

Mary Price

Well it's Mary Prosak really; that's my maiden name. For good reasons I had it changed. I was born in Winnipeg, in East Transcona, a suburb of Winnipeg. I'm going to be jumbling; I'm all helter-skelter. The first thing I remember, I must've been about 4 years of age, was a commotion in the bedroom, which mother and dad occupied on a big bed. I was in a small white metal. I was standing there wondering what this was, and calling to mother. Mother was just giving birth with the midwife, brought out my brother or sister. Must've been my sister, because there's 4 years. So of course I was pacified. The other things I remember was, as a child, times are pretty tough. A visiting uncle used to bring a toy doll. I would put the doll on the chair and push it, pretending it's a wagon. There were a lot of things I remember about toys, about children in the area. A lot of things we had, a lot of things we didn't have. But as I grew older, one of the things I noticed, dad was away at times visiting with other men. They were talking about, to me at that time it was all gibberish. But it was very serious. It turned out to be that they were talking about working conditions then, about unions, about people doing something about it to eke out a better living. I remember dad was very keen on us growing up, my sister and my brother and myself, to be worthwhile citizens and to learn as much as we can. There was an occasion of a picnic. I still wasn't school age at that time. There was a lot of commotion being made for this first picnic that the Ukrainian people were going to have. That turned out to be the Association of United Ukrianian Canadians today, but it had several names before then. It included the farmers as well. So at this picnic, mother had dressed us pretty. She was holding my brother still in her arms. There was my sister and myself. We were under a tree and dad said, 'here I want you to read this paper'. He was trying to teach me Ukrainian. He wanted to show off to other people the same thinking. It turned out also, I went to go to the grocery store. One of the people that had ideas and thoughts like my father did was for better conditions for the working people, and setting up an organization...I'm sorry, words are difficult to come right now.

That eventually took in or indicated dad's ideas for the future. He participated in many of the efforts to organize unions. To also take part in parades that were during the war against wars. His thoughts were very progressive. Of course there were people in the neighbourhood that

were opposed, too, because they thought quite different. But the environment I was brought in was for peace, fairness for pay, and for every opportunity to be given for children to grow up and progress.

That was one of the beginnings of the AUUC. They had quite a lot of picnics. But I remember that one in particular, because dad giving me the paper, asking me to read because he was so proud he wanted to show off to his other friends. That'll be about 1915, 1916. I was born in 1912. I was 4 or 5 years old. Dad did take part right throughout his life, in unions. He's been blacklisted because he was seen by another worker, when dad had broken his leg on his job and was watching this Ukrainian building being built. This other man noticed that dad and he reported that instead of going to work. But he was still wearing crutches. But he was blacklisted for that. My father's job was a builder. That's seasonal work in Winnipeg, because weather at that time was far too cold to be working outside with nails and hammers. I remember dad taking part in the General Strike. All through his life, both mother and dad were very active and they thought progressively. They were both involved in the cultural activity in the plays, dramas, and choirs. On the whole, they wanted all the best they could for the kids, and encouraged them to go to school and learn and become good citizens. I think you'd better ask some questions.

When I went to work? After I finished high school. In between then I used to babysit and make extra money. This was during the '30s when jobs were very difficult to get. There was a lot of unemployment, a lot of demonstrations. Also, unless you had a higher education or some clout, somebody speaking for you in some place, it was difficult. So for about 3 or 4 years I worked as a domestic in other people's homes, cleaning. Got along quite well with them. Slept in. The earning was \$15 a month plus your board and room. But I felt that at least I was learning something. The people I worked for were attached to universities and were very fair, except one exception, a lawyer, where it was dreadful. That was abusive actually. But on the whole, I did learn a lot.

I participated in the orchestra on my nights off, with the Ukrainian Hall. Took part in plays. But as I grew older, a lot of them had to be put aside because of work and distance. I did get married. It didn't last very long, about 4 years. I wanted to get out of Winnipeg for a job that

would be a little better than being a domestic. A friend of a friend had come from Toronto on a trip. She was on her way to Vancouver, but she had a return fare from Winnipeg back to Toronto. She persuaded me to look for a job in Toronto. So I bought her part of the ticket to get me back to Toronto. She let me stay at her home until she returned back. I finally found work to do, office work. That's where I got into the needle trades and the union, and was quite active there at the time. I got more and more involved with the progressive organizations, and took part in the peace movement and became an activist politically. All that led into the Second World War. I'd like to quit, unless you ask me.

It was a sweat shop. There was a union. We earned 10 or 15 cents an hour. Very often it was not by the hour, by the number of garments you sewed, piece work. I decided, this is not for me. Mind you, I was active and participated in the activities of the union. But that wasn't going to lead me anywhere. I went to night school and started to learn. The boss where I worked for needle trades came to me one day and he said, 'do you use a typewriter'? I said no. He said, I gotta write a letter. He was an immigrant who had gone into the business of doing uniforms and needle trades. Most of the workers were also just public school or even that much. I was the only one that had a little more education. He coaxed me to practise on the typewriter to get some letters out. Getting a steno would cost a lot of money. That's how I got to the typewriter. Also with bookkeeping he needed help, fine. So I did little jobs of that sort for quite a while.

Yes I did for a while, to have my diploma .. I never got to university, but it was impossible then financially. I got heavily involved in the progressive movement. I was involved with the Communist Party for a good many years, until it disbanded and it was called the Labor Progressive Movement for a period, and had different changes.

Oh yes. Becky Buhay, Annie Buller, Tim Buck.

Then I moved to Niagara Peninsula, where they needed some help, and became active and met some very nice people. I thought my life with working and mixing with people that there couldn't be any better good, honest working people. Also I was in an environment where you also saw a lot. Having connections with the union needle trade, I was interested in other occupations. The way some of the people were very active, how productive they were, how

devoted they were to the cause of improving conditions. One example, I met this man who was huge, tall, well built, but seemed a little troubled. I asked about him, and somebody told me he was hired by this company because he is so big and strong. They didn't bother buying wagons with wheels and that they figured he could carry it. The tiller just wore him out and here he was, comparatively young man, who had been abused. There were quite a number of examples of good people; they keep fleeting by.

I came in 1952 [to Calgary].

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In St. Catherine's, a General Motors building where they had a number of strikes, there was one person who was quite active for the union. Bill Small was his name. He was a whiz. Other workers would say, that man has made millions for the company, and he doesn't get what he deserves. He had a knack with automobiles. They would have a problem in the building and he would find the solution. The company was saving thousands of dollars on it, but they'd give him \$25 maybe once, and that was it. Over and over again he's improving on the machinery and to do things quicker, and with poor recognition. Then too, in Welland, they were having quite a lot of unemployment. The kind of factories they had, it was slowed down, not actively making pipes. One time Charley Simms came to me and asked me, Mary, I was reading an article in this big newspaper about gas lines. What do you think about a pipeline coming from the west? Page-Hersey, which is the company there, would do the piping. I said, wonderful, I think that would help. So we spoke to my boss mentioned who was ?? They took in the job of doing gas pipeline. I'm fumbling very badly... Before you publish anything, I'd like to see it. I'd like to see it worded better.