

TRANSCRIPT

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE:

Person: Sharilyn Bell

So my name is Sharilyn Bell and I'm a third generation Edmontonian. I was born and raised in Edmonton, but I moved to Vancouver just after I finished high school. So I live in Vancouver at the moment, but I'm part of the Shechter clan, which is the Alberta Bakery, which is what brought me to this interview, and I'm here really just to talk about my impressions of it.

You know I wasn't involved particularly in the bakery at all. I was young. My mother, she's Eva. She was Eva Bell, originally Eva Shechter. My dad was Arthur Bell and he was from Calgary originally. He came to Calgary from Russia with his parents and three sisters and they grew up in Calgary. He moved to Edmonton when he married my mother in 1945 and she was the oldest of 10 children. Their parents were Mayer and Feigel Sheckter. Mayer was the baker that started Alberta Bakery. He was born in Russia and when he was about three or four his father died. His mother remarried and sent him to a place called Zhytomyr. It's very close to Kiev and I think that that may be where he had lived with his parents.

We always have this strange question as to where the Sheckter name actually came from. Was it his birth name or was it the name of this adopted father? But unfortunately there's no one to ask. So we've always assumed that the family name is Sheckter. But anyway he was sent to when he was eight, he was sent to live with this uncle, and this uncle was a baker and so this is really where he learned his trade, and as the story goes, when they were about four or five, he met Feigel -my grandmother, and they were you know friends and whatever forever and they were betrothed before he left for Canada.

And so when he was about 14 or 15 he decided that he would immigrate to Canada. We don't exactly have the real story on how it happened and who was in Canada to receive him, but he ended up in Winnipeg and he went to work for a bakery. It was called Siegel's Bakery, and he worked there for a year. This was in about 1911, and he worked there for about a year to make enough money to bring Feigel to Canada. And so when she got to Winnipeg, they got married. They were both about 16. She was a couple months older than him. But they were very young. They were 16 years old, got married, and they were married for about 55 years.

Anyway my mother Eva was born in Winnipeg. And shortly after she was born, the family moved to Toronto. They worked in an apple or he worked, Mayer worked in an apple orchard that was owned by Feigel's cousin. He was there for about a year. The second child, a son, was born there. But the business went south and they returned to Winnipeg where he went back to work in Siegel's Bakery. I think you know the bakery was kind of his life all the way through. So they lived there for a while, and then they moved to Vegreville because Feigel's brother had a tanning business there. So they worked there for a while. They had another two sons and a daughter. But things didn't really work out there, and so for whatever reason he wasn't happy in the tanning business, and they hitched up their horse and wagon and took a trip to Edmonton. And that became their permanent residence.

There were six other children born in Edmonton. They had two daughters and four more sons, and soon after that, between 1918 and 1920, Mayer made a commitment really to himself to go into the bakery business. He just wanted a business of his own. He found a grocery and a bakery called Shane's and it was in the Parkdale area. It was at 11735 90th Street, and he put on a very small down payment. We've been told it was about \$15, and for that sum he got the lot, he got a warehouse-like structure, and a building. There was the store which had living quarters above it and with it came a stove and a brick oven, and so that was the start of Alberta Bakery.

And the story goes that he had enough chutzpah to go to Robin Hood and Quaker Oats to ask them to front him you know enough flour to start baking and whatever, and he promised that with the first profits he would pay them back and it actually started a lifelong association with Robin Hood. They were his suppliers right through the business. So when he finally got baking, the story goes that he made about 300 loaves, and not exactly sure what they were in the beginning, but they always called their breads fancy breads, whatever they made, that was the umbrella for it. And so he hitched, after he baked the loaves at night, he hitched up his horse and wagon to come with him from Vegreville and he set about selling the bread. He charged 10 cents a loaf in those days, and they say he made about 300 loaves to begin with, and he basically sold them to individuals to begin with. But eventually the business expanded to include wholesale and retail outlets and it just kind of grew like that.

The sons, Frank and Sam and Joe always tell stories about their adventures delivering the bread in the wagon. Joe had a story that he was 13 years old, time for his bar mitzvah, but you know he still had to work. So he stopped the wagon in front of the shul, got out, went in, said his mafter, got back in the wagon and finished his route, and same with Frank, tells stories he was 14 years old, selling the bread, stopping you know to meet the people that were on his route, have a cup of -really a coke with them and sit down and have a chat and they enjoyed it. They were young but they really felt that they were part of this growing business and the same with the other son Sam who eventually became a dentist. But his youth was spent working in the bakery. All the children growing up, all 10 of them worked in some capacity in the bakery, whether it was helping baking or in the front counter. My mother did a lot at the front counter as did her sisters, and really only three sons out of the 10 actually made the bakery business their lifelong work. Two of them -Abe and David were in the Alberta Bakery and the third son who started in Alberta Bakery was Joe and he ended up doing his own thing with the Dainty Maid Bakery which I can talk about a little bit later on.

Anyway Dainty Maid was mainly cakes and pastries, whereas Alberta Bakery really concentrated on the bread product. So it wasn't a conflict of any kind and as I said, David who was the youngest and Abe remained with Alberta Bakery and they ran it for most of the time along with my grandfather. Actually it was about -I think it was about 1960 that he, my grandfather was still running it. But he turned over the day-to-day operations to David and Abe. But he remained president till he died and also David died very young. He died in 1976 and so the business really fell to Abe. So he was the remaining son that ran the business for a while and it prospered.

They remained in the same building until the end of the Second World War. But they put the horse and wagon away. For deliveries they now had six trucks and they had two ovens, and they were turning out about 600 loaves every hour. So they were really a thriving business,

and I do remember the bread from my childhood. They made this fabulous raisin loaf. It was kind of a soft square loaf -almost like a challah loaf. But it was just studded with tons of raisins, and to this day it's still my favourite. Wherever I am, I go looking for a loaf that will replicate the taste of this bread. In the early days their breads couldn't really be matched. They were really good. Their rye was spectacular. We just slather butter on it and just, it was great. A bowl of borscht and you're done, and of course the challahs you know for Friday night, they made this a great challah and my mother would then, you know the oven was still warm from dinner, she'd sliced it up, put it in the oven, and in the morning we'd have what we'd called crunchy because it was like a kind of a hard melba toast and it was just, I mean the bread was really part of our life.

The other thing I wanted to say is that their breads were all made with vegetable oil. They didn't have a hechsher in those days, but everything they did had to be koshered. The family was extremely Orthodox and observant, and in their home they kept kosher, and the bread had to be made to those standards. So for the whole duration of the Alberta Bakery, the breads were made with the oil and were acceptable as kosher even though they were, you know, they weren't specifically labeled as such. And when we moved to Vancouver we would always get a box of bread delivered. Whoever was coming or whatever, we'd go back to Edmonton, we'd stop at the Bakery, pick up a box of bread, or people would put it on the plane, send it, and we were thrilled to get it -me especially with the raisin bread. I loved it.

They moved from that original building in about 1953, and they moved to an old Safeway store. It was at 11388 95th [Street] and that was kind of the -I think the best times were in that building, and they stayed there until I think it was 1973 when they moved to a very large building at 14545 128 [Avenue], and by this time my grandfather, as I said was semi-retired. Although he did certainly have a voice in everything, and that time David was still alive and so Abe and Dave ran the business. Joe had gone on to open his own bakery, which as I said was focused mainly on the fancy cakes and pastries, and he was actually the only son that went to baking school. He went to a school in Guelph, Ontario and you know really learned how to do the pastry part of it, and he would have stayed on probably but his father wanted him back to work in Alberta Bakery. So he came back, worked there for a brief time, and then you know said, "can I have a bag of flour? I want to open my own bakery", and off he went to do that.

Anyway, Alberta Bakery continued in their new place. They could now make about 5,000 loaves an hour. Everything was automated. They, you know the way the flow went into the mixer, the bread was now, you know on conveyor belts and put into plastic bags and it was selling all over the country. It went to the Yukon, the Northwest Territories. It went to places in the US, went to Salt Lake City, and it's always been my feeling -although you know this is strictly my feeling that at that point it turned into more of a commercial operation rather than the artisanal products that originated with Alberta Bakery, and so it lost that kind of flavour I think. When you have to prepare things for commercial sales, they're sitting in Safeway or they're sitting in some grocery store for a while, you're adding stabilizers, you're adding all sorts of things that do not make it an artisanal product anymore. And I feel that changed the bakery. Again, that's just my feeling.

But anyway, the bakery did continue until David, *alav ha-shalom* died in 1976. He was very young. His family was very young. He had three daughters and one son, and the son was

really just an infant. So there wasn't a question of his family taking over I guess. And so it ultimately just went to Abe, and then when Abe was no longer running it, his son's took over. He had two sons, and in the late 1990s, unfortunately after about 78 years in business, it went into receivership. It was you know, it's really crushing to the rest of the family to hear it. But nobody else was involved at that time. So it was a decision that the boys made, and then after 78 years it was gone and that kind of you know to me is a very sad ending. But that's life and that's what happens. So that's kind of the end of the Alberta Bakery, which is really the start of it all.

Also of interest in the area that they had the bakery and that they lived in was the Sheckter family house. It was at 11707 88th Avenue. I still remember the address without having to look at it and it was built, it was a house that was built in the early 30s. It was in the Parkdale area which is where the bakery was. Their first Bakery was very close to it. And this is the home that they lived in basically for most of their life. As I said, it was built in the 30s and they owned it until 2000. My grandfather didn't live in it after my grandmother died. He moved out of it. But my uncle Sam kept the house and unfortunately you know he didn't live in it all the time. It was ransacked. It was, you know it had a lot of issues. But some people bought it and felt kind of this strange connection to the family, and so they refurbished it in keeping with the style that the house had, and apparently I've not been in the house, but apparently in the front hallway there's a picture of Meyer and the family, and on the front of the the house has been designated a heritage home, and on the front of it, there is a plaque that reads "1933 Mayer Sheckter, bakery owner". Which is kind of neat you know, and in the backyard apparently there's still the old Alberta delivery truck. It's kind of on two lots and it's a you know, I guess a big enough property that the truck still sits there.

And really I remember this house vividly because the family just always gathered there for Pessach, for any holidays. Wherever the sisters and their families lived, they came back to Edmonton for you know the holidays. And my grandmother had this giant table in the dining room, and we'd all sit around there. She was, you know, the perfect Jewish mother. She always had a guest at the table and she was feeding everybody. The kitchen also had a giant table, and there was food constantly for whoever came in. She could feed them no problem. And they could stay there. When they were young, they had a rabbi that lived with them who would teach boys, and other boys would come learn from him. They always had uncles staying there. She just was that kind of woman. Apart from having the 10 children, she was a very busy woman. But she was known also for her cooking and her baking, and she made the most wonderful cinnamon buns. They were never made in the bakery, but she turned them out just by the dozens. And we have never been, we've all tried, all the cousins over the years have said "you have the recipe, can we try it?" But nobody has ever been able to duplicate it, even though we know basically again she made it with oil. She, you know we know the basics. But can't make those cinnamon buns like she used to make them.

Anyway, going on to the Dainty Maid Bakery, which as I mentioned my uncle Joe started, was kind of the second bakery that I remember from Edmonton, and it was on 119th Street. And he started it in 1936 as I said after going to school in Ontario, in Guelph, and he came back and worked for his father in Alberta Bakery for a very brief time, and then started his own cake bakery, and Bertha, one of the younger sisters was always there to help. She worked both in Alberta Bakery and for Dainty Maid in assorted ways. She was also an excellent baker. But she did the bookkeeping, she did front counter reception and sales -as I

said, a very talented creative woman and we actually have a very interesting newspaper clipping of her from about the 1950s where she was boxing little cakes from Dainty Maid to send to the Stampede in Calgary and you know they did all sorts of interesting things.

My uncle Jack, the third child was very involved with the Stampede. He had chuck wagons. He had horses, and so the Stampede was kind of you know, a connection through him. My mother also helped out in the Dainty Maid business and she set up a pastry counter for them in a department store called Christy Grants. Don't know if you've ever heard of it, it was a department store in the downtown area at the time. It was owned by Ralph Samuels and his brother Joe Samuels and it was -I can't remember what street it was on but it was just a basic you know little department store, like Walk-Rite like Johnstone Walker. All of those stores were in the same area, and as it happened Joe was married to Sadie Samuels -Ralph's daughter. Sadie was a concert pianist, studied in Philadelphia, was very talented. Anyway she married Joe and so that was the connection through her to Christy Grants. They had this little counter in Christy Grants and Joe sold Dainty Maid in about 1956. But baking was always a big part of his life of Sadie's life. He was well known for making a little cream puff, with a head -a swan. He put little wings on it, filled it with whipped cream, was absolutely one of the things that was well known for every occasion. For parties he'd put them on a glass mirror. So they'd look like they were floating. It was actually quite cute and anyway even though he sold the bakery and went into other businesses, hotels and whatever, he continued to bake for any event in Edmonton -charity events or whatever. He made the wedding cakes for his daughters' weddings. He just loved to bake and continued to do so, and later in life, he and Sadie added a second kitchen to the house where he had an industrial oven, two floor-size mixers, several tart machines -all of the equipment that you'd need in a real bakery. And they just churned out pastries for charity events. They were known for that. People would come to them and ask them, and they were thrilled to do it, and it was fun to go there and you know, work in that kitchen. Somehow we all had a feeling for baking.

The other bakery that was part of our family's life was the Bon Ton, which was really the third important bakery in Edmonton at that time, and it's really the only unfortunately, the only one that is around today -even though they're now on their third owner. But when we knew it, it was owned by Jean and Judy Adelman, who started it, and we actually have an interesting connection to them. We met them when they first arrived in Edmonton. They were friends of Joe's. He had met Eugene and wanted him to become a partner in Dainty Maid. But Jean felt that he really wanted to be in business for himself. But nevertheless they remained lifelong friends and we met Judy and Jean, they were a young couple. They didn't have any kids at that time. They just moved to Edmonton and my parents needed to go out of town and so they came to stay with us for a couple weeks and that's how they met them, how we met them and I remember how kind and nice they really were. They were lovely people and I can still see Jean, he had hurt his leg when he was a very young boy and he had a stiff leg that didn't bend, and so we would get down on the floor in the living room -his leg and I remember this vividly -his leg being stretched out and he would make us little mini doll furniture. He'd take a little cork and stick pins that had round black heads on them and he would put them into the corks at different levels. Then take a kind of a ready orange thread and weave it around these pins to make chairs, and to make tables, and they were -I mean they were fabulous. He was just such a lovely person, as was Judy, and we kept these little little furniture things. Unfortunately they got lost when we moved to Vancouver. Somebody

packed us up and they asked about what are these? But we loved them, and they were as I keep saying, they were really nice people, and so outings to the Bon Ton Bakery were really special. We love to go there. We love to see him and he always had on the white uniform with the hat and we especially liked they made this kind of pocket pastry that they filled with either blueberry or cherry. I think they probably still make them, and we love that we don't know how they make them. They were delicious, and we didn't know what they were really called. But we called them the blueberry things and anytime anybody was going to the bakery, get us those. They were delicious and we really have fond memories of it, and as I say and for, it's the only bakery that is still there, and just unfortunately read not that long ago that Judy just passed away in the early part of this year.