

Pioneers of Feminism and Unionism: Léa Roback and Madeleine Parent

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These transcriptions were extracted from footage shot during the filming of *Madeleine Parent, tisserande de solidarités* (2002), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

AWAKENING TO INJUSTICE (1918-1940)

Family and Studies at the Convent (1918-1934)

Judith Murray: Madeleine, please tell me about your birth and your childhood.

Madeleine Parent: I was born in 1918 in the house on Parc Lafontaine Street where I grew up. My father was an accountant in a grocery store, and my mother was a shorthand typist before she married. Obviously, she had to quit when she got married, as was the custom. I was an only child until I was eight and a half years old, when my brother was born. That brought great joy to my family, and especially to me.

When I was a child, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents. We went to the countryside every summer, and my grandparents were nearby. I would go on walks with my grandfather, and he would greet everyone we encountered. They were mostly poor people who rented out their winter homes to people who came for the summer, and who lived in extremely poor housing during that time. My father, my grandfather, treated everyone equally, and their kids became my friends.

When I went to the convent, it was the convent of the Notre-Dame congregation. In French, of course. At the convent, I became even more aware of certain social injustices. There were some excellent, dedicated nuns there, who were good teachers. But in the upper echelons, where the decisions were made, the nuns tended to be more like businesswomen. And I realized that the poorer girls were not treated in the same way as those from wealthier families. For example, a friend of mine whose father was a plumber. At Sunday school, she would be asked when her father was going to pay his bills.

I found that atrocious, and there were many other such examples during my years at the convent. On the other hand, those who were truly devoted were often excellent. I was fortunate enough to have a diction teacher who was a perfectionist. And if she didn't scold me at least once during diction class, I would worry about her health, and I would look forward to the following week, to see if she was feeling better. And if she was, we would get back to it. There was a diction contest, and I won the prize. She had donated a tricolour flag, which was interesting, considering the times we lived in and the fact that we were in a convent. I think some of her ideas were ahead of her time. In any case, she was an excellent teacher.

Meeting with Françoise David

Madeleine Parent: The entire time I was at the convent, I fought against the boarding school system, which wasn't necessary for children who had families. And because I fought, I at least succeeded in only having to board for one year.

Françoise David: That's not too bad!

MP: No, not too bad!

FD: Were you the type—because I was, as well . . . I imagine you did pretty well in school.

MP: Yes, pretty well.

FD: That's what I figured. I did pretty well, too. Probably neither of us was particularly mischievous nor inattentive, but there were nevertheless certain things that we couldn't accept. You're telling me about your fight against the boarding system. For me, in high school, I fought against having to attend mass. That was a few years later, but the principle was pretty much the same. Neither of us was against school, we weren't against the idea of getting good grades or of learning. We were against oppression. Basically, we were against . . . rules that existed for no reason. I get the impression that you . . . that it was already part of your character. If I've understood correctly.

MP: I hated them! I was well-behaved, like you said, like you were. But I couldn't stand all the long periods of silence. That constant discipline, in the hallways, everywhere. Except when the bell rang for recess. But why were we completely forbidden to talk to each other? Actually, at Villa Maria, I took drawing lessons. Not because I was any good at drawing, unfortunately, but because in the classroom of the nun who taught it, there were no rules.

FD: Finally!

MP: We were still well-behaved! We spoke to each other, but quietly. We asked questions, and we drew. And it was the most relaxing part of the entire week. And the nun must have known that. But, for example, when we went up and down the stairs, there was another nun. She had one of those, you know . . . those clappers!

FD: Yes, we had those, too.

MP: And that one nun—halfway up the staircase, the stairs turned back the other way, and she would stop us on each landing and find someone to scold. No exceptions, ever. And I would look at her. And I knew she wanted to find something to scold me for, but she never did. And I would just wait. You know what I mean? It was just so ridiculous. What was the point? And all those prayers!

FD: There were a lot, weren't there?

MP: At 5:50 in the morning, we would pray first, and then start to get ready. Then it was mass. Later, after recess, the classes began with a prayer. And then there was the visit to the chapel during the day, with another prayer. And in the evening, after study hour, but before supper, the big visit to the chapel. The two big visits of the day were the mass and that one. And then, before going to sleep, we had to pray again. So it became mechanical, and it no longer had any meaning. And another thing that upset me and made me angry was the way the nuns treated the servants. First of all, we weren't allowed to speak to them. But I would smile at them when

no nuns were looking. But I would never have dared to speak to them, because they're the ones who would have been punished.

English School and McGill University (1934-1940)

Madeleine Parent: After the convent, I did two years of school in English, because my father had promised me I could do a bachelor's degree at McGill if I wanted to. And for women at that time, you still had to do your bachelor's degree with the nuns, because the universities only offered more advanced programs. But at McGill, there were women, and undergraduate programs. So I went to English school, and it was quite a shock for me. First of all, in history class, we were taught the British imperialist version, whereas I had been taught the other version. For example, when we had talked about the Indigenous people, we had learned that the Algonquins, the Wendat, were the good guys, and the Iroquois were the bad guys. But at English school, it was the opposite. The Iroquois were the good guys. It took me some time to understand the difference, but I became obsessed with the idea. I had to know. Especially since in the summers, we went to Lake Saint-Louis, not far from Kahnawake. And one of our neighbours there was an Indigenous widow who had become like a great aunt to our family. And even when I was very little, I understood that when it came to the Iroquois, our version was somewhat lacking.

