

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAW'R Y FFATRI

Steinberg, Hawthorn, Trefforest; Bernard and Lakin, Aberpennar/ Mountain Ash

Interviewee: **VSE064 Martha Irene Lewis**
Date: **12/6/14**
Interviewer: **Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's
Archive of Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru**

Martha Irene Lewis was born 19/7/1927.

Her father was a miner from the age of 14. He started work at 11. They lived in Abercynon. Her mother helped her mother because her grandmother had a lot of children. She also took washing in. She was born in the Rhondda. She says that she had 4 brothers who were miners and a sister who worked in Alexon Steinberg's factory from the age of 14 until she was 64. She said she started working there when she was 18.

She says that she went to the local school in Abercynon, and when she was 11 she went up to (? don't understand) school, junior. Then they came back down to the Higher School in Abercynon. She finished school at 14.

03:00

When asked how she felt about leaving school, she says

"I went to school for 8 years and only lost a half a day in eight years and it was on the last day of me finishing school that my grandmother died and my mother said to me I had to stay home for the afternoon to get the food ready for them coming home from work then. So of course when I went back to school then, I had a row off the teacher. I had more of a row for losing that half a day because I had broken my eight years' attendance.... There were only two in Abercynon school.... they had a watch you know, a wristwatch for the time and I lost out on that as well."

She says she enjoyed school but then she had to work at home with her mother then to look after the 5 miners and her sister was still in school. She talks about her brother losing his wife and coming back home to live with his son Graham (Irene's nephew). They had to raise Graham as well. (Graham her nephew is in the room and can

sometimes be heard interrupting the conversation.) She says she couldn't go to work in the factory because she had to stay home to help her mother. She talks about how small Graham was and Graham joins in!

When asked if she would have liked to have stayed on if the circumstances were different, she says she was very good at sport and a "proper outdoor girl." She talks about her home life. She says she helped her mother until she was 18. Her sister who was working at Steinberg's said that she'd get her a job when she went back to work. She arranged an interview for Irene. She went one Monday and started on the next.

08:00

When asked what happened in the interview, she says that she was asked her age and what she liked. She says they just employed her 'like that.' She says the factory was small but they were about to open the big factory up in Hawthorn, Rhydfelin so they were looking for people to start in the new factory. She started in the new factory just after the war. They talk about the factory and it not being long finished.

When asked if she had to be trained when she went there, she said no. She said two of the women on the section showed her what to do and she picked it up quickly. She tells of a time that she spotted a whole rail of skirts had been cut incorrectly because she could place the buttons on them.

11:33

When asked about a day's work she says they went in at 8 am. She says she was standing all day. They had models on the floor and when the coats came down they had to put the coats on the models so they could measure the buttons properly. That's what they did all day. She said that they had to be careful that they didn't lose a button because they were given the right amount. She said that they used to have worker's playtime on to keep them happy and they were all a happy crowd she says. She says she always worked with buttons the whole time she was there until she finished. She says there were suits and skirts and something different all the time they were there.

13:21

"One day a young girl came up to me and she said 'Mr Rhodes wants to see you.' Where we used to work was right down where they used to have the clothes going out. And I thought well I haven't done anything wrong so I went down. And he looked at me and he said 'Would you mind trying on a suit for me?' cos I was a 16 then, was tall and whatyoucall. And I looked at him - I thought 'Oh what....?' So the girl came with me and brought the suit. I put the suit on. I had to go back down to the manager Mr Rhodes and he asked me to walk up and down with the suit on. He said 'That's fine.' He came over.. he said 'I just wanted to see it on a person!' cos I don't think they had any models there. So when things came down that were my size then, the girl used to come up and fetch me to try things on you know. It was a bit embarrassing you know. I wasn't used to

anything like that.... When I got married then and when I was having my daughter, they sent the girl for me to go down, and I said to her 'You'll have to tell Mr Rhodes I've put a bit of weight on now - I won't be able to try anything on!' And fair play he came up and congratulated me!"

