

Interview with Italian Munitions Worker Charles Fusco, 1938

Living Lore ITALIAN MUNITIONS WORKER

by Robert Gaurino

Fusco Speaks His Mind

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES FUSCO, 86 Cherry Ann St., Hamden

I was born in the old country — Italy — 41 years ago and came over here when I was 3 months old. Things have certainly changed a lot in forty years.

I started to work when I was 13 years old with a shoemaker for 50 cents a week and left him for a job in a saloon for a dollar a week. When I started to go in the shops on machines in Greist Manufacturing Company. Let me tell you I had to learn. I had to leave school in the fourth grade. I guess you know how the old people was them days. If you was 12 or 13 years old you was able to work. But I learn to be a machinist working on die-heads, and assembling different parts of machines, reading blueprints too. Then I went to work making guns before they was over the other side. Then they started the war and I started to work on the Russian machine gun. This was in Marlin-Rockwell. Then America went in and we started to make the Brownie (Browning) machine gun. Oh Boy! when I used to go down stairs where they tested the gun I used to see before my eyes all those men dying and believe me I was glad I was not over there. Yeah. I was in the No 1 and 2 class. The government told me that they wouldn't take me because I knew too much about guns to go. When they started to make these guns there was a man from Waltham Watch Co. from Massachusetts and he came down with new machines for experiment and he asked the boss if he had a handy man around machines, and the boss picked me. They put us in a special room with these new machinery and we started to make the guns.

Then everything was set then the whole factory started in to make them. Everything had to be to the thousandth of an inch, not like now everything is production and cheap. I got 65 cents an hour and there was others that was making 50 to 60 dollars a week. Boys 17 and 18 years old. Which makes me remember that I used to kick to the supt. for more money and tell him I was going to get through and that lousy Englishman used to tell me that if you quit, Charlie, we're going to send you across. Finally I got mad one day just before the war stopped, I think 4 months, and I quit but got another job right away with George Griswold Machine Shop making guns for the government for 53 cents an hour. A lotta of people thought I was crazy working for less money — well maybe I was, but wait till you hear this — After the war everybody got laid off but I stayed working for over a year making lolly pops dies and funny things about the lolly pops was that when the war was on the lolly pop was small. The kids did not notice it because the old man made money, but after that the people did not have any money so the candy people had to make the pops bigger, so I made the dies bigger. Well, after a year doing that I left and went back to Marlin's. What a change! Everything they wanted in a rush, production

work. The pays were cut and if a man made \$20 a week he was lucky. To make things worse they had a bunch of young fools working who couldn't come anywhere near the old timers when it came to doing good work. The old men were a little slow but they put out good work.

These young guys and the girls all they think about is stepping out nights and having a good time. When work got slow I left and got myself a job assembling locks. I am a jack of all trades when it comes to machine work. After a while I left and went to Winchester to work on guns. I did other work in Winchester like seeking parts for washing machines, electric refrigerators, and when work got slow I left for Marlins again and worked until all the orders were filled and got through. I used always leave them in good terms so that in case I wanted a job back I could always get one. I can get a job today even if we got a depression. I don't mean that I wasn't on relief when things got tough because there was a time when everything was shut down and I had to get on relief for a job. It isn't so long ago I was working on WPA. Believe me it was a big help. But it wasn't wasn't the kind of a job I should have had because this town is Republican and I am a Republican and I was a good worker for the party — making voters and helping a lot of people out — getting their taxes rebated (abated).

Getting jobs for them. When it came my turn that I needed help the politicians told me that I had to go on relief — well, when I did I was handed a shovel and pick. I wouldn't do anything for the party anymore. You know today isn't like twenty-five years ago; them days nobody thought of politics and nobody gave a damn either. You take today the papers and radio are full of politics, one knocking the other and telling the people a lotta of baloney — what they going to do if they got elected — then they forget everything. Maybe we would do the same thing we were in their shoes. This time I voted Republican because my father is a strong Republican and I been one myself for 21 years. But I don't think they'll do any better. Roosevelt is a damn good man — you take all these young fellows and you can't talk to them like in the old days to swing them over. Today all these kids are satisfied on WPA and the NYA. My son works there and gets 44 cents an hour. I only have one son and believe me I am glad I can't buy him the things he needs. Where would I get off if I had a large family. That's something I don't believe in. One or two is plenty for any family.

The large families of years ago knew how to take care of themselves — they didn't live so ritzy and they were satisfied with the little they got. Today the young generation are bosses — if things aren't just right they put up a big squawk. The old generation stuck together more. I suppose you think I talk like a man who had a large family when I got only one. But I am taking my family for example and others who are friends of mine. Also you couldn't beat the old days for good times — you know I used to play the trap drum. I learned by myself and to get better I took lessons. I used to make a few extra dollars, playing for dances and in the movies. But it goes to show you when you think everything is running fine up comes some fool and invents a machine and it knocks every musician playing in movies houses out of work.

