

Jenny Brouse

From Russia to Tulsa. Jenny and her son, Brian, tell the family's immigration story.

Chapter 01 - 1:13

Introduction

Announcer: Brouse's Shoe Store in Utica Square was a prominent business for many years in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Jenny Brouse was partner, buyer, and secretary/treasurer for the family-owned business from 1975 until its closing in July of 2011.

While attending college, Jenny's husband, Sidney, worked as a shoe salesman, which eventually led to the business of shoes.

Jenny's father, Harry Robinowitz, came to the United States in 1914 from Russia. And her mother, Briana Robinowitz, along with others, escaped Russia in 1922. The oil boom in Oklahoma eventually brought the family to Tulsa.

Jenny graduated from the University of Tulsa in 1945, and was a substitute teacher for many years in Tulsa public schools, and a director for the Margaret Hudson Program. She was a volunteer and community leader for many causes, including president of the Tulsa Jewish Community Council, which was the forerunner of the Jewish Federation of Tulsa. And Jenny was a founding member and past president of the Tulsa Center for the Physically Limited. Now the Center for Individuals with Physical Challenges.

Jenny, along with her son Brian, is heard in this oral history interview telling this story from Russia to Tulsa on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Jenny Brouse was ninety-three when she died, January 21, 2018.

Chapter 02 - 4:40

Sugar Beets

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is July 6, 2011.

Jenny, will you state your full name, your date of birth, and your present age?

Jenny Brouse: Jenny Robinowitz Brouse. I was born June 1, 1924, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I am eighty-seven.

JE: And where are we recording this interview?

JB: We are at my apartment at the Jewish Retirement Home. I'm a new resident here and I'm very comfortable and extremely happy.

JE: And this is known as the Zarrow Campus?

JB: Yes, but it is actually the Tulsa Jewish Retirement Home.

JE: Who is this gentleman sitting here?

JB: Brian is my second child. He is the son of Sidney and Jenny Brouse.

JE: So Brian, your full name, your age, and date of birth?

Brian Brouse: Brian Edward Brouse. I am sixty. I was born November 12, 1950, here in Tulsa at St. John's Hospital.

JE: Brian will be here to visit with us throughout the course of the interview.

Where were you born, Jenny?

JB: I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: In what hospital?

JB: I was not born in a hospital. We don't know exactly where. My mother and father were reunited in 1922, and I was born in 1924.

JE: What—

JB: My father came to the United States in 1914; my mother and two brothers were unable to join him until 1922.

JE: Okay, then let's go back. Your mother's name, maiden name, where she was born and lived?

JB: My mother was Briana, B-r-i-a-n-a, Foonberg, F-o-o-n-b-e-r-g. She was born in Oratov, a little bitty town in Kiev Gubernia in Russia. As was my dad.

JE: Your father's full name?

JB: Harry Robinowitz, R-o-b-i-n-o-w-i-t-z.

JE: Do you know anything about their meeting and how old they were?

JB: They lived in the same little bitty town, Oratov. My grandfather, my mother's father, managed, he didn't own, but he managed a sugar beet plantation. It was on a river site. They lived very well. They had servants. Of course, in those early years, they didn't have amenities. The river would freeze behind their home and they would dip ice, bring it on the premises, and that was their refrigeration. They had maids, they lived very well in Russia for a while. But they didn't own anything.

My father worked at the sugar beet plantation for my mother's father. They married very young. They were married in Russia, Kiev Gubernia in the Ukraine. My two brothers were born there.

My brother Mike was born in 1909. My brother Sal was born in 1911.

My father came to the United States in 1914. My mother's oldest sister lived in Omaha, Nebraska. She signed the affidavit for my dad. In those years, Jews couldn't enter the United States unless an affidavit was signed that they would not become a public charge, that they would be financially taken care of.

My aunt signed this for my father. He went to Omaha to be with her. The oil boom was on in Tulsa, Oklahoma, so they moved to Tulsa. I'm not sure when. My aunt and the family moved to California because the oil boom fell, it dropped. And my dad was afraid to move. They wanted him to go with them but he was afraid to move because he feared he would lose contact with his wife and children. They knew he was in Tulsa and were writing to him. He was afraid he'd lose contact with them so he did not go to California with them, he remained in Tulsa.

JE: What did he do then in Tulsa?

JB: He was a peddler. He had a horse and a buggy and a wagon. He would find produce and then go up and down the streets selling it, from house to house. That was how he supported himself here.

JE: That would have been in the 1914, '15, '16—

JB: Yes.

JE: The era, somewhere in there?

JB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How long then did he do that before he was reunited with his wife?

JB: Well, my mother and the boys were unable to join him until 1922.

Chapter 03 - 3:40

Departure from Russia

Jenny Brouse: Their departure from Russia is rather interesting. My mother's baby brother, his name was Jimmy Foonberg, he was in the Russian Army. He was injured, they wouldn't treat him because he was Jewish. His boots were stolen, they wouldn't replace his boots because he was Jewish. He deserted the army. He went back home to his mother. His dad had already died.

He went back home to his mother and said, "We have to leave. If I am caught they will not try me, they'll just shoot me because I'm a deserter." He expected to be shot if he was caught.

She said she would not leave Russia until all of her children could go. It took him a couple of years to make plans. Not all of her children wanted to come. Some were married

and had families and they didn't want to leave. The younger brother of my mother, actually my uncle, took him two years to make the plans to leave.

They would walk at night and sleep in haystacks during the day, until they got to the border of the Dnieper River. It was the border between Russia and Romania. He made plans. One boat got across, the second boat was fired upon and didn't make it, but my mother and my brothers were on that first boat. When they got to the Dnieper River they started making plans to come to the United States.

Because it had taken so long my dad had earned enough money that they could come second class, they didn't have to come steerage. They emigrated to France. I'm not sure how they managed that, but they came across the Atlantic in a French boat. My mother and my younger brother were seasick and were in the cabin the whole time.

My other brother whose name was Mike was all over the boat. And by the time the boat landed in New York he could speak French.

John Erling: (laughing) So how long a trip was that?

JB: I don't know. My mother and my brothers landed in New York. They had an address of another aunt who was living in New York. She welcomed them there and it took them a day or two before they could make arrangements to get to Tulsa, Oklahoma. But they did.

JE: So they came through Ellis Island then?

JB: Yes. So far as I know. I have relatives who tried to check on it and couldn't find it.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: But I'm pretty sure it was Ellis Island, because I'm remembering my aunt was in New York.

JE: So people were leaving Russia for better times in a bigger country? Or was it because of hardship living there?

JB: Well, I think it was everything combined. There was anti-Semitism, they were Jewish, that was part of a problem almost anywhere they were in Europe or wherever. And of course, many of them wanted to join relatives elsewhere.

I also had relatives who went to South America. I had a cousin who later found those relatives. They were in Chile, in several countries in South America.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: Contact has been made with them. I don't know them but I know that contact has been made with many of those relatives.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: But these were relatives of my mother's that emigrated to South America at the time. They weren't always able to come here.

