

JOSEPHSON

Bridgeport Public Library, Historical Collections
Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century.
Elizabeth Josephson interviewed by Julie Jutkiewicz, November 16, 1997

I Hi. My name is Julie Jutkiewicz, and I'm interviewing Elizabeth Josephson, for the Bridgeport Public Library Oral History Project. How are you doing today?

EJ I'm good. I'm fine.

I I'm going to start off wondering where and when you were born.

EJ I was born in Bridgeport, right in the city.

I And when were you born?

EJ 1908.

I What was your home like when you were younger?

EJ A mother, a father, five children.

I Oh!

EJ Five of us.

I Can you tell me a little bit about your family. Five children -- were there boys and girls?

EJ Three girls and two boys. My father came from Romania and my mother came from Russia.

I What were your parents' occupations? Did they work?

EJ My father was an entrepreneur with all kinds of businesses. We had a grocery store and an ice cream parlor, so I learned how to take care of customers.

I How old were you when your family owned the grocery store and the ice cream parlor?

EJ The earliest I can remember.

I Really?

EJ Yes.

I What do you remember about those businesses?

EJ Serving the customers, filling the ice cream cones.

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- I** [laughs] That was the main priority.
- EJ** Yes. Shopping with my mother, learning how to get the goods through the store.
- I** You got some good exposure at an early age.
- EJ** Yes. We were all trained that way.
- I** In your understanding, why did your parents immigrate to America?
- EJ** Because -- the Russian end of it -- was because of the “Pogromme” -- the Pogroms.
- I** Could you explain that a little bit to me?
- EJ** Jewish people were persecuted when they came over, way back then.
- I** And why do you think they settled in Bridgeport?
- EJ** My father always said he was a Yankee, and liked Branford, Connecticut. [laughs]
- I** [laughs] Sounds like a good enough reason as any. [laughs] Do you remember what it was like growing up in Bridgeport?
- EJ** We lived across from Beardsley Park, and that was a great asset because on the way to Nichols, we had ice skating, we had snow sledding.
- I** Oh. Lots of winter activities.
- EJ** Lots of winter activities.
- I** So that was a big part of your growing up?
- EJ** Yes. We were the end of the line. We had to walk to the trolley car to go to school. That’s where the town trolleys were -- ended - the trolleys ended up on Noble Avenue.
- I** So you took the trolley to school?
- EJ** Yes.
- I** What was school like? What was your education like?
- EJ** I went to Barnum School up until the eighth grade, and then we had to transfer to Central, and then to Harding.
- I** And Central and Harding are the high schools, right?
- EJ** Yes.

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- I** Do you remember what the classrooms were like and what the education was like?
- EJ** The education was very good then. I took a college course, because I intended to go to college, but in later on years, we couldn't afford it.
- I** You said you took college courses to prepare you for college. Was that usual? Did a lot of your girlfriends and other people take those courses?
- EJ** No. We went to Business College. After high school we went to Business College.
- I** That's what most girls did?
- EJ** Most girls went to college.
- I** Did you notice any difference between the educations between you and your sisters and your brothers?
- EJ** Oh, I considered our educations always good.
- I** Really?
- EJ** Yes.
- I** I know there was a big influx of population into Bridgeport during World War I. There was a lot of growth in the city. Did you notice how that effected the classrooms at all? I'm sure you were very young then.
- EJ** I don't remember.
- I** What types of social activities were popular in Bridgeport?
- EJ** Always riding and dancing. Very, very teenage activities.
- I** What were your favorites to participate in?
- EJ** Dancing, I guess.
- I** Are you a good dancer?
- EJ** Well, in the ice cream parlor, we had this jukebox in the back, so we always taught each other dancing.
- I** That sounds like fun. [laughs]
- EJ** A lot of fun.
- I** Were there any particular social organizations or ethnic organizations that were

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popular?

EJ Not that I remember.

I Not that you remember?

EJ No.

I So you didn't belong to any clubs or anything like that?

EJ Later on in the years, after school. After education.

I Oh, really?

EJ Yes.

I Did you want to talk about those at all?

EJ Well, like now, I still belong to Haddassah -- things like that.

I What is it?

EJ Haddassah -- a Jewish organization.

I What does that consist of? What do you do for that organization?

EJ Well, it helps everybody to understand each other.

I That's important. [laughs]

EJ That's right.

I Very important. Did religion play a role in your family or your community?

EJ We were ultra-religious, but we learned it all about those---where we lived was a lot of Irish people, and we understood all their problems. We understood the Catholic religion, as well as our own.

I Did you have any duties outside of school, like work or chores?

EJ Taking care of the store, until I went to work for a company.

I Why don't you tell me a little bit about your first full-time job and how you got it.

EJ First full-time job came because of my uncle, who owned the Josephson Bag and Canvas Company, with another partner. I took my first job after going to Business College. I studied shorthand and typing, and was the world's worst. [laughs]

I [laughs] I don't believe that.

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EJ Well, I only went for three months to business college.

I And then?

EJ And then I became a bookkeeper, and eventually, after the death of my uncle and his partner, I became the owner.

I Oh. Around what time was that?

EJ This was incorporated in 1922. I came in 1927.

I And you worked as the bookkeeper?

EJ I became the owner and the president and lasted sixty-five years.

I Wow! Wow!

EJ Until I retired.

I Around what time did you become the owner and president?

EJ Around 1968.

I Let's talk a little bit about your first job, when you started as a bookkeeper. What was your reason for entering the workforce, for starting to work?

EJ Reason? Financial reasons. A father who is an entrepreneur, who changed many businesses. We all had to learn how to earn a living.

I How did you feel about your first job?

EJ It was very exciting because it was new and you had a challenge.

I Were there other secretaries or other bookkeepers in your office?

EJ No, I was the only one at the time.

I So you were keeping all [unclear] [the records?].

EJ I learned all -- from the bottom, up.

I What type of work was done at your factory -- ah, Josephson?

EJ Manufacturing canvas products. Originally it was coal bags. Then coal went out -- oil came in. So custom shop -- we did everything else. Made an awning, made a truck cover, a boat cover, welding curtain. You name it -- we made it for the factories.

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- I** It sounds like it was diverse.
- EJ** Very diverse.
- I** Do you remember what the policies were like, regarding things like vacation time or insurance or sick benefits?
- EJ** We didn't have any benefits at the time. We had to pay regular wages -- fair wages.
- I** So how did people generally feel about the salaries?
- EJ** Well, everybody was more or less content. They lasted many years.
- I** Do you recall any strikes or lock-outs?
- EJ** No, we had no strikes or anything like that.
- I** None?
- EJ** No. It was a very small company.
- I** I'm sorry. That's something I didn't ask you about.
- EJ** Yes. A very small company -- not a large company.
- I** I was reading an article, and I noticed that the company relocated from the East End to the South End. Do you know the reason for that?
- EJ** I came to Main Street -- it started before that on Seaview Avenue.
- I** Okay.
- EJ** That was a couple years before, when it was incorporated.
- I** And then it moved to Main Street, which is on the South End? Is that correct?
- EJ** Yes. Jill Jim _____, the new owner.
- I** What was the difference between the two neighborhoods?
- EJ** I was too young to know.
- I** Really?
- EJ** I came to Main Street -- I didn't know the Seaview Avenue.
- I** Oh, you never knew the Seaview Avenue?
- EJ** No. I knew it was over near City's Lumber, over near there.
- I** How did you notice the effects of World War II in the workplace?

