes, yes, everyone.

RS: What was the average age of the [00:10:00] worker there, if you guess? Make a guess.

EM: Oh my goodness. They started out right when they graduated from high school. They started at the age of 18 and we had people that were in their fifties and sixties working there.

RS: And they had been working there for --

EM: A long time. I know people that had over 30 years there.

RS: There wasn't a lot of turnover then?

EM: No.

RS: People sort of went there and --

EM: That was it.

RS: Good pay. It was a good job. When did you begin to feel that things might be slipping? Turning bad?

EM: Really, in 1979.

RS: The very end.

EM: Well, when we went back after vacation, because we have vacation in July, the first two weeks in July, and when we went back to work after that, we realized something was not right. The future [00:11:00] wasn't looking well at all.

RS: Was something said?

EM: Nothing, they -- no one had really said to let us know, but we did see the work where it was slowing down. We didn't have the work coming. The cutters didn't have the work, and you could see inspection just gradually leaving. And work would be done, that section would be done. They would tell the people they would call them when they would need them. So they didn't really let us know that they were closing down.

RS: This is really the first time in 15 years that --

EM: Yes.

RS: -- this was happening like this. Did management explain anything at all?

EM: Nothing. Nothing.

RS: So you didn't have a clue then?

EM: No.

RS: What do you think happened?

EM: What do I think happened? The economy. That's what I think happened. People weren't buying our goods that we were making. People weren't buying them.

RS: The pants, obviously. Do you know who you were sewing for? What companies these pants [00:12:00] were going to?

EM: Well, we had some for [Norman Davidson?]. He was a company. We had some Geoffrey Beene. You know who else?

PM: Eagle.

EM: Yeah, Eagle. What was that golfer's name? We did some of his pants too.

RS: Palmer?

EM: I'm not sure which one, it might have been --

RS: So these were good quality pants.

EM: They were very good quality.

RS: Good quality pants. Do you think it was foreign competition?

EM: Yes I do. Yes. Because people, you know, make doing it cheaper.

RS: From where?

EM: I presume that they were sending some work down South, to have it done cheaper. That was what I felt, if they sent it anyplace else out of the country, I don't know. But I felt some of it was being sent down South [00:13:00] to be done cheaper.

RS: Or possibly textile, they were sewing things outside, like in the Far East, sending manufacturing there and [sending them?]

EM: Right.

RS: So foreign competition you would say probably had a lot to do --

EM: Big part in it. Yes.

RS: How did you feel about that?

EM: Angry. Very upset.

RS: Describe that a little more?

EM: I'll tell you, it was furious because there I felt, what am I going to do now? I mean, I had a family and I wanted the best for my children. I wanted to go ahead, not backwards. And I said, "What are we going to do now? Where are we going to go?"

RS: How old were you at that time?

EM: About 35.

RS: Thirty-five, and you had put in over 15 years now. So you were really angry.

EM: Oh yes I was.

RS: What did you think about in terms of working again?

EM: [00:14:00] Where was I going to go for a job making the money that I was making to help my family? I wanted both my boys to go to college. Where was I going to get the money? What were we going to do now? Because I felt, like I said, that I would retire from there. And I felt "Oh great, no problem." Because I figured back then what I was making was very well.

RS: So all of a sudden these hopes sort of...

EM: My dreams and hopes just fell. I was really a nervous wreck, upset, wondering what we were going to do. Where was I going to go?

RS: Did you feel the company was at fault in any way for what happened?

EM: No, not really. I really do feel that it was, like I said, because they were maybe contracting work out. Getting it done cheaper. Because our boss [00:15:00] Morton Levy, he really, that was his dream. That was his life and I'm sure that he didn't do this on purpose.

RS: How did he feel after you had closed? Do you know? Have any idea?

EM: Just one time, I know that he felt bad because we did have quite a few employees working there, and I'm sure he felt bad.

RS: Do you know about how many there were there?