The Vitaphones put me out of making extra money night. The Vitaphones are good but the people enjoyed themselves first at the same with silent pictures and the music. When the young people go to dances they are not satisfied with chap music. They want Rudy Valle or some of the big shot band. Although it's a lotta fun watching the new swing music dances and music I still think the old fashion dances were better. You know there was something to it like the waltz. Today all you see is a couple shake all over and no wonder when they go into t work in the morning there [sic] in a fog, When IU was a young fellow, not that I am very old now, I used to have a lot of fun going around singing and to friends but you don't see that nowadays. I guess everybody just don't care anymore. Of course the depression is the fault. When the pocket book is sick the whole body is sick also. You know they call this a depression. Well I think it is a sickness that won't go [redacted] way. Ten years is a long time to suffer it seems to me that if the government wanted to stop it they could. Not that Roosevelt isn't a

good man because whoever get in there things will be the same old story. The money men control everything and the unions, most of them are crooked. Of course I believe in unions but most of them don't do anything for you when you go out on strike. And besides I think there are too many unions. I think one big one is the best. That way we are stronger and then the people with the money can't refuse. For myself I like short hours and good pay — not because it's me, but I know my work and why shouldn't I demand more money. I used to quite good jobs. You know what I mean, jobs that pay \$25 a week and that's supposed to be good pay nowadays because the boss would refuse me a raise. I'll tell you something. When I first went to work for O. F. Mossberg on East St., they make these cheap guns, I was getting 37 1/2 cents an hour and I know my business on machines and I was doing good work but the boss made one mistake, he told me I was doing very good so that was my chance to ask him for a raise and he said — “well I let you know.” I waited a few days and asked him again and I got it from 37 1/2 to 43 cents an hour. I waited a couple months more and asked for another raise and the boss took gas, but when he saw that I was packing and meant business he gave it to me. I was the only one in the shop getting 45 cents an hour — knocking out about \$20 a week. It isn't that I am independent but a man should be paid for what he's worth and I believe that is the reason why the poor people never get anywhere. They're afraid to give themselves a push.

You know this is the second time I am working for Mossberg and now I am getting 50 cents an hour more than anybody else in the shop. Of course there are a lotta Polacks and grease balls working there — and have been there for years still working for 35 cents an hour. Not me — all I want out of life is a chance and I'll take care of rest. When I was on relief I pushed myself around and got a job. Of course, this is my way of doing things and maybe I am a little lucky. Not everybody can get places — there's a friend of mine who sent his son to Brown College in Providence, R.I., and everything looked bright and rosy for him — but look at him today he is walking the streets and wishing to God that he had learned a trade.

It wasn't that way in the old days — I mean about twenty-five years ago. Education was on top of everything. If a person didn't have an education those days he was classed as a laborer or a shop worker but let me tell you when I started working some of the older fellows knew a thing or two and could teach the college boys many things that are not in the books. I believe in education and I always wish that I had one — but today the man who know knows a trade, especially a machinist trade is the baby that can get along. There are no depression for him and furthermore how many of these college students after they graduate get on the top? Let me tell you that when I was on the WPA I met some of these college men working in the ditches and damn glad to do it. Well, this brings us right back to where we started. It's just like a circle. Somebody is got the key and we're all trying to get out. Suppose we get out, then what? We get right in again. Because the capitalist almost controls everything. To-day if a person is getting along fine - along comes something like the depression or some screwy laws and down in the ditch you go. You know I don't want you to think I don't like the way this country in running things – because I do. Believe me I would rather live here on the pay I'm getting than to live in Italy or any other country for ten times the amount. At least I'm safe here and if I yell out loud and call anyone a name I don't have to duck bullets or get out of the country fast. A friend of mine who went to Italy on a visit told me that Mussolini done a good job in Italy but he said that he noticed that all the people there were tongue-tied and afraid to say anything for fear that they might say something wrong. Well, I say that if its like that, then Mussolini didn't do a good job because what good is to build a country and not have the people free. This fellow Hitler is the same way. Only in Germany the biggest trouble is the Jew. I don't know much about things over the other side so I can't say much except this that this country ought to mind our own business and let the rest of them go straight to hell. There's too much to be done here without fooling around with Europe.