15:20

When asked where the clothes they made went, she says a lot of them went to America. They had to be very particular when the clothes were going there. Steinberg was an American - she thinks they were all Americans. They were women's clothes - suits, skirts - anything that needed a button on. They used to have open day on a Saturday for people to go in and buy seconds. The open day was for employees and the public. They were high end, really expensive clothes, top quality. She doesn't know where they were sold in Britain. They had a special room to keep the clothes that were all passed. They had people in the factory checking every item.

18:52

She says that when her sister was 18 she had a nervous breakdown. She'd been working in Steinberg since she was 14. The doctor said if she could go to work and was allowed to do some light work, then she'd get through her illness better. Irene says they were 'marvellous' with her sister. They kept her on and gave her little jobs to do. She was so used to going out working and the girls were very good with her. Irene thinks the firm were very good to keep her on and she came out of her illness quickly because of it. She stayed on for another 50 years.

20:16

She says that they had to catch a bus to go to work. There was an inspector on the bus going down to Trefforest making sure that the buses weren't late and would get you there on time for 8am. So Irene and her sister would travel from Abercynon to Hawthorn, Trefforest every day. The company was Red and White and it was public transport rather than a factory bus and they had to pay for the bus. IL knew other people as well as her sister who worked in the factory. Her friend's sister used to work there. She didn't know many but she says she soon got to know other people during the lunch breaks etc. and made lots of friends. She says that her sister 'showed her the ropes' on the first day and showed her how to clock in. However her sister was an M Furlong and Irene was also an M Furlong because her first name is Martha, so the boss went to her sister and said 'How come you've got two clocking in cards?' Because Irene is called Rene she didn't realise. The mystery was soon solved. She says she thought the factory was very big on the first day and she wasn't working with her sister so it was strange working with people she didn't know. But she says that the other women were kind and showed her what to do and helped her a lot because they'd been there a while. She says "Then I got on alright because I think I can get on with anybody."

23:54

She says it was very noisy in the factory because of the machines and the big presses and the big industrial sewing machines. On top of that they'd be playing music and singing. She says that they'd all have a go at singing! She doesn't remember what the songs were except they were "all the popular ones and still a lot of the war songs". She says that they had a good time working as well there. She says she started work there in 1946.

25:23

She says she earned about £3 in her first pay packet. She used to give some to her mother but she had most left over so that she could buy her own clothes. Her mother did the same with her sister then and let her buy her own clothes. She said that her sister Margaret used to be a terror and would take Irene's clothes and not look after them. But when she had to buy her own she'd look after them. She says she had to save her money so that she could buy what she wanted. She says she didn't buy a lot from the factory because they were too expensive and they'd go and look for cheaper clothes. Even the seconds were expensive. She says that when her sister Margaret started in the factory she was hand sewing the buttons on and after she'd been there a while she was sewing on the machines. She says she was only 14 and she used to have to sew army clothes that were heavy to shift around.

29:13

When asked how she felt about working in the factory she says it was alright. She knew she had to do something and it was a job. She was also glad to get out of the house and make friends. She says that they all seemed happy.

30:15

When asked how many people worked in the factory she says she couldn't say. She says that when they were young they didn't think of things like that, they just did their jobs. There were rows of machinists, there were the cutters, there was cleaners who got the cotton off the clothes. "Everyone had a different job to do". She says they were mainly women there and the men were employed as mechanics and cutters. She thinks all the cutters were men. She says they got on well with the men, they were friendly. They only saw them in the canteen or break time. They were women of all ages there. The two women who helped her at the beginning - one was in her 40s and the other was about 50. They could have worked in the older smaller factory. They had all ages there. There were lots of elderly women just sitting down sewing. She says there was a few there who had families. They weren't all single women/

34:27

She says they went in to work at 8 and worked until 5. She says it was very dry with dust from the clothing. They would get thirsty. They would have about 20 min break at 10.30

am. Then they'd have a lunch break at 1 pm. They'd sometimes have a break to have a drink in the afternoon in the warm weather, because it got so dry.

35:26

There was a big canteen in the factory.

"Sometimes you couldn't afford to buy the food. You'd save your money and take your own. But then you'd have to buy a drink there - tea or pop - but you could have a dinner there if you wanted it. The (price of the) food was reasonable only when you're young you think you'll spend money.. "If I can take something (to eat) I can buy something (else) you know."

