

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

Polikoff's, Ynyswen; Sobell's, Rhigos

Interviewee: VSE031 Maureen Howard Boiarde

DOB 1/5/1947

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

MHB says she also lives in the US in Maryland.

MHB says she's one of 9 children and was born at home in the Rhondda valley. When her mother went through her 9th live pregnancy she was also sterilised whilst in the hospital. She says she had 2 younger sisters, Patricia (the baby) and Christine. MHB says that she's a twin but sadly her sister Doreen is dead and they were born 'somewhere in the middle.' They were born on May 1st and her father "a staunch socialist took it as a sign that one of us would go on to be a leader." She says she was the first born and older than her twin by 10 mins and they were totally different. She talks about her sister and compares the two of them.

04:42

MHBs father was a builder, a plasterer and a 'journeyman'. She says his skill was profound. "I'm talking about watching a man put plaster on the wall and make it look like a piece of cake." She says that her father worked in Margam when work was scarce and would travel through the train tunnel to work. She talks about him going to work.

08:20

When asked if her mother worked she said no not at all. "Having nine children, her work was cut out. There were no washing machines, there were no vacuum cleaners. I was 10 years old when my mother had her first electric stove. Electricity came into the house I was born in, in 1957." She talks about how excited they were when the 'Belling' turned up. She'd been given a chip pan with the cooker, so to celebrate the arrival they had egg and chips for Sunday dinner.

10:22

She says that young children went to school earlier in Wales than they did in England. She thinks this was because of the abuse or neglect that could happen.. They were a family of 9 children, across the road 12 children and down the road 14 children. She says she wasn't quite 3 when she went to school. Her first school was Dunraven infants school in Tŷ Newydd. She says it was like a government run nursery. They were given orange juice, milk and cod liver oil and went to bed in the afternoon. She was about 6/7 when she went to Junior school and was there until 11+. After that she went to Treherbert Secondary Modern girls' school. She says she didn't want to go there but she thoroughly enjoyed it. She says she was a very clever kid and enjoyed school. "I absorbed everything that the teachers could give me and I loved it." She says that her parents stopped her trying the 11+ because it would have meant that she would have gone on to university. It meant that she would not have gone to work at 15 and brought in a wage packet. She says that her parents had to sign a form that said that she would go on to further education. Her mother refused to sign the form. She says that she was devastated and her teacher was too. She said that her teacher - Ieuan Butler - gave her and another girl the same exam in a different room and she passed 'with flying colours.'" If she'd been able to sit it she would have gone to Porth County. The teacher called her mother in but to no avail. She says "It broke my heart. It absolutely broke my heart." But she says that the teachers in Treherbert Girls' school were wonderful. You could also get into Pentre school if your grades were good for a year in Treherbert. But once again, her parents wouldn't sign the form for her to go.

21:08

MHB says she was exactly 15 when she left school. She went on the bus with several other girls and went to Polikoff's. It was 1/5/1962. The teachers would already try to find jobs for the girls before they left school. So she went to work in Polikoff's with a gang of girls from school. She says that she didn't want to work there. She says she hated it. She and her sister went on the bus but didn't clock in because they didn't have a clock in number. They went to the training school. She says there was a big notice and big arrows that said TRAINING CENTRE NEW GIRLS. And the arrows pointed to the training centre. She says they were introduced to one another, to other girls. She says it was a big area with probably about 50 sewing machines in there, different kinds of sewing machines, but the majority being flat and fast sewing machines. But they also had buttonhole, overlocking and cuff making machines. They would train for 6 weeks. "The job wasn't granted to you. If you couldn't cut the mustard, then you couldn't stay. They needed to know that you could sew."

25:52

They were paid £2/19/6 a week when they were training. It was 8am til 5.30 five days a week. They weren't entitled to do overtime. You were given clock in cards with your number on. Your card was put into a big clocking in machine and there were hundreds of them.

"When they said 8 o'clock, they didn't want you clocking in at 8. If you weren't sitting down when that buzzer went off at 8, it meant that you were late. So when the clock cards were picked up and they went to the wages secretary, the WS was told to look out for anybody that had clocked in at 8am and put it to one side. If you had more than 2 or 3 8 o'clocks, they'd take you into personnel and they'd give you a warning.... And they would say to you 'You couldn't have been at your seat if your clock card says 8 o'clock... You've got a five minute walk to wherever you're going.' And that was true! They were very strict about that and you could lose your job if there were too many reminders."