I have another cousin who determined that my grandfather knew sugar beet planting and cultivation because somehow or other the family came from South America.

Chapter 04 - 3:50**Stop and Shop Market**

John Erling: So your father is continuing in the produce business then?

Jenny Brouse: Yes, he eventually opened a grocery store.

JE: Here in Tulsa?

JB: Yes.

JE: What was the name of that, do we know?

JB: Well, the last name was Stop and Shop Market. I do not know what the earlier names were, they might always have been that, but Stop and Shop Market.

JE: Do you know where that was located in Tulsa?

JB: One of them was located on 11th Street. The last one was in Brookside. My dad sold that store.

JE: Sounds like an early convenience store, doesn't it? Stop and Shop. This would have been in the '20s. He was ahead of his time.

JB: It was, well, my oldest brother ended up in Chicago. I had an aunt in Chicago and he ended up there. And when he came back to Tulsa he decided they should call the stores Stop and Shop Market. That was the name of a business in Chicago, I believe.

JE: Then we come, obviously, to you. In 1924, here comes the first birth of a child in America and the first girl in the family.

JB: Yes.

JE: So there had to be a lot of happiness.

JB: My dad had become an American citizen. My brothers had derivative citizenship from my dad. My mother did not.

JE: How does that work, derivative citizenship?

JB: It was because of their age, they were still pretty young.

JE: Your father then was in his thirties at this time? Brian, you just jump in there.

Brian Brouse: Grandpa would have had to have been born in the 1880s.

JB: Yes, you're right. And my mother was born the same year, but my dad was born in January or February of that year; she wasn't born until August of that year.

JE: All right, so we're estimating when you're born, say, he's approximately in his forties. What are your first remembrances of Tulsa? The first house you remember and where it was?

JB: Yes, the house I remember was around the corner from 11th and Harvard.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JB: It was on 11th Street. I remember that the house faced north. There was a street called Independence that was just to the left of our house. I remember living in that house. It was very hot in the summertime and I would sleep outside. My mother would put a blanket or

something on the grass and I would sleep outdoors. We didn't have a fenced yard, nobody had. We didn't have a dog but nobody was worried or scared or anything. We didn't fear intruders, we didn't fear thieves. I slept there, I remember doing that.

But I also remember that my mother would get a pan of water and put it on a kitchen counter. We had an electric fan. The fan would blow on this pan of water and I would stand receiving the benefits of the fan as it blew over the water. That's the way I got cool.

JE: Yeah, that's good. This would have been in the early '30s that's you're talking about then, your first remembrances, I would imagine.

JB: Yeah.

JE: The first school you attended was?

JB: Sidney Lanier.

JE: And where was that located?

JB: It was on Harvard, almost at 21st, something like that.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JB: Still there, I think.

JE: Yes.

JB: I went to junior high at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, and I went to Central High School downtown, the old Central High School, the building that is now Public Service Company. I loved school, I did fine. I sure wasn't brilliant or anything but I was able to learn.

My mother had broken English always. My father and my brothers had an ear for language. Did I mention that my mother and my brother were seasick on the ship coming across? My brother Mike was speaking French by the time they landed.

JE: Yeah.

JB: My family had an ear for language. My dad had no accent. My mother had an accent till she died. But my dad and his family spoke absolutely perfect English.

Chapter 05 - 6:37

"You Are Jewish"

John Erling: Let's bring you to your high school time at Tulsa Central. Some remembrances.

Jenny Brouse: I wanted to go to college. My brother Mike told me that I would never be able to afford to go to college. I was taking Latin and French. He said, "That's ridiculous. You have to take bookkeeping and typing and shorthand."

So I dropped the Latin and the French and I did take those at night school. I took the other classes and I was able to enroll at TU, at Tulsa University.

JE: After graduating from Tulsa Central. In what year did you graduate?

JB: I skipped a half year in California. We were broke half the time. I remember that we left our house and would find other places. My brothers and my dad would sleep in the back of the store. But Mother and I would go live with somebody else. We couldn't pay our rent at the house.

But after we had enough money saved up to pay the back rent we would move back to the house. Everything, the drawers, the closets, just the way we left them. Nobody moved them or touched them. But I remember that happened two or three times.

JE: You said something about California.

JB: My mother's sisters, I think I told you that the woman that my dad had lived with in Omaha when they moved to Tulsa, they all moved to California.

JE: Oh, that's, okay.

JB: They were in Los Angeles. I remember one year my mother and I went to Santa Monica. My aunt lived in Santa Monica. We lived with her in Santa Monica and I went to school there. While I was there I was promoted. They skipped a half a grade. In those years, they had A and B.

Well, I got back to Tulsa, they promoted me another half grade because they no longer had half grades, they just had full classes. So I was a year ahead.

Brian Brouse: Mother, why did you move? Why did you and Grandma go to California?

JB: Because we were broke.

BB: This is during the Depression?

JB: I think I skipped the second half of the second grade. So it was very early, yeah.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: It was Depression. One remembrance of California was that there was an earthquake when we were living in Santa Monica. My mother and I were upstairs. I came down the stairs during the earthquake and everybody on the first floor was screaming at me because of the earthquake. I didn't have any understanding of what was going on. But everybody was okay, we were all right.

JE: In 1941, you're about seventeen years old. Pearl Harbor, do you have a recollection—

JB: Yes.

JE: ...of remembering that day?

JB: Well, I'm pretty sure I was at TU already. When Pearl Harbor happened there were no men left on campus. All the men left immediately. I did not pledge a sorority because I was Jewish.

JE: Explain that, "because you were Jewish."

JB: Well, um, the Dean of Women was Mary Clay Williams.

JE: This is at TU now we're talking about.

JB: At TU. She called me in because I was a freshman, and she said, “Miss Robinowitz, you’re Jewish.”

And I said, “Yes, ma’am.”

She said, “Well, you can’t pledge, you know, you can’t go through rush.”

I said, “I understand that.”

“Well, if you can’t go through rush and you can’t pledge, what will you do?”

I said, “The only thing I know to do would be to study.”

And she said, “Well, okay.” But she was concerned about me. Sorority was very important at TU in those years, probably still is. And I couldn’t pledge, but I had very good friends at the sororities.

I remember decorating floats for football parades and that sort of thing. I didn’t pledge a sorority but I had friends in the sororities and they were very nice to me.

JE: And you helped them decorate their floats?

JB: Yes.

JE: How does this make you feel as a young woman and they say, “You can’t because you’re Jewish”?

JB: It didn’t bother me a bit. (laughs) We had social clubs in high school that I didn’t pledge.

JE: Because you were Jewish?

JB: Yeah, well, Jews didn’t go to those things. We had our own clubs. I had a club to go to in high school.

JE: You were used to kind of living a Jewish life here.

JB: Yes. I went to the synagogue here. I was very used to being Jewish.

JE: Was it ever hurtful?

JB: Not really because it happened to everybody. It was one of those things that happened.