EM: I would approximately say at least three, four hundred.

RS: Your husband said around 420.

EM: Because he had that Strongwear Pants on 13<sup>th</sup> Street, and then 11<sup>th</sup> and Gordon I think it was, he had Strongwear Slacks.

RS: That closed too?

EM: Yes, both of them.

RS: So, in 1979 you suddenly found yourself out of work after all these years. What did you do then?

EM: Well, I collected unemployment for a while and [00:16:00] started looking for another job. But, I wasn't happy with the job that they wanted to give me because I had to start all over again, plus I had to start at minimum wage. \$3.35 an hour at that time.

RS: That was a fifty percent cut --

EM: Oh yeah.

RS: -- from what you were making, practically.

EM: Yes. But what was I going to do? I had to help.

RS: Where did you go to work then?

EM: I went to J & A Dress on East St. Joseph's Street. That was a ladies garment workers. They made ladies slacks, ladies skirts, things like that.

RS: And how long were you there?

EM: Five years, and they closed down.

RS: They closed. What did you do at this J & A Slacks?

EM: I had worked downstairs when the product was finished. I would have to -- we made ladies slacks, [00:17:00] so I would have to put the belt on the slacks and then we'd have to put them in sizes and colors and bag them before they got shipped out.

RS: So you weren't doing any sewing then, right?

EM: No. No.

RS: And you were working for minimum wage?

EM: I started out at \$3.35 an hour. They had a union, the Ladies Garment Workers Union. Then when I joined that, then I did get my wages up, so when they closed I was making \$5.05 an hour.

RS: So you still weren't up to your 1979 wage --

EM: No I wasn't.

RS: -- and this was 1984-1985.

EM: Yes.

RS: What did you think this time?

EM: Really outraged. Very upset and very angry, because again the company didn't tell us they were going out of business or they were closing up. They sent us home for vacation at November, for Thanksgiving vacation, then they said we would call you to come back to work. They called us back [00:18:00] and we worked a couple of weeks and then they laid us off. So they said we'd be coming back to work right after the Christmas vacation. Well, finally -- they didn't call us -- finally, I think it was around January 13<sup>th</sup> or so, that we got a letter in the mail saying that they were no longer in business, they shut down. So I was very furious because I said, "Here we go again." I said, "Now it's another business that's shut down. I said, "Now, I started out, just got up to \$5.05 an hour." I said, "And now I have to start all over again." So, I was out again.

RS: Very discouraged.

EM: Very downhearted and very discouraged.

RS: Let me ask you something. Did either the textile workers union or the ILGWU make any effort to place you or the other people you worked with?

EM: Yes, we asked for placements, [00:19:00] or tried to go different places, but some, I think very few, might have found replacement. You had to travel out of town and that



was not for me. I didn't have transportation to travel out of town.

RS: I assume most people were in this position.

EM: Exactly. Exactly.

RS: So they were only limited help.

EM: Right.

RS: What about the other people you worked with? How did they feel about this?

EM: Very upset too. Very upset because, again, you had people that have worked there for 30 years, 40 for some of the people, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) so they were there for a while too. So, they were all upset wondering too, how could they do this? Where are we going to go? What are we going to do?

RS: Who did they blame?

EM: Again, they blamed that it was being -- they were sending the work out, [00:20:00] getting it done cheaper, and imports.

RS: Imports, foreign competition.

EM: Right.

RS: There was a movement afoot around that time to get imports restricted. Textile imports. Did you know anything about that or did they --

EM: Yes, they picketed downtown. Had a couple pickets in the circle.

RS: Were you part of that at all?

EM: One time, yes. We went down, carried signs.

RS: Do you feel it did any good?

EM: No, because the place still closed down, I was still out of a job.

RS: So that's about when, 1984 or '85?

EM: Yeah, '85. Right.

RS: And then what did you do then?

EM: Hopelessly went back down to the unemployment office and trying to find something again. I said, "Now what am I going to do?" I had so many [00:21:00] interviews with the people in the unemployment office and they were trying to find work for me with what I was doing. There was nothing what I was trained to do in what I had done in either factory. Nothing whatsoever.

RS: Nothing in Easton.

EM: No, what they did then was sent me to Avante Bedspread. And that's right here on the corner of St. John's Street and Philadelphia Road. Minimum wage. \$3.35 an hour.

RS: So you are back again to the minimum wage.

EM: I am furious. Yes, \$3.35 an hour. And I started there in 1988. April 1<sup>st</sup> of 1988. \$3.35 an hour.

RS: So you were off quite a few years?

EM: Well, I had -- when Strongwear closed off in 1979, I didn't work for a year. I was collecting unemployment, trying to find a job where I could make money. And it just got to the point [00:22:00] where the unemployment was running out and I had to just take what I could, and that's when I started in J & A and worked there five years, and I turned around and went down to Avante.

RS: And, are you still with Avante?

EM: I'm still at Avante. (laughs)

RS: I'm glad one of them is still in business.

EM: Well, I'll tell you, I'm there five years now and I got worried. (laughs)

RS: You got worried?

EM: Well sure, because I said, "My God, it's like five years I was at J & A, they closed down. And work was slow down here and I thought, "Don't tell me I'm closing this place down." I said, "I don't need to do this." I was very upset. So, now you figure 1988, I started at \$3.35 an hour. Now I'm in a nonunion shop.

RS: This is the first time you've ever worked in a nonunion shop?

EM: Yes. Yes. Very disturbing to me. I don't like it.

RS: Oh, you're very --

EM: I'd rather have a union but there's no way they'll have a union down there. The owner [00:23:00] said right out if anybody tried to get a union in here, he would shut the place down. He has the people scared and has them believing that --

RS: By the way, which is illegal to say.

EM: Oh. (laughter)

RS: But that's what he said?

EM: He has the people scared.

RS: How many work there?

EM: I'd say about 200. Has to be about 150 to 200. No more than 200.

RS: That's fairly -- fair size.

EM: Yes, it is.

RS: Apparently it's one of the last textile type factories left up here.

EM: Yes, as a matter of fact this is called Avante Bedspread in Easton, and they have a place in Nazareth, Lincoln Textile. So they are combined, Lincoln Textile and Avante.

RS: And what do they do?

EM: Up in Nazareth, they make covers, for your couch, covers [00:24:00] and bedspreads. And down here at Avante, we make bedspreads, comforters and drapes. Panels.

RS: And the work is fairly steady?

EM: We've been pretty well so far. We did have a slow period for a while, but it didn't last too long. It has picked up now.

RS: No imports yet, or?

EM: Not yet. (laughter) Not yet. Our biggest, well, our buyer -- who we make our things for is J.C. Penney.

RS: J.C. Penney?

EM: Yes.

RS: Okay. I don't know if you know this or not, but are many of the people who work there veterans of other companies like yourself?

EM: Yes, we have some people that have worked at Strongwear, and now they work at Avante. Some of the [00:25:00] people from J & A, when it closed down to went to Avante, and again you have workers that they have their years there too, like 30 years. Well, that was years ago called Shapiro's.

RS: I remember that, yeah. Well, I assume then that the average age of the workforce is pretty high?

EM: Yes. Yes, we have people that are in their sixties working there. We have a couple women that are like 62 and retired and still come in a couple hours a day to work.

RS: Would you say the average age is in the forties or early fifties?

EM: Yeah, I would say forties and fifties.

RS: Are there many young people at all?

EM: Yes, we have some young people in their twenties. Yes.

RS: Okay, I won't ask what your current wage is, but it clearly doesn't compare with --

EM: It's \$5.00 an hour.

RS: Five dollars an hour.

EM: Yes. [00:26:00]

RS: So you're --

EM: I'm really stuck. (laughs)

RS: You're really not back to 1979.

