

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Polikoff's, Ynyswen; The Bag Factory, Llwynypia

Interviewee: VSE012 Margaret Chislett
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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's Archive of
Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

MC says she was one of 6 and that she was one of twin sisters. There are only two of them left now, her and her younger brother.

She says that her father and mother were from Aberhafesp Newtown, Montgomeryshire. They lived on a farm and her mother was a farmer's daughter. Her father came down to work on the farms in the Vale (of Glamorgan) and eventually he moved up to the Rhondda to work as a top repairer in the Ton Pentre pit. She and her siblings were all born in Ton Pentre, and went to school in Gelli infants and junior school. Then they went to Bronllwyn senior school. MC says there was no hope of them going to college in the 30s and there were 6 of them. Only her brother went to Porth County Grammar School.

02:17

She talks about her father's unemployment in the 30s and then a lot of work during the war and he was a member of the home guard. She talks of her father's garden and her mother's cooking.

03:42

MC was 15 and a half when she left school. She left before she was 16 because her mother knew of someone in Croydon who wanted a young girl to train as a nanny.

04:12

She talks of going to England by herself to work as a nanny for 2 years and living in London when the war was about to break out.

MC didn't mind leaving school when she did because she had a job and she was paid.

05:46

MC came home in 1938 and she went to the labour exchange. They sent her to Polikoff's where she got a job. During the war they made uniforms.

06:05

MC talks about completing an order for Lady Churchill. They made overcoats for Russia - for her Russian fund. They were the heaviest thing they ever made. They thought that the men must have been 6 or 7' tall because they didn't realise they wore the coats down to their ankles. Princess Marina came down to Polikoff to thank them on Lady Churchill's behalf.

07:30

MC said that the lightest thing they made was the uniform for Montgomery's Army in Northern Africa. MC talks about her brother Ray and the uniform.

10:20

MC said she didn't need an interview to go to Polikoff's. She says that they were just sent there. Her sister was sent to a light engineering firm over the pass to Rhigos and she would have liked to go there with her sister. She wanted to travel with her because she was doing shifts and also her sister was getting more money. She was an apprentice in Polikoff's and MC was only paid 7/6d after stoppages. She paid 2d insurance, 2d to the Red Cross, 2d to Lady Churchill's fund (!) and 2d for something else she can't remember. MC says that her father and mother kept her. She was given 2/6d for her week's pocket money, 2/6d for the bus fare from Ton Pentre to Ynyswen and 2/6d to her mother. This was from mid-1940 for 2 years. Her mother thought it couldn't be right so MC asked about it but was told that she wasn't a machinist but an apprentice machinist. After 2 years they had a rise from 7/6 to 12/6. (This varies from 2 years and 3 years during this part of the interview).

They couldn't believe it - they thought they were rich! For this they worked a 48 hour week and sometimes if they had to rush an order they were asked to work on Sunday morning which was very much frowned upon in the Rhondda in those days. They always worked on Saturday morning.

13:50

She says that they were trained for 3 years. She said that she tried piece work and that was quite good for her presumably because she was fast. MC also said that learnt to use every machine on the line, so she got 10/- a week extra. If someone went to the toilet or they had to go up to see the nurse, she could fill in their job on the line. MC says that it was on the line that they did the Russian order.

14:48

MC says that most of the machines were ordinary singer sewing machines but they had specialist machines as well which would do buttonholes, sew buttons on, turn up a hem, and she was on the hemming machine when they did the Russian order. That's why she had to handle the whole heavy overcoat.

15:28

She talks about different uniforms and goes back to talk about Montgomery's khaki shorts.

16:08

MC said that she didn't need any qualifications to get the job, and that she was trained from scratch. She had never used a sewing machine before. So they used the sewing machine until they could do a perfect straight line on scrap material, and another by the side of it, only then would they be put on the machines to do different parts - sleeves, shorts etc.

17:11

MC enjoyed working in the factory because she'd never worked with people before and she met a lot of girls that she wouldn't have met. She was known as a chapel girl and her friends did as well. So until she went to the factory she'd never mixed with people who went to pubs and clubs. MC saw that when she worked with them they were no different to her, but she didn't go to pubs.

18:04

MC and her family regarded it as war work and her mother preferred her working there than if she'd been sent to the Bridgend armaments factory where the shells were filled and the work was quite dangerous because of the gun powder etc. People were sent to work in these factories, groups of girls, and they'd be living in hostels.

18:59

She talks about the armaments factory in Bridgend where her sister worked and the German bombing raid on the factory, on Cwmparc and Treorci.

20:21

MC first impression of the factory was what a huge place it was. Polikoff's factory had moved from East London. They brought the foremen and the supervisors with them and a lot of them were Jewish.

"Huge, huge factory and at the peak of its time there were 2,500 people working in there, so you can imagine how big it was, but the flat part of area of Ynyswen that's by Treorci.....You can imagine now the buses going down from Ynyswen taking the girls and of course some boys as well, men, cos they were the mechanics that was repairing our machines."

21:45

MC said the workforce was mainly women and because it was such a big place, they had a big canteen. It was used as a hall for entertainment and ENSA came down to entertain them.

22:18

She talks about ENSA and wartime radio entertainment.

23:09

MC said the Rhondda bus company put on the buses. But sometimes when they finished early on Christmas Eve she would walk home to Ton Pentre because there were no buses.

24:54

MC she says she doesn't know how many women as opposed to men worked at the factory, but there were many more women and girls than men. It didn't matter if you were married or not. You weren't conscripted if you had a child under 3 or 4, but other than that, there were lots of married women.

MC says that there were no childcare facilities in those days but if the women had children their families would help them look after them. At the time if you were married and had a baby you had to finish work, but not during the war.

27:03

MC says they were all paid about the same, but that her wage never went higher than £5 although she was there for 9 and a half years. But that was regarded as a good wage. MC says that her mother managed the money and the strict rationing that was still in place. There was still rationing when she got married in 1948, and it didn't end until 1953.

28:04

MC talks about rationing.

Mc said that the canteen would do chips with everything, sausage and chips, fish and chips, but later on she would produce a cooked dinner for 2/6 and when she earned more money she would occasionally eat a dinner in the factory.

29:27

When asked what she spent her meagre pocket money on, MC said that she was a known chocaholic. She talks about sweet rations during the war again.

30:35

MC and her twin sister had their clothes made by her mother's friend Mrs Davies who also made her wedding dress.

31:34

MC said her mother brought some silk parachute material once. She and her sister made petticoats and French knickers for themselves out of the parachute.

32:49

She says her mother had to queue up in Ton Pentre Co-op for the parachute. She goes on to talk about wartime rationing and general wartime stuff.

34:55

MC said she belonged to a trade union when she was at Polikoff's and went on to be a member of other trade unions. They were members of the garment workers unions. She remembers a dispute and walk out over something, and the local MP who she disliked telling them to go back to work after two days. But she can't remember the cause. She goes on to say that it was a big place. She says there was a cutting room where the men worked cutting the material, then the men used to take the trolleys down to the women on the lines. Then there were boys and men being trained as mechanics on the machines.

37:02

When asked whether she thought they were treated fairly she asks how would they know but she says they were happy on their line. MC says that people in the Rhondda weren't paid much anyway, not even the miners.

37:40

MC said they got on fine with the supervisors and managers. The foreman knew them by name and they knew him. They could get up and go and talk to him.

38:07

When asked about the managers who came down from London, she said they got on fine with them. She said they walked around in nice suits and they didn't know who they were. She returns to talk about the Duchess of Kent coming to thank them for making Lady Churchill's Russian overcoats. Then she talks about General Montgomery coming to the Rhondda and that they all went out to wave to him.

41:51

MC says she went to a couple of union meetings but not many because they worked such long hours. She reckons she wasn't a very good union attendant but if they were all out she went along to union meetings to find out why. They'd come out and tell you (working on) Sunday was wrong and unfair, and they'd listen to that but she says she's not political in that way.

41:38

MC says they wore overalls to work that they'd made themselves. They were bib and braces made to fit a woman. They could wear them with a blouse or jumper under them. Afterwards they used to wear overalls and different sections had different colours as well. The factory provided the material and the women made them. Everyone used to wear an overall. MC thinks the overall was a bluey colour, but the bib and brace that she like because of the smart cut was a navy colour, made out of denim. That was the first time MC ever wore slacks because her mother was dead against women wearing slacks.

43:42

She talks of women wearing trousers and shorts during the war and wanting to wear shorts and trousers. She also talking about Gelli ladies choir and winning at the national eisteddfod.

45:32

MC doesn't think the work was dangerous but the machines could be dangerous. She once had a needle in her finger and had to go up to the surgery to have it pulled out. They had their own modern surgery and a nurse at the factory. Girls could fall off their chairs, but mainly they had needles in their fingers. She didn't have any time off, she just had it seen to in the surgery factory. They didn't have time off. Everyone worked long hours because of the war.

47:30

MC says it was such a big place, the machines were noisy, they had the radio on and the wartime programmes were playing and Vera Lynn was singing. People didn't sing along to the radio then. They had to concentrate otherwise they'd have needles in their fingers. They'd sing in the canteen - all the songs of the day. She talks about the music she likes. MC says they were allowed to talk to the person next to you however. There was a woman on the line who used to walk up and down and fetch things for you if you needed a new reel of cotton or something like that. Every machine could be put on and off individually. On a Friday afternoon they all dusted and cleaned their machines and put a cover over it. They all kept their own machines. Lots of people didn't like changing their machines but MC could use every machine on the line and because of that MC was paid 10/- a week extra. She could take over if anyone was unwell or went to the toilet. They took pride in their own machines and didn't like others using their machine. There was a table every so often of examiners that would examine the work that they'd done. They took pride in what they were doing.

51:04

When asked about rules and regulations she said that they had to be careful because of using the machines and electricity. When asked about health and safety, she said she'd never heard of it - she was born too early.

The factory was heated with electric lights and it was warm enough. She thought there must have been radiators about because it was such a big place. They were in their blouses or overalls and she doesn't remember it being cold. All along the length of the factory there were toilets upstairs and there were sets of stairs all along the floor. They were allowed to smoke in the toilets but they weren't allowed to smoke in the factory. But she didn't smoke.

53:16

MC says that the relationship between the men and the women was a good one. They were doing similar jobs anyway. They had an overman or overwoman on each section. Lots of the people who came down from London were tailors or tailoresses. The factory was built not for the people of Rhondda but to shift the work from the east end of London, because they knew that London would be bombed. But it provided work for the people of Rhondda. She herself was there for 9 and a half years.

54:49

MC stopped working because she had got married and was expecting her first child. She says that when you were pregnant you had to finish work at 3 months. She talks of going to the doctor. She says there was no such thing as expectant mothers working on. She worked for a while when she was first married. They were saving to buy a house. Her husband minded her working after she married because he was a traditional man. But she told him once that she had children and she had 3 within five years. She planned it like

that because she wanted her family before she was 30. She didn't go out to work for 10 years.

57:21

MC talks about working a 48 hour week. She says it was usual in those days and people worked shifts, like her sister in Rhigos who worked days and afternoons. In the week she worked from about 7.45 to 5 or 6 and up til 12 - 1pm on a Saturday. When the orders had to be completed quickly they worked on Sunday morning but that was voluntary. Her parents minded that because her mother was a big chapel goer, so they didn't think it was right. It was looked down upon especially girls and women. Her father often worked Sunday nights in the pit, but for women it was frowned upon. They didn't however work shifts. They didn't clock in in the beginning but they did by the time she finished there.

59:40

They had a break at 10 am in the morning. There were 2500 people there and half of them would go for tea at the same time. They had half an hour for lunch and in the time they went upstairs washed their hands, went to the canteen for lunch and went back to the toilet

to wash your hands before you went back to the line. The lunch break was in two sittings. Sometimes she used to take sandwiches but she didn't want to do that because she was taking rations from her mother, that's why she used to put up with egg and chips although she didn't mind if it was fish and chips. A lot of girls lived near Ynyswen, so they went home for lunch. But a lot of girls would come up from Porth and over the mountain from Ferndale. MC said they had a 10 min break in the morning, half an hour for lunch, and then they had 10 min for tea in the afternoon.

1:02:14

MC says that the canteen was sometimes for works' dos, but the girls really liked going out. That's the first time she went to a pub was when she went to a factory do. When you had a works do you didn't all go - 2500 - to the same pub so different groups would go to different pubs. But she said it was mainly for meals. They used to go to the restaurant. She says she's never been one to go to a pub and sit down and drink, because she doesn't like drinking.