The thing that was wonderful was that I had food to eat.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: The thing that was wonderful was that I had clothes to wear.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: And I got to go to school. How many people were able to go to school in those years? And I did. I was able to go.

JE: And you’re—

JB: And I was very fortunate.

JE: Yes. And going to TU was a cost for the family. Was that true? Who paid for that?

JB: Well, I got a job at TU in the Treasurer’s office. There was a fund set up by President Roosevelt, it was federal, it had initials that wasn’t WPA—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: ...but everything had initials in those years. All these work programs came into being. I had this job in the Treasurer’s office. And if you’ll remember, I took shorthand when I was in

high school so I knew what to do. TU owned property, a tremendous amount of property, and my job was to send out monthly rental notices, asking for money for the people who were renting the properties.

The treasurer that I worked for talked, brrr, brrr (burring noise) but I figured out very quickly the name of this renter on the property and the amount of money. So all I had to do was put the name and the amount of money down. I didn't have to take the dictation.

My dad had a heart attack while I was working at TU. I quit school and I stayed at home and I was the cashier at the store register—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: ...while my dad recovered from his heart attack. When he got well and came back I went back to TU and I asked if I could have my job back. They were thrilled to have me. The secretaries there in the office said, "We haven't been able to send out notices."

I said, "Why not?"

And they said, "We can't take dictation. You're the only one that ever took dictation from him."

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JB: I said, "You don't have to take the dictation," and I showed them I had already put down all these amounts and I left them there when I came to work in the store.

They were just shocked, absolutely shocked.

JE: How long would you have been gone from the school?

JB: Oh, it was just four months or so.

JE: Yeah.

JB: Three or four months.

Chapter 06 - 8:50

Letter Writing Courtship

John Erling: We talk about the treatment of Jews then at the '40s. Do you recall how the blacks were treated?

Jenny Brouse: No. There were no blacks in my classes. I never had a black friend. I never had a black teacher. There were no black teachers in my schools. There weren't any black students in the schools. I wasn't aware of the race riots and that sort of thing at all, I was not aware of it. I probably should have been but I was not. I found out later.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: And I read about it but I didn't have a black teacher or a classmate until I got to TU. There were a few blacks there but not very many.

JE: Do you remember Tulsa itself and downtown then?

JB: Yes.

JE: Speaking of blacks, did you ever see the signs, "No Blacks Here" or—

JB: I don't remember that.

JE: Yeah.

JB: But there were no blacks in the movies. Blacks didn't go to the movies with us—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: ...they had their own, I think, on the north side.

JE: On the north side, right.

JB: Uh-huh (affirmative). Now in the early beginning we lived on the north side but I don't remember it.

JE: Was there some time that you met somebody that you became very fond of and decided to live your life with that person?

JB: You mean my husband?

JE: I am, I'm kind of sneaky here, right. (both laughing)

JB: I went to a dance at Congregation B'nai Emunah. There was a kitchen and then a stairway leading up from the kitchen to the outdoors, to the back. On Saturday night, once a month, we would have a dance for soldiers that came in from Camp Gruver. Camp Gruver was near Muskogee, if I'm remembering correctly.

I was introduced to this man at the dance. I was majoring in History at Tulsa University, and this woman introduced me to a soldier who was also majoring in History. We met at this dance, and he said, "Would you write me?"

And I said, "Okay," and I wrote my address down for him.

I got a letter from him from Camp Gruver. He was getting ready to leave Gruver and go to California for additional training. And he said would I please answer him?

So I did and we corresponded back and forth. He then asked me not to wait for his letters but to write as often as I could, and I did. He was on a ship bound for the war in Japan when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And Japan surrendered because they were atomic bombs.

So instead of continuing to Japan he was sent to the Philippine Islands. The reason he went to the Philippines, if you'll remember, McArthur left the Philippines and went south. The Japanese were in control of the Philippine Islands for a number of years. They had taught a tribe, Hukbalahap was the name of Indian tribe in the Philippines. They had taught that tribe to kill Americans. They had told them Japan would never surrender, and they wouldn't have had the bombs not been atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He was sent to the Philippine Islands to try to take care of this uprising. He was there for a couple of years. He was then sent to San Antonio to be separated from the army.

By the way, his home was in Florida. His family had lived in a small town and he had ended up at the University of Florida, that's where he had graduated college. He had come to Tulsa, he wanted to get married, and I told him to go home because he hadn't seen his mother. Still hadn't seen her and he'd been gone for, I don't know, three years or so.

JE: And you know, we should state his full name here right now.

JB: His name was Sidney Merrill Brouse. His dad had died already. His mother married three or four times. She was reared in an orphanage; her father had deserted the family and moved out so she was reared in an orphanage.

At the orphanage, the women were persuaded to learn the trade of beautician. They learned how to set hair and that sort of thing. They didn't go to school or anything, they were given training in trades. They were taught to become self-sufficient. That's what she did, she was a beautician. She had already been married once. That marriage ended.

Her second husband was my husband's father. He had a half brother. My husband didn't know that he was a half brother—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: ...but he was. He only found out in later years that his father was different from the father my husband knew.

JE: He wanted to come to Tulsa but you told him to go to Florida.

JB: Yeah.

JE: He wanted to get married.

JB: I told him to go home.

JE: So then sometime he came back because then you were married.

JB: No, he wrote my father a letter asking for my hand in marriage. (laughing) My dad was very impressed. Nobody was writing to fathers asking for their daughters' hands in marriage in those years.

JE: And so you had obviously committed yourself to him?

JB: Yeah.

JE: Already, so he knew that.

JB: Yeah. And we got married.

JE: November 3, 1946.

JB: Correct, yeah.

Brian Brouse: I think the remarkable thing about this courtship was that it was a courtship by—

JB: Mail.

BB: ...correspondence. You know, they saw each other at this dance. It was, "Hi, how are you? Let's talk a little bit. Let's have a couple of dances," that's it. Then they don't see each

other again. They write each other and somehow these letters between each other click. We do not have any of these letters, we don't know where they are.

JB: I wasn't saving them.

BB: He comes back and proposes. So somehow—

JB: You have to understand that there weren't any men around all the time I was in college.

JE: Jewish men.

JB: There weren't men, period, on campus.

JE: Okay. But you also were going to be careful to marry a Jew, weren't you?

JB: Yes. Well, I was never asked by a non-Jewish man to go out. I wasn't asked by a Jewish man to go out. There weren't any men around. There really weren't.

JE: Do—

JB: Those were the years when Franka, I think that was his name, was the coach at TU. He had winning football teams. They were all 4-F. They were people who were injured—

JE: Right.

JB: ...otherwise they would have been in the service.

JE: But this marriage, as Brian just stated, it was kind of, "Hi, how are you?" "How are you?"

JB: Yeah, it was—

JE: And then it was all through letters.

JB: Yeah.

JE: It lasted how many years?

JB: He died in '99.

JE: So about fifty-three years or so.

JB: Oh, yeah, we celebrated fifty years.

JE: Yeah. It worked, something clicked.