And then there was literature class. My first year at English school, I was confronted with Milton, who was against the Church in Rome. So that was pretty hard to take, but it certainly got me thinking, especially since my ideas were still in development. When I arrived at McGill in '36, I realized there were at least two social classes there, that is, the sons and daughters of the rich, most of whom were in the fraternities and the sororities, and the others, who weren't from the same social class. And after careful consideration, I decided I didn't want anything to do with the fraternities and the sororities. At that time, the less privileged students were starting a student movement called the Canadian Student Assembly, which demanded one thing and one thing only, and that was federal government grants for students from less privileged families, who wouldn't otherwise be able to attend university. It was in line with a more profound demand we had in mind, namely the right to free education. People tolerated us, but they weren't very comfortable with the idea of what we were doing. But the movement grew. And I made myself useful by working with some contacts I had at the Université de Montréal and at Université Laval, which was very exciting. Obviously, there were only men there. There were no women, like there were at other English universities in Canada.

One of the people who supported our student movement was André Laurendeau, which really helped us with the students from the Université de Montréal and Laval. But once the war was declared in '39—because we'd started in the fall of '37—with the war on, the governors of our English-speaking universities, and particularly McGill, turned on us and we were attacked from every angle. But for me, it was very eye-opening, even though I knew we had barely been tolerated. Why were people fighting so hard to prevent students from making that demand? Because our program had no other demands.

I had insisted on that, and I had won, because otherwise it would have been too difficult to keep the Université Laval and Université de Montréal students in the movement. We were better off working on something we could all agree on, and then later, we'd see. But what I understood later . . . And in the end, the movement died out, especially when a few of us finished our programs and graduated. But what I came to understand later was not only that certain people

didn't want to make university more open and more accessible to less fortunate people, but also that the Mackenzie King government was preparing for conscription, and so they were attacking almost all youth movements that displayed any degree of militancy, before imposing conscription. But although the movement appeared to have died out, after the war, for the first time in Canadian history, veterans, many of whom had apparently been student activists in the past, were given access to university by the federal government. So I thought maybe the movement had achieved something, after all.

Judith Murray: I have a question.

MP: Yes?

JM: I believe that at university, you also fought for women's right to vote?

MP: Yes. That was in '39. I was president of the French Society, which was made up exclusively of women. Men had to belong to a different club. For what reason? The director of the French Studies program at McGill was a French man from France who was a monarchist. And he wanted male and female students to be kept separate. He also didn't want women to have the right to vote. And because before I had become president, and before the final year of my bachelor's degree, my intention had been to fight for that, I had decided I'd be better off not taking his classes. And I heard that had I been his student, he would have stopped me. So I hadn't been wrong. We invited Thérèse Casgrain to come to our campus, and the whole French Department, except for one person who never attended anyway, perhaps because he had more advanced ideas than his director, boycotted [the society] for the entire year. So I tried again after Thérèse Casgrain's visit and her lecture on campus. It hadn't drawn huge crowds, but those of us who were there found it very interesting. They knew about the Anglophone feminists in Canada, and they were a little bit familiar with the feminists in England, but they had never really heard about Francophone feminists. So I think it was useful. And this was about six months before the Godbout government granted women the right to vote. But it was quite an experience. And to show the director that I wasn't going to change, despite his boycott, we invited André Laurendeau to our next meeting. And it went on like that.

JM: When you attended university, did you live on campus?

MP: No, I lived at home. And I never objected to that, because when I was very young, I had been locked up in a boarding school, but it had only lasted a few days. I had thrown a huge tantrum, and I didn't come back until the following fall, when I knew I would be attending a school that had boarders, but where I would only be a day student, and that I would go home every night. It had been hard. And traumatic, at the age of six years old. But had I not done it, I would have been a boarder for my entire life as a student, and I couldn't accept that.

JM: Madeleine, when it came to family values, what did your parents think of your efforts for women's suffrage and for students?

MP: As far as women's suffrage was concerned, they thought it made good sense. At the federal level, women had obtained the right to vote at the end of World War I. And you have to remember, during World War I, the government first granted the right to vote to the wives and mothers of soldiers, as if they had special intelligence. How ridiculous! But about a year later, the government was forced to give it to all women, at the federal level. And my parents understood, and my mom thought it was a good thing for women to be able to vote, and so did

my dad. He had sisters, two in particular who, although they weren't big activists, were very independent. They earned their own livings and they took care of their parents, and they were very well-respected by the family.

Meeting with Françoise David

Françoise David: For a woman like me, who also had the chance to attend university . . . I realize that we're talking about the 1930s, when you were at McGill. There must not have been that many women in the university faculties at that time.