28:28

She says the hours were 8 o'clock til 10, then you had a 15min break. One part of the factory had a break from 10 - 10.15. The another part had a break from 10.15 to 10.30. From 12 til 1 was lunch. Lots of people went home if they didn't live far. In the afternoon you worked from 1 til 5.30. There was a tea break from 3 - 3.15 or from 3.15 to 3.30.

29:33

She tells a story of being very upset on the first day and not wanting to be at the factory so she goes to see her old headmistress in the lunch hour to ask her to save her. When she got home, her mother was smoking a cigarette and knew what she'd been up to.

"There was this eerie eerie silence... the calm before the storm.. and I expected a battering - there's no question about it - I expected a thumping from my mother. But she didn't. She had her cup and saucer, she had her cigarette and she said these words to me 'Lose this job and you will lose the roof over your head.' And she walked down the passage way down the front garden and went across to Rosie Jones our neighbour.... and I said to my twin sister 'Well that's bloody it then isn't it!'"

32:30

When asked what the first day was like she says

"Magical - if I want to use the word... even though I didn't really want to be there, when I walked in it was a sight to behold, I have to admit. First of all, I think the first thing you remember when you walk into a big area, is the noise. It's almost like a drone. You have to concentrate so hard to know there are people talking - there are hundreds of people talking and all the noises of the people's voices are all melded into a sound. You don't

know what the sound is, because suddenly you'll hear someone cough and then suddenly you'll hear someone shout. And then all these machines are going 'brrrr... brrrr...!' at high paces. And that's incredible when you have hundreds of them and they're all sewing and the conveyor belts, they all make a sound of their own. In Polikoff's... the suites had to be steamed so you had all this steam in areas and you can hear the men pulling the big press down "shhhhhhhhh... clonc!" and this was repetitive.. they were pressing... because they too were on piece work, so they had to get these jackets or trousers steamed or whatever. And then the men with gigantic irons like I'd never seen.. big steam irons with pipes connected to water. It was magical... it really was... an incredible sight."

When asked how many people worked there she guesses it was about 1000 people. The factory was built in different sections under one big roof. They were making all kind of clothes. She can remember an advertisement for Polikoff's - Fred Perry in his long white trousers which were made by Polikoff's.

There was a catalogue that they supplied for. "I can see the section where they had men's suites and what you see are packages - packages of cloth tied up in ribbon. These would be say the leg section, and one woman would have piles of these and it was her job to sew two legs together and then it would go down a conveyor belt... To me it was sort of drab... men's suites were drab weren't they... they were black or brown or grey.. so that was the men's section.. all the same."

38:16

When asked how many women worked there compared to men she says 80% were women and the majority of the work was done by women. "The majority of work in the factories was done by machine... it was the machinist." She says that the men and the women did different jobs. She doesn't ever remember a man on a sewing machine. She says there were a couple of designers who were men.

"Men went into the cutting rooms and that's a sight to see - a huge area elevated over the sewing machines right at the bottom of the factory, in a room of its own with material 3ft high, 2 feet high and it was like a laser, these cutting machines, these cloth tailors had taken the pattern and every little nick had to be drawn in... and these men were cutting 2 feet of cloth - you know how thin a piece of material is - there were about 200 trousers in that one cut so they had to be precise."

40:29

She says a lot of sexism came into it

"Women weren't expected to go into pits and mines. Women went into factories to do the monotonous jobs. Women could work, women took care of the kids, women could sit and do the same job over and over again cos that's what every housewife does every day - she polishes the same floor, washes the same dishes, cleans the same carpets. Women are great at that."

41:19

She says she stopped crying and showed the supervisor how good she could sew, "because we'd been taught to sew in Treherbert Girls' School." She came out of training and went on to the conveyor. Because you were new you weren't put on the front of the conveyor belt in case "you fumbled." They were put on the end with someone until they became fast. She reckons it took her a month to get up to speed and that was excellent! She says the sooner you got of training that's where the money was.

43:00

She says that she had a standard wage which £2/19/6. She talks about the ins and outs of training wages etc. She says also that if they had to lay anybody off the trainees would be the first out. She says she had a good aptitude and attitude for the machines. She was made a 'floater'. What that meant was that if someone had to leave the line because they were ill or for whatever reason a whistle would blow or a light would go on and a 'floater' would come over and would be able to fill in with sewing whatever part of the jacket or trousers she was sewing. The floaters had a higher wage because they could use any machine but also because they couldn't pick up bonuses from piece work. She says her wage was £5.