JB: (laughs) Well, there were a lot of reasons why it clicked. Number one, he was a college graduate. Very few men were graduates of college in those early years because of the war.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: They had dropped out of college. Many of them wanted to go to college but had dropped out because they had to be in the service.

JE: Yeah.

JB: My husband, by the way, stayed in the service. Eisenhower was elected president and my husband figured we would back at war in six months, with the military man as president.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: So he stayed in the Reserves. He went to army camp every summer and that's where he spent his vacations. He went to army meetings once a week at night when the Reserve unit that he belonged to in Tulsa was called to active duty for a while, the head of the group asked my husband if he would stay in Tulsa and keep the group alive because he wanted to have it to come back to.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JB: Any my husband said, “Yeah,” he was glad to stay in Tulsa because by then he was working, had a job, and we were married. He wanted to stay in Tulsa.

JE: Children then, name them from your marriage. How—

JB: My first child was a girl, her name was Carol. My husband and I lived with my folks when she was born. She was born—

BB: In 1948, January 24th.

JB: Yeah. Brian was born two years later.

BB: About two and a half years later.

JB: Yeah.

BB: November 12, 1950.

JB: And then by the time Brian was born we were living in an apartment, by the way. We lived with my folks for two reasons, not only financial reasons, but because you couldn’t rent an apartment. There was no building.

BB: Housing was short with the soldiers coming back.

JB: Yeah.

BB: There was just a huge demand and little supply on housing.

JB: Absolutely.

JE: What did your husband do then?

JB: My husband had sold shoes on Saturday. One of the jobs he had when he was going to college. He was in ROTC in college. He was in advanced ROTC. He had been called up to active duty when he was a senior in college because he was in ROTC. He went to the Battle of the Bulge in Britain. He served in Patton’s third army.

Chapter 07 - 4:14

Lazarus Shoes

John Erling: But then because of his shoe experience he started selling shoes here in Tulsa?

Jenny Brouse: He started selling—he got a job at Renberg’s selling shoes, this is downtown. It didn’t last very long. So he then got a job at I. Miller. The I. Miller store was on Main Street and it was operated by a man named Sid Lazarus. It was an I. Miller store. I. Miller was a very fine brand, a national brand of shoes, ladies’ shoes. The I. Miller store was on Main Street. There was an adjacent store in the same building for lingerie. Mr. Lazarus sold his company to General Shoe Corporation with a five-year non-compete clause.

But he continued at the I. Miller store. At the end of five years, he said to my husband, "I want to open my own business. Will you go in with me?"

And my husband said, "Mr. Lazarus, I don't have any money, I can't go in with you."

Mr. Lazarus said, "You won't need any money, you can pay for it out of profits."

And he said, "Mr. Lazarus, there won't be any profits. The only reason you want the store is so you can charge expenses to it," which was true. That's what businessmen did in those years. They would charge their expenses to the business, that way they avoided taxes.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: But anyway, Mr. Lazarus said, "It's okay, we'll work it out."

So at time, they rented space where we are now at Utica Square, and my husband made arrangements with a company called Renberg's to open the ladies' shoe department there also. Because he knew that this one little store wouldn't support what Mr. Lazarus wanted to do.

JE: Did that store then, with Mr. Lazarus, open as Brouse's?

JB: No, it opened as Sid Lazarus Shoes. Of course, when we—

Brian Brouse: This is in 1958.

JB: When we went into Renberg's that was the least department at the Renberg's stores.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: Renberg's had a store downtown already. That was their father's store, Papa's store. Then the one in Utica Square opened. Eventually, they opened a store at South Roads Mall. Eventually, they opened a store at Woodland Hills Mall. And we opened shoe departments in each of those places.

I was teaching school at the time. I had two kids, I did substitute work, that way I could turn down jobs and I could take a job that would release me at three o'clock in the afternoon when my kids would get home from school.

JE: Did you teach high school?

JB: I taught mostly at the grade school and junior high. But I didn't do high school right away.

JE: So you were adding to the income of the family?

JB: Well, very little.

JE: By teaching. Didn't you also work for the War Assets Administration?

JB: In the very beginning, both my husband and I got jobs at War Assets Administration. We took Civil Service exams and passed. That's how we got the jobs at War Assets. That was at the old bomber plant here in town. We got jobs selling war surplus. But when the surplus ended, the jobs ended.

JE: This was all surplus—

JB: Yeah, from the war.

JE: ...equipments, mess kits, tanks, airplanes, machine guns—

JB: Yeah.

JE: ...even warships they were selling.

JB: That's right.

JE: That was in the late '50s and '60s.

JB: Yes. Then my next job was with Affiliated Foods. My brother Mike had started Affiliated Foods. The independent grocer was having a very difficult time because the chains were coming in to town and were killing them. They couldn't compete.

So my brother had gotten a job with a man in Kansas City who was related to a family in Tulsa. He had an organization that bought merchandise in quantity for the independent grocers. They housed them in a warehouse and then independent grocers could buy what they needed. And that way they could compete with the chains.

My brother got a job with this man in Kansas City, learned the business, came back to Tulsa, and started Affiliated Foods in Tulsa, Oklahoma. My brother's name was Mike Robinowitz.

Chapter 08 - 7:18

Brouse's Shoes

John Erling: The store then that was Lazarus, when did it become Brouse's and how did that come about?

Jenny Brouse: It came about because the original owners died. There was an owner in Little Rock, Arkansas. There were two owners in Tulsa, and a—

Brian Brouse: And Sal Leavy in Wichita, Kansas.

JB: In Wichita, Kansas.

BB: We had operations in Wichita, Kansas, as well.

JB: We also operated in the least department at a store called Henry's in Wichita. We had the ladies' shoe department there. But that ended. The manager of Henry's died. Mr. Lazarus had died. And all the partners had died, so we bought them out.

BB: In 1975.

JE: So that's when the name change came about.

JB: Well, actually, it didn't really change.

BB: It changed about six years later. We got into the Sid Lazarus store, totally remodeled it, changed the image. And when that occurred in '81 is when we changed the name from Sid Lazarus Shoes to Brouse's. We thought, "How do we make a change?"

We thought long and hard. We knew we needed to make a change from the previous name. We looked around and most stores were named after themselves, so that's how we picked Brouse's.

JE: Brian, when did you come into the shoe business?

BB: The corporation bought out the other three families in April of '75. That's when Mother entered the picture. In June, I graduated from Columbia University with an MBA and I came into the business that fall in September of '75.

JB: Well, what happened was the first job he ended up with was at Abraham and Strauss in Brooklyn. And my husband jumped up and down, literally, jumped up and down, "Hot dog! Hot dog! Hot dog!"

I said, "What's up?"

He said, "If he's at Abraham and Strauss he'll end up with us some day." He was so excited. I'll never forget that.

JE: (laughing) Was that your goal, Brian, to be part of the family business all along?

