

Bessie Maas (Mashinka) Rothstein

Interviewed by JCRS Executive Director Ned Goldberg

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Seven Acres Senior Center, Houston, TX

Transcribed by Theresa DuBois; Edited for clarity and length by Marlene Trestman



Figure 1. Bessie Mashinka Rothstein

NG: Okay. We're here today with Bessie Rothstein. And, Bessie you're how old?

BMR: Eighty-seven.

NG: You lived at the Jewish Children's Home for how many years?

BMR: I was thirteen years in the home.

NG: With how many brothers and sisters?

BMR: Six of us.

NG: Six of your seven siblings. And today's date is August 28, 2003, I am in Houston, Texas, at Seven Acres Living Center. And right now Bessie is going to tell us about the circumstances that led to her and five of her six siblings, how they went into the home, and some of the things that happened in the home, and some of the things that led to her leaving, and some of the things that she did right after she got out.

BMR: I was four years old when I went in the home. And, I don't remember my mother at all. And, really didn't know my father as well, because I was there thirteen years and he only came up one time to see us at the home. So it felt like I didn't have any parents but, I went in the home 1920 (giggles) but I always brag about being in the home. Very proud to be there, and loved it, and I mean where else can you go where you have a hundred sisters and brothers in the home? That's the way we felt. And, the home took very good care of us physically and otherwise, the schooling and whatever else.

NG: Where was your family living prior to the death of one of your parents before you went into the home?

BMR: We were all born here in Houston, Texas. And, I don't remember anything about being here in Houston. I don't remember at all. The reason we went to the home is because our daddy couldn't take care of seven children, so we were fortunate to go to the home. And, I have my lovely daughter here, Debbie [Wizig], and have a son, and my daughter is always bragging about loving to hear stories I've told of the home.

NG: You were four years old. And you were how old when you left?

BMR: Sixteen or seventeen. And, that was very difficult, coming out of the home, because we were so sheltered in the home and everything was done for us. And, when we came out had to be on our own, and that was very difficult.

NG: Where did you go to school in New Orleans?

BMR: Isidore Newman High School (giggles).

NG: Starting from what grade or year, do you remember?

BMR: Right from kindergarten on up. My children always consider all of the other kids that were in the home with me, as their aunts and uncles (giggles), but it was a wonderful place, it really was and we were just very happy to be there.

NG: Can you think of your fondest memories of being there? Things you did with your brother and sisters?

BMR: They are older than me. And, the funniest thing is we didn't really communicate with them very much, because they had us by age, and they were older, so they lived in another part of the dormitory. And, but we did get together eating at the dining room, they tried to put families together in the dining room. And, we just loved going back for reunions, and this is very funny, we were all waiting to see who was coming and, "Who's that? Who's that?" you know, and so that was really nice. And, I started to tell you that we went to camp every year, and that was real nice. And, we also took dancing lessons and piano lessons, and some of the kids played musical instruments. I was one of them that took dancing lessons with my twin sister, and a few others, and we really enjoyed doing that. And, they took just so good care of us. When I came here, I joined the B'nai B'rith women. The main reason I joined it, because I remember the B'nai B'rith men came to

the home, they'd give us a picnic every year, and I remembered what they did for the home. I can't brag enough about being there in the home.

NG: Joe Samuels mentioned about going downtown, and getting clothes from the department stores.

BMR: Yes, yes, some of the stores, you know we'd go down, and they would pick out the clothes we were to wear.

NG: I think he mentioned Krauss being one of the stores.

BMR: Could have been, yes. And, they picked out our shoes and our clothes, and everything, and they'd try to dress my twin and I alike, but we – our clothes were alike, but I wore blue all the time, and she wore a different color. While we were there in the home, they'd send out The Golden City Messenger, and every time they'd want to take pictures they'd say, "Go get the twins, go get the twins." So we were always in the pictures, because we were the only twin girls. And there were about two or three sets of twin boys. And, we didn't really get to go out a lot on our own. Everybody always says, "Oh you were in New Orleans, you must have gone to the good restaurants and everything." I said, "No we didn't." At Mardi Gras time, they'd have us separated at in some yard or whatever, with the fence around, and make sure nobody got away, but they knew that we were from the home, and when they would throw out the beads and everything, they'd throw a lot of them over our way.

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BMR: We did go on hayrides. That was fun. And, we just were one big family really. And, we have to really thank Joe Samuels and his wife [Jeanne], because he was the one that kept up with the home kids and took care of reunions that we had. We had quite a few up here in Houston, and they were always at Joe and Jeanne's house.

NG: How many of you came to the reunions?

BMR: We had quite a few people that came from out of town, so many of them lived in California, New York, Alabama, whatever. But the thing was, we lost track of the girls because we all got married, and they didn't know their married names. So, but Jean [Segal] Avegno, I'm sure you'd remember her, she kept up with the kids and she was able to get the names of the most of them.

NG: So, as you approached your sixteenth birthday, how were decisions made for you to leave the Home?

BMR: When we got out of the home, we still had to be under the care of the Jewish Family Service, because now I had this one aunt and uncle here, they had seven children, so they couldn't take us all, you know. We all didn't come out at one time, and so we did – so they had to take care of us, where to live and everything.

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BMR: We also did a program every year at the Athenaeum Theater, close by Lee Circle. But we always put on shows. All the kids in the home, and

people came you know. And, so that was nice. I remember every year at Christmastime we did a show, trying to think of the name now, I was a flower girl. And, so we just did so many other things, and they'd bring movies to the home so we could see movies, and there was a piano, and a woman would come and entertain us on the piano. And, we also danced, did ballroom dancing, girls and boys together. And it was very hard leaving all of this – leaving behind all of the children that still were left in the home, you know. But, there's so much more I could talk about – slipping my mind.

NG: At what age did you join the Army?

BMR: Well, that was quite a few years after we got out of the home (NG moves camera to show pictures on a nearby table)



Figure 1- Photos on table filmed by NG.

And that was in -- let's see the War was in '42? And we joined in just about the 2nd year of the War or something. Well here, in Houston we got so excited too, "Twins were joining the Army." We were famous. And, they came to get pictures. I was stationed in New York. They had said, "No you're not going to be separated." But they sent my twin sister to Alamogordo [NM], and sent me to New York. They said, "If

you want to get back together, you'll have to talk to your commanding officer." So we did, and I could have gone to Alamogordo, or she could come to New York. And, it so she came to New York where I was. And, we volunteered to go overseas, because you don't get a choice where you're going, but we were fortunate – we went to Berlin, Germany, right after the War was over in Europe, and that was a good experience. We were there about eight months overseas. And what was so wonderful about the home, and there were so many girls and boys, so when we joined the Army, that was fine with us because we were used to that kind of living. But most of the WACs thought it was going to be glamorous, you know, and they couldn't take that kind of life. And, then we went into the regular Army, we were in the WACs first. And then they said, "Any of the WACs that wanted to get out of the Army they have to do it now." A lot of them got out, of course, we stayed. We had to back into the regular Army, and that was okay. And now, being here at Seven Acres, I was used to living with a lot of people, and so that was okay.

I didn't get married until quite a few years after I had gotten out of the service, and then when we did get married, everybody would say to my husband, "Where were you in the Army? Where were you stationed?" (Laughter) And he'd say, "I wasn't in the Army, you'll have to talk to my wife. She saved the country." But anyhow, I have two wonderful children, and granddaughter and all, but anyhow, I like Houston and

like I said, I don't remember anything about Houston before going into the home. I don't remember riding the train to the home or whatever it was, but I think there were a hundred or so children when I was in the home. And we had good times together, we'd gab and talk, the girls and boys.

NG: What do you remember about the building other than the fact that the girls and boys were separated?

BMR: Well, we were separated. We had a big courtyard in the center, and they had a building on one side where the boys slept, and on the other side of the building were just the girls. And, because I remember Mr. [Harry] Ginsburg being there as the director.

NG: What do you remember about the school?

BMR: The school. It was a wonderful school too. It was like Kincade here – a private school. And, the classes we were in, most of the students there they knew we were from the home, and they would always ask us about it and all, but, it was very, very good. And, we made good friends with a lot of them at the home.

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We couldn't all go to one synagogue or temple – too many of us – so they divided us up. And I went to Temple Sinai. But, you know they tried to have a teacher that would come to try to teach us a little Hebrew, and none of us liked taking Hebrew. And oh, some of the boys were terrible with the teacher. He didn't stay too long.

NG: If your brother or sisters were here today, what do you think they would say were some of their fondest memories?

BMR: I would imagine they'd have the same memories that I had. Especially my sisters, and my one brother. But, we just had lots of fun there. I always brag about being there. When people would ask me where I was born, I'd say, "Well I was born in Houston, but I was raised in the Jewish Children's Home in New Orleans." And, you know a lot of people would say, "You were raised in the home." They thought it was the worst thing that could happen, but we were very content in there, and very happy there. Now they didn't send me and my twin out at the same time. She came out of the home about three months later than I did.

NG: Tell me a little bit more about when you left at sixteen.

BMR: Well, I did stay with my aunt and uncle for a while. But, like I said, they couldn't take all of us, they had seven children of their own. And, so my daddy was still living, it was agreed that you'll have to go live with your daddy. And, we didn't know that he had remarried, and had three more children. They live here in – we're friendly with them, they were half-sisters, but we were friendly with them. And, but then after that, first the Jewish Family Service were trying to find places for us to live you know, and again my twin sister and I were separated, and then we got together. And then we went on our own, and worked different places for a while until we got settled. And, when I came back [from the Army],

I was reading the Jewish Herald Voice, and they had an ad in the paper for Temple Emanu-El, they needed an office clerk. So, I answered the ad, and they took me in, and I worked there at least thirty years. And, that was very good – it was a reform and my kids went there to Sunday school, and they got confirmed there and all. When I got married, Rabbi Kahn married us, and he knew I didn't have any family, and the congregation was very nice to me. They gave me my whole wedding, reception, and everything. They took care of everything. And, Rabbi Cahn said, "Bessie, if I wasn't marrying you I would have been happy to have given you away." And I thought that was something, for the Rabbi to say. I used to babysit for his kids when they were little.

NG: It sounds like you worked there more than thirty years, at Emanu-El.

Debbie Wizig: Yes, forty years. And I'm glad you said how the Temple gave you the reception, which was in the library you know.

BMR: Well, I got married in the library. But Feld Hall we had a big reception. And I couldn't get over that and I wrote a letter. I said, "Knowing that I didn't have a family to do for me, and I said that I have 750 families here at the Temple."

NG: You were working there when I started my job fifteen years ago.

BMR: Oh really?

NG: Yes, I met you there.

BMR: Oh you did.

NG: I went to see Rabbi Walter one day and he says, "Well, Bessie Rothstein, who grew up in the home works here. Come on down the hall." And I met you. That was well – I've been here fifteen years, so do you remember how many years ago she retired?

Debbie: I think they did it when you were about 75 or 76 or 77.

BMR: Even after they retired me – I didn't retire. I went back and did volunteer work, and still went back to the Temple there. And, worked at the Sunday school office a long time. And, so I hated to leave there, but I always call that my second home. But, I made a lot of friends. And, made a lot of friends in B'nai B'rith Women and with the Temple. So I really had a wonderful life I had. I never envied anybody -- what they had, and what they did and all. And, I was just -- did what I could do.

NG: And, you have how many children and grandchildren?

BMR: Two children. And a granddaughter and a grandson. My son lives in Florida .

NG: Did most of your brothers and sisters marry?

BMR: My twin [and my brother] never married.

NG: How many nieces and nephews did you have from people who were in the home?

Debbie: A million.

NG: A lot.

Debbie: Yes.

NG: A lot.

Debbie: That's why I was so lucky to have so many cousins. Including Joe Samuel's children, who are all my cousins.

BMR: But, I keep in touch with Joe. He keeps in touch with me.

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Now at the last reunion we had in the home, someone arranged to get as many as they could, because they were going to do away with the home, you know. And, so, I hadn't seen quite a few of them in maybe twenty years since I left the home. And, it was just great to just see them. And Mrs. [Edith] Lashman was there. Now, talking about Mrs. Lashman, when we were over in Germany, I think we read in the paper that the Army put out, that Sonny Lashman, we called him Sonny, was in a wreck or something, and he was in the hospital there. We made arrangements to see him. He was little [when we were in the Home], so he didn't know who we were, but we told him how we knew his mother and father, and so we did get to see him which was good. So then we had a reunion in the home, we saw Mrs. Lashman. When we told her that we saw her son, she just couldn't get over it. And, every time we would go around, she'd introduce us to someone, "They saw my son." And it was really was something for her to do that. But, we'd look like you know, "Who's that? Who's that?" and then we knew who they were, and oh my gosh. So there was hugging, kissing, and everything with them all, but it was great. I know the last year they had

the reunion in the home, they tried to contact all of the help that was there, you know. That was good to see them, the cooks and all that, you know. But I started to say that everybody when you say, I think I already told you, when you say you were in the home, they thought it was the worst thing that could happen; that the home was not a good home, and all that kind of stuff. But, they just didn't know what it was. And I'm thankful that we were able to go there.

NG: [To Debbie] Do you want to ask a couple of questions?

Debbie: You told me an interesting story when you all had to do something.

BMR: The step-mother did not understand our situation, and my daddy had a grocery store, and he was a shoemaker. And, we'd go to the grocery store to want to get something you know. And, oh, she fussed about that, "No you got to get out and work for it and all." And she just didn't our situation – well we didn't stay there very long. And, but her three children were younger, much younger than we were. Well, they were twelve or something. And, so we didn't communicate very well until we were older.

Debbie: I didn't want to bring up bad memories about the step-mother, I just meant it was interesting that for us to hear as children, not growing up in the depression, that if you have a nickel for the whole day, and the decision that you have to make with what to do with it.

NG: Well, do you have any other memories of New Orleans.?

BMR: We had [Big Sisters] – you know some of the women they would come up to the home to see us, or they would come and take us for a ride. Take us to the drug store and get us an ice cream soda. But as far as New Orleans, since we didn't get out too long or anything, all I remember that they took us to a movie, which was the first talkie with Harold Joseph (ph), and we all went to that movie theater to see that show. We went to Audubon Park a lot. And go swimming there and then, we'd go to City Park, where they had concessions and rides and all that. Well that was the first time I got on a roller coaster. And oh my gosh – I said, "That's the last time I'm going to get on a roller coaster." Everybody was screaming on that. But anyhow.

Debbie: I think they were the smartest group of people I've ever met. Every single one of them that came out of the home. You all are just the smartest group of people. Every single one of you. And, you are all leaders in the community.

NG: Let me stop and I'm going to – (NG: stops tape and resets with Bessie's daughter in camera, continues the interview but with Debbie, Bessie's daughter).

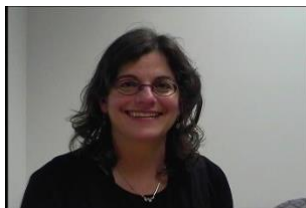


Figure 2 Debbie Wizig,
daughter of Bessie Rothstein.

Okay this is Debbie Wizig, daughter of Bessie Rothstein, who wants to say a few words about the alumni, her aunts, her uncle, her aunts and all of the adopted aunts and uncles that she had, who were her mother's colleagues at the Jewish Children's Home.

Debbie: Yes, I did consider them all of my real aunts and uncles, every single one of them. And I think they are the smartest group of people that I've ever met – all of them that came out of the home. And, they've all been leaders in the community, or in any business that they did, or any service organization. They've taught me a whole lot about that. And, I try to use all of the things that they've taught me when I teach my young children in the Jewish Day School that I teach. And each of the men, and the women, to me, are the greatest role models for anyone. And, I am so blessed to know them and have them as part of my family forever.

BMR: When I talk to people and tell them I was raised in the home, they say, "They certainly did a good job with all of you coming out of the home, and being active in everything." And, I feel that way, that they did do a lot for us.

NG: Thank you.