

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

**JR Freeman's Cigar Factory – Cardiff, Spirellas Corset Factory – Cardiff/Caerdydd?,
Cora Garment Factory – Aberbargoed**

Interviewee: VSE080 Margaret Gerrish
DOB: 5/5/31
Date: 15/09/2014
Interviewer: Catrin Edwards for Woman's Archive of Wales / ar ran
Archif Menywod Cymru

She was born in Rhymni and she was one of 6 children that lived though she thinks there were more children who died. Four boys and two girls. She was brought up by her mother and father and an Italian family who ran the Fish and Chip shop. She says she wasn't much more than 4 years old. The family was called Bizzi. She says that the whole Italian family looked after her because her mother was very ill. She talks about the family life when she was young. Her mother died in 1947 when she was young and had been consistently ill before then. She was just leaving school. She talks about her aunties coming down to help when her mother was ill and her resenting the fact because she didn't realise her mother was so ill.

04:56

MG says that her father was a staunch unionist. She says he worked in Eliot's pit. She says it was hard going for him because he had 6 children. She says that they marched up to London during those days. In 1947 they won the day and he was one of the first to start the NACODS union. Her mother died the same year. She says it was a rough year. She says that all her brothers and sisters got married except for one who was 'a bachelor.' Her brother lived away somewhere and she later found that he was in an approved school because he'd stolen a shoe last from a local house. She talks about her dad looking after their shoes.

07:39

She says that her mother's father had a small holding up in Rumney and she thinks they came from Carmarthen. He had his own coal level up in Rumney. But she thinks her grandfather's mine - the business collapsed and she and her parents moved to New Tredegar.

09:07

She went to New Tredegar primary school and they lived in Greenfield. She says that her father was always doing something for the unions during the 30s. HE then had a promotion and he was an overman at the colliery. They moved across the river from Monmouth to Glamorgan. She then went to Turf Hill school. She says she was interested in school - she liked stories - she wanted to know everything.

"But I wasn't good at putting pen to paper even then. I didn't want to do that. I just wanted to listen."

She lived next door to the monitor and they'd be the first people in school every morning and she just loved it.

She says again that her aunties were always around when she got back from school and they taught her everything about house keeping and cooking.

12:05

When asked if she took the 11+ she says no. "in those days there was only certain children that were allowed to take it. That's how I felt about school then."

12:35

She says she finished school at 13 or 14 and went looking for work. It was 1944 or 45. She back tracks to the war and tells me that they had evacuees staying with them during the war. She says that she used to sleep with her brothers - four of them in a bed.

She says that she was on the washing board before her mum died - she used to stand on a box to reach the sink. She talks about washing clothes for the family. She had a sister as well. She says that before they came down to Tredegar, the boys and her sister had rheumatic fever and were really ill. She says that her legs would bother her as well so she thinks she had the same thing. Her sister had another bout when she was 17 and it left a weakness with her heart. Her sister was 10 years older than she was. She was the youngest but one and has a brother who's still alive and lives in Glyn Neath. She says that the brother who went to Crickhowell special school, she found out later that he was gay. She says that they didn't talk about it in those days. He went to the merchant navy on the first year of the war in 1939. He was on the Artic convoy. She thinks he worked on a Canadian firm. She talks a lot about her brother and his life and his death.

21:56

When asked what she did when she left school she says that she went away to work in a boarding school in Yeovil - about 6 local girls from her school. They worked in the kitchen. She says she was a bit shy and lacked confidence so she tended to stay in the kitchen with the cook who was kind to them. She talks a little about going out with her friends in Yeovil.

24:46

She says she became ill there and was in bed for quite a while with housemaid's knee. She talks a bit about this for a while. She says that they still meet up now although some of them have died. She says that she had one certificate from school that she would make a good maid. She was honest, trustworthy etc etc. She talks about cooking and cleaning at length.