BB: I—I don't know. No, when—

JB: I—

BB: ...I say it was my goal I was living in New York and I was happy socially. But I also realized that to exist in New York you really had to have a thick skin, just because of the sheer number of people and because of the competition. And I really missed the family, my cousins and aunts and uncles, and I wanted to come back to Tulsa. The opportunity was there. I don't think I would have come into the business had it not have been owned outright by the family.

JB: No, he wouldn't have. We wouldn't have asked him to.

JE: Then from '75 on, it's the two of you.

BB: Well, the three of us. We operated the corporation together. My father, in the mid '70s, had been diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukemia. It was his decision, which we honored, to really keep the knowledge of it just among the family members.

JB: We didn't tell anybody.

BB: He lived a very, very normal life. In February of '99, he slipped outside the house and that fall and a few other things contributed to him a downward spiral. And he died in October of '99.

Since that time, my mother and I together have run the Brouse store in the square.

JE: Things have changed in Utica Square, no doubt, down through the years. Any reflections in all of that?

BB: You know, that Helmerick family, Mr. Helmerick in particular, bought Utica Square probably forty, forty-five years ago. It's very much a reflection of his image. He upgraded the square, modernized it, has tried to bring in name stores, more high-end stores. In the last ten years they brought in a lot of restaurants.

As one of the older shopping centers in the city, it has been rejuvenated several times and it is still a strong center with a high occupancy rate. It has been a pleasure to be in the square.

JE: The competition in the shoe business from '75 on up, then there were more choices of buying shoes, even with Utica Square. How did you manage that and did you ever change who your customer was? Let's go to the beginning then, who was your customer in '75?

BB: If I go back earlier than that, when we opened up Sid Lazarus Shoes, probably about 25 percent of the business was children's shoes. Probably 10 percent was ballet shoes and tap shoes.

JB: We had a relationship with the ballet teacher in Tulsa.

BB: Probably after about ten years or twenty years, we eliminated the children's shoes and the ballet shoes, focusing more on women. And then the last of the years, we suddenly upgraded the store, went to more fashion lines, designer lines. We always tried to specialize in sizes in which, and I think became known in the city for having sort of those hard to fit sizes for people.

JB: And remain today. We have customers that come in crying because we're closing. Because they don't know where they're going to buy their shoes.

JE: How many brands would you have carried in '75 and '80 and there? How many different brands, do you think?

BB: Thirty years ago, we probably carried twenty-five shoe brands, probably thirty to forty different brands of handbags and small other goods, billfolds, jewelry lines.

JE: And today?

BB: Uh, carry far fewer lines. Many of those manufacturers no longer exist. We felt it would be better to concentrate more on a smaller group of vendors. So that number has probably shrunk by 50 percent at least.

JE: The store then, with the economic times of the city and so forth, had its ups and downs, I'm sure, down through the years.

BB: That's correct. It's really a reflection of what happens in not only the Tulsa economy but the global economy or national economy as well.

JE: When were the toughest years, you think?

BB: It cycled because I would say certainly the oil bust for us.

JE: The '80s, in the '80s?

JB: That hit us.

BB: 'Eighties, when the price of gas and oil goes up money is flowing in Tulsa, and money is being spent. When it drops down people have less money to spend. It's all about the discretionary, disposable income dollar that we're going after.

JE: But it's provided a good way of life for you. Brouse's, down through the years?

BB: Yes. My sister and I both college educations. Our family has always lived in a decent house, always had clothes on our backs.

JB: We always had food for our tummies.

JE: (laughing) And, Brian, you were full time in the business then?

BB: I've been full-time in the business since I came back home in September of '75. Before that, beginning at about age fourteen, I started working in the business during the summertimes, having to get a special permit because I was below a certain age.

JB: We had to get a special permit from the Board of Education so he could work.

BB: Because I was below, I guess, sixteen or something.

JE: So was that fascinating as a young boy, to be in the shoe business?

JB: He wanted to be with his dad.

BB: I think my dad was working, probably, sixty to seventy-five hours a week and it was just a chance for me to see him and to have lunch with him on Saturdays. Or I started working there in the summertime just so I could have lunch with him and to be near him more.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BB: Spend more time with him.

JE: You graduated from Tulsa Central?

BB: That was my mother. I went to Edison Junior High and Senior High, graduated from Edison in 1969. Did my undergraduate degree. Got a bachelor's in Economics from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Then I got my MBA in Finance from Columbia University in '75.

JB: In New York.

JE: You did a good job on him, didn't you?

JB: Nope, I didn't. (laughing)

JE: (laughing)

JB: He did it by himself.

Chapter 09 - 2:00

Store Closing

John Erling: Here we are, we're in July of 2011. You made a reference to the fact the store is closing. Let's talk a little bit about that because it will be closed as of the end of when?

Brian Brouse: End of July, this month.

JE: Jenny, what are your feelings about that?

Jenny Brouse: Well, I am not uncomfortable about it. I'm in retirement. I have moved to the retirement home.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: My house is vacant. I still own it.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: I'm still paying utilities and charges on the house. It's a very nice house. I have no quarrels with that house, but I'm not a kid.

JE: This business that was so much a part of your life—

JB: Yes.

JE: ...and goes back to your husband—

JB: But I've been a very active person in the community. I've been very fortunate in that I very early did a tremendous amount of work in the Jewish community.

JE: And I'm going to get to that here in just a moment. Brian, your comments about this?

BB: Yes, yeah, it's bittersweet. We have done what we could to operate Brouse's. Well, I will certainly miss it. You know, I'd been going to this store every day ever since I came back to Tulsa in '75.

JB: And we're talking seven days a week.

BB: We have made a lot of friends, not only with customers but with the fellow merchants with management and ownership of the square. Our—

JB: Also with the people who sold him. He's very close to—

BB: Our manufacturers are good to us.

JB: ...manufacturers.

BB: But financially, it's the correct thing to do when one pulls out the emotions and does an analysis and pulls the ego out of it, it's what needs to be done. It was a very tough, tough decision, but Mother and I and my sister, Carol, feel it's the proper, correct thing to do.

JB: He quit buying merchandise.

BB: About six months ago.

JE: Well, it's definitely been a mainstay in Tulsa for all these years. And both of you can certainly be proud of the image. And as you said earlier, some of them are wondering where they can buy their shoes now. That's how much you meant to these people.

Chapter 10 - 8:07

Community Involvement

John Erling: So to your work, Jenny, in the community, you were a teacher in the Margaret Hudson Program? And what attracted you to that program? Why did you do that?

Jenny Brouse: I was the substitute teacher and I had a call once to come downtown and handle the Margaret Hudson Program. One day, I went down there and did it and then I was asked to take over and do it, period. I developed the program then.

At that time, pregnant women were not allowed to attend school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. What this program did was to provide pregnant women an opportunity to continue their *high school* education.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: It wasn't college or anything like that. And there was so much prejudice against the pregnant women in the city, it was just unbelievable. Even among the teaching staff, they didn't want pregnant girls in their classes, which I understand. They thought it would be deteriorating to students who were not pregnant. Of course, out of wedlock was anathema to people in those years. Today, you don't worry about it, I guess.