"That was magical right. Your wage packet was brown with a tiny little perforation in the front. It had white clear cellophane on it and on the top it had a very thin 1/2 inch docket.. it was long strip of paper it was about 24 inches and it would tell you your name , the date your clock in number, your machine - wherever you worked, how much you earned, what your wage was.. and then all the contribution were taken out - your tax, your deduction, your scissors, your season ticket, so by the time everything was taken out then you were left with £4/2/6 maybe."

47:43

All of them used to give their wages unopened to their mother. Her mother would give her 10/- and she's never forgotten that first 10/-. She talks about what she had to buy out of that 10/-. She says she would have been better off paying her mother board and lodge, which would have been about £2.50.

50:00

"It meant your board and your keep and that's what you had to pay your parents for the roof over your head and the food in your belly. When you started to work you contributed to the household."

50:32

She says "there were many little battles in many households when you handed over your £5 and you'd say to your mum "This isn't fair it's about time I was on board and lodge."

You progressed from handing over all your wages to paying board and lodge in the same way that you became a fully fledged member of the workforce earning more money. "It progressed as you went into the factory and you got quicker and smarter and you could keep up and your wage packet started to fill, then it was deemed if you didn't put your daughters or your sons on board and lodge you were stealing from them."

She eventually was able to say to her mother that her friend was on board and lodge so she wanted to be on it too. She threatened not to do any overtime so her mother would be worse off. It took about 6-9 months.

She talks a bit more about board and lodge.

53:30

When asked what she spent the extra money on, she says "There was always the dress you couldn't afford." There was lacquer for her hair, new shoes and nylons and all the other things she had to buy. They would also make their own clothes to save money. She says she can make anything to this day.

55:00

She says that she finished off in Polikoff's on the hand sewing section. She talks about that. She says it was intricate work and that's the first time she heard the word bespoke. She says that the standard of hand finishing work was elegant and beautiful on say a man's collar and lapels. "No wonder they paid a fortune for them." She talks about the work on the men's suites and the Burberry coats. She says she wasn't paid any more but she was paid on a different scale.

58:25

When asked if she worked overtime, MHB says yes. "If I wanted to stay in my mother's house, overtime was compulsory." It meant extra money. The factory shut at 5.30 so she would have a sandwich and carry on. She says that she was lucky that she could hand sew and machine sew. When asked if they were paid a different rate for overtime she says she doesn't remember. She says Saturday morning was fab, because you worked from 8am to 12. They paid time and a half on Saturday. Anything over 40 hours was paid at time and a half.

61:00

When asked if the men were paid more than the women MHB says always. She says it didn't affect them. It was expected that men should have more because they were the

'bread winners.' She talks about a husband and wife who worked together clocked in and out at the same time and he would earn £3+ more than her. She talks about post war expectations.

63:19

When asked how the men and women got on together she says fantastic. "God help any man who worked with women in a factory. We were the ballsiest gutsiest females that God put on the earth, especially if you were Welsh. We had a working relationship that was just fabulous. We had an awful lot of sexual bantering going on.. it was innocent, it was fun, jokes were told. The men would pinch a woman's bottom and actually if you didn't have your bottom pinched you'd go home and you'd cry! You'd think there was something wrong with you!"

"What the men gave the women, the women gave back to the men a hundred times more." But she says that they worked very hard to get orders out because they knew that their jobs depended on it and they wouldn't get paid.

65:45

She talks about 'Bull week.'

"'Bull week' was the week before Christmas and the week before the annual holidays. It meant that you had to double your production this week because next week you're going on holiday." She talks some more about Bull Week.'

"To get the bonus, to get your nice big hefty bonus all the stops and whistles were pulled out. I wonder sometimes what the management used to think. They Probably thought 'Why the hell can't they work like this every day!'"

MHB says that all the factories closed down for holidays in the last week in July, first week in August, she says even in London. She says all the mines were shut. It was paid leave but everyone wanted extra money to go on holiday.

70:58

When asked where she went on holiday she says Trecco Bay. She didn't go until she was 16 and had worked in Polikoff's for 15 months. August 27 1963. She remembers it well because her brother got married. She's made a new dress for the wedding. "A year in Polikoff's - I could have been David Emmanuel when I think about it. I could run anything together in 15 minutes, right. Get on the train to Ponty market, barter with the guys for some good looking material, come home cut the arms out, cut the sleeves out, two darts there... I mean I had a dress for 30p - it was fabulous!