27:53

She says they came back from Yeovil - all of them. They were asked if they wanted to go to the cigar factory - a recruitment drive for the cigar factory - and she had an interview that she 'passed'. She says they used to travel down to Cardiff on the train because it was early. Then they'd go down to Cardiff and get a bus to take them to Grangetown, where the factory was first of all. She mentions a neighbour who used to work in the Cigar factory with her in the stripping room. She says they were given a big leaf and they had to strip the vein out of the leaf, then it was packed. She says she was in the stripping room all the time she was there.

30:13

When asked when the train left in the morning, she says it was about 6.30 to 7 because it took an hour to get to Cardiff. Her colleague caught the train in Bargoed because she lived further down. She says she doesn't remember anything about the first day she walked into the factory. She says they weren't trained they just showed them what to do and they were supervised to make sure they were doing it right and then when they were happy with them "they let them do it."

32:00

She doesn't remember when they started but does remember that they started the same time as the Cardiff girls although they travelled from afar. She doesn't remember clocking in and out and she doesn't remember how much she was paid. She doesn't think it was a lot but it was enough for her to contribute to the family budget. She says that quite a few girls from her area went to work in Freemans and she knew quite a few of them.

34:59

When asked about the smell of the factory she says that it smelt of tobacco. She says that her dad used to smoke a pipe and her sister smoked so she was used to smoking. When asked how she got on with the Cardiff girls she says "Fine! I got on with everybody." She says that Shirley

Bassey used to work there and agrees that there was a big gang from Grangetown and ButeTown working there. She thinks that everyone mixed well. She says they were quite friendly.

She talks about liking going down to Cardiff with her dad. (She says that 'they' were boxers as well.) She says they used to go straight to Cardiff market and have a small china dish of cockles. She says that her father would buy clothes for her in Marks and Spencer. She talks about having something to eat in Woolworth's.

40:04

When asked if she enjoyed the work in Freeman's she says that she did. She doesn't remember what she was paid. She says that she's kept her father's payslips from during WWI, but she didn't keep her own. When asked if there was a union in Freeman's she says that she thinks there was. She would have had to be a member if there was because her dad would make sure she was. She said that the whole family believed in the union. When asked what the conditions were like in Freeman's she says it was all new to them. Coming from a home where she had to do a lot of the housework, suddenly "oh you was going to Cardiff and seeing how the otherhalf lived and I just thought it was all anew world to me." She thought the conditions were ok. She said the canteen was good and she used it a lot. If they had money they'd buy something but if they didn't have money they wouldn't and they'd take sandwiches.

43:30

When asked what she did with her wages she says that she took it home to her parents and they would say she could save 2/6. They had had a club to buy clothes and pay a bit each week. Then they used to have a provident cheque.

45:17

When asked whether they could talk when they were working she says yes, that they used to talk about silly things. But the work was mainly about earning money - that's what it was all about. She thinks they used to have the wireless on, Worker's Playtime and all that. They all used to sing to the radio. She talks about Shirley Bassey again.

47:05

When asked if they used to go with girls from work out she says yes then she says no not often because they had to catch the train back home. She says that they got home about 6. She says it was a long day.

47:52

When asked if they had Christmas parties that kind of thing she says she can't think of that but she expects they did.

She thinks that she went to work in Freemans before her mother died but thinks that she didn't work there long. She now thinks that she went to Freeman's first. She says that she wanted a nylon mack to go away and her mother go one for her top go away.

51:16

When she came back from Yeovil, she went to work for Spirella Corsetting firm. She says that they came to the house and asked her whether she'd be interested in working for them. She says that her father had got her an apprenticeship to go and learn at a local tailor's shop in New Tredegar - Parry's the Tailor's. She says it was THE tailors at the time. She always wanted to make things. She could have had the job but her parents had heard different things about the man (Parry?), and her mother wouldn't allow her to take up the position.