JE: Yeah.

JB: But it was quite a problem.

JE: This would have been the '60s, '70s when you were involved in the Margaret Hudson Program?

JB: Uh, yeah.

JE: Somewhere in there?

Brian Brouse: The late '60s, early '70s.

JB: Yes.

JE: That was the attitude then, so you basically ran—

JB: I did but I didn't start it.

JE: ...that program.

JB: I didn't begin it but I definitely—

BB: Mother was involved on the academic side. I believe that these ladies would go to school part of the time, learning the basic reading, writing, arithmetic, and the other part of the day would be spent learning how to care for your child, nutrition, stuff like that.

JB: These people were going to a doctor for the first time.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JB: For the first time they were getting medical attention. It was anathema to be pregnant in those years. We had space at the YWCA downtown to teach. And I would go there every morning and teach a half a day.

JE: Were there many in the program at a time?

JB: Not a lot. Oh, we had as many as twenty, I think.

JE: Yeah.

JB: These were women that were living at home still, many of them in those years. But many of them didn't even have medical attention, they weren't even going to a doctor. They also had counseling that started.

JE: That must have made you feel good that you were helping these young ladies.

JB: Yeah.

JE: There was a lot of prejudice against them.

JB: There was so much prejudice. I remember getting a phone call from a teacher, one of my students had had her baby and had gone back to school. But her records came with her. And her new teacher called me and said, "You gave So-and-So an A in her class. How in the world could you have given her an A?"

I said, "Well, she earned it."

"What do you mean, she earned it? She was pregnant, how could she could possibly have earned it? How could you do that?" You know, she was livid with me.

And I said, "Does she know the material?"

She said, "Who cares?"

I said, "That's what I based her grade on, what she'd do, what she had learned. It's the only consideration I gave to." I mean, this teacher was adamant, she was livid with me.

JE: How many years were you with the program?

JB: Just two. That's all.

JE: But you served at a key time there. You also in the community are president of the National Council of Jewish Women?

JB: Local.

JE: Tell us what that was about and what kind of work you would have done with that?

JB: Well, women were very restricted in many things that they did in those years.

BB: There were women's organizations.

JB: There was a group of women that belonged to an organization called Hadassah, Jewish women. Hadassah was a program that based almost completely, in those years, in Israel. It was for the state of Israel. But these women, they were Jews, they belonged to Hadassah, and they raised money for Israel.

Council of Jewish Women was a Jewish organization that was primarily in the United States. They did have some programs out to France, Great Britain, but was primarily in the United States.

BB: There's more involved with social work.

JB: It was, yes.

BB: As opposed to religious work.

JB: That's right. Women were very active at synagogues in those years because they didn't participate in synagogue activities. They would go to the synagogue, they would keep a kosher home, many of them, but they didn't do any work at the synagogues.

JE: Was that they were restricted from doing it or ...?

BB: Well, did not participate in any services.

JB: In prayer.

BB: Or being on the Bema. Women generally were not on the boards of the synagogues or officers or committee chairs. Those roles were restricted to males.

JB: Males.

BB: So if a woman wanted to do something outside of working she would join women's organizations. So Mother became active in the Tulsa Section National Council of Jewish Women and their various projects, one of which was the—

JB: Center for Physically Limited. I was very active with that group. There is still a Center for Physically Limited. There are still Jewish women that are active in it; I am not. I no longer am.

JE: But you were for some time?

JB: I was president at one time. I was very active.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: These were groups that were civic groups. They were religious in the fact that we did pray at times and that sort of thing, and we were Jews. If we had food around it was kosher, but we were not really religiously oriented, as such.

JE: Right. So the Tulsa Center for the Physically Limited, was that started by the Council of Jewish Women?

JB: Yes it was, it was indeed.

JE: Huh, you're right. And it still continues to this day.

JB: Yes.

JE: Late '70s you became president for the Tulsa Community Council?

JB: Yes. I was the first woman president. I was the last president of the Tulsa Jewish Community Council because after that the Tulsa Jewish Community Council became the Federation, the Jewish Federation of Tulsa.

JE: Just a little bit about that, what is that Jewish Federation?

JB: The Jewish Federation is an organization which serves as the vehicle, it unites the Jewish community in that it is neither Orthodox nor Reform nor Conservative, it is general. We provide means for people to become educated, means for people to survive. Especially when people came in from foreign countries that organization helped those people find a place to live, helped them have a job.

We used to say, "Ho, ho, ho Otasco." Oklahoma Tire and Supply—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: ...offered jobs to these immigrants who came in and they didn't speak English. Then later a company called Fabricut did the same thing. That's part of what this organization did was to help find jobs. We provided a means for people to learn English and to continue school, to do anything, to exist.

BB: And the Jewish Federation of Tulsa developed the Charles Schusterman Jewish Community Center, which houses a lot of physical and recreational activities on the campus. A—a—a—

JB: I have a picture of my husband and I breaking ground for the Tulsa Jewish Community Center.

BB: Also out of the Federation came the studies of the development of the Tulsa Jewish Retirement and Healthcare Center, the development of the Zarrow campus, social service work is done through that community relations committee.

JB: We sponsor organizations that help Jewish life through the state of Oklahoma on college campuses. There are all kinds of activities that initiate that way.

JE: I'm thinking about when you were talking about the Federation and the Community Council helping those who came to the United States. Much of that had to be driven because your family was in the same position they were in. You could relate to them.

JB: Yeah.

Chapter 11 - 7:34

Prejudice

John Erling: Population of Jews in the United States is relatively small.

Jenny Brouse: And is decreasing.

JE: And why is it?

JB: I think birth control is one reason. (laughing) I mean that.

Brian Brouse: Certainly the Jewish population out of Tulsa has not kept pace with the growth of the population as a whole in the metroplex. I think many of the children, once they leave and go away to college, they don't come back. They go to communities that will have a larger population or because maybe in the old days they would join their family business. Today there are no longer family businesses so there's nothing really to bring them back here. So it's because of jobs and finding a spouse that they oftentimes don't return to Tulsa.

JE: And the fact that they're not necessarily marrying other Jewish partners. There's a lot of intermarriage.

BB: You're right, intermarriage is certainly on the rise. You know, Mother pointed out that when she was going to college and off when she was looking for work doors were closed to Jews. It was just an accepted—

JB: I was turned down by an oil company locally because I was Jewish. We had a customer at my daddy's grocery store who was president of an oil company in Tulsa. I went down to

that oil company and applied for a job. I already knew shorthand, typing, and bookkeeping and I wanted a job.

I took a test and the woman who gave me the test, said, "Oh, you'll be hired. That's the highest score I've ever seen on this test."

And I wasn't offered a job. I wasn't ever turned down, I never got a letter saying, "Thank you for applying." Nothing. But the reason I knew about it was because we had a customer who was president of that company. And I asked him, I said, "I know I scored very well on that test."

He said, "I wondered when I'd hear from you." He said, "We can't hire you because you're Jewish. But I know a job that is available to you if you would like to get it."