EM: No way.

RS: And obviously you've seen over the last, since '79, the last what, 15 years, you've seen -- 13 years, 14 years -- you've seen a decline in your standard of living.

EM: Yes.

RS: And, I don't need to ask you how you feel about this, I guess.

EM: Mm. Very unhappy. Very unhappy. It's sad to think that in 1979 what I was making and now that I'm still not up to what I was making back then.

RS: Do other workers feel this way too?

EM: I'm sure. I'm sure they do. I'm sure they do. There's a lot of people who are very unhappy with their wages. Down

here they mostly have a lot of piece rate workers and  
[00:27:00] I'm a time worker, because I work on the floor.  
And most of your time workers are very unhappy with what  
they have. Some of the women make good on their piece rate  
but they're not happy with it either, they feel the price  
could go up on their jobs. From just talking to them --

RS: So in general there's a kind of uneasiness about the wages  
but people are afraid to --

EM: To open their mouth.

RS: -- to open their mouths. Is that because there's simply  
not much work available anymore?

EM: At this point, yeah that's part of the reason. There isn't  
much work. And then they are afraid that if they do open  
up their mouth that they won't have a job.

RS: Do you know if anybody's been fired for that particular?

EM: No. No.

RS: So, it's sort of just a threat, then.

EM: Right. Right.

RS: Do you think the management would actually close down?

EM: Yes, I really do. I really do. Now management has changed  
hands, so --

RS: You mean, the company was bought by someone else?

EM: Yes. [00:28:00] Yes. Mr. [Sugarman?] was the top man and  
owner and now he sold his shares to another man. Well,

from what I understand there's three men involved. Mr. Sugarman still has some say in the company.

RS: Are they local owners or not, they're from out of town. Or don't you know that?

EM: Well, from what I understand, Mike Mitch is supposed to be one of them that took it over, and he was working in the Nazareth shop. And Ken Anderson, and he is supposed to be working for J.C. Penney Company.

RS: So they obviously have a close connection with J.C. Penney.

EM: Right.

RS: What do you see for yourself down the road, in the future?

EM: Where [00:29:00] I'm at now I see no future where I'm at, I really don't. Unless I would just try and put some money aside and send myself back to night school or something, to find some other interest to do something. To get a better job, more money, or something.

RS: Do you think that's a real, viable possibility?

EM: At this point, I think about it, but I'm not really doing anything about it.

RS: So you are more or less just --

EM: In limbo, stuck where I'm at, thinking what to do. Because most of your factories now that haven't gone out of business, that if you know somebody that reopens, it's nonunion. They just don't want the union.



RS: Do you think management has taken advantage of this situation to keep the unions out?

EM: Nonunions, yes. Yes I do. Yes I do because, [00:30:00] like you say, what's there to say if I stay down here 20 years and there's no union. If they feel like they don't want me no more, they can just say, "Hey, you're not doing your job." Or, you know --

RS: Yeah, you have no protection.

EM: Right, no protection.

RS: Do you think if they actually had an election the rest of the people would vote in the union or don't you--? People just don't talk about it.

EM: When you do talk about it, it is hush-hush and you have some that say, "Yes, yes I am for it." It was talked about at one time and at one point and everybody was saying, "Yes, yes," but when it came down to actually doing something or getting involved, they didn't back you up.

RS: So it's fear.

EM: Exactly. Exactly.

RS: Do you think this company is viable? Do you think it will last? You said a while ago, you are not sure.

EM: Yes. [00:31:00] Well, like you say; right now work is slow. We were supposed to pick up but they couldn't get the material to make the drapes. I don't know what the problem

is with this material that they are supposed to get that they can't get.

RS: Where did they get it from?

EM: I don't know. There's two companies they say they get them from, but I'm not sure where they get it from.

RS: So this actually may be imported material too. You don't know that.

EM: I'm wondering. I'm wondering. I really don't know. When they get it in --

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