

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.

Unwanted Pregnancies: The Miséricorde Hospital and Clandestine Abortions (1930s and 1940s)

Sophie Bissonnette: One of the things Yvette told us yesterday is that the female workers told you a lot . . .

Léa Roback: . . . about their own personal lives.

SB: They confided in you about their problems. I'd like you to tell us a bit about that. Unintended pregnancies, abortion, single motherhood . . . surely those things must have been discussed.

LR: There was one particular case, a pregnant woman who was too far along to have an abortion. So she went to the Miséricorde [Hospital]. At that time, it wasn't a very welcoming place. She went there, and the women there weren't allowed to smoke. But they had always smoked! And they weren't allowed to gossip, and they had to atone for their sins. Oh, so many sins! Mortal sins! This sin! That sin! So I went with her. And one day she said to me, "Get me out of here. I'm going to die if I stay here." And she was pregnant. Very pregnant. But she said, "Get me out of here!" So I did. But where could I take her? There was the Salvation Army, and they were always happy to convert Catholics to Protestantism. So I spoke to Major . . . I don't remember her name, but she was at the Catherine-Booth Hospital in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, which nowadays is no longer a maternity hospital, but a hospital for people with disabilities.

So she said, "Sure, we'll look after her." And I had spoken to . . . At the time, there was a Doctor Letondale. I said, "She has to get out of here." And he said, "I'm a doctor," —he was a gynecologist and an obstetrician— "I can't help you with that." So I said, "I'm going to get this done!" And the head nun—I think her name was Sister Parent, I'm not sure. She was a very dignified woman. I told her, "I want her out of here." "Oh, you can't take her. She's a sinner. And she'll have her baby here." And I said, "She can't stay here. I'm taking her with me." So she looked at me, and she said, "You're not Catholic, are you?" I said, "No ma'am, I'm Jewish," but [more importantly,] "I'm human." So there was a bit of a discussion. And she was smart enough to understand that I was going to keep at her until I got the woman—whose name was Céline—out of there. So . . . At the time we didn't take taxis. We took the streetcar. So we went there, and an extraordinary doctor named Dr. McCaffrey, an Irishman, examined her properly, and said, "You know she's got twins! Twins!"

And I told him, "Well, I'm not going to be the one who breaks that news to her." So he told her, "We'll take good care of you and we'll take good care of the babies." And so yes, the delivery

went well. Pretty well. But they don't come out of your ears, right? And two of them! So she stayed there, and she worked. But not on her knees, scrubbing. There was other work for her to do: cleaning, sweeping, dusting, all that. Finally, the babies were born, and Dr. McCaffrey and Major said, "There's a form to fill out, and this is how it will go." Then she asked, "Where are you going to bring them?" She was Catholic. And I agreed that her babies needed to be in a Catholic environment. So, there was a place. Oh, goodness. There were nurseries in Pointe-aux-Trembles, and in Saint-Laurent also, I think. Places like that. So we went . . . She was carrying one of the babies, and I was carrying the other. It was really very moving. Getting to Pointe-aux-Trembles was quite a voyage in those days. They were very welcoming there, but when we went upstairs and she showed us the place, it was like . . . I said, "There must be five hundred of them." I don't know how many—a huge number of little cradles, all these little cribs and little babies. Because remember, there was a lot of prostitution here, and there were also unmarried women who gave birth, and they had nothing, so the babies ended up . . . The children needed a place to stay, so that's where they went. So she did what she could, and we went to visit them for the next three Sundays. And on the third Sunday, they were already "angels in Heaven who will pray for you."

SB: The babies had died?

LR: Yes. But I can't blame her. You should have seen the place. Row upon row. It smelled like urine in there. There were maybe one or two nuns in there from time to time. But how could they take care of that many babies? It wasn't her fault. But it was good that they believed they were "angels in Heaven" who would pray for their mother, who no longer had to anything to worry about. And those women . . . There were some who said that later, they would go get their babies. Like Céline. That's what she had wanted to do. She later got married. She had one baby with her husband. Very good. I used to hear from her regularly during the holidays, but now, I don't even know if she's still alive.

SB: I believe you had the chance to see what illegal abortions were like at that time. Could you give us an example?

LR: Well, kitchen table abortions, those were, I wanted nothing to do with those. I . . . Like I said, when I worked at RCA Victor, for example, there were a lot of questions. And when I worked in dressmaking, there were safe places you could go, with real doctors, in clinics, and those people didn't lose babies. Except for one . . . It was a very painful situation. It was Dr. Moller, on Fairmount Street . . . No, not on Fairmount, near Fairmount. He lost a young girl. He went to prison. But you needed money to get an abortion there. And there were other places to get an abortion, all over the place. Safe places, as though you were in a hospital. They were all over town.

SB: I think there were also places that were . . . where women often died.

LR: Oh yes! But not in the clinics that were on my list. And I went with the patients, and I saw how they cleaned their instruments, and I saw their gloves, and I saw if they had washed their hands properly. Women don't get abortions just for fun, do they?

Contraception

Léa Roback: So, when there was . . . and I'm skipping ahead here . . . There was that young nurse from St. Catherine's, Ontario, who wanted to try to help people understand that there

were options for planning a family. There were diaphragms and gel, all that. So the woman . . . so the husbands would be there, sitting in the rocking chair . . . I would go with them because they didn't speak French. And mind you, I only went to see people I knew. And the husband always had the last word. So he'd say, "What does this woman want?" "Okay, listen, I'll explain it to you in a bit." So she would go tell him, and he would say, "I don't want there to be any rubber between my wife and me!" So then, she'd say [whispering], "There's nothing we can do, nothing we can do." It was up to the husband. "It's just too bad, eh?" That's just how things were.