

# 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.

## Working Conditions in the Dressmaking Industry (1936)

Sophie Bissonnette: So Léa, perhaps you could tell us about the employee hierarchies in the workshops.

Léa Roback: Well, the aristocrats, as I called them, were the tailors. They were . . . without the tailors, there would be no business, right? Next were the drapers. What talent! And when it was fashionable, there were the operators, as we used to call them—the people who worked the machines, ziiiiip! [Mimes putting fabric through a sewing machine.] And there were . . . other things. Factories that produced the finest quality dresses. There were two factories. There were two factories . . . There weren't . . . There were two factories in the Hermès Building, across from the Mont-Royal Hotel. They made beautiful dresses. Sperber Brothers and two others, an Italian and a Jew. In those places, you took your time. There was no piecework in those two boutiques, because they produced beautiful dresses. But at the little hole-in-the-wall factories on De Bleury Street, in the Lennox Building and the Wilder Building, they made inexpensive dresses. And the seams were like slalom ski courses, and uh . . .

SB: And it was mostly women?

LR: Yes, of course! And for example, the Francophone women worked the machines. There were a lot of new immigrants at that time. There were Jewish women from Eastern Europe, who didn't like communism, so they had come to Canada. There were Russian workers and Italian workers, very honest people, in the union. There were also some Syrian women, very brave and honest. There were a lot of cockroaches in those little hole-in-the-wall factories. The women didn't have any working hours, the employers were very ignorant. They were small men, men who had maybe married a woman with a nice dowry, and the father had said, "He's done being a press operator, or a cutter. He's going to open his own factory." So the man would find himself a little back-alley factory, knowing nothing about the business. Sometimes it would work out all right; other times, it was over. There were two or three factories where the workers were treated with respect and . . . But in the others, especially those little holes in the wall, it was always "Hurry-up!" Nothing was never enough; nothing was never fast enough. They didn't care about quality.

SB: And health and safety . . . ?

LR: There wasn't any of that! None! They would keep working while eating their sandwiches, trying to keep up. And so there were cockroaches there. So they would scream, and they'd be told, "Eat! They won't hurt you!" Such rudeness, you know, such a lack of empathy. There was one woman, Mrs. Labelle. She'd been pregnant, and then she had the baby, of course. She lived far away, and she took the streetcar. So she got up even earlier than the Good Lord did to arrive by 7:00 or 7:30. Then she started working. If you arrived at 7:00, you sat yourself down and started working. But you didn't punch in! Because work started at 7:00. If you arrived before 6:45, it was money in the boss's pocket. Safety and cleanliness weren't considered at all. It wasn't their problem. If you want to work, then work!

And illnesses . . . For example, that woman, she couldn't breastfeed her baby. So in the summer, she told me, "I was holding onto the [streetcar] straps," and she could see wet spots—the milk that was leaking from her breasts. But she had to work. Poorly paid! Cheated! Those who did piecework had to . . . always keep track of their tickets, write them down in a notebook, because watch out for those in the office, when they calculate people's pay. . . But some people didn't know that.

SB: What were the relationships between the different nationalities like?

LR: Well, let me tell you. Within the union, they were very good. But for the Francophones, there was the issue of communication. The Russian and Italian women spoke a bit of French, but each . . . It's like nowadays, in 1989, in the factories. At lunchtime, the Francophones, the Portuguese, the Chinese . . . each had their own little groups. Because if you didn't speak the language, you couldn't communicate. And people can't be bothered. That's how it was.

SB: I think you taught some classes?

Léa Roback: I was the educational director. So I taught English and French classes. The tailors and the Jewish women from Europe wanted to learn French. So that went well. There was also . . . There was the first Midinettes' Ball, with long dresses. For that, the bosses suddenly became our friends, offering us special prices. Ugh! And also, in addition . . . Yes?

SB: The classes must have helped.

Léa Roback: Yes, they helped! People attended, and they made an effort. I would say that many of them . . . Like with Gaby, it helped a lot with comprehension. Some of them really understood. But for others, it was, "I go to work, I do what I have to do, and *basta!*" But it's always the same thing. If we all shared one language, it would be wonderful. Like Esperanto! Everyone would learn it. I'm all for that. It's important. There's a lack of communication. Huh? [Mimes incomprehension.] So . . .