Marion Yagoda

The Real Rosie the Riveter Project

Interview 31

Interview Conducted by

Kirsten Kelly

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For The

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Elmer Holmes Bobst Library
New York University

Interview: Marion Yagoda

Interviewers: Kirsten Kelly

Date: July 12, 2010

Place: Detroit, MI

Kelly: Well, hi.

Yagoda: Hi, how are ya?

Kelly: Good, how are you?

Yagoda: Fine, thank you.

Kelly: Can you start introducing yourself.

Yagoda: My name is Marion Yagoda. Y-A-G-O-D-A. And uh I ma 85 years old and I was Rosie the Riveter when I was 18. How that came about was I was going to school. I was going to uh um...I'm trying to think of the name of the school right now. Um it was a wo—a girls school. There was a girl's school and there was a boy's school and the girl's school was on one street and the boy's school was a few blocks down. The boy's school was called Wilber Wright and the girl's school, I can't remember the name right now, but

that's where my mother sent me. After I came from Cash Tech, I went to Cash Tech in the 10th grade, and I couldn't hack chemistry so my mother put me there and I was um doing home ec. and I specialized in dress making and I was supposed to go out to work for six months as a dress maker. And then come back and get my diploma and my dad said to me, "A girl don't need a diploma." He said, "How 'bout going out to work, because we need the money." So he says, "Go to work. You really don't need to get a diploma." So I went—I applied at Bridge Manufacturing. They had a school there. They were teaching women how to rivet and to buck. And I went to school there, I don't remember how long I went school, but from there I went to Connor's in Detroit on Connors Avenue and that's where Bridge Manufacturing was and that's where I was Rosie the Riveter. We made wing—wing tips for B-17s and B-29s. And my partner's name was Rosie. So it just so happened that her name was Rosie so was Rosie the Riveter too. And we were making uh the production was half a wing tip a day and we speed it up to two and half wing tips a day and everybody was mad at us because we upped the production. And her and I were doing two and half wing tips on B-17s and B-29s.

And I remember this one story when I was bucking the rivet I had my hand up and I was bucking the rivet and this

man came along in back of me and hit me on the rear end and I had a dolly bar in my hand and I took that dolly bar and threw it and I missed his hand about half an inch. And so he never did that again.

03:42:11----------

Kelly: That's incredible. Was there at this time, because it was such a new thing, was there—what were the men feeling about all these women?

Yagoda: Well the men that were in there were 4-F because they were rejected because they weren't they weren't able to go to war so they were working in the factory along with the women but there was more women than there was men there. And I remember my mother used to make me a lunch and she would put corn in a thermos or tomato soup or some kind of soup in the thermos. I never had coffee because I never drank coffee then but uh she always put something in the thermos for me and I loved corn so uh I really looked forward to those thermos jugs when it came to lunchtime.

Kelly: And what—can you talk about your day? Like how long did you work and what was your break like and then how long—

Yagoda: Well before I started I used to start at three o'clock in the afternoon. My shift was three o'clock in the afternoon so instead of going at three o'clock I went at twelve o'clock and we had a baseball team and I was the pitcher and played baseball always before we went to work. And uh we had the girls played against each other. We didn't play with the men. The men didn't play baseball. It was just the women.

Kelly: That's amazing. So they really...how did that start? How did the baseball start?

Yagoda: I don't know how it started but I remember being a pitcher of the baseball team. And we always played baseball before our shift.

Kelly: That's amazing, that's really amazing...It was probably also really good morale for all the people working.

Yagoda: Yes it was.

Kelly: How was morale at the time? I mean, the war was going on and what were people's feelings about it? What were your feelings at the time?

Yagoda: I remember that I used to write to quite a few fellas that were in the service that were friends of ours and friends of my brother. And I used to write to my brother. He was in the service. And we used to write letters to them and uh there wasn't, there wasn't there wasn't an issue with the morale. There wasn't an issue with the morale. I don't remember exactly because it was so many years ago.

Kelly: Do you remember some of the things that you would try to say in your letters or what were you—or why were you writing?

Yagoda: Well to keep up the morale of the young fellas that were in the service. My brother was on the U.S.S. Langley and that was bombed about three times and he was down the hole down below and I used to write to him almost everyday. I used to write a letter to him but he came out of it okay

and came home and became a judge. He was a lawyer and then he became a judge.

07:35:08----------

Kelly: And did you have—did you know anyone else in the service at that time?

Yagoda: Oh yea! I knew about maybe four or five fellas that were in the service and I used to write to them.

Kelly: And do you think that's different than today that the morale around?

Yagoda: Well the people were more into the war before the Second World War, this time people didn't do what we did. We saved cans, we we recycled everything. We saved our oil, our cooking oil. We had red food stamps and green food stamps. The green food stamps were—the red food stamps were for food and the the green fo- stamps were for gasoline and they don't do that today. They didn't ration. Everything was rationed before and the morale of the people were amazing. It really was and they really went along with everything but not like today. Today people are not like

that because of the war. They they just think of themselves and not of what's going on.

Kelly: When you—what what was inside the factory like?

Yagoda: We had benches that were about that high and we had steps to go up to the benches and the uh the wing tips were standing up, straight up and we would work on either side of each other and sometimes I would rivet, use the drill motor and rivet and sometimes she would. We would take turns riveting and bucking. I remember one time when I was riveting and I had a big long drill about that long and I put the drill, I tilted my head to one side and put the drill to drill the hole in the aluminum and I co and the drill caught in my hair and I took a big chunk out of my hair. I still have the scar today up here because of it.

10:18:06----------

Kelly: Wow.

Yagoda: I was lucky that I didn't do more damage than what I did and because of that they made us wear caps after that.

Kelly: Oh so you were the first accident and they really had to change.

Yagoda: They changed afterwards and everybody had to wear a blue cap to cover their hair, all the women had to wear a blue cap to cover their hair. Or a bandana and tie it to tie their hair up.

Kelly: Oh the famous bandana in that poster.

Yagoda: In that poster, right, that poster...

Kelly: And and what else did you wear? Was was there uniforms?

Yagoda: No we didn’t have uniforms. I just wore slacks and a top. We didn’t have uniforms.

Kelly: Had you worn slacks before ever?

Yagoda: No, not before that. I started wearing slacks when is started working in the factory and I started wearing them ever since.

Kelly: So we were—

Yagoda: I didn't only work in the factory, you know as Rosie the Riveter. Afterwards, when I left the factory, I was there for a few years and after that I went to the Induction Center. The Induction Center is where they brought the men into the service but where I worked was where the boys came to have lunch and they had lunch free. But my dad worked a Wagner Baking Company and Wagner Baking Company made pies and my dad would unload his whole truck there at this one particular—at the Induction Center. And all the boys would get a slice of pie. It cost fifteen cents. They didn't have to pay for the meal but they had to pay for the pie. And I was the cashier and I took in the money from the boys from the pie but the meal was free.

But I worked there for a while for a couple of years and then after that I went upstairs. This this was in a factory. There was a factory upstairs from the Induction Center and I went upstairs and got a job making parachutes. Not the parachute itself but the pack for the parachute. The parachutes were made there but in in a different section than I was working. And I used to make the packs

and put the buttons on the snaps on the packs and we used to work real fast to really boost up the production.

Kelly: So you were a go-getter because you really tried to—

Yagoda: I did a little bit of everything.

Kelly: And did you stay working through your whole life or um?

Yagoda: I stayed working. When my brother came home from the service, my father had—before my brother came home from the service, my father had a grocery store, got a grocery store but I was working at um J.L. Hudson in the Women's Half Size dresses in the basement. And my father said to me, "I'm going to open up a store. I'd like you to come and work for me." So I quit Hudson's, J.L. Hudson's and went to work for my dad. And then when my brother came home from service, he took over. I said, "You can take over my job now, I'm going out to work." So I went to work at Kern's. You remember Kern's? Downtown Detroit? Kern's and Company. It was right next door, right across the street form J.L. Hudson.

Kelly: Was it another clothing store? Another—

Yagoda: No, I worked in the lotions department but it was something like J.L. Hudson.

Kelly: And did you stay working when you got married and had children.

Yagoda: I didn't get married until I was 29. I stayed home with my parents all that time and I stayed working with my dad most of the time in the store. I used to get up and go to work with him in the market to Eastern Market and get vegetables to take to the store.

15:15:04----------

Kelly: So that was that in a time when most women were getting married at 18 19 and you were much more mature and grown up and had all of this experience. What was that like for you?

Yagoda: Well, I liked it so much at home; I didn't want to leave home. Not only that, I didn't have a steady boyfriend. I didn't have a steady boyfriend at the time.

But I used to go out with my girlfriends and we'd go out to the Grace Dome that they would have dancing there. And you'd sit there and wait for a fella to come up to you and ask you to dance. It was disappointing when they didn't come up and ask you to dance.

Kelly: That was such a time when the music was so much a part of things.

Yagoda: Oh the music was beautiful. All the big bands that they had then.

Kelly: Would you go to dances with live bands?

Yagoda: Yes, yes. They were all live bands at the Grace Dome.

Kelly: So—let's go back to the time right before Rosie because we're really trying to get it in the context of someone's life, the women who were Rosies. What was your childhood like?

Yagoda: I don't remember too much of my childhood because I kind of grew up kind of fast. We lived on 17th Street and

next door was my-our neighbors, the Mahurs that lived next door to us on 17th. And I went to St. Leo's School and I used to walk to school with my neighbor. Her name was Rita Mahur. Her and I were friends and we would walk to school and go over the railroad tracks and walk to school and then walk back. And my mother used say to us, "Don't speak to strangers." Because that was a time when this one girl was kidnapped and they put her in a trunk and my mother would scare us and tell us, "Don't talk to strangers. Don't take anything from strangers. Don't take any money. Don't take candy so we weren't aloud to take any of that from anybody.

17:46:04----------

Kelly: Was your family originally from Detroit or did they come from somewhere else?

Yagoda: My father from came from Lebanon and he was—my father and mother were first cousins. My father and mother—my father uh my mother came here to visit a cousin and my father saw her and followed her to Texas and asked her to marry him. And then they weren't marrying first cousins. First cousins weren't marrying because they were Catholic so my father told the priest, "If you don't marry us, I'll

turn Protestant." He was Catholic. So the priest married them. So they came back to Michigan here and they stayed in Michigan.

Kelly: And did you have brothers and sisters?

Yagoda: I had two brothers and one sister.

Kelly: And you said you felt you had to be—grow up fast. Why did you feel you that you had to grow up fast?

Yagoda: I don't know...I just felt like things were moving fast with me.

Kelly: And can you tell the story about—so your dad wanted you to go to work—

Yagoda: Right.

Kelly: He wanted you to stop going to school and not get your diploma and then can you say what happened later just in 2001?

Yagoda: Well he didn't want me to get a diploma so in 2003 I decide I wanted to get my diploma before I died so I looked up the school, Farmington Community School and started to go there. I went there on Tuesday and Thursday nights, I drove there. I was 78 years old. I drove there to school every Tuesday and every Thursday night until uh until uh I graduated. And when I graduated, I was an A student and I was valedictorian and I made a speech—I graduated from Farmington High School. I went to community school but our graduation was held at uh at um at Farmington High. And my teacher was there uh the Mayor of Southfield was there, Brenda Lawrence; she came to my graduation and Paul Condino who was a representative of Michigan went to my graduation. And Verde, I believe his name was Verde uh he was from one of the other communities all at my graduation.

Kelly: What was that like to stand up in front of everyone and and finally get that—

Yagoda: Finally get my diploma? It was wonderful. It was wonderful. And I lived here at the time at the Pocket Trowbridge, it was called the Trowbridge but other owns bought it and they call it the Pocket Trowbridge now. But

before when it was the Trowbridge they made me a big part and Brenda Lawrence and Paul Condino all came to my party here.

Kelly: And so did you give a speech?

Yagoda: Here?

Kelly: No, at uh as the valedictorian, did you give a speech?

Yagoda: Yes, I gave a speech.

Kelly: And and what is one thing that you said? What is—

Yagoda: Well I thanked my family and thanked everybody and thanked God that I was able to graduate and that I had always wanted to graduate. And that my father wouldn't let me grad—wouldn't let me get a diploma. And I finally got one.

Kelly: That's amazing...that's an amazing story.

Yagoda: But he had passed away. My father had passed away so he didn't know. So my son was there and my my uh my daughter-in-law and my two grandchildren; they were all there. I have a picture of all of them.

De Mare: I think it's interesting what you said to go back to when you were in the factory and the time the gentlemen patted you on the behind—

Yagoda: Uh um.

De Mare: And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the relations between men and women in the factory and how that was? And you can talk to Kirsten you don't have to look at me.

Kelly: Yea, look at me.

De Mare: But yea just to talk a little bit about that dynamic.

Yagoda: Well the thing is the relationship between the men and the women was really the men kept to themselves and the women kept to themselves. Nobody intermingled because there

were all different ages, in fact, there was a woman working there that was in her 50s and she was working at the bench next to me. And they were all different ages that were working there. Not just my age. I was 18 at the time and she was 50 and the other women were all different ages.

Kelly: And were there women who had children?

Yagoda: She had children. She had children, the woman who was 50 but I don't remember too many of them right now because it has been so long ago but she stands out in my mind.

Kelly: So was there any dating or what was the dating like?

Yagoda: No dating. There was no dating in the factory. There wasn't any of that going on. They were strictly all business. They all stuck to whatever they were supposed to do and they did it. We had a production of, like I told you, of two and a half wing tips a day so that really kept us busy and we were on our toes. And we really produce.

Kelly: And what would happen at lunchtime? Would all the women go to one place?

Yagoda: No. We all just sat at our benches and ate our lunch.

Kelly: And how long would you get? A half-hour? Hour?

Yagoda: A half-hour as far as I can remember.

De Mare: And can you remember how much money you made?

Yagoda: A $1.39 an hour. I remember that...and that was good money back then. $1.39 an hour.

Kelly: And what did you do with your money at this time?

Yagoda: My mother would use my paycheck to run the house and she took my father's paycheck, I told you he was working at Wagner Baking Company. She took my father's paycheck and she saved that and uh took my paycheck and used it run the house with and she saved my father's paycheck and she saved up enough money to buy a house on Oregon. So I worked there quite a while and she took all the money that I made and ran the household with it. And she used to make...she made-she took piece of cloth about

that long and about that high (showing) and she made sections and she would put so much for food, so much for rent, so much for miscellaneous, so much for transportation. And she was a penny-pincher and she knew how to save money and she saved up enough money to buy this house on Oregon.

26:15:14----------

Kelly: That's amazing. It's really hard to imagine people doing that by being that disciplined today.

Yagoda: And she was and she used to take my brother with the wagon. And we were a couple miles from Eastern Market. She'd put my brother in the wagon; he was small then and she'd take him down, walk down to the market and by the groceries and the meat and everything for $5. She'd come home with bags full of food. And she'd pull that wagon with my brother and she'd bring it back home. She walked all the way Eastern Market and back again.

Kelly: Did you have a car at this time? Or how did--

Yagoda: No.

Kelly: How'd you get to work?

Yagoda: I took the bus and when I came home in the morning. One o'clock in the morning...my mother would be there waiting for me at the bus stop...every morning.

Kelly: Was it da—did she feel it was dangerous?

Yagoda: Well there were undesirables living next door to us and I had a bad experience. I was coming home from choir practice and I let my friend off at the corner, which was 12 or 15 houses down; we lived in the middle of the block. I walked her to I walked form the church to the bus stop and then I walked home. And as I walked home there two fellas two and undesirables in the car following me. And I got to my porch and start pounding on that door screaming, "Ma ma ma." And he followed me up the porch it was a big long porch. He followed me up the porch and both my mom and my dad came to the door and my dad saw him and my dad chased him down the alley with a shotgun. He didn't find him but he chased him down the alley in hi pajamas with a shotgun.

Kelly: And how old were you when that happened?

Yagoda: I was about 16. So from then on when I came home from work from the factory, I came home at one o'clock in the morning. I don't' remember if it was one o'clock or three o'clock; I don't remember if it was a 12 hour shift but I know we started at three o'clock. And my mother would always be waiting for me at the bus stop after that and she'd walk me home.

De Mare: So you went straight to work out of high school before you graduated? Can you talk a little bit how you think working especially in the war effort, which was such important work, how that changed you? How it affected you?

Yagoda: It didn't really chance me because that was my first job. It was my first job working in the factory but from then on I kept on working.

De Mare: Did you enjoy that kind of work when—

Yagoda: I enjoyed every bit of what I was doing. In fact, I'm the type of person who likes a challenge when Rosie and I boosted the production from half a wing tip to two and a

half wing tips I liked the challenges. Like I said, everybody was mad at us because of it. But I liked the challenge.

Kelly: So what did you do when everyone was mad at you? How did you feel?

Yagoda: We didn't care. We didn't care. We were doing our own thing. But I was going to say every time we made a wing tip we had an inspector come to inspect it and if there was a can in there, they called it a can, where there was uh a bump we would have to take and repair that. And we would take and put a a a not a screwdriver but it looked like a little screw driver and we'd put it in the hole, lift it up, make another hole and put another rivet in there to take the can out. And we would keep that until we got it right.

Kelly: Was there a feeling at all, what was the feeling like in terms of the importance of the job in terms of— because you were making the airplanes that the boys were fighting—

Yagoda: Right.

Kelly: Right. Was there a feeling of being a part of that and that that the detail in each thing was kind of life life-saving or—

Yagoda: It was life-saving and that's why I say whenever we made something we'd make sure it passed inspection and it was right.

Kelly: So why...so why were we fighting the war?

Yagoda: Why?

Kelly: Yea just from your mother. It's great to hear.

Yagoda: Because Hitler had invaded Germany or had invaded the United States and then when Japan—when they had uh uh what was that?

Kelly: Pearl Harbor.

Yagoda: Pearl Harbor. When they had Pearl Harbor that was absolutely devastating. That was absolutely devastating and

then to send our boys over there. So many of them went form here to over there to fight.

32:46:03----------

Kelly: To Europe or to Japan or to Okinawa?

Yagoda: To Europe and to Okinawa. And then when they had the atomic bomb, that's what stopped it. I think it was Truman wasn't it who Ok-ed the atomic bomb. We were glad of that.

Kelly: Is there anything that you think you learned from being a Rosie?

Yagoda: Rosie the Riveter?

Kelly: Yea.

Yagoda: Well, I am very proud to have been a Rosie the Riveter and I am glad because it stuck with me for the rest of my life and I never forgot it. And I was glad I was a part of the war effort. I am glad I'm a part of history.

Kelly: Yea...

De Mare: And what was it like to be a young person with all the activity of the war around you in Detroit you know?

Yagoda: You see, my father and my mother were um my father and mother were kind of strict so we never got out and around and about so I really don't really know how things were but I know one thing, Belle Isle today is nothing like what it was. We used to go to Belle Isle and sleep there was too hot. My uncle took us out in his truck one day and took us to Belle Isle and slept on this side of Belle Isle because we had no air condition. And the people were all so friendly and so together much more so than they are today. Everybody worked together as a as a team. That's how people were.

The End.