

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.

Women's Work and Domestic Service (1939-1945) – Léa Roback with Madeleine Parent

Sophie Bissonnette: There's a perception that in Quebec, the war created new opportunities for women, that there were more jobs, that women—some women—worked in male-dominated professions, that salaries were higher. Is this true? Did the war create more opportunities for women?

Léa Roback: Of course, because the men had to go to war. So women finally had the chance to get in. I remember I was working at RCA Victor. There was a woman who worked in the metal plant. She wore overalls. And there were women in pants, and they felt like they were really somebody. No working with rags, no washing the dishes, no dusting, or any of that. And there was also the fact that there were other women they could talk to. "Oh, let me tell you what happened last night." One would tell her own story, then the other would tell hers. And during the lunch break, the ones who didn't go to the cafeteria brought their own sandwiches, and they chatted. "I'm glad I don't have to work on Saturday. I'll do my washing. There's always so much darn cleaning to do!" I don't know how many times I heard that. But of course, those women picked up the habit of . . .

Even the maids. That was really something! I remember . . . Now I'm just talking off the top of my head. The maid issue. Those important ladies with their fourteen- and twenty-room houses, who didn't have maids. It was a serious situation. So they asked me to go speak. Me, a woman who worked in a factory. A big deal, right? So I had just gotten off work, and I went there. And those women . . . That's how they were raised. It wasn't their fault. But they wanted to know. I remember a Mrs. Vautelet. She was a Geoffrion, a real businesswoman and all that. And she said, "They'll come back. They'll be happy to come back!" And I was laughing silently to myself, "Oh no, my dear, they aren't coming back!" So I said, "No, madame!" She said, "You'll see. They'll be laid off and they'll no longer have jobs." And I said, "You know, madame, once you've had a taste of it, and you have your key to the little room you rented, you're not going to want to go back to sleeping on the ninth floor, or wherever." Because at 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening, Madame would knock on your door and say, "I'm sorry Marianne, but the hem of my dress has come undone. Could you please help me?" And poor Marianne, in those days you couldn't say, "Listen, it's late, I'm done working." That's not how it was. So she would take care of the hem—because Madame had to attend a ball or something, and her hem had come undone. So most women—because of course, when the war ended, the first people to be laid off were the women—so most of the women went to work as waitresses, but very few went back to being maids.

SB: So even the maids went to work in the factories during the war?

Madeleine Parent: Oh yes, as long as there was other work, they were happy to take it, because it was a form of liberation. They worked a certain number of hours, and then they were done. The rest of the day and the night were their own, until their next shift. So it was . . . They were much more independent, and they could choose what they were going to do, how they wanted to live, and how they would manage their own money.