The other day I was downtown and I was looking at the styles especially at the hats the women wear. Boy what a kick I get and the laughs. Some of them look just like monkeys with those small hats. What a change from the old days. I used to buy my wife a \$12.00 hat and it was so big that she used it for an umbrella — today everything is shrinking, even the dresses. I remember when I was young all the boys used to stand on the corner where a trolley car stopped and when a girl got on the trolley our eyes almost popped out of our heads when we saw a girl's ankle in silk stockings. How times have changed. Everything has changed for that matter and when we pass out of the picture there'll be more changes. You know I don't think all these things would change if it wasn't for these new inventions like the radio and a lot of other things. It seems the people just woke up. What I mean is that everything is brought before the people today. The radio, the newspapers and there are more magazines than before and even in the churches they preach about everything and I think its a good idea. Of course the churches always preach one thing that in important and is money. I used to go to church every Sunday at the nine o'clock mass — the early masses are the shortest — well I don't go any more because every Sunday it was the same old story about money. It seemed that the priest didn't like the idea of the pennies being thrown into the basket — he wanted silver. Well religion is alright and I'm for it 100 per cent, but when people haven't got it—how are they going to give? And let me tell you something else, these priests and ministers are getting along better now than in the old days. I remember when they used to walk to places — today they ride in big cars. Well, why don't they walk and give the expense of running these cars to the poor. I bet you think that I don't believe in supporting the church — well I do but let those of the church help too. My son goes to church every Sunday and I'm glad.

This other law the Social Security I believe is the best. The only fault I find is that a man has to reach the age of 65 before he can collect. Well, how many do? They tell you nowadays that a person lives longer — well they used to before this depression but, hell, today you worry your god damn head off on how to meet both ends and that makes your life much shorter. You see what I mean that this government wants to do something good for the people and does but, damn it, they put strings to it. Tell me how many reach the age of 65? Very few. Why the hell don't they give a person a break and say at 56 years old you should retire from work and enjoy life instead of waiting until he is almost dead they give him a few dollars a month. I think the whole shooting match is wrong. And unless we get the crooks and chislers out of Washington, we'll remain the same. Nowadays isn't like years ago. A family could save and there was better opportunities. There wasn't the luxury like today - not that I don't like them - say who doesn't like a radio or electric ice box and all the other things they have today? But you can't save anything and if there was those things when I was young the old folks wouldn't have saved either. I like to come home and listen to some nice music and enjoy myself. Of course some of these songs are as screwy as a bed bug but its good to hear them just the same. There's a lotta things I think are screwy. But its alright with me. Take the women of today, besides wearing those funny pots on their heads they look funnier with a cigarette between their lips. If they only knew how stupid they look smoking maybe they wouldn't smoke. Me, I don't smoke, maybe its because I never got the habit. I tried once before but I can't see no enjoyment in it. Drink is alright if you don't make a pig out of yourself. I like to drink everything - wine, beer, or whiskey, but what a change since they took the stuff away you don't know what you're drinking and even if it has the government label. Besides the stuff isn't aged enough like in the old days. The beer today is rushed right out of the brewery and into your stomach. That was a big mistake the government made with prohibition. They had the opportunity when you fellows were in France and they gave you the business. Between us two I don't think prohibition would have come if this country had stayed out of war. And here is something else I think the old time saloons were better respected places than the taverns of today. All you see nowadays is young punks getting a few shots in them and they want to show up the town. Well, the war done that and I suppose if there was another one there would be more changes. We go around in a circle.

Do you know that they ought to have in this country a lottery. There's more money going to the other side that they could use for the poor people here. In Italy today it is legal to gamble and it helps to reduce taxes. Almost all the other countries have gambling and I am willing to bet that there's more gambling in this country than any other. I used to gamble heavy myself and I still do although I've cut down and only play about 50 cents a week. I never won anything but I got the habit and I still play. Some people are very lucky they just buy one ticket or play one number and win and it's always those who have plenty.

Well, the kind of food I like is plain although some of our dishes are very rich. I like American food too but not to eat every day. You know there are more American people eating Italian food nowadays than any body else. Years ago when I started in the shop everybody used to make fun of our food. Today these same people invite themselves in - especially when it comes to spaghetti. I like it every now and then. But in other homes I noticed they have 2 or 3 and sometimes sometime 4 times a week. But I think its too much and yet most of the Italians are healthy especially those that were born over the other side. They didn't eat soft sweet dessert and coffee but good old wine. But I am satisfied with the food I get and I guess I look well as my wife is a good house wife and besides my family is small so that gives us more time to enjoy ourselves. You know we're always going some place. With me I like the shows. But I like good pictures with a wild west picture now and then thrown in. What a difference from the old pictures and the ones of today. It's better now than before. At least its more clearer and the talkies are better even though it threw me out of a job.

I think Father Coughlin is very good. And at least since he's come on the radio the people are getting more educated on politics. I don't listen to him all the time but when I do I learn something. Some people don't like him but he's got the right stuff. I don't know what good it does because when it comes to voting they vote wrong anyway. It's like everything else you can't satisfy everybody. With me well I am happy I have a good home and I am getting along good so why should I kick. Some people have less then me and they get along.

You asked me what I think of these unions. Well I said before that unions are alright if they drive the crooks out and besides I believe in one big union — whether its the C.I.O. or what they call it. I remember it was during the war it was the I.W.W. and they were a lotta bums. But the government took care of them. The draft came and all of them were forced to register and if any one got tough the government stuck a gun in his hand and sent him to France. You know there's always a lotta men who never work even in good times.