And I did. I took a job at Oklahoma City. There was a Tulsa oilman whose brother was an oilman in Oklahoma City. The books were officed in Oklahoma City. The Tulsa brother wanted the books brought to Tulsa. I went down there and I worked for three months learning the books. But then I got married and quit the job. The books are still in Oklahoma City, never made it to Tulsa.

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives). But I asked you earlier when you were rejected from sororities because you were a Jew—

JB: Uh-huh (affirmative)?

JE: ...and you thought, "Well, we did socially our own thing anyway," so it didn't really bother you. But here you were turned down in a business—

JB: Yeah, uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: ...because you were a Jew. Now how did that—

JB: It was prevalent. Jews are aware of this, we're aware of the fact that you don't always get something because you're Jewish. Can—all it does is it makes you work harder, you look around more, you try to find a place. There are places that wouldn't rent to Jews. There are still places that don't rent to Jews, not like there used to be, but that's one of those things.

JE: You had—

JB: I remember restaurants that we didn't go to.

JE: In Tulsa?

JB: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: Because Jews weren't welcome?

JB: They weren't really welcomed. They weren't turned down but maybe the waitress would be curt or something.

JE: Brian, now you're a younger generation, you didn't feel, I am assuming, as much as your mother did that anti-Semitism.

BB: Correct, I really did not experience it in Tulsa.

JB: You did at college.

BB: Maybe a little at college, but on the flip side, you know, I was having my bar mitzvah in seventh grade. I had a major project in geography and my geography teacher, Mr. C. B. Wee, said, "I know you're having your bar mitzvah. You want to do your project before or after your bar mitzvah?" So he went out of his way, reverse discrimination.

Knowing how hard I had to study and, like, made it more easier for me. So there were things like that. You know, Mother talked about segregation when she was growing up. As far as I can remember there were no blacks in my elementary school or in my junior high. There might have been one or two blacks in my senior high at Edison.

I remember Mr. Melvin Driver was a math teacher and may have also been involved in physical education. I think he was one of the first black teachers to come to Edison. He was well received. But you had gerrymandering of school districts and blacks and whites were separated.

My first black friend was when I was in college. I really didn't come into contact with blacks my own age, growing up.

JE: But again, you didn't feel in high school and all the prejudice your mother might have felt toward Jews then?

BB: Correct.

JE: When you were growing up and you knew there was this feeling about Jews, you must have asked yourself many of times, "Why do they not like me? What is it about Jews they don't like?"

JB: Uh, I don't know that I asked myself that because, number one, I went to great lengths not to hurt my parents. I wouldn't have brought anything to their attention that would have hurt them. I know that. But we were already aware of discrimination against blacks and it was not nearly that bad against Jews.

JE: And I suppose that's because of the pigmentation of our skin, isn't it?

JB: Yeah.

JE: I mean, you were white.

JB: That's part of it too.

JE: Right, right.

JB: Also part of it is because more Jews were independent and they had their own businesses. Because they couldn't go into other businesses. So that in itself. We were discriminated against in some areas. You didn't go into country clubs.

JE: Didn't Southern Hills for some time—

JB: Oh, for years they had no Jews.

JE: ...would not allow Jews or blacks?

BB: Correct.

JE: Yeah.

JB: But we were glad to eat. We were glad to have a house. I was thrilled to have clothes.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: I remember I had two dresses, cotton print dresses. My mother washed and ironed both of them. I would wear each one two days. I'd wear one on Monday and Tuesday, another one on Thursday and Friday, and by then, the first one was washed and ironed. I would wear the first one on Friday. Then I would very carefully put that dress on a hangar and I would wear it again on Monday.

About the last day of school, I remember it was hot, very hot. And when I got out of my seat the print on the cotton dress I was wearing was on the wood. It had come off of the dress. There wasn't a hole on the dress.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: But the print was gone. I waited until everybody had left the classroom and I went up to the teacher and I showed her that. She said, "I don't have a car or I would take you home. But you can sit here and wait until everybody is out of the school and then we'll walk out of the school together so you won't be embarrassed." But she said, "How are you getting home?"

I said, "Oh, I can walk home."

She said, "How do you walk?"

And I said, "Well, I usually go down Harvard but I have a side street I can go down and I don't think anybody would see me." The object was to get me home without my being seen because it would look funny at the back, you know.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: I remember that to this day. I've told you about it.

BB: Yes.

JB: You know, it was one of those things. But it wasn't because I was Jewish, it was because I was poor.

JE: Yeah, right. (both laughing)

Chapter 12 - 4:10

Concentration Camps

John Erling: Back in the war and the '40s, did your family hear about the concentration camps? Was there talk about that at all?

Jenny Brouse: Yes. We knew about the discrimination in Germany. Don't forget, my family had experienced it in Russia. They had experienced discrimination in Russia.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: Because they were Jewish, no question about it.

Brian Brouse: But Mother, I think what Mr. Erling is focusing in on, your family knew about the prejudice in Germany. Did the family know about the concentration camps? The mass killing of Jews and other “undesirables”?

JB: Uh, as a youngster I wasn’t aware of it that much.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: But my mother and dad took a Jewish newspaper. It was called *Der Tuge, The Day*, I think. It’s still published. My mother didn’t read the newspaper in English, she read this Yiddish newspaper that she got. And the thing about concentration camps was in that. But I don’t remember talking about it as a youngster at school.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: I became very aware of it when I was in college, but it wasn’t generally discussed. I know that my parents talked about it and my brothers knew about it and talked about it. But I was not immersed that much in it.

JE: When Israel became a state—

JB: Yes?

JE: ...in 1948, do you remember that as being a happy time in the life of the Jewish community?

JB: Well, I remember that there was celebration. But my family was Zionist. My father, especially, was very close to a man named Gershon Fenster, who was a very active person in the city of Tulsa. He was married to a Sanderson. Gershon himself was not part of the Sanderson hierarchy but he was married to a Sanderson. He was very much a Zionist, which was pro Israel.

My father was also. But my brothers, for instance, weren’t trying to go to Israel to work or to visit or anything. Today’s kids do that, but in those years they didn’t. My brothers were thrilled to have a job and earn money.

JE: But to have finally a state of Israel and to instill confidence in the Jewish community, there was this country or did any of that come about?

JB: I don’t—I don’t know that, I don’t know that.

BB: Well, certainly with the liberation of Europe and the finding out what happened to the Jews and to other people—

JB: In Germany, oh, yeah.

BB: ...and with refugees not being allowed to go here or there and not being able to go back to their own countries there was a need and a cry for, “Somebody’s got to take us!” That helped to develop Israel. Don’t bring them here, don’t bring them there, go there.

JB: And other countries were frankly glad to see Israel develop because they wouldn’t have to handle the Jews. They wouldn’t have—

BB: Solved their Jewish problem as well.

JE: There is a spirit of the Jewish community which states, “Repair the world.”

BB: *Tikkun olam*. Yes.

JE: What does that mean, “Repair the world”?

