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The University of Houston

Interviewee: Ann Blum

Interviewer: Shannon Sheena

October 26, 2004

Houston, Texas



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Sheena: Today is Tuesday, October 26, 2004. I am at 5203 Braes Valley which is the home of Ann and Morris Blum.

Blum: My name is Ann Blum. I was originally born Chana Wachsberg. I was born in Chrzanow, Poland. I grew up with two wonderful parents and three brothers that were older than myself. I was the youngest of the four children. Before the war, my father was a painting contractor, and we lived a very nice middle class life until 1939. Then the war broke out. The Germans invaded Poland.

Should I talk more about my life in Poland?

Sheena: You can talk about your childhood or . . .

Blum: Well, I was just a child when the war broke out and all of us children were going to school.

Sheena: Do you remember how old you were?

Blum: Yes, I was about eight or nine, I don't remember. We had beautiful holidays together and life was good. As a matter of fact, very good. I was the youngest and the only girl, like a princess in our household.

After the war started, not too long afterwards, of course, they went right away after the Jewish people. The first thing they closed was the Jewish Businesses, and the Jewish children were not allowed to go to school anymore. So I managed to finish seventh grade and that was all the schooling I had in Poland.

And about one or two years later, I don't remember what year, the Germans decided to make a ghetto in our town so all the Jewish people which were about maybe ten or fifteen thousand were put in this one or two streets. Of course we had to give up our house but we were allowed to keep one room. One room for our family, and I forgot to tell you before that the ghetto they were already taking people to the camps. They took two of my brothers, the two youngest ones, Sal and David, to the labor camps so they were not in the ghetto.

By the time I was 12, I already worked in the ghetto. I worked twelve hours a day, one week the night shift, one week the day shift. They made factories out of the synagogues. They were just down the street from us, so we walked over there and sewed buttons for the German uniforms.

My mother was working there too sewing the uniforms, and sometimes when she was sick or I was sick, we would cover for each other. Sometimes I worked 24 hours or maybe 48 hours, and that was without food or sleep. Food was very scarce, everything was rationed. We were sort of lucky, my father had painting

experience. He was able to get out of the ghetto and take my older brother. They were working for the Germans outside of the ghetto and they were able to sometimes sneak in a little bit of food.

I, being a child at that time, didn't understand the danger of everything that was going on around me. My parents evidently knew and since I was only 12 years old, it started when I was 10 years old, they constantly made me 2 years older. They understood that at my age I didn't have a chance of survival, because you had to be at least 16 years old to qualify for any kind of work. So they always taught me when I was 12 that I was 14, and when I was 13 that I was 15, and when I was 14 I was 16. They drilled it in my head and I used to protest, I am just 12, and they would always say no-no you are 14 or 16. They tried to make me say I was 16, so for a few years I was 16 years old. It finally worked and that was the life of the ghetto. It was very, very hard and in between, there were raids. The reason we survived another 2 years, my family that was left, is all because during the raids my father used to hide us and also some of our neighbors.

Then one morning, February 18, 1943, we didn't know that this was the end of our lives as we knew it, but we soon found out that this was the final solution of the Jewish people of Chrzanow the town where I lived. I later found out after the war that it was the final solution of the Jewish people of all Poland. One morning on February 18, 1943, the Nazis took all Jewish people to the square. In the square,

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they divided the young people and the older people. My mother was only 42 years old, a beautiful woman. My father was a little older so they put them on another side. When they came to me and asked me how old I was, I was just one month short of my 14th birthday, I told them I was 16, and that is why I survived. My parents insisted on me being 16 forever. They actually saved my life.

I was put to work and from then on it would take too much time to you what I did from that time until the war ended. That was the last time I saw my parents.

From then on until May 9, 1945, I was in 4 or 5 hard labor camps. It would take hours to describe everything that I did and how I survived. I would be like working below zero without shoes and uniforms and all these camps it would take too much time, it would take up the whole book.

Sheena: How did you meet your husband?

Blum: After the war we all went back to Chrzanow hoping to find my parents and my brothers. I did find two of my brothers and of course my parents perished in Auschwitz. From then on without any money or any belongings, my brothers and I traveled and smuggled through borders and trains until we reached the American side of Europe which was in Marktredwitz, Bavaria.

I met my husband in Germany where we found out that there were a few Jewish

survivors there. We felt we would stay a few days. After that we stayed a few years, hard years. I met my husband Morris because he was my oldest brother's friend. My brother introduced me to him as his little sister, and that's where it all started.

In 1948 or the beginning of 1949, Morris and his brother Lee received papers from his uncle Louis Blum from Tennessee to immigrate to the United States and at the time there was in our minds either you go or never get out of Germany. So he and his brother left for the United States. My brothers and I planned to go to Israel.

I thought I would never see him again. As fate wanted it, my brothers and I also immigrated to the United States. We didn't have any relatives or friends we knew. We didn't speak the English language. We arrived on a freight ship, *General House*, in New York on Halloween day in 1949. The next day we were sent to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where we were supposed to have started our new life. After the first day, they put us someplace and we had a case worker and this is where our lives began in the States. Our case worker first changed my name from Chana to Ann. She thought I wasn't going to get anywhere with the Chana.

It is a popular name now.

So she changes my name to Ann. I was given \$15 and so was my brothers. Now we were armed with \$15 in our hands and no knowledge of the language. We had two days to find a place to live on our own. We never saw the case worker again, or help again. After a day of looking, we found a one or two rooms place in an attic of an apartment and in the next two days we found a job.

I found a job in a bakery for 50 cents an hour, even everybody else made the minimum wage at 75 cents but they treated me like a refugee. So I was cheap labor. I did everything from selling bread to cleaning the cases and washing the floors. The after about one week, I enrolled in night school. And every night from work I went to school to learn English and the American way of life. The best teacher was the mean woman that I worked for. Why do you think? She was my best teacher because for the rest of my life until now, she taught me how not to treat people. I learned to treat people with a heart. After a while I learned some English and managed to get a very nice job downtown, which for me was a big deal, in a linen store.

I was looking for a better boss that would treat me with respect and kindness and I found it. I managed to make more money than anybody else in that store. I realized it was because I worked the hardest. I was the first one on the job and the last to leave. I did so well in that store, after a while, I was managing the store.

My boss would leave for half a day and leave me in charge of the cash register,

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which was unheard of at the time. I was too young to understand why. This gave me a taste of the business world.

Sheena: How long did you stay in Pittsburgh?

Blum: I stayed in Pittsburgh until my boyfriend Morris found me.

Sheena: Were you writing to him?

Blum: Of course, we stayed in touch. He found out where I was through my cousins in New York. So this is another story and would take pages to tell this love story. After all this time he found me and on October 8, 1950, we got married. We married in Pittsburgh. We left Pittsburgh to go to New York in his car that he bought for \$200 from his cousin. He had a job in Houston already. He was going to bring me to Houston, but we didn't have any money for either a train ticket or enough gasoline so we stayed with my cousin in the Bronx. He got a job in a furniture store, and I got a job in a boutique. The reason I got a job at such a fine French store is because I had an accent and spoke English. The boss told me that I belong there and gave me a French name, Annette.

Sheena: Your name changed?

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Blum: I had so many names. Anyway, my husband and I had a job. We paid \$15 a week for a room and some food and the rest we saved. My husband traveled to work in Newark every morning two hours and two hours back, and he got tired of this. So in the beginning of 1951, we set out to come to Houston.

At the time we came to Houston, the money we had we spent of snow tires and on gasoline. We arrived in Houston broke with a '42 Chevrolet, a broken suitcase with our belongings, and not a penny in our pocket. We settled down on Blodgett Street in a little furnished apartment and had to borrow \$50 to put a deposit on light and gas. He went back to his old job at the furniture store, and I got a job immediately at Foley's. I worked for 75 cents an hour until I was seven months pregnant with my first child, Michael. Back then we had already saved up a little money and not having any insurance, we spent it all on the doctor and the hospital. So again we had to start all over again.

Blum: At the time, we shared the little apartment until we brought the baby home with my brother Sal and my husband's brother Lee. We all lived together in that one tiny bedroom apartment. I had to stop working to take care of the baby. At that time we didn't have child care. They didn't have any child care and of course we couldn't afford for anybody to take care of the baby.

In the meantime, my husband moved from a salesman at the furniture store to a

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manager. And evidently a very good one. This furniture store had a big store in Beaumont, Texas, and they were doing so bad that they were about to close the store. They asked my husband to go to Beaumont, to move to Beaumont for just a while to see if he could bring the store back to good business. At that time we had already brought my brother David and his wife down to Houston. They lived in Pittsburgh. My brother Sal and my husband's brother Lee and us had already become friends. I was getting used to living in the city of Houston and when I thought of moving again, I cried my eyes out day and night. To again go to a strange place where I didn't know anybody ... Well, I eventually gave in and with the little baby Mike, who was one year old, we went to Beaumont. And it was supposed to be just a little while. We stayed there for 18 years.

Sheena: I didn't know that.

Blum: The first five years, including in Houston, I forgot to mention that in Beaumont we lived in the apartment we lived without air conditioning and just barely a fan. Coming from the cold country in Europe that was tough. That was the toughest part. Then after some years we built a little house in Beaumont and we thought it was paradise with air conditioning.

After we moved to the little house, two more children were born, Glenda and Tina. While we were raising children, we managed to save each month a little

money. We never went out to eat, only for special occasions like an anniversary. Since my husband had much bigger dreams for his family no matter what it took. He worked day and night. He was going to achieve a better life. He made such a success of the job that he was like nobody before him.

One day we were coming back in the car from a company meeting in Houston, he announced to me that he quit his job. I almost fainted. With three little children, what were we going to do? But he assured me that no matter what, we would be okay. He stayed at the old job like a gentleman to train new people for his past bosses. When he accomplished that, he left under very good conditions. They told him that he could always come back. That was a relief for me.

He took a little 3,000 square foot store, no air conditioning, no heating, and no parking in downtown Beaumont, with the money that we had saved up. He also had help from the bankers who liked him because he is a wonderful, kind, hard working man with a lot of personality and had a good record with his former job. I cannot remember how much. In the evenings and Sundays we got babysitters and we restored this place, painting and doing whatever we could, my husband, me, and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ employee. One and $\frac{1}{2}$? I will explain why 1 $\frac{1}{2}$.. The secretary he [Morris] had at his previous job followed him since I didn't know how to type. I knew nothing about bookkeeping. She followed him for half the salary she made before. And the sales man also followed him and the reason I called him half of

an employee was that if he wasn't drunk or in jail, he was the best. But half the time he was drunk or in jail and we couldn't afford anybody better.

I took a babysitter and set out to become a full time employee at the first Blum's Furniture Store, not a full time employee, but a full time partner with absolutely no knowledge of what was going on. My husband was well-experienced. He bought some cheap furniture. He picked up some guys off the street and with their help unpackaged and put it on the floor. And I was selling and the half salesman was selling it, and he was delivering it.

Sheena: Morris was?

Blum Yes, and I forgot to tell you that after a few years, he finally bought me a car. That was before he went into business for himself. He bought me a car and one day declared to me that we need a truck. At the time it was a pick-up truck so he traded my car and got the money and bought a pick-up truck. So there I was without a car again, but we had a pick-up truck. He promised to buy me a nicer car later. The first winter we spent in this little store it was freezing cold. Inez, the girl in the office, had to type in gloves. And when the summer came, it was so hot we had to change our shirts ten times a day.

We had a one year lease on this store. The landlord approached us to sign a ten

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year lease or get out. Well, my husband promised to sign the ten year lease if he was going to put in air conditioning and heating because it took ten thousand dollars to do it and it was very important to do it. But we didn't have the \$10,000 to put the heating and air conditioning and he was so mean that he would not let us park. He had an apartment right across the street. There was a business family we knew well, the Rogers. They were beginning to build a strip shopping center and wanted us to move there.

Sheena: In Beaumont?

Blum: Yes, in Beaumont. About the Rogers family, they were beginning to build a strip center in Beaumont on 11th Street and they built for us a 10,000 square foot space with air conditioning. We worked so hard that we made wonderful progress. In the meantime my husband taught a man how to pick up a load of hide-away bed. Do you know what that is?

Sheena: Yes.

Blum: A sofa with a bed. The men dropped the hide-away bed and my husband ruptured his disc and had surgery. He was laid up in the hospital for two months. That was when I was forced to become a real businesswoman. I did well.

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Sheena: How about the children? Were they in school?

Blum: No, Mike was in school. Well, when we opened Tina was six months old, Glenda was 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ years old, and Mike was 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ years old. So Mike was the only one in school. That is a good question. We just, as a matter of fact, did very well in the store. And life began. We made a lot of friends, and we joined a club.

Sheena: A social club or what?

Blum: A business and professional club, that is what they called it. We had a nice and normal life until my husband was faced with a second operation and they demolished the street in front of us and built an overpass.

One night the entire strip shopping center tenants moved out. And since I was a young woman in the 20s, no I was about 31, they didn't confide in me so we were the only ones left in the shopping center, and. I didn't tell my husband about it. I didn't want to aggravate him. And then we stayed. I decided no matter what we were not going to close up. So the three of us stayed on the phone calling customers and from that unfortunate thing that happened, that nobody could get to the store because of the mud and the cars, we were still making money, and I pulled through. That's dedication.

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I was persistent. On the 11th Street, which was the main street in Houston, there was a corner lot. Nobody ever knew who it belonged to, and I insisted to my husband that he go down to City Hall to find out who the lot belonged to. And he went and found out it belonged to a family that had inherited it. There were like ten heirs to that lot. He immediately made a telephone call to a man about buying this lot. He said yes, we want to sell it but nobody has ever gotten in touch with us. My husband told him I want to come with the down payment today, and the man said tonight I can't because my wife has a bridge game. My husband said, look we won't take but about five minutes. He took his lawyer and with a \$5,000 check bought that lot while his wife was having a party at 10:00 at night. Immediately we started working with an architect and designer on the most beautiful building in Beaumont. Everybody gave us 3-6 months to stay in business. In a town of 120,000 people, who is going to support this kind of business? It was a 55,000 square foot building.

Of course, we borrowed the money for it. And for the beautiful furniture, the most beautiful furniture we could find. I forget the year but I made sure the grand opening would be like Hollywood. By that time we had such a good name of paying bills on time and never being late what our vendors from the factories that they sent down planes full of representatives and the owners. And on the next morning of the ribbon cutting, it was an immediate success.

People from Louisiana, Houston, from all over came to shop with us. From then on we were in real business. But there was still something missing in our lives. Oh, and we also built a beautiful home in Beaumont. We built a home like this on an acre of land with sixty oak trees. It was much bigger than this (indicating her home). We wanted the same size house but we shrank it to this size because we didn't need such a big house anymore [the children had grown up]. But there was still something missing. We had a lot of friends and all of our family that we had left in Houston. Our children were growing up and we didn't want them to be strangers to the family. So we decided one day to move to Houston.

One day the Heinz Corporation approached us about signing a lease. They wanted a prominent furniture store because they were building a Galleria and they wanted us as a tenant. But the expense and the circumstances were unbelievably high, and my husband is not the most patient man to surrender to all these regulations they had. So he declined. We felt that if the Galleria is going to open on Westheimer, maybe there was something more to it. So we drove down Westheimer and saw a sign for sale in front of a big fence surrounding someone's summer home.

