

LibertiRose 19911118

RICHARD SHARPLESS: [00:00:00] This is an interview with Mrs.

Rose Liberti of 261 Rock Street, Easton, Pennsylvania,

November 18, 1991. The interview took place in Mrs.

Liberti's house. The time is 10:10 a.m. Mrs. Liberti, do
you mind telling me how old you are?

ROSE LIBERTI: I'm old. Seventy-five.

RS: Seventy-five, perfect, and have you lived in Easton all
your life?

RL: Most of it. Fifteen in Phillipsburg.

RS: But in this area?

RL: Born and raised here, sure.

RS: And how many children do you have?

RL: Three.

RS: Three?

RL: Uh-huh.

RS: They're all still alive?

RL: Oh yes, uh-huh. [00:01:00] Two boys, one girl.

RS: When did you start working, originally?

RL: I was thinking today, my daughter is 40 and I worked before her. It had to be at least 45, 49 years that I was in the business.

RS: And what kind of work did you do?

RL: Worked in a factory. I was a presser. Definite one I never have to leave.

RS: That's the whole 40, 45 years?

RL: Mm-hmm.

RS: Could you describe a little bit about what you did and what a presser does?

RL: I worked in several factories because I would do blouses one place. Maybe I did nightgowns and house coats, dresses, so I was working in different industries all around this town here, right?

RS: Mm-hmm.

RL: [00:02:00] And then, I became very interested in the union, and then I held office in the union, and that's how I became doing all these things I did, but I worked in a lot of factories. Not a lot, but I worked in many.

RS: How many do you think you worked in?

RL: Oh, about five.

RS: About five different places?

RL: Different ones, yes.

RS: Different ones over the years. Again, what does a presser do? What kind of work?

RL: You just press anything that comes along.

RS: Use a regular iron or machinery?

RL: Oh yes, you do. Well, at one time, I used the machine. As I've used it, I only used an iron when it was the beginning, right?

RS: Uh-huh.

RL: And I understood that the state of Pennsylvania was the only state that allowed a woman to be a presser at one time.

RS: In other words, you think it was just men before that?

RL: Yeah, in other places. This was the only state allowed a woman to do that kind of work. [00:03:00] Using the pressers were hard for women, you know?

RS: Why was that?

RL: Well, it's heavy work. Mostly, I used the iron. I did the small work or whatever.

RS: Was this considered piece work or different?

RL: Oh yes, indeed, at all times.

RS: So you got paid according to the amount.

RL: I never worked time work unless I was asked to come in the factory to help out, ship out something. That was a

different thing. Other than that, I was always paid piece work on my job. Most of those girls, even the sewing machine operator, we were always --

RS: Piece work. Most of the workers were piece work workers.

RL: Yeah, yeah. Uh-huh.

RS: About what year did you start working? You recall? Was it after World War II or during World War II?

RL: No, I think it was a little bit before, but I'm trying to think. [00:04:00] Oh, gosh. I think, I think -- oh gosh, I can't even think how old my children were. It had to be over 40 years ago that I was in -- oh yeah, a lot of white people entered at war time. Oh yes, mm-hmm, yeah.

RS: How big were these factories? Did they have--

RL: Some were big, some were on the small scale, some weren't.

RS: About how many people, for example, in the larger ones?

RL: Oh, well, I didn't ever work in a real big one, 'cause around this town, they didn't have real big ones.

RS: These were small shops?

RL: These were small shops, and I think most of them are small shops, outside of the big cities or whatever.

RS: The garments would come from New York, is that right?

RL: Oh yes. Oh, all over.

RS: From all over?

RL: From wherever their jobbers' were, mm-hmm.

RS: And then, they went back to New York, most of them?

RL: Yep, whoever we were working for, sure.

RS: So they were really coming in from all over the country.

RL: [00:05:00] Oh yeah, uh-huh. In other words, whoever the jobber was that gets the work, that's how you got it.

RS: What was your hourly -- what was your rate when you started, approximately how much? Do you remember?

RL: In those days -- oh, gosh, I guess it wasn't too much, but when you worked on piece work like all us girls did, we never thought about that too much. You know, at the time I went to work, I was making more money than men in the factory -- than men, but you have to realize that's seasonal work. Maybe you'd only work five months a year, but per day or week, I'd be making more than a man in the factories around this town. Mm-hmm.

RS: But you didn't really work all year then, did you?

RL: No, oh no. Never. No, that's seasonal work.

RS: What was the season?

RL: Well, in other words, in the summertime, you were doing the winter things. In the wintertime, you would be doing the spring and the summer things. You know.

RS: And that's the time you were laid off?

RL: Oh yes, collecting compensation, mm-hmm.

RS: [00:06:00] So you worked about maybe half the year?

RL: Oh yeah. We did seven months, that's all about. Six or eight months. That's all that we ever did.

RS: Was this true the whole time you worked, all those 45 years?

RL: Uh-huh, uh-huh. I think all the factories were like that then.

RS: Is that the nature of that industry?

RL: Yep, that is the nature of this industry, yeah.

RS: What kind of -- do you remember what your take-home pay was in those days when you first started?

RL: Yeah, sure.

RS: Per week?

RL: I put it down. I kept them forever and ever. (laughs)

RS: Oh yeah? Just an approximate figure.

RL: Yeah, I've got it. Oh, I would at least make 40, 40-some dollars a week, and I would say in those days, even the men didn't have a good job per hour rather. Per hour.

RS: So you were -- that was a pretty good wage back then.

RL: Oh sure, sure. Uh-huh.

RS: Was that enough you'd say for a family?

RL: I'm sure if I'd have lived alone and didn't have a husband, sure. [00:07:00] I would have been able to survive on it, uh-huh, because my husband had worked many years in the Lehigh Foundry and I was making more sometimes per week than he was. He worked there for 36 years.

RS: Now, when did you stop working in the shops?

RL: My husband positively insisted that I retire, which was the worst thing he had ever done to me because I had 19 and eight, I think seven months, and I could have had a pension at the 20th, and he wouldn't let me work anymore. He made me quit.

RS: So you quit before you got your pension?

RL: Yeah. The union came and begged him not to do that to me. Give me a day in this shop, give me a day in that shop. Hold onto the five or six months I had coming, and he could not do it. He said, "She worked long enough and she's not going to work anymore." Unfortunately, he never knew that he was going to get sick shortly after that and dropped over with a heart attack where I could have used that job and that pension. [00:08:00] And I lost out for about five months. That's all I had to put in.

RS: What year was that then?

RL: Let's see. Gosh. Let's see, Frankie's date. About 14 years ago.

RS: About 14 years ago?

RL: Mm-hmm.

RS: It was around 1977.

RL: Yep.

RS: Seventy-six, in there. Have you worked since then at all?

RL: No.

RS: No?

RL: I work for my American Legion. I do cooking for them, do things like that.

RS: Right, but you're not going to work in the garment trade anymore.

RL: I haven't [made?] any jobs. No, no. Mm-mm, no. I never went back.

RS: Did you like this job?

RL: Mm-hmm.

RS: Did you like this work?

RL: Mm-hmm, yeah.

RS: Why?

RL: Well, because it was the only job I had ever had probably in my life I guess, so it taught me something that I didn't know I knew about, right?

RS: Uh-huh.

RL: I liked it, and of course getting involved in the union, I think that gave me more outlet. [00:09:00] I was always doing something for them. I'm doing something in my union. The union was good to me. I went to things. I did things. Ordinarily, all girls didn't have that chance like I did, see? I mean, to me, the union is the best thing that ever happened to me.

RS: When you stopped working in 1976 or 1977, how would you compare conditions, say, to the time then to the time when you started? In other words, how did you feel about the working at that time? You were older, of course.

RL: Well, I speak to my friends, who still -- I still have friends that are still working like I did that are still working. I resented that piece in Easton Express not too long ago when they were talking about the sweatshops. Now, as I've just told you, I worked maybe five or six shops in this town, and I never encountered that. And I was not treated badly, or I did my work, and I was praised for it when it needed to be. [00:10:00] I resented what they said. I don't know any sweatshops around this town.

RS: So you enjoyed your work then?

RL: Oh yeah, uh-huh. Oh sure.

RS: And did you think that -- over the years, say from the time you started to the time you required, conditions generally improved in the shops?

RL: I think they did, oh sure, uh-huh. You might have got one boss that wasn't too easy to work for, but that's all that I remember. You're not going to go from shop to shop and get an angel. You know.

RS: Right, right.

RL: That just doesn't happen. I really never had any problems.

RS: Now, you started getting active in the union when? Do you remember?

RL: Almost in the beginning when I started to work, uh-huh.

[00:11:00] I was elected to take over the secretary job right off the bat, and I stayed in it all those years.

RS: Why did you get involved?

RL: I don't know. I guess because my husband, who I wasn't married to at the time but was dating, he was such a great union man. And I suppose that's what I -- because I never worked before.

RS: What union was this?

RL: ILGWU.

RS: The International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Were they organized in the shops when you started work already?

RL: Oh yeah, oh sure. Very much so, uh-huh.

RS: They organized in the Lehigh Valley back in the 1930s, did you know that?

RL: Oh, way back. Yeah, uh-huh. I don't know exactly, and I know how many shops I've tried to get, but some you won, some you didn't.

RS: Was it a good union, you felt?

RL: Oh boy, to me it was, I'm sure. I have good friends right now that I see maybe two or three times a month or that I talk to. They're working in the same kind of shop I am up in Bangor or whatever, and it's still the same thing. It's still the same thing. [00:12:00] They don't go in the street and fight for a raise. They ask for it. They might dicker for it, but they get it.

RS: So, you felt the union was good for you?

RL: Oh, sure. Yeah, it gave me many opportunities. Many.

RS: I was trying to think the other day. The woman that used to be the head of the ILGWU here, she was downtown in--

RL: Grace Birkel.

RS: Grace Birkel, is she still around, alive?

RL: No, she passed away.

RS: She passed away?

RL: Uh-huh. She married Mr. Birkel, and went and retired, and went to Bethlehem. And she got sick and died, but there was the organizer of the world.

RS: Yeah, she was good.

RL: Yeah, she was the first girl that tried or defied, you know, anybody in this town because we didn't have unions like this in those days.

RS: She was good. She had a good reputation.

RL: She was. Oh, good, and you did what you said.

RS: Yeah, she was tough.

RL: [00:13:00] And you probably loved every moment she was telling it. (laughs) We used to laugh at her. No, she was great. She worked real hard. She was a real hard-working lady, I'll tell you. In other words, for us. I'll put it that way, for us.

RS: Now, your first job in the union was what? What did you do? You said you were secretary?

RL: Uh-huh.

RS: You were local?

RL: Well, yeah, of the shops.

RS: Of the shops.

RL: Of the shops, uh-huh, and I stayed there I think always. I guess I never lost in all the years I worked. I didn't

want to take over the other job because it was too hard. I had new babies, things like that. Children.

RS: What was the other job?

RL: Well, the girl that's the head, she's the head in our shop, and I was her secretary.

RS: Was she the shop steward?

RL: Shop steward.

RS: And you were the secretary.

RL: But I didn't want -- in other words, it wasn't plausible for me to do that because I did not run the machines. I only was a presser. [00:14:00] Had I been on a sewing machine and knew what was going on with those girls, then I might have been the shop steward, but I couldn't be because I only did one job or worked on the [pleebles?] when they needed me to fold and ship out. But see, I never worked on machines.

RS: So that's why you sort of stay with it.

RL: That's why I had to stay as a secretary. Uh-huh.

RS: What kind of duties did you have as secretary?

RL: Well, you took the notes. You never missed a meeting. I don't think I ever did in my life unless I was sick, and they were good. They paid you back for things. They sent

you up to the mountains for the week free, being things like that.

RS: Did you ever go to Harmony House? [Unity House]

RL: Yep, mm-hmm.

RS: Did you?

RL: Mm-hmm.

RS: I see that's just been closed down.

RL: Yeah, it's just been closed, and they'd send me up the Poconos for the week.

RS: Oh yeah?

RL: Oh yeah.

RS: Where?

RL: Taniment.

RS: Taniment?

RL: Uh-huh. Oh yeah, they had gorgeous place up there.

Gorgeous place for all union people, coming from all over New York, anywhere. We all -- [00:15:00] and then that's when they would take care of their buyers and things like that. They went free too.

RS: Did you go free to that place?

RL: Mm-hmm, yeah. Never paid. Always got me there and got me back home.

RS: So they gave you a week's vacation essentially free?

RL: Oh yeah, for doing what we did, sure.

RS: And this was part of your dues, I guess.

RL: Yeah it was. Really, when you think about it.

RS: That was a pretty good benefit.

RL: I know. Like I said, they were good otherwise too.

RS: Would you usually have a week or two vacation every year?

RL: Yeah, we'd go up once a year, I think in part of July, when no work was in the shops, okay?

RS: Right.

RL: Naturally, you'd have that first week off. Some shops took the first two weeks off, so that would be the week they would send us.

RS: I was at Harmony House [Unity House] myself once.

RL: Were you?

RS: Yes, it's quite a place.

RL: Yeah, it is. It's nice up there, too. It's beautiful up there. They have their own theater and everything up there.

RS: [00:16:00] Do they?

RL: Yeah, because I used to do the shows for the ILG. That was one of the biggest reasons why I always had to go because then they'd bring in people from New York and entertainers,

and then you'd do your thing. And so, they had a gorgeous theater up there, up the road.

RS: What did you do when you did these shows? What was your job?

RL: Sing, dance.

RS: Oh yeah?

RL: Shows. Oh, sure. The years, all while they had it, I was always there.

RS: And you did that too?

RL: Oh yeah, I love to sing. Call me a ham (laughter).

RS: Yeah, Russ said you were always interesting and entertaining. Yeah, that's where Russ gets it, he's an entertainer too.

RL: Uh-huh, that's where my family gets it. We're all like it.

RS: Your granddaughter Nancy--

RL: Oh, they're all great kids, aren't they? They are, yeah. And the other side, the other son, his both daughters are great dancers and entertainers too, so it comes from both. [These kids?].

RS: Both sides, yeah.

RL: Uh-huh, run in the family.

RS: [00:17:00] During those years, did you ever have strikes?

RL: Oh lordy, yes, but then, as I said, I always tell everybody I used to call myself the professional picketer because whenever a shop went out on strike, I went.

RS: No matter, even if it wasn't your shop?

RL: Right on.

RS: Oh yeah?

RL: Right on. Washington, New Jersey, I went to the Bethlehem, the [Tie?] Companies when they went out. The committee took me off my job.

RS: Oh, they could do that?

RL: Yep, they paid for it. They paid for it -- I would get paid.

RS: In other words, the work does the -- the union paid for it.

RL: When I came in, they would take me right off my job and I'd go with --

RS: Huh, the union would do this?

RL: Oh yeah, and I'd go where they told me to go. Oh, sure.

RS: Was this standard practice?

RL: I guess.

RS: For officers?

RL: Because they always did it to me, yeah. Uh-huh. Oh, they wouldn't take any other girls.

RS: I didn't know that, see? My aunts were in --

RL: I didn't know either till I got in.

RS: [00:18:00] My aunts were in the textile workers' union which was a different one in Wilkes-Barre. They were union people too, but they never got pulled out --

RL: They didn't?

RS: -- to support other strikes, no. Huh, I didn't know that. What did the shop managers or owners think about this?

RL: I guess they knew that was the rule or the intention.

RS: That's probably in the contract.

RL: It probably was in their contract. I'd never went into that before, but my bosses would never say, "What?" They'd just come in and say, "Okay, Rose, you know, let's go."

RS: So the union was pretty powerful really, pretty strong?

RL: Oh yes, yes. And I always presumed because of Grace. She was such a great leader. We didn't fool her.

RS: What were these strikes about? Money, most of the time?

RL: Money.

RS: Benefits?

RL: Or maybe a nasty boss or whatever. I had a boss that took the soap out of the ladies' room, and the toilet paper.

(laughter) [00:19:00] You know, used to be petty because you'd be mad, mad at the union. They would do these things. I already went to Wilkes-Barre and I dreaded having to go

up there. And you'd have to go appear before whoever they'd appear before, to be [comic?]. Little crazy like that. You had guys that did that, you know. See, all bosses hated the union.

RS: All bosses?

RL: All -- remember that, yes. I had one good, Jewish -- I adored him. He didn't. He went along with everything. He thought it was a great thing, protected us girls, but most of them, uh-huh. All you had to do was say you belonged to the ILG and you were --

RS: But everybody in the shop had to belong to it?

RL: Oh, absolutely. You only had six weeks, maybe seven, trial. Now, that boss was able to fire you. [00:20:00] If he wasn't that crazy about you, he wouldn't let you get in the union because once you got in the union, you were in. So he'd be getting maybe six weeks' leeway for this girl to teach her or think that she liked -- because you had to go [show?]. You had no choice, which was a good thing because I think it would have caused an awful lot of problems. I had to work next to a girl that didn't pay her dues and I had to, and it was always perfectly frictionless. It was the right thing, you know?

RS: Uh-huh. Were most of the women supporters of the union?

RL: I think so. I never had -- you'd have to get two or three in a shop that isn't going to like them, but you know what I used to teach them. I'd say, "Well, when you get sick, you like that money. They pay you while you're off and you do like that raises that you get," so I used to tell them things like that. [00:21:00] You like what they do get, and you don't like them.

RS: Don't like them, period.

RL: But you benefit from them. They used to call me the rebel rouser.

RS: Were these strikes also about benefits? Pay? What kind of benefits did you get from the union?

RL: Well, you had a sick benefit.

RS: So many days, sick pay?

RL: Uh-huh, right. First week off you wouldn't get, but the second week, and I had been in and out of the hospital so many, many times six years solid and they never said one word. My check was always there.

RS: Yeah, and of course you had health health benefits, I guess, too.

RL: Oh yeah, but I'm just saying, you know, then when Blue Cross and Blue Shield came, then they gave us Blue Cross and Blue Shield, so the girls were pretty well protected.

RS: And you had your pension, of course.

RL: Yeah, and pension.

RS: Was that standard after 20 years in the shop? [00:22:00]
You could collect your pension?

RL: I think it was, yes. I'm not sure when it happened, but --

RS: And the pension was really run through the union, wasn't it?

RL: Oh yeah, mm-hmm.

RS: The shops didn't --

RL: No, it was run through the union. When you paid your dues, that's what they included.

RS: Well now, as you moved around from shop to shop, these four or five different places you worked at, did you take your benefits and your seniority with you?

RL: No, each shop had their own seniority. In other words, if I got laid off and I quit or whatever, if I had four years there, that was it, but not in the union.

RS: So your pension kept accumulating.

RL: Oh yes, oh yes, mm-hmm, whatever shop. Sometimes, they placed you in a shop, too.

RS: Oh, the union did?

RL: Oh yeah, mm-hmm. In other words, they could if I didn't have a job in for a couple weeks and that other shop was in

trouble, they might say, "Rose, will you go up to that shop and help them until they get those lots out." [00:23:00]

See? And I could do that.

RS: You could do that.

RL: I wasn't taking any girl's job now, I was helping this man out.

RS: Right, you were helping them, right. And the managers agreed to this.

RL: Uh-huh, oh yeah. It was never no. Not that I ever knew of. I never knew of anybody talking about it. It was a good system when you thought about it.

RS: So, you said that the bosses didn't want the union, or hated the union, but they were still pretty much required to go along with it.

RL: They had to do it, but still, no. Most of the guys -- most of those bosses, I think they knew that the union kept these girls down where maybe they couldn't keep them down --

RS: Control.

RL: -- or control them, right?

RS: Right, right.

RL: The last job I went to was funny, and this guy was crazy about me. Came from New York, his wife and him.

[00:24:00] And when the union came in then to talk to all the girls. It was a new shop. When he pointed me out, the union man [acquired the union?] there too, and said, "Now, there's your good girl." From that day on, he didn't like me.

RS: Oh yeah? Because the union --

RL: I told him, I said, "What? Don't tell him that."

(laughter) Right off the bat, that was the -- you know?

RS: That was the thing.

RL: He was afraid of me, in other words. He was afraid of me.

RS: Right, sure. Most of the shops in Lehigh Valley then were union shops.

RL: Oh yeah, I don't know of any that wasn't. Yeah, oh, I mean, most, yes -- Threadwell I can remember [the times I?]. Yeah, there was a few shops in this town, but not that kind of work, our kind of work, I mean.

RS: These were sort of fly-by-night operations?

RL: Yeah, uh-huh. Threadwell did thread and things like that. That was different. What we did was garment work. Well, we called ourselves the garment workers. [00:25:00] That was all out. It's -- (inaudible) I just thought about that myself, I said, "Oh my God, that must have been when I picketed Laubach's," which I did.

RS: Laubach's?

RL: Mm-hmm, it used to be Laubach's a couple years back, then it turned to be Pomeroy. I could remember standing out there, that's when I must have stood out there.

RS: That was a department store.

RL: Mm-hmm.

RS: And you picketed them?

RL: Because they were selling all the goods from Taiwan and Japan.

RS: I see, all right.

RL: They weren't selling American-made labels, so we'd stand out there and tell them not to buy it. (laughs)

RS: [00:26:00] When did the foreign garments start coming in and affecting the work in your industry? Was that in the late '60s?

RL: Yeah, it had to be at least -- oh, gosh, let's see. It had to be at least 35 years or more.

RS: That long ago?

RL: Oh, I think so. Yeah, because look how long Pomeroy is out before Laubach's is gone out.

RS: Yeah, Pomeroy's closed in '74.

RL: Right, we were doing them way before that.

RS: This really had an impact on work, then?

RL: Uh-huh, yeah.

RS: These foreign textiles, foreign garments. How did the other girls feel about this?

RL: Oh, I think most of the girls yelled and screamed, but then, as I used to try to teach the girls, when you're rebel rousers, you had to realize over there, they did not have piece work. They worked per hour. They could work as slow as they wanted to. [00:27:00] Maybe their stitches were smaller so they could do a better job, try to pacify the girls, in this country. I think that was one of the reasons why. In other words, they could not produce what we produced in a week.

RS: No.

RL: Let's put it that way.

RS: But they also did it a lot cheaper.

RL: Oh my God, yes.

RS: Cheaper labor.

RL: They were working for 50 cents an hour there, you know. It doesn't hurt them, but I tried to say to the girls, you know, "You can't."

RS: This began to have an effect on people?

RL: Oh, it did. Oh, easy. Oh my gosh, yeah. I think we lost a lot of work through them or a lot of it, you know.

RS: Did the shop owners, how did they react to this?

RL: They didn't like it very much either, no. They were bringing all that goods in and, you know.

RS: Yeah. Did they -- [00:28:00] when these foreign garments started to come in, in large amounts, did that affect your work at all? The amount or the pace of the work in the shop, anything?

RL: Well, I think in my little town, it didn't hurt, but I presumed when you were going to the bigger cities -- New York and whatever -- it could have possibly hurt those people that worked there. Maybe they weren't getting all that work that they used to get from the jobbers because remember, if a jobber could get somebody over there, a big shipment here for half the money that he'd have to pay us, they probably took advantage of it. I didn't know it, but they probably did.

RS: But did the bosses here insist that the woman work faster or harder?

RL: No, no. I don't think we ever did that, no. [00:29:00] It was the matter of changing the stitch.

RS: I see.

RL: In other words, our girls worked with a longer stitch because we produced.

RS: With a longer stitch, you could sew faster. Is that right?

RL: Over there, it was not a necessity there. I think that was one of the biggest problems there was, for making men's shirts and everything.

RS: Did this have any affect on quality of clothes?

RL: I don't think so. I never thought we hurt that much. Like I said, maybe the bigger factories did. I don't know. Connecticut around, maybe it did hurt them. I don't think it ever hurt that bad.

RS: Because you know a lot of foreign garments, the quality is not there.

RL: No, no.

RS: You pay less, but on the other hand, it's really cheaper made stuff.

RL: I'm sure even there's people like me now that I was the great union girl, wouldn't touch anything less than our union labor, but I'm sure that other people did it too because look and quality. [00:30:00] You know what I mean?

RS: Yeah.

RL: In other words, some people were a little smarter, so they'll pay a dollar extra, but they got quality for it, and why should we give it to them when we needed our people here? I'm sure most of our people felt that way, you know?

RS: Yeah.

RL: Real cliché, "Buy the Union Label," right? (laughs)

RS: Right, "Buy the Label." Yeah. In the 19 -- well, about the time you retired, was the industry in decline in this area?

RL: A little bit.

RS: I mean, were the shops starting to close?

RL: Mm-hmm, a little bit. Yeah, mm-hmm. We were.

RS: Have you kept up at all with --

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