She says it was a good canteen and everybody used the same canteen she thinks.

36:45

She says it felt like a new factory and there was no fault with the facilities. She says that her sister saw a great difference between the old factory and the new. She says a film star came to open the new factory - Anne Phillips or Field. She says it used to be hot there sometimes because of all the machines. They had air conditioning there - she says they had to.

They used to make all the heavy winter clothes in the summer to get them ready. So that's why it got so hot. They were doing heavier work in the summer. She says it was never cold there in the winter either. She says the lighting was very good and they had all the mod cons. She says it was a pleasant place to work. She says her sisier Margaret wouldn't have stayed there for 50 years otherwise. her sister got a gold watch for her 50 years' service.

41:14

She says that she was paid around £3 p/w at the beginning. She can't remember whether she was given a raise every year. She says there was a trade union in the factory and she was a member she thinks. She doesn't remember any disputes and she thinks everyone was quite happy. She says they didn't have to wear a uniform. They could wear their own clothes. She says she worked Monday to Friday and sometimes they were asked to work Saturday morning if they had to finish an order. They were paid overtime. She never worked on in the evening. She doesn't think anyone worked in the evening.

45:19

When asked whether she was aware of time and motion people she says no. When asked if she had a holiday with pay, she says she thinks it was a week. She thinks the factory closed unless the cutters were prepping for when they came back. It was during the miner's holiday. When asked if she went on holiday she says yes.

"I went to Porthcawl in a caravan with my friends for a week and my mother thought I was going to the end of the earth. Nineteen I was."

47:23

She talks about her holiday in Porthcawl. She says she went to Porthcawl on holiday twice. She was 18 the first time and 19 the second. She was courting her future husband Des by then. She didn't go with friends from the factory but friends who she went to school with.

48:30

She says she was friendly with the women from the factory, but they all lived in different places. She says she couldn't travel to see them. She says one of her friends lived in Pontypridd and another one lived further down the valley. She says there were no Christmas dos or day trips from the factory. IL says she stayed in the factory from 1946 until 1952, so for 6 or 7 years. She left when she was 7 months pregnant.

50:52

She says she went back to work in another factory when her son went to school in the early 60s. It was a small factory in Mountain Ash and she could walk to work. The factory was called Bernard and Lakin, another clothes factory. She says she used to press the made clothes in the factory. It hadn't been opened all that long before it closed. She says it wasn't a big factory and it was a very friendly place. She says she knew more women there because they all lived locally. She thinks about 50 or 60 of them worked there. She says she saw some of the women socially and she still sees some women now that used to work there. A friend of hers had said why didn't she come down to the factory to see if she could have a job because there was a nice crowd of women there. She says she was there for about 3 years. She says her husband was in work, her children were in school and it was a bit of extra money to go for holidays. She says her husband was glad when she finished in Steinberg's because they were both out working and they didn't see a lot of each other. She says that she told him she wanted to go to B&L to work "for an hour or two". Her husband said it was up to her. When asked if she was glad that she went back to work she says yes she enjoyed it.

55:16

She says that she enjoyed her work in the factories of the years and her sister 'always praised' Alexon. When asked why her sister stayed for so long, she says that she enjoyed the work and had got to know all the people and IL says that Alexon were so good to her when she had her nervous breakdown. She says that one winter her sister had started work in January and she bought a pair of clogs to go to work. She says that it snowed and all the trains and buses stopped. She says the old Steinberg factory was even further away than Hawthorn and her sister and her friend had to walk all the way home. She

arrived home with her clogs in her hand saying 'I'm not going to work anymore - I'm frozen - and I'm NOT wearing these clogs anymore.'

"It happened on the Friday so she had the weekend to get over it. But she was in work on the Monday!... She hadn't long started going to work and I thought oh that'll put her off going to work there.. but she stayed there all that time."

She says her sister didn't get married until she was 41 so she didn't have any children. She stayed living with Irene's mother until she died. She talks about missing her sister after she died and other members of the family and how they all died in their 60s.

61:12

She says she missed the factory when she left but she was busy with her first baby. But she did miss being at work.

62:24

END OF INTERVIEW/ DIWEDD CYFWELIAD