Westheimer was still like a wilderness. That was in 1970, I think. Immediately, without asking the price, my husband bought this property. He decided that if it was good for the Galleria, it was good for us.

His cousin, Luis Carr, a prominent commercial real estate agent and attorney was

very upset. He meant well but he was worried that we were going to lose every penny we made to now. He thought, what were we going to do with this property in a place of nowhere? And my husband said, well we are going to build a furniture store. He [Carr] called him [Morris] every single night and would say get out of it, get out of it. He was persistent that it was a mistake to start all over again, but we did. As long as we are young we can always start all over again. So it doesn't matter because we had done it so many time in our lives that to start all over, it didn't matter. Immediately, we duplicated the store in Beaumont and made it larger, 65,000 square feet with a very tall sign of Blum's Furniture. Today I am told it is the tallest sign in all of Westheimer and if the Beaumont store was a success, this was one ten times more. Again, against everybody's approval, against everybody's beliefs, our hard work was a big success. After a year, no after two years, we also duplicated our home. We built our home in Houston where we still live and we love it.

Sheena: How old were your children?

Blum: When we came to Houston, Tina was in junior high school, Glenda first year in Bellaire [high school], and Mike was at the University of Texas, I think the second year. And from then on I would say our American dream came true. My husband and I sometimes talked about how we can't image how we accomplished all of this and when it all happened. We must have worked very hard without

knowing it. In the process we developed such a fine name in the community.

And this allowed us to give back to the community and share our good fortune with involvement in many charities like the Holocaust Museum Houston which tell the story where we come from and many others.

I think, when we had the business I learned so much from our previous life when people treated us as refugees and my husband was paid \$5.00 a week. We learned so much in order to be nice and kind to our employees. Never to raise our voice and the nicest thing was that it allowed us to share our good fortune with our employees. Whenever someone retired they had a wonderful pension plan they could live beautifully ever after. So we always looked after our employees and shared with them and that's very important. It makes you feel good.

I used to see the drivers in the cold or rainy days and they would go out without sweaters even though they have uniforms. My husband would take off his coat and put it on them. They would say, I'll bring it back tomorrow Mr. Blum, and he would say no just keep it. It allowed us to do some good things which makes you feel good and charitable and give back some of our good fortune to this country. So it is good, it made us feel good. In Beaumont, while I was helping run the business, my husband and I were partners. We were running the store together. I went to design school twice a week at LaMarque College for four years to get a degree in design.

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And another reason we were so successful was that we were importing a lot of things. We had an office in Italy. We imported [furniture] from Italy and we were the first business people to be invited from the government of China to come to China to do business. We were the very first one. My husband worked on it for two years. He even went to Washington to try to get a Visa. It took him two years and then one day we got the invitation from the government of China. I still have the invitation. I wish I could find it. And this is how we started doing business in China and over the Orient actually.

Sheena: You sold furniture?

Blum: No, we brought in furniture and rugs from all over Hong Kong, Korea, from Singapore, Taiwan.

Sheena: Do you remember what year that was?

Blum: That was right after President Nixon opened relationships with China. We had such a good name in China that they used to ship us merchandise without a letter of credit just with our name or just our signature, and even without our signature. We still get invitations. I forgot that was a big part of our business life, traveling to the Orient and twice a year to Europe. I forgot to mention it because we would bring such unusual beautiful things. I used to work with Italian designers in Italy.

It was hard work, but I loved every moment of it. You see I have been very fortunate too. People used to ask me, why when you have everything, you don't need to work and you had enough money, so why are you working? But what they didn't realize is that I loved what I was doing and I looked at it as a hobby I just happened to be making money at, but that was because I worked hard at it. That's how much I love it and so did my husband. So that was a nice life.



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