Madeleine Parent: No, but we could complete our bachelor's degrees at McGill, which wasn't possible at the Université de Montréal, for example. You had to go to Marguerite-Bourgeois College, or one of the other colleges that were run by nuns. And I was done with all that. And so even though women were in the minority at McGill, at the bachelor level, there were several of us, and we felt comfortable there.

FD: At that time, would you have called yourself a feminist? Or were you not yet familiar with the word back then?

MP: No. The word was seldom used, even by feminists.

FD: That's true.

MP: And in the fourth year of my bachelor's degree, I was president of the French Society, which was only for girls—the boys had their own club—and I invited Mrs. Casgrain [to campus].

FD: Thérèse.

MP: Yes, Thérèse. With the committee. We were all in agreement. But it turned into a big issue with the French Department. The director of the French Department was from France, and he was a monarchist. At the end of the year—and this wasn't a complete coincidence—but each year, in the spring, there was a meeting for all the deans and rectors of the universities. A meeting where the French Canadians from Laval and the Université de Montréal kept pretty quiet. And there was a student who had been invited to go speak about the movement for bursaries. And because he asked me to go with him, the one from McGill, the dean, I think, said to him, "Then ask the young girl to speak also." So he said to me, "You're on!" I thought about it, and I decided to talk about the prejudices against French professors in English universities, and about the fact that there were educated people in Quebec who had also gone to university. Some of them had attended the Sorbonne and had come back afterwards. And I told them that if they wanted to understand what was going on in Quebec, they should consider those people, and they should hire them. And it was interesting, because they all listened very graciously and quietly. And when no one was looking, the rector of the Université de Montréal said to me, "Bravo!" but not too loudly. And the Dean of Arts at McGill said, "I'd like to speak to you." He was all right. So afterwards, when everyone else had gone to get a coffee, I think, he said, "I find what you said very interesting. When you come back in the fall, I'd like you to come see me so we can talk." So I told him, "I won't be coming back in the fall. I've completed my bachelor's degree." "Oh," he said, "I thought you were taking a French course and that you planned to teach." I said no. But they brought in Idola St-Jean that summer.

FD: Another person who wasn't afraid to speak up!

MP: Exactly, exactly.

FD: So in the end, they were somewhat open. What I hear from what you're saying is that you have a sense of strategy, which I already knew, but even back then—and you were still young—you knew how to mete out your message. You were able to discern how much a person would be able to accept, and you were able to figure out where you might be able to slip in through a small opening. And that's something you have to learn. It's not innate. A three-year-old wouldn't be able to do that. Were there any people you had seen do that in the past, who served as role models in their way of communicating with others?

MP: You know, at the convent, there were so many periods of silence.

FD: You had a lot of time to think!

MP: A lot of time to think. To witness injustices, and to think about them. And so that's what I did. But I was determined not to let that get me down. And when I arrived at McGill, domination was expressed in different ways. It was Anglo-British and class-based, much more so than at the convent. So I thought about what needed to be done.

FD: Basically, you could have become a militant nationalist, as others did. But clearly, that wasn't your priority. You became a union activist, and you wanted to work with those who were the most disadvantaged, the most exploited.

MP: Yes, that's right. That's what I wanted to do. First of all, in the fight for bursaries, for students . . . for the underprivileged, who were being denied the chance to get an education. And at that time, those being the most exploited were the young French Canadian women in the garment factories, the cotton mills, and the other poorly paid sectors of industry.

FD: In other words, what I understand is—but I think we all already know this—what fires you up the most, what outrages you the most and leads you to want to take action is the whole issue of class exploitation. I think that's pretty clear. But what you're also saying is that it just so happened that in most cases, those people were women, French Canadian women . . . or immigrant women, who weren't any wealthier, I imagine.

MP: Even in the secondary textile industries, for example, in the clothing workshops, there were a number of Jews. They were the people that Léa Roback knew well, the people who had left Eastern Europe during the pogroms with the kings and the czars, or whose parents had left Eastern Europe, and who worked in certain trades. They were tailors, pressers, skilled machine workers. In those workshops, there was also a large number of both younger and older French Canadian women, who made up the majority. And the priests would say to them, "Don't speak to the Jews, because they killed Jesus. You can't trust them." But it was the minorities in the workshops—the Jews, the immigrants—who were the most class-conscious and from whom they could learn a few things. And when I met Léa, and I asked her questions, it gave her great pleasure to tell me very frankly exactly what went on in the workshops. And how she had been able to connect with the French Canadian women, who were the ones being the most exploited, as well as being the most numerous. And with time, as she spoke to them and took an interest in their situation, and as they discussed how they could get out of it, she was able to open them up to the idea of working with the Jewish workers, who were a minority, and to realize that they weren't so bad after all. In the end, they were human beings.

FD: And they were all in the same situation, and it was in their interest to fight together.

MP: Yes, exactly. So I learned that from her. She was a role model for me.