72:01

She talks about going on holiday to Trecco Bay with 5 other girls. She goes over some of the things she's talked about. She says she had to ask her father about the holiday. An aunty of a friend had a caravan and they rented the caravan from her. They had to save

up for the caravan and groceries which they took with them, they had to pay for the mini van and they had spending money. It was the day her brother got married and he had his reception in the EMI working club. She says everyone was happy and she went to talk to her father before she left to go on holiday. She asked him for money and he gave her £5. "To this day I don't know whether he was drunk or not!" She says they went to Trecco bay and Cliff Richard was singing Summer Holiday on the radio. "It was magical. Absolutely magical. We had a fabulous time. We broke every rule... We drank.. we were 16 and we went up the promenade.. there were 5 of us, 5 pretty girls, 5 debs and we were going to hook ourselves 5 boys... but by the time we'd gone up the promenade and back we'd hooked ourselves 3 sets of boys, not believing that any one of them would turn up that night at the dance... and they did... so there was a big fight and we got chucked out. The first night in Porthcawl.. if word got back up to Treherbert, my father would be down here tomorrow."

77:29

She talks about factory women. She says her twin sister was in the lingerie section. That was on the left. There was more glass on the ceiling to let in more light because they had to do delicate work. She says it was like walking over to my little pony with all the rainbow colours etc. all the pinks and the blues and the satins and chiffons.

She says there was a cross section of women. She was the youngest going in on her 15th birthday. Six weeks later she was working out on the factory floor and they were celebrating someone's 65th birthday. There was a cross section of ages and women and men. There were married women and single. She talks about her bench where was a woman called Pamela who was going to get married at 18 and a woman called Olwen who was 62. One of the women from the factory had to go with the family planning clinic. It was all very hush hush.

82:43

When asked if there were many women with children working at Polikoff's she says yes probably, because based on her life she says her mother went back to work when the children were older. But on the whole you got married and stayed at home. There weren't any nursery schools and crèches. She says granny or 'bopa' would come in and look after the children if they weren't working themselves.

"Women were working because they could not live on the wage packet of a miner or their husbands alone. It couldn't be done. Unless of course they had some help from their parents. The reason my mother didn't work was first of all she couldn't because she had a houseful herself and as each and every one got older they put a little wage packet in, so my mother could make do. I'll always remember poverty but I'll always remember the camaraderie the women had. Factory work sadly is seen as this place of last resort" She says it's because they don't have an education and they don't have a skill and they can be taught the job. And they teach the women the jobs because the men won't do it. "Men won't put 22 ball bearings in a little cup and screw it up and pass it on. Men will do that

because women know more than men the baby will come to mam and say mam I'm hungry. They won't go to dad. Dad's fast asleep aft night after a day's work so kids won't go to dad, they go to mum. And it's mum who turns round and learns to do this because it's putting bread and butter on the table. Everybody I would say, with only a few exceptions to the rule was in very much the same boat. They had an emotion, they had a connection to one another because they'd probably been there."

86:30

She talks about the time when she and her twin were 16 and a half, and her mother told them one lunchtime they were finishing in the factory that afternoon and that they were moving to London. They were devastated. Their parents had had a row and were separating. Her mother was English and her mother lived in Useley. She said they could go and work in London. She and her sister were very upset. Her sister was in bits and started asking the women in the factory did they have a room for her to stay. She says that many of the women would have given them a home but they weren't old enough and her mother had control of them. They had no rights until they were 21. A lot of the women said if it doesn't work out you can come back and stay with me. But they had to leave and go to London.

95:27

When asked if she was a member of a union, she says yes that they were members of the TUC. When asked if it was the garment workers or maybe the T&GWU she thought it was the T&G. She says that everybody was in a union. She doesn't think that anybody dared not to be. When asked if she remembers any disputes she says that she doesn't. She thinks that the workers were treated fairly. She says that they had great union representation. She can't recall any big walkout. She says that Polikoff's was a good company to work for.

97:27

She says that the conditions were excellent. She says she never remembers having to keep her coat on because it was cold. "Working conditions were great." There was lots of light overhead, clean conditions. You weren't allowed to smoke because of the flammable materials. But you could smoke upstairs in the toilet. You could have a smoking break. Someone would step in for you. You could smoke in the canteen, but there were big warning signs - no cigarettes and matches in the factory.

98:57

When asked if the work was dangerous, she says if you didn't know how to sew it was. There was a good medical unit there which kept plasters.

"You would hear 'Arghhhhhhhh!' (she screams) every other 20 minutes (she laughs) and it meant that somebody's finger went under the sewing machine and I'm talking about

high speed. I'm not talking about 'tchtchtcht' or 'brrrrrrrrr' I'm talking about 'broom, broom..' These machines went fast. They had guards, but you couldn't put a safety guard on a foot. You had to be very careful, you had to know what you were doing. I'd defy any woman who worked in Polikoff's to say "I Thought I was skilled! I must have had a needle in my finger at least 50 times!! It was like a rite of passage."