1:03:12

When asked who used to arrange the do, she said that the different 'lines' or group would arrange them. They would also arrange days out to Barry and Porthcawl in the summer. She remembers a big group of them would go all on double decker buses. They used to go on the beach and they used to go on the donkeys. They used to walk around the town and if it was wet they'd go to the pictures. She says there used to be a nice cinema in Porthcawl. The chapels also used to go on trips and her mother liked the fair, but MC didn't particularly like it. She preferred to spend her money on chocolate.

1:04:57

MC says they didn't have paid holidays until 1948. That's when the miners were given paid holidays as well. It was also 1948 when she got married. They were given breaks, but they weren't paid. She talks about the miners having a break but no pay.

1:05:42

They were given 2 weeks holiday in the summer, and bank holidays 2 days at Christmas, 2 days at Easter and May Day. Eventually the bank holidays were paid too. But they had to pay contributions towards their bank holiday pay. She says that was taken out of your salary.

1:06:22

When asked where they'd go on holiday, MC says they didn't go abroad in those days, but she went up to North Wales to the farm and to her aunty in Leicestershire. Her uncle was the manager of a big estate. So it was mainly to family. She didn't go away to Bournemouth until after she was married. She talks about taking the children to the Gower and then talks about going to Swansea on the train which went through the tunnel from the Rhondda. She talks about the Rhondda Fach train tunnel which was later closed. It used to go from Treherbert station to Blaen Gwynfi on the other side.

1:09:30

MC says after they finished making uniforms they made men's suits, demob suits. When all the men were demobbed from the army they were given 'civvy' suits and Polikoff's made them. They were different styles, different materials and different sizes. She said she left in 1949 to have her first child. She talks about it becoming Burberry after it was Polikoffs.

1:11:32

When asked if they had any perks or things they could buy cheaply, she says that they could buy things for her brother's and husbands but there wasn't much for girls except their own overalls that they bought. It was mainly service wear and demob suits.

She enjoyed working in Polikoffs mainly because that's where she met her friends that were so different to her i.e. they weren't chapel girls. She talks about the social side of chapel - Bethany Gelli e.g. drama group, concert, chapel hockey team etc. She talks of playing hockey on the golf course (!) But she did different things with her Polikoff friends. She used to go dancing with her friend Iris who was in the infant school in Gelli with her. They were 18 by the time they went dancing. But the first time they went dancing in a place called the shack in Pentre, her dad was waiting for her on the front door when she came home. She had to be home at 10.30. Even when she was engaged to

be married she had to be home at 10.30 unless they went out to Cardiff and they had an extension because the train didn't get back to Ystrad station until gone 11 pm. She talks of her later husband walking her home and she talks about the dancing. She says that in The Shack there was no alcohol. You could have coffee tea or squash.

1:15:40

She used to meet up with her friends after she left Polikoffs. She used to go to Cardiff to see Iris, until she died. She's met people in Treorchy that used to work with her in Polikoffs. She goes on to say that people still recognized her.

1:16:43

MC went back to work after having children. She went back to Polikoffs when her youngest was 10 but they didn't have a job. So she went to a factory in Llwynypia. It was called the bag factory. They made bags and cases for Marks and Spencers. She hadn't been there 3 weeks when Polikoffs rang up to offer her a job. But she told them that she had already found a job. She didn't feel she could give that job up when they'd given her a job when she needed it.

MC says the bag factory was very nice. It was a sewing job again with a machine but she had to get used to using the different kind of material. She was on the line there and she was there until it shut. They were doing well and they had a lot of orders. It was only a small factory - 150 to 200 workers - compared to Polikoffs. The reason it shut was that the zip factory in Treforest bought the factory as a tax break that is instead of paying tax. She didn't understand that at the time and she doesn't understand why they bought a factory and shut it down, just for them not to pay tax. MC thought this was wrong and thought the factory had been doing well. She worked there for 2 or 2 and a half years.

1:19:44

She says that they moved then because her husband left the pit. She talks about him going to Cardiff to work and them moving to Pontyclun and getting a bigger mortgage, sending the children to college and training as a nurse.

MC says she felt sorry for her mother and that the house was like a cafe, people coming in and out for food all the time. She didn't mind working in a factory and says the hardest thing about working in Polikoffs was doing the overcoats for the Russians.

1:23:26

She talks about her wages again and 2d contributions to various funds including Lady Churchill's Russian fund.

85:16 END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD