

HOWARD ZINN ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

Interviewee: Howard Zinn

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ABSTRACT

Biography

Howard Zinn (b. 1922) grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He began working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as an apprentice after taking a civil service test in 1940. Howard helped organize the Apprentice Association, which was an organization of apprentices who were not allowed to be a part of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions. Due to his work on the Yard, his family was able to move into a housing project in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Howard left the Navy Yard to join the Army Air Force in 1943. After World War II, he went to college on the GI Bill and pursued a career as a historian. Howard became a civil rights and anti-war activist, and is best known for his book, *A People's History of the United States*, which prioritizes minority and marginalized viewpoints on American history.

Summary

In this oral history, Howard discusses his family background and his path to working at Brooklyn Navy Yard. He details his work as an apprentice shipfitter, and working conditions that he and other shipbuilders faced. Howard further offers insight into his salary and commuting experience, his work in organizing the apprentices' basketball team, and witnessing a workplace accident. Finally, he provides an overview of his early activism, and describes the segregation on the Yard and in the workers' unions.

Keywords

Brooklyn Navy Yard, Army Air Force, New York, African Americans, Germans, race relations, union, family, apprentice, historian

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STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: Apprenticeship at the Brooklyn Navy Yard [01:48 – 2:53]

It was 1940. I was eighteen. Young people were *desperate* for jobs. In my background, my neighborhood, my situation, kids didn't go to college at the age of eighteen; they went to work. And so, I took a test.

They announced there was a civil service test to become an apprentice in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. And, like, I don't know how many thousands of young people took that test—I think 30,000 young people took the test for 400 jobs. And the 400 guys who got 100 on the test got the jobs. And so, I was one of those 400 young people who then went to work as apprentices in the Navy Yard in 1940.

Story 2: The Work Was Not Satisfying [14:19 – 16:30]

The most uninteresting [of my experience] was work. [*laughs*] The most uninteresting and the hardest and the toughest. I must say this: the first day I walked into the Navy Yard, it was an amazing experience because I had never walked into a situation [like it]. The first time I walked out on the ways, I was walking into a kind of nightmare of sounds, noise, and smells. The smells of working on a ship are amazing smells. The smells of the welding, especially when they were welding galvanized steel. I don't know if you've ever smelled galvanized steel burning, but galvanized steel is covered with zinc. And when zinc burns, it gives off the worst smell in the world. [*laughs*] So that and other smells.

And the noise of the riveting and the chipping. It was just—yeah, it was nightmarish; something I had to get used to. And so, work was not [easy]. Very often, we wore earplugs because the sound was so horrendous. And so yeah, work—work was not a satisfying experience. It was not like—you know, here I was building a beautiful little ship. You have these people who have hobbies of building boats and, “Whoa, what a nice experience it is putting little things together.” No. This was not a pleasant experience. I didn't even know what the whole thing would look like when it was over. I was just working on a little part of this big, steel ship. No, it wasn't terribly satisfying.

Story 3: The Waiters Union

[25:57 – 26:51]

My father was a waiter. That is, he moved up in rank from being a factory worker to being a waiter. And as a waiter, he was a member of the Waiters Union—Local 2 of the Waiters Union, which was a Brooklyn local that specialized in Jewish weddings and bar mitzvahs. *[laughs]* And so, yeah, he was a union member. And there was some vague connection between his union and some bunch of gangsters who extorted money from people in the union in order to get them jobs. You know, just part of the history of unionism.

Story 4: Injuries on the Yard

[43:22 – 44:51]

There were other little injuries of guys who looked at the wrong time at a welder's flash and got [a flash burn]. You know, actually, I still have in one of my eyes a little blood shot, which goes back to looking too long at a welder's flash, you see.

And I mean, who knows what other physical effects there were from working in the shipyard. Because the zinc actually was deadly, which we didn't know at the time. But years, years later, they found that there were people who worked with that zinc—and I wasn't working with it all the time, just occasionally smelled it and got away from it as fast as I could. But people who worked a lot with that zinc, years later [doctors] discovered they developed cancers and died as a result. But I mean, industrial work is dangerous, unpleasant, and people die earlier. And I was glad to get out of that. The [Army] Air Force was respite.

PHOTOS CAPTIONS

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Howard Zinn being interviewed by Daniella Romano, screen-captured from video footage (Courtesy of Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives)