

Sissy Lewis

From - Furnishing the World, The East London furniture trade 1830-1980

When I first went to Lebus' I was a sort of sweeper up. I'd clear up in the spray booths. In those days they'd spray one piece of furniture at a time on a turntable. But then, I expect by my mother's influence, I got a job on the new run-way. A run-way is a moving belt where the furniture comes to you, you spray it, then it went away from you. I was fifteen when I first started to spray. Somebody showed me how to do it and the very first bed I was put on, Mr Solly Lebus came and stood behind me. I was scared and couldn't pull the trigger. I didn't get any practice. I went straight onto beds – it didn't matter much about beds, especially the back of them. It was easy to learn and I got into it very well. I worked alongside girly of my own age and some a little older. The older ones were professionals as they had been spraying in the booths. There were no men sprayers at the time. All women and very friendly. We began at eight o'clock in the morning till six at night, with ten minutes for tea. We had a canteen upstairs, one side for staff and one side for the workers. There were no holidays, other than one day in August, Good Friday and Easter Monday. If you were ill you were ill.

The makers used to make all their articles on a bench, then put them onto a moving belt that went onto a big wide moving belt. From this belt they were sorted onto smaller belts that came through our shop. The two spraying rooms were huge with different moving lines for beds, chests, chairs, wardrobes and tables. They were positioned on the belt about two feet apart in such a way that you could spray the sides, the front, the top but not the bottom or the back. You couldn't stop because you were on piecework. If you wanted to go to the lavatory you could miss a turn. As you worked with five other girls every fifth one was yours and if you missed it you they got paid for it. Each wardrobe, for instance, had a ticket n it and when you'd sprayed it you took part of the ticket off and at the end of the day you'd give it to the foreman. The polishers had the same system. But later on we worked as a gang, so whatever we took was divided between the five of us which we found was a lot better. We were all equal and we had a woman charge-hand for two lines. It stopped all the aggravation. At the time there were eleven belts through the two shops with five sprayers on each.

We didn't maintain our equipment; that was done by a 'gun boy', a young man about eighteen. He used to some round and do our guns and wash them out. The material came through pipes and from there was a rubber pipe at the end of which was our gun. If anything went wrong with your equipment there was a button at the end of your line to press and a bell would ring. The 'gun boy' would come along and do whatever we wanted him to do. Sometimes a pipe would burst and you'd have to turn the whole think off and have a new pipe on it.

The spray never made me feel funny and I never had a cold. When visitors came round they used to put handkerchiefs to their noses 'cos the smell of cellulose. It smelt like nail varnish. People used to say that we should have milk on a job like this but we never did. We didn't have masks or special clothing either.

The lighting was very good but we didn't like the fluorescent because you could never really tell

what your job looked like. We all had to work to a pattern. You held it up to the job to see if you had the right colour, and if it was, you were alright. The next morning you'd look at it and say, 'Look at that.'

So the first job was to spray the stain to the colour of the pattern. You had no control of the colour as it was all done special according to the work you were on. The stain dried quickly and you'd lacquer it. It could be either a shiny or a matt finish. Some pieces of furniture like wardrobes were big to do, so they got the tall girls to do them. How they got me on there I don't know but the better sprayers were put on wardrobes. I was always a wardrobe sprayer.

We used to do a lot of shading. I remember doing a dining room suite for America. All you could see of the colour was just an egg shape in the middle, all the rest was shaded. I had to alter the air in my gun so it spitted out little spots so it looked as though it had woodworm.

If you weren't careful the spray would run if you didn't control your gun. If the air pressure was too high and if you pulled the trigger back too far then you'd get a lot of runs and you'd get told off. The furniture you'd take off the line and it would be taken to a place where men washed it off with stripper. It was a very nasty job. It would then be put back on the belt and you would have to do it again for nothing. If it was somebody else's fault it would be put on the repair line and resprayed there by one girl. Sometimes you had arguments and you were taken in the office and told off. I think it was mostly on the governor's side, not the worker's. Lebus didn't get unionised till 1939, and only then so they could get government work.

The first job I did in the war was white wardrobes and cupboards for hospitals in France. It was white enamel inside and out. I got covered like a snowman. Then we went onto tent poles and the telegraph poles. The telegraph poles were done with khaki paint, the tent poles red. Even our hair was red and these poles were ever so long. You had to do them on a rack, turn them and spray them. You had to walk along to spray them 'cos they were so long. Then we went onto ammunition boxes. They were khaki with white letters on the front. Then I went into the dope shop where I spent the rest of the war working from seven in the evening until seven in the morning. My husband worked there too on a landing craft next to me but he was on days. We used to pass one another in the street, me going to work and him coming home.

In the dope shop you had this material called 'madcap' which is linen you put over the plywood of an aircraft. We worked on the Horsa Glider which was very big like an underground tunnel about thirty feet across. You moved it round as you worked. Put your back under it and shift it round. We worked in a gang of six, first the 'madcap' and then the dope. Dope was like a reddish paint. Terrible smelling stuff. We used to do four of these fuselages at night, which was marvellous really. We were the best gang. They put me in charge.

We also made the framework of a lorry in wood. Just the framework. It was then covered with canvas and I had to spray the windscreen, the radiator, the wheels and the numbers. It was then put on the road so the Germans would bomb that convoy or artificial lorries so the real lorries got through. Then we made petrol tanks of plywood that they used to jettison. Later I worked on the Albermarle airplane where I put on the red, white and blue. The Mosquito was different: we just did the wings, and that was all wood and every square inch a screw hole.

We had a lot of air raids but we never took cover except when it was overhead; just switched all the lights off. Our house in Enfield got bombed. We had a landmine at the back of us and it knocked all our windows out and damaged the roof. But we repaired it.

During the war the money was good but we were still on piecework. We said it was wrong that we should be on piecework because men's lives depended on it. In one case we were putting little potholes in a plane and putting madap round so it made the window squarish and some of the girls cut through too much and we had a complaint that we were cutting through the ply. In the end it got sorted out because the union was getting stronger.

After the war I became the only woman shop steward at Lebus'. I spoke at our union conference at Eastbourne one year against equal pay for women. At the time it was our union policy because, as I said, by having equal pay for equal work men liked it because it secured their own jobs. Woman on the other hand would find it harder to find a job as people would sooner employ men although I insisted that women were better workers. A woman would have her husband and children to look after and could lose time from work whereas a man was alright.

I knew that something was wrong as soon as Sir Herman Lebus died and the two young boys took over (in the 1960s). This fella came in, I've forgotten his name, but he was given a beautiful house and a snooker table in a beautiful snooker room. They said he had come to try to put the firm back on its feet. We realised that something was wrong. We were asked to pull our socks up or else we'd go under. It was all a terrible shock. Oh, it was dreadful, fellas were coming along the line and shouting out 'We're finished, we're finished, we're closing down!' We all cried. It was a terrible time because we'd spent so many years there. Me right from a young girl and my husband from fourteen - and he was fifty eight. He came home crying saying that he'd never get another job. But he did after a fortnight. We were terribly upset. Never thought it would happen to Lebus'. It was one of the biggest furniture manufacturers in the world; three thousand people worked there.

The shop stewards were called into the office and we were told that we would go in groups according to how long we'd worked there. Those who had worked there least years would go first and then down the line. I was one of the last to go with a number of other girls. The oldest Lebus son had us in his office and said how sorry he was. We all talked about the old times and I told him how my mother had worked there in the 1914 war and I remember her filling up trucks on the sidings. He cried. He thanked us for all the years that we had worked there. We walked out and went over to the pavilion and had our own little parties. Oh dear, it was sad. Part of my life had gone. Fortunately, we got full pay between January and being made redundant in May; plus I got a thousand pounds.

Sissy and Tom Lewis were the only married couple among the employees to attend Sir Herman Lebus's birthday party at the Connaught Rooms, London WC2. All those who had worked more than 21 years for the firm were invited - a copy of the invitation is in the gallery