She says they kept a pad by their machine.

You had this... it was like a safety pad. If it happened it was almost like a... it was a clean cloth. You always kept it in emergencies because you needed to stop the flow. You didn't need blood dripping all over clothes. Though I must admit you couldn't see it in the dark clothes. I'm sure that some of our DNA is in some bloody piece of trousers, floating around the world somewhere!"

101:17

She says that Polikoff's used to do army clothes. She remembers sewing the little army jacket and the army blouson which had two pockets on the chest. Her job was to sew the pockets on. They sewed khaki material which was terrible stuff and made your hands rough.

She says that the uniform in Polikoff's wasn't compulsory because it wasn't dirty work, but everyone had an overall. The first thing they were given when they walked in to Polikoff's was a scissors. It was the essential piece of equipment. As soon as you got your scissors in the training factory, you'd take it up... there were too many sitting at the top engraving, and they would engrave your name on it and they would engrave your number on your clock card. That was the very first thing that you had in Polikoff's and you paid for it and you kept it. It was taken out of your wages." Re. the uniform there was a little store in Polikoff's where you could buy them.

104:22

When asked if there were any perks, she says the only thing she remembers is the shop but isn't sure whether the shop was there in 1962/3.

105:15

She says they could talk and chat as much as they wanted to while they were working. She says there was no music allowed, but they were allowed to listen to the radio for half an hour 3 times a week. She thinks there was a programme that played the top hits - Where the Boys Are - Connie Francis. Tab Hunter was the heartthrob at the time and Suzanne Pleshette. She talks about a film they were in and a song that came out of the film.

was called Al di la (?) - she sings. When they played the song everyone in the factory would stand up and wave to each other like idiots. If they played the Beatles for 5 mins you went crazy. This would last about 30 mins.

109:12

She says that after they came from London - they only stayed there for months before her parents made up - she went to Sobells, the TV factory (in Rhigos) to work. Sobells were doing TVs and their starting pay was £5.50. That was a great incentive and she went to work there and she worked there for a year.

110:00

When asked how Sobells compared to Polikoff's, she says different culture different background. She says they were nice women and she met some lovely women. But she says that they were Rhondda valley people and they only had to go 7 miles over to Rhigos and they were in a different land. It was Aberdare and they were strangers.

111:01

She says that the social activities were arranged by the workers in Polikoff's. She says that the bosses were the bosses and they didn't mix with the workers. She says she didn't go but there was a Polikoff's club. She says that in 1962, Polikoff's was full of 'old fogeys' and no way were they going to go to Polikoff's club. The younger set found their own places and it wasn't the social clubs. Their favourite place was Townboys (?) club. All you needed was 6d for a bottle of coke and packet of crisps and you could drool over the boy you fancied. The legal drinking age in GB then was 21.

But the older people organised trips - the workers in the factory was always organising something. Pantos, raffle, trips etc etc. But nothing was organised by the factory. She doesn't ever remember a Polikoff's day, mingling with the bosses kind of thing. But lots of other things happened - football, rugby, the women had a football team and they played EMI, they had races day and they would do things on a Saturday. She remembers going over the Rhigos to Porthcawl. MHB says he women arranged everything. Blackpool was an annual trip but she never went there. She was too young.

116.29

When asked whether she enjoyed working in the factory or whether she was bored she says she did and was too busy to be bored. If it happened all over again she'd still want to go to University, but she says that what she had there, it taught her the ethics of work and that she had the responsibility of getting herself to work, and that she could earn a decent living.

"The women of my generation and the women before... these are forgotten years. She says her mother kept the family on her father's pay packet and she thinks he was glad enough to hand his wages over because he could never have made it stretch like a woman.

When I asked what it did for her generation she said it made her grow up fast and hard to take charge of her life. She talks about board and lodge again. She says it taught her great independence. Then she talks about mending her husband's shirt. She talks about making clothes and she says she can turn her hand to anything that requires sewing. She talks about cutting out and finishing off.

123:04

When asked if she's in contact with her former workmates she says "every one of them." She says

"I went to Polikoff's with 6 girls,... I went on the bus with 6 girls that day, and last week they were all in my house celebrating the six nations cup. We've had our 65th birthdays together... some of us are widows like myself, some of us are still happily married, but they're in my life.. we're all alive... and every one of the will sit here and say the same thing - if anything Polikoff's gave us, they gave us the stamina , the ability to know what working lives are all about. Without work, you don't get a wage packet, without a wage packet you don't put food in your stomach."

124:07

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD Y CYFWELIAD