

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.

An Activist in Search of Employment (1950s and 1960s) – Léa Roback with Madeleine Parent

Sophie Bissonnette: And you, Léa? What happened . . . What was happening at that time?

Léa Roback: At that time, my brother was dying of cancer. He was young. Forty years old. And he had two young kids. So I was very caught up in all that, obviously. He had a four-year-old, so . . . But people kept calling me.

SB: So you quit?

LR: Yes, of course! There was nothing . . . I couldn't stay. Michel was dying, he spent two years . . . He was a guinea pig. It was allowed. So.

SB: You took care of . . .

LR: . . . of one of them. His four-year-old daughter. And I was also working for the communist movement. I was a volunteer.

SB: It must have been hard to keep working for the communist movement during those years?

LR: It was! People came to the house all the time to search through our books. And there was . . . My mother . . . You know, it was interesting. My mother wasn't at all political, but the fact that people kept coming to her house to search it, to take books . . .and they weren't even communists! And there were . . . My mother had her own bibles, with black covers. She would take them—they were all in Hebrew—and say, "Take this one, it's communist!" They would look at her, "Stop pestering us." My mother would say, "You're in my house! Take this one! Take this one!" She was outraged. And they would show up with two or three cars full of guys who would come up the stairs. They were constantly coming to search. They took our books, but fortunately, they never found the paperwork they were looking for.

SB: So, when you started looking for work . . .

LR: Right. When Michel died, the kids went to live with one of our aunts and I went . . . I needed to work, so I worked at Eaton's. And when the women got annoyed . . . We went upstairs to have lunch. But there was no time to eat because it took . . . We had to go up to the ninth floor. But not to the big restaurant. Eaton's had a restaurant for its employees. So they would complain, and I said, "What if we all joined forces? And there was one . . . I'll never forget her. She was English. She was surly—not because she was English—she was just surly, period. She said, "Well, Mr. Eaton didn't go to your house to ask you, 'Would you please come work for

me?" So I said, "Oh, come on, that's a bit ridiculous!" She said, "I don't need a union." But I said to myself, "Well, most of us do." And at that time, there still weren't even seats for those employees. So I worked there for a little while. And she reported me, and they told the staff I wasn't happy working there. I didn't care. I found other work. And then I worked for the Montréal Children's [Hospital], as a technician in the medical library. It was something to do in the meantime, eh? Technician—that made me laugh. But I worked for the Quebec Association for the Visually Impaired for ten years. I always, always worked to help . . . After all, I was a woman. And women were greatly in need of support. Especially on the issue of abortion, and all the injustices. I've always had that in me. And it doesn't go away.

SB: Was there any blocklisting? Was it hard to find work?

LR: Oh yes, definitely. To work at . . . For example, I wanted to work for social services. I said, "If I work there, I'll be able to accomplish what I want to accomplish." Like, for example, Jewish social services. But I never got to work there because they said, "Oh, no, no, no, she's too radical." And there were also the social services, what we have today, Ville-Marie, and it was very swanky. I had the chance to replace someone. This was in '58 or '59, in Longueuil. Saint-Antoine School. I worked there as a substitute. It was a Catholic school. They knew I was Jewish, of course. And the chaplain . . . They were very, very kind. The chaplain asked me about Jewish traditions. He liked that. He would come during lunch hour. And then I quit. First of all, I was teaching English, and those young people wanted to learn conversation, not Robinson Crusoe, which is what they were reading. So we put Robinson Crusoe in the drawer. And I brought in advertisements, and we formed a circle, and we bought things, sold things, went to restaurants, all sorts of things. And one group understood very well. They made great progress. And one day, we were laughing. And the head nun often came to check on us. We were laughing our heads off, so she asked, "What's going on here? And your desks! They should be in straight lines!" So I said, "We're buying and selling things." And she said, "But they're going to be tested on Robinson Crusoe!" So I said, "These are sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. They're not interested in Robinson Crusoe. They want to learn to speak!" So she said, "I'm very sorry." I said, "This is not for me." And I left. Unfortunately, the other woman wasn't back yet. I shouldn't have left. But the head nun said, "If that's what you want." So I told the chaplain, "I'm not staying here."