

PWY YDW I'N MEDDWL  
OEDDWN I?

1914

WHO DO  
I THINK I WAS?

1918

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## **My New Life**

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My name is Martha, it's August 1914 and it was my 21st birthday! It was no different to any other day. "Martha do this", "Martha do that", "Go there", "Bring this". No celebration for me!

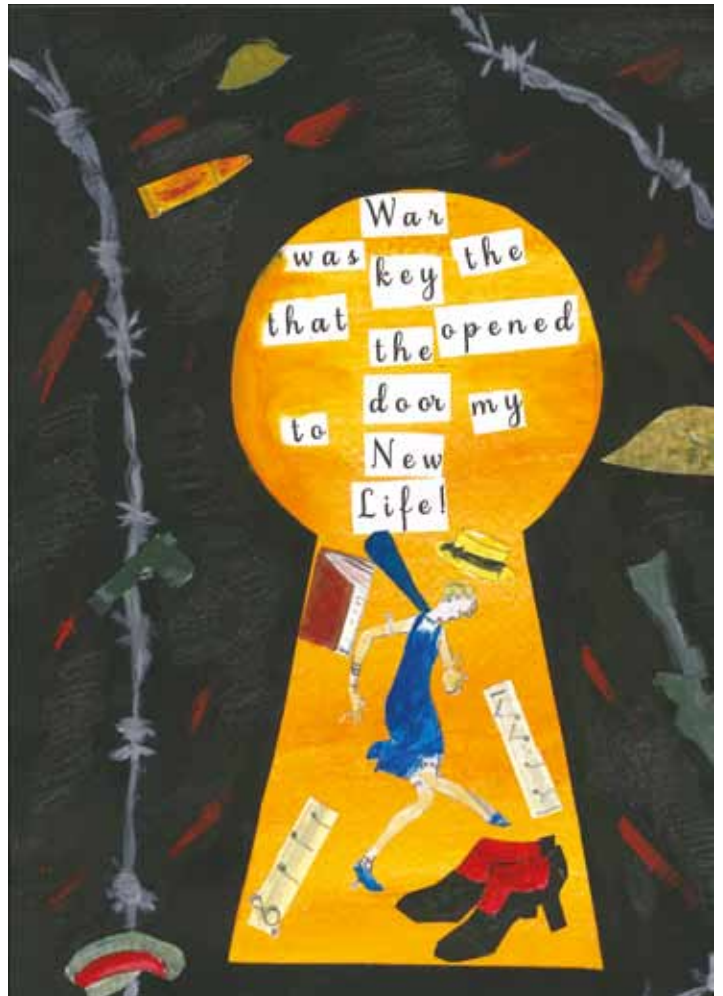
Life had begun to feel different though, things were changing. We were at war and little did I know it but life would never be the same again.

A few days later I was travelling on the tram from Penydarren to Dowlais, the tram was fully, mainly with male passengers and a few other women. I heard some of the conversations – it was the main topic of conversation these days – 'the war'.

I heard them say that they were employing women in the Armament factories. When I got off the tram, my heart was racing! I thought, this is my chance, I will be free! I could hardly concentrate on doing the shopping. I was wondering how I would tell my parents that I was going to apply for a job in the factory and what they would say. I had a fair idea, my mother would be beside herself. How could she manage to look after the kids on her own? 10 children, I was the third child with two older brothers – it went without saying that being a girl, I had to do the most to help her as well as do domestic work for 2 other 'posh' families.

When I got off the tram, I met my friend Angela. I told her what I had heard and told her that I would apply for a job in the factory in Rhigos. She was as excited as me! The first thing she said was, "They will never let us go". She said her two brothers were already talking about volunteering. I knew she was right but I was determined that I would find a way.

When I got home, my mother was in tears. "What's wrong mam?" I said.



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“Your brothers have joined up. How will we manage without their money from the steelworks, we are struggling as it is!”

I thought this is my chance, “I may be able to help with that mam”, I said. “They are looking for women to work in the arms factories in Rhigos, the money is ver good. I could earn more that dad does down the pit”

She went purple; she screamed, “Your not going anywhere my girl! Your father will see to that, I need you here to help me look after the children”.

“I will” I said, “I will go, I don’t care what you or dad say”, I left the room crying but determined.

In spite of all the shouting and screaming at home, I did start working at the factory. The charabang picked us up at 5.30am to start work at 6.30am(PM?). We worked 12 hour shifts, it was hard and dangerous work but we had a laugh.

I had easily made friends, I met other women from all over the valleys: Aberdare, Hirwaun, Glyn Neath, Neath and some from as far as Cardiff and Swansea – like me, they were only too glad to escape the drudgery and sometimes squalor of their lives. It was an adventure and the money was good too – more than any of us had ever earned before!

After a few weeks, my friend Bette who lived in Neath asked me if I would like to go to a dance with her and her mates. She said I could stay over at her place for the night. I didn’t ask my parents if I could go and stay out for the night, I knew they would say no so just left them a note. I would take the punishment another day!

The dance was in the Oddfellows Hall in Neath. It was amazing. It was a huge hall with windows all round with beautiful red drapes. There was even a stage with a live band playing.

I had never been to a dance before – I wasn’t allowed and didn’t have the right clothes to wear anyway.

The hall was packed with people, quite a few men and some soldiers on leave. Quite a few of them asked me to dance!!

Over weeks and months I met different people with different backgrounds, different points of view, who introduced me to music, books and fashions. I soaked up every new experience like a sponge I knew for sure my life would never be the same.

I feel sad to say this, and terrible as it was, the war was the key that opened the door to my “New Life”.