JB: It means that we feel an obligation. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Jewish or not, we feel we have an obligation to fix wrongdoing. To help people who are discriminated against. To help people who can’t get jobs, who are not allowed to work. There are some hospitals that wouldn’t allow you. There’s some doctors who wouldn’t treat you.

JE: In Tulsa?

JB: Yes.

BB: *Tikkun olam* means “you shall leave this world better than you found it.” Since just about all of us Jews are immigrants, in fact everyone in America is an immigrant except the American Indian, it’s very challenging to listen to this anti-immigrant conversation. Because I think too many people forget where they came from. They forget that their ancestor’s first language was not English, that somebody had to help them learn the language, to learn the customs of the country they immigrated to.

And I think that’s one of the reasons you’ll find many Jews among other groups who are working to help integrate immigrants into life in the United States.

Chapter 13 - 7:00

To Repair the World

John Erling: Your family was very active in congregation B’nai Emunah?

Brian Brouse: Yes. Both my father and I are past presidents of the congregation. Mother and I are still very active, involved in the congregation both from a ritual point of view, and also from the standpoint—

Jenny Brouse: Financial.

BB: ...of financially and sitting on the board.

JE: So to “repair the world,” does that come out of your Jewish faith? Was that—

JB: It’s part of it.

BB: Yes.

JB: It’s part of it.

JE: Right.

JB: We are taught from kindergarten to give charity. We’re taught to help people in need. I can use the man Zarrow, I’m sure you know what he does, and it’s not just Jewishly. He’s extremely active in these organizations.

I took clothes one time to the—

BB: Homeless.

JB: ...day care center for the homeless. I was parked behind a limousine, and in the limousine was somebody who worked for Henry Zarrow. He had found out that they needed blue jeans. He went to Drysdale's.

BB: Froug's.

JB: He went to three or four places, bought every pair of jeans available in any size and brought them. He must have dropped off, oh, twenty dozen in all sizes. That's the kind of a thing he did. If there was a need and he could do it, he would do it.

JE: Henry Zarrow?

JB: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: And that's the spirit that exists though among the Jewish community.

JB: Yes. We don't think it's odd. We don't question what he's doing because that's what he should do.

JE: Yeah.

JB: He has the means and the time and the help to do it. He can do it, he should do it, and he does.

JE: The influence of the Jewish community is so strong in Tulsa that most Tulsans would be surprised to know how small the population is. We're down 1 or 2 percent of the population, somewhere in there?

JB: It's getting less.

BB: Less than 1 percent.

JE: Less than 1 percent.

JB: It's less, uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: And yet your influence in helping is so enormous. This small band of people, let me say it, has had such a tremendous influence on our city and state too from this small group. It's just amazing, I think.

BB: I would also say that at least for, I think, our family and for our community Tulsa has been good to us. I mean, our family has been here for—

JB: We're grateful.

BB: ...ninety to a hundred years. It's provided—

JB: We're very grateful.

BB: ...an income for us. I am a product, as is my mother, of the Tulsa public school system, as is my sister. We got public educations, which I felt were good. We had good, caring teachers.

I remember we used to go to Florence Park on 21st Street.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BB: We'd go into the wading pool there and use that during the summer. So I remember those

community pools as a cooling off place during the summer. Those are public amenities that the city built for people.

JB: Well, the fact that they can go to a good school. Some places wouldn't let you go to a school, and we could here.

JE: Yeah. Brian, we should state your family and members of your family.

BB: Well, I am single.

JE: Oh, I didn't know that.

BB: Yes, I'm single and so you're looking at my mom, and my sister, Carol, lives in St. Louis with her husband. They have a daughter, Cindy, that lives here. They also have grandchildren and a daughter-in-law who live in Pennsylvania.

JE: Okay.

BB: I grew up in Tulsa with my aunts and uncles and lots of cousins.

JB: Cousins.

JE: Well, this has been very interesting listening to your story. And it was real appropriate here since Brouse's is coming to a close. But you leave a tremendous legacy in our city and both of you certainly can be proud of that.

JB: Well, look how lucky we have been that Tulsa has a decent education system. And Tulsa is not a real big place, it really isn't.

I used to ride the buses. We didn't have a car; I rode the bus everywhere. How lucky was I that there was a bus available?

BB: And I'm a product of the car transportation. I really don't know how to ride that public buses through Tulsa.

JE: Right. (all laughing)

BB: And we just want to thank you, Mr. Erling, in what you've contributed to Tulsa.

JB: Oh, yes.

BB: Particularly your show that you used to have on KRMG was just phenomenal.

JE: Well, thank you.

JB: Just look at the library system.

JE: Yeah.

JB: It's marvelous. I used to go to the library. I took a bus downtown on Saturday morning and I went to the public library. I spent every Saturday at the public library. I didn't have books to read at home. I read them at the library. I took the bus down and the bus back. But that library was there. (laughing)

JE: You know, the more I listen to you, Jenny, you have such an appreciation for those simple things in life that Brian and I can't appreciate because we were never there where you were. So while you had your struggles, you have that appreciation for the beginning.

JB: Just think of the medication that is available to me.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: The hospitals that are available to us.

JE: Jenny, as you look back on your life, we'd like to ask, "How would you like to be remembered as the people will think about you?"

JB: First of all, I would hope that people aren't negative about me. That would be my first hope. Secondly, I guess I would hope that if any kind of a legacy exists, and I'm not so sure that it does, I would hope that it's for the good.

JE: I'm a little surprised you'd end with a negativity. Why couldn't negative be about Jenny Brouse? (laughs)

JB: Well, it doesn't have to be a negative, but it doesn't have to be positive.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: It could be just nothing.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JB: You know.

JE: Brian, you have a comment maybe here about her?

BB: I think Mom is fondly remembered, I mean, many people are coming to the store and thanking us and thanking her for what we've done, not only at the store but we've done the community. And at eighty-seven we're hoping that she lives another thirty years.

JB: It depends.

BB: And maintains her mind and her health. We've had a very good life in Tulsa. We've been very, very fortunate to have been able to do the things we've done. We hope to continue doing many, many more.

JE: Brian, what will you do now when the store closes?

BB: I have not decided yet what I plan to do though I will be doing something. And those things are still up in the air. We have a lot of paperwork left to do and some merchandise left to sell, so it will be a short while before we start doing something else.

JE: Eighty-seven, I keep forgetting that you are eighty-seven. You are so with it, such a beautiful smile.

JB: When I wake up I know my name, that's the important thing. (her and JE laughing)

JE: Well, got to say Shalom.

JB: Shalom.

BB: Shalom.

JB: Thank you very much for your courtesy and kindness. It's very nice to be asked to participate in this situation.

JE: Well, it's my pleasure and it's an honor to have you as part of this website that will be listened to by generations to come.

JB: Well—

JE: Thanks to both of you, Brian and Jenny.

BB: Thank you very much.

JB: And be well.

JE: Be well. Thank you so much.

Chapter 14 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on VoicesofOklahoma.com.