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- EJ** We had to work with the government – made some products for the government.
- I** Like what types of products? Do you remember?
- EJ** What are they called? Navy cots -- like that.
- I** So you noticed a difference, then, in the type of --
- EJ** Oh, yes. We were very busy. All the companies -- Bridgeport Brass and Remington Arms -- we made products for them.
- I** Did you have a lot of women in the workforce -- in the factory?
- EJ** Women sellers and men -- both.
- I** Both?
- EJ** Yes.
- I** How were the women in the workforce? How did they seem to be viewed and treated?
- EJ** Equally. There was no discrimination.
- I** Could you guess when you started working, about what percentage of the workforce was women?
- EJ** Maybe ten percent.
- I** Okay. So it was a small percentage, when you first started.
- EJ** Yes.
- I** Did you see that change at all over the years?
- EJ** No, because it was a relatively small company.
- I** So it's fairly constant?
- EJ** Yes, fairly constant.
- I** What types of jobs did women perform at the factory?
- EJ** Mostly just sewers.
- I** Did the jobs change at all over time?
- EJ** No, the same exact. After the war, we made more costume products, like boat covers and truck covers, and things like that.

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I Did women take on any different roles in wartime, when the factory was gearing up for wartime products?

EJ I guess they all knitted or something on the side.

I So pretty much the same all along?

EJ Yes.

I How many did you notice in the unions in the workplace?

EJ They had no unions. If I knew I had a union, I shut the shop.

I Oh! [laughs]

EJ I couldn't understand after we were told what to do.

I So what were you --?

EJ My aim was to give work to people and teach them right and treat them right.

Otherwise, I didn't see any reason for any union.

I So you saw no reason --

EJ It was so small, anyhow. That was one of the reasons.

I Yes.

EJ It was never approached.

I Right. So none of the workers ever tried to organize one?

EJ No, they never tried to organize one.

I And you wouldn't have --

EJ Well, as happy as they were -- they were happy to have a job. I was glad to give work to people.

I Yes, yes. That's what it sounds like. [Tape Off/On] What was the work- week like? How many hours did people work?

EJ Oh, forty hours -- time-and-a-half for over forty.

I Oh, okay. Did many of the female workers that were at the factories -- did many of them have husbands and children?

EJ I remember, I remember mostly all of them -- were -- married and children. All the

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women included.

I Do you know how they dealt with child care issues?

EJ We didn't seem to have any problem with child care. Not at the time.

I How would you explain your move into your managerial position, and compare how it was different from --

EJ Well, after a while, my uncle separated from the partner, and the partner eventually died, and he had to turn over the business, and I inherited the business that way.

I How were you prepared for it?

EJ I was always interested in the customers and interested in the product. I learned from the beginning. I was always in the shop, learning how they sewed the product or what kind of thread they had to use, how the thing was made. I had to make sure I had people I could delegate work to.

I That's true. So you had been learning.

EJ I didn't know how to sew myself. So I had people who knew more than I did.

I [laughs] How did your employees respond to you, once you moved into your managerial position?

EJ They all accepted it, except some of the men. They were always a little bit jealous.

I Really?

EJ Really.

I Did you have any stories -- anything in particular?

EJ Well, they always thought they knew more than I did, which they actually did in the sewing end of it. But not in the managerial -- they didn't know how to manage. They didn't understand the [unclear] business, how time meant money.

I So did you have a hard time holding your ground?

EJ No. I just went along with the tide. [laughs]

I [laughs] Sounds like the smart thing to do.

EJ Well, you couldn't fight City Hall, like they always used to say. You had to pull the

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punches.

I What was the composition, as far as immigrants of the workforce, when you started working? Did you notice?

EJ [Josephson clarifies interviewer's use of the word "competition" vs. "composition"]

I The make-up of different ethnic groups.

EJ Oh, we had minorities and people born in this country. Minorities and both.

I Did it change at all over time -- the different groups that were working there?

EJ No, we always had blacks and Puerto Ricans. All ethnic groups, along with Americans.

I How did the different ethnic groups seem to relate to one another?

EJ We didn't have any problems.

I You said you didn't observe any competition -- like along ethnic lines?

EJ Not along ethnic lines. We never had any trouble.

I Competition in other ways?

EJ Only competition in the business sense.

I Right. [laughs] Of course. You said there were no unions at the factory?

EJ No.

I Do you know how your family got involved in business?

EJ Well, my uncle, when he came over, was a harness maker, so that's how he's used to the selling end of --

I For horses?

EJ Yes. So he knew about selling. That's how he started.

I Do you know of any specific obstacles that your family had to overcome to get started --?

