

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 *A Vision in the Darkness* (1991), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

Racism in the Dressmaking Industry (1937-1939)

Sophie Bissonnette: I'd love to hear the story of how you earned the nickname Calamity Jane, with the draper, Helen . . .

Léa Roback: That, my girl . . . Helen was Black, and she had the nimblest fingers. She was a draper, and she approached her work like an artist approaches a painting. She loved her work. She did very good work. And one thing that could have been very good, but that could also be a double-edged sword, was that we had the right of seniority. And it was us, in the office, who handled the grievances, and the union office said, "Each person in turn. No favouritism." And it was Helen's turn. A house in Philipps Square had requested a draper. I said, "Helen, it's your turn." And she usually wasn't as lucky as the operators—the women who worked on the machines—because the drapers mostly stayed on-site. They had their jobs; they had their posts.

Helen . . . Our union hall was on the corner of Saint-Alexandre, and it only took two minutes to get to Phillips Square. She . . . I hadn't even finished filling in her card when she came back, looking sad. She said, "You sent me there, but they didn't need me." That got me mad. And I . . . This was in '38, and I had arrived there in '37. I had arrived in the early 1930s, in 1932, from Germany, and I had witnessed Hitler's rise. And this guy, a Jew like me—we were a minority—and he was being racist? So I phoned him and asked, "What's going on? It's Helen's turn. She's one of the best drapers in Montréal, and she just came back and said you don't need her." So he said, in Yiddish, "*zi iz a shvartse*," [she's Black]. Well, that had me up in arms! So I gave him a piece of my mind. And he was completely offended that I had dared to lecture him, him the big boss and me just a worker, an office clerk...

[Sound of wind blowing]

That's the wind! Careful, he's coming here, to my house! We can hear him!

So he phones Shane: "Who is this woman? She insulted me!" "Oh," said [Shane], "That's Léa Roback, Calamity Jane." So he's the one who gave me that nickname! And then Shane said, "Let her go work there, or I'll never hear the end of it." So Helen went back, and he kept her on. And a few months later, he called me: "Oh, she's fantastic!" And he had the nerve to tell me that it wasn't he who had been opposed to her, it was the female workers. Do you see how he tried to weasel out of it? It wasn't the workers! There wasn't . . . There wasn't a lot of that . . . The bosses were the "damned Jews." So I told them it wasn't because they were Jewish that they were the "damned bosses." It was because of [rubs her

fingers together in the sign of money]. But I wasn't allowed to show them how the profits were made, eh? So I said, "*Basta!*" And I left.