She talks about Spirella. She thinks their base must have been in Cardiff. A woman came to interview her and show her what she had to do. They used to sell skirts and knitted jackets as well as corsets. She says that she did a few fittings for people who wanted a corset. She says that she didn't have to go into the factory but went around people's houses. She went to the house and measured the client and took them different garments to try on. She'd put it all down in a book and then it would be ordered. She doesn't really know where the factory was but the corset was made in the factory. She says the job didn't last long.

56:37

She says that she was basically working from home. She doesn't remember what the wages were like. She didn't take much notice of what she was earning. She enjoyed the job and she enjoyed it more because she had a skirt and jacket made for herself by Spirellas.

"Marvellous! Everyone used to ask me where did you get that. It was like green check - not a permanent check - in the weave and this green cardigan knit, with a roll collar and buttoned up the front. It was like a suit really - beautiful clothes."

57:30

When suggested that she was very young to be doing the job she agrees. She thinks some people were giving the orders 'for me, I think.' She says that when she lived in Birch Grove the people saw that her mother had suffered and died at a young age. She thinks that all the people looked after her. She talks about this at length. She talks about her younger brother missing her mother when she died.

61:28

She went to Cora after Spirellas. That was nearly 1950, 49 perhaps. Cora made everything for Marks and Spencer - blouses dresses pyjamas. When she started she started on the cutting

section. She used to lay the materials flat and then the cutter would come with a big machine and cut the patterns out. If anyone made a mistake they'd come back to her and she'd arrange a re-cut. She says that she enjoyed that. She says that she could see the outcome of it all. She says she'd met her husband by then. He was 18 and had just finished his apprenticeship. He then had to go and do his national service and that's when she went to the factory. Cora was in Aberbargoed. She says she loved it there. She says the older women who worked there got the job for her and they looked after her, because they were all from her street. She says that they'd been working there for quite some time because those women had also worked in the munitions factory.

65:12

She says that they took a bus to Cora. She thinks they caught a service bus for a few years and then they put on buses. She doesn't remember how much she was paid there. She thinks she might have the receipts somewhere up the attic. She talks about her family again - her father and her mother.

66:45

MG thinks they had to be in work for 8 pm in Cora and she thinks they clocked in and out there. She says they had a break in the morning, a break dinner time and a short break in the afternoon. She says the food there was lovely - they had a lovely canteen. There were no other facilities except the toilets and the first aid room. She says the building was quite new. She says that a lot of the women had been there a while before she started and they all went to Leicester to train. Those women then became supervisors. She says that a lot of them could sew because people made their own clothes in those days. The woman who got MG was a friend of the family and she'd made MG's confirmation dress. She talks about some other neighbours.

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70:10

She thinks that the conditions were quite good in Cora and she says that they were treated well by the management until a man came from the army - an ex Sergeant Major called Mr Florn - to supervise them. The factory was going OK she says and for some reason they employed this

man. She says he started sacking people workers on the floor, engineers and machine maintenance. Sh says she'd been put on examining the clothes. If there was anything wrong you had to give the clothes back to the machinists and they had to put it right. She found a batch of clothes which were all bad. She says most likely they'd been cut badly in the first place. So they wouldn't pass them. So Mr Florn came in one afternoon and sacked them instead. She tells the background story. She got hom and told her dad and her brother. They had a woman from the union in Cardiff to come up and sort it out and give them their jobs back.

76:27

She says that everyone were afraid of losing their jobs. So they were re-instated and when they went to work they told them they could stick their jobs. She says that before that people would have stuck together but she thinks it was a time of change. She starts talking about about an accident she had in M&S shop and the compensation she had from them.

80:49

She says that after she left Cora she got married. She didn't go back to work in a factory. She kept in touch with the women she worked with in Cora. Her husband left the merchant navy and became a collier. She talks about her family again and her father's illness.

83:16

She says she was happy enough working in the factories. She's still in touch with women she worked with in Cora and Freeman's the cigar factory.

84:40

END OF INTERVIEW/ DIWEDD CYFWELIAD