EJ Only learning the hard way? They didn't have any problems. They were hard workers.

I Do you think in any way that the struggles of your family being immigrants and

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coming to America and starting a business -- do you think that desensitized you to [oh, go ahead]?

EJ A man who becomes over and has 5 children -- they have to work hard to keep the family together. There was no problem. There had to work and they had to use their brain.

I Do you think that helped them sympathize with other immigrants who were coming over and working at Josephson's?

EJ First of all, they knew they had to learn English and willing to work hard -- my father said -- he took a job as an ice man to begin with. He had to learn how to box because they were all Irish and he was Jewish, so he had to learn how to box. He finally became a foreman. He worked for the Southern New England Company.

I What do you mean he had to use how to box? Like boxing, the sport?

EJ Yes. Because they all put him down.

I Oh. So he had to defend himself.

EJ Yes. He had to be strong. His mother and father came over from Romania and they had a little store on Pembroke Street. He was an engineer at the time. So they all know they had to make a living to help each other.

I What was your living situation like as a young adult, and then continuing into adulthood?

EJ Well, one sister was an artist. One of the other children in the family -- there was always competition. They all helped each other.

I Were you the only member of your family who got involved with the Bag Company?

EJ Yes. I was the only one. My sister became mentally ill many years later. She worked for a newspaper.

I How about your brothers?

EJ My brother got married and went out of town. He was in the insurance business.

I Were you the only member of your family who stayed in the Bridgeport area?

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EJ I was the only one that stayed, except a married sister.

I Is there anything you wanted to share about your personal life outside the workplace?

EJ I know they had to work – you had to work hard and (I) didn't mind it.

I Did you do much else, like during your adult life. Were you involved in much else besides -- I'm sure work took up a lot of your time, but did you have time for other things?

EJ We always had friends and we always had parties. We always went to shows. We all went to movies.

I Oh.

EJ There were always activities in the winter. And we were at the end of the line, so that we always had a lot of parties.

I You mentioned that -- was it your mother or your father who had immigrated from Russia?

EJ My mother immigrated from Russia.

I Did you notice -- I guess it would be called the second red scare, like McCarthyism. Did you notice any discrimination because you were Russian?

EJ No, there was no discrimination at that time.

I During the time of the Great Depression, do you remember anything specific about what commissions were like in Bridgeport during that era.

EJ All I know is that you survived it. I don't remember too much about it. I know that everybody had a pull in their tummies.

I How about Bridgeport after World War II?

EJ After many years, they were all in the Brass Company or Remington Arms. It was only later in the years that everything changed and all the factories failed -- went out - - one after the other. Bridgeport went slowly down hill -- because everything was manufactured in Bridgeport at one time.

I Really?

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EJ We had great factories -- Bridgeport Brass, Remington Arms.

I What do you think it was about Josephson's Bag Company that made it survive so much longer than the rest of them?

EJ In other words, we went from coal bags to tote bags. Tote bags were always needed -- even today -- besides the ones that L.L. Bean makes. So it was needed for school, it was needed for hospitals, and it was needed in all different directions. So it lasted and I was able to sell it in the end. So it's still going strong.

I Yes. It sounds like it is. I noticed that you brought out from The Fairfield Citizen News for me. It's from Wednesday, September 30, 1987, and the title is: "Perseverance is Key to Seventy-Nine-Year-Old Success. Did you want to tell me a little bit about this article?"

EJ The bags now are made for all kinds of advertising and for silk screening for hotels and schools, for colleges, for Reader's Digest -- or any kind of organization. Everybody needs a tote bag to carry.

I [laughs]

EJ Especially, especially Julie here, you even carried one.

I That's true. I brought my tape recorder and equipment in a tote bag. [laughs]

EJ That's right.

I So they were versatile.

EJ And this is you pictured down here with the tote bag.

I That's the picture of me with the largest one we made.

EJ Was there anything else that you wanted to tell us? Maybe some questions that I didn't even think to ask, or anything that you wanted to talk about?

I No, I think you did very well.

EJ Well, thank you very much.

I You're welcome.

End of Interview