

Interview with Jon Bell

for the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society

(Participants: Noel H. Pugach interviews Jon Bell)

- Noel: Today is April 27, 2018, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I am interviewing Jon Bell. First of all, Jon, give me your full legal name, the names of your parents, and where you were born and the date of your birth.
- Jon: My name is Jon Ethan Bell. I was born February 8, 1964, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, St. Vincent Hospital. My father is Irving Aaron Bell, and my mother, Marilyn Bearman Bell.
- Noel: Okay, and how many siblings do you have?
- Jon: I have one brother, two years younger. That's Gerald Lance Bell. He goes by Lance.
- Noel: Okay. So, I've interviewed Lance, and he told me quite a bit about the family and where they came from. He wasn't sure, maybe you had heard, why they decided to come to the United States when they came. Do you know anything?
- Jon: Kind of reading between the lines, or just listening to family talk, without being definitive about this, I just have to assume that it was because of persecution of Jewish people in their -- in the old country where they lived.
- Noel: And they grew up in Lithuania?
- Jon: They grew up on my father's side, in Lithuania. My grandmother was born in Romania.
- Noel: Your paternal grandmother?
- Jon: Paternal grandmother, yes, that's right.
- Noel: And they came about 1906?
- Jon: That's a very close approximation, yes. Grandfather arrived in 1903 and Grandmother around 1893.
- Noel: From what Lance told me.

Jon: That's right and I believe that they settled in Colorado, first.

Noel: And why in Colorado?

Jon: One of the -- of my grandfather's sisters came here first. That was Lizzy. Last name is escaping me right now, but Lizzy was the first one and they all kind of came after her. My grandfather, two of the brothers came, kind of, within a very short time span after she got here first. And they all settled in that Denver/Colorado Springs/Trinidad area.

Noel: And what kind of work did they do?

Jon: In this country, they listed their skills as master tailors, the men. And they worked for other shop merchants. They started their own stores very early, as they got to this country and had saved enough money to do so. And their very first stores, to my knowledge, were either in Trinidad or Colorado Springs.

Noel: You're not sure which?

Jon: I am leaning toward Trinidad for the first location.

Noel: Okay. And what kind of work did they do in Lithuania? In Europe?

Jon: My great grandfather and grandmother had some sort of general store. They sold little foodie type items, general goods for the people there. There is a story that kind of comes to mind and that they had like herring that they sold to people. And the poor people thought it was a luxury that they could just get the juice from the barrels of the herring and use that with their potatoes to make their meals out of it. That type of thing.

Noel: Uh-huh. Tell me about your education.

Jon: My education. So I'm a product of public schools, Santa Fe, New Mexico. I went to Wood-Gormley, I went to Harrington Junior High. I went to Santa Fe High School. Notably, those are the exact same schools my father went to, growing up in Santa Fe. And then I went to university of New Mexico as my undergraduate was in management from the Anderson School of Management. I graduated in 1988. A decade plus later, I went back to get my master's degree in accounting, also from the University of New Mexico. I finished in 2005.

Noel: Okay. What was the extent of your Jewish education?

Jon: My Jewish education, we had a very unique experience in Santa Fe. We had one very small congregation, Temple Beth Shalom, of which my father and grandmother and uncle were, you know, founding members of, and very active participants of. Both my father and his brother were presidents of the congregation. They had a rabbi, Rabbi Leonard A. Helman, that came to town around 1974. I remember meeting him when I was around 10 years old. And he gave me my bar mitzvah lessons personally. Every single lesson I had for my bar mitzvah was with Rabbi Leonard Helman.

They also had a Sunday school. We went to Sunday school. The entire Sunday school, to my knowledge, from grade 1 through grade 8, probably had no more than a dozen kids. Maybe 15 kids, at best. But I remember that I thought to my knowledge, I got a very good exposure to the Jewish faith. I had great memories and recollections of sitting there in services on the top level of the original sanctuary, on Friday night listening to Rabbi Helman, and before him, Rabbi Markowitz, and occasionally, Rabbi Shinedling, give their sermons to the congregation.

Noel: Did your family go regularly to services?

Jon: They did not. My mom's big thing was making a wonderful Shabbat dinner, -- very traditional Jewish type meals -- and we always lit the candles. She always claimed to be too tired to go to services. My father would go and honestly, I remember even asking him to take us to go. That's very unusual for a kid to do that.

Noel: Yes.

Jon: I think it was mainly more toward my Bar Mitzvah years, but I enjoyed going. I did enjoy going and sitting there. I remember that.

Noel: Tell me what it was like growing up in Santa Fe. Also, what it was like growing up Jewish in Santa Fe.

Jon: I'm referring to some notes I have because I spoke just -- I wrote specifically just to that. There were not a lot of Jewish kids in Santa Fe that I remember, when I was growing up. In the entire grade school, I felt like, you know, there might have been one or two other kids at a particular time in the entire elementary school that were Jewish. So, it was very unique. I do remember giving little presentations about Hanukkah to the class, and maybe saying the prayer in front of them. It was overall, okay. I don't

remember experiencing a large amount of, you know, maybe minor bits of anti-Semitism from other kids.

Noel: Such as?

Jon: Just such as being made fun of, or bullying instances. But, you know, as kids did back then, we dealt with it without really any parent intervention. We just dealt with it.

Noel: You don't believe in Jesus Christ?

Jon: Yeah, that kind of thing, right, yeah. Yeah, you're going to hell for something, for not being a believer. What else? I guess -- the Jewish life but the Rabbi was always a fixture of our home. He was there for so many Shabbat Friday night dinners and holiday dinners. So we had -- it was almost like another family member at our house with the rabbi at that point in time.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: So that was my growing up Jewish experience that I mainly remember, growing up in Santa Fe, yeah.

Noel: So, by and large, do you have very fond memories of growing up in Santa Fe? Or, it was okay?

Jon: I do, I mean, it was a special time in Santa Fe, I think. Before the influx of -- before the town was discovered, per se. An influx of everyone that started happening in the late 70s, early 80s, really started to rapidly change the feel, the look of the community. Yeah, it was a very close-knit community. You know, our store and the people working there, those of the Spanish and Catholic faiths. We were very close to them also. So, I felt like that exposure to many difference cultures was definitely a plus in my life growing up.

Noel: So, comment on the role of Bell's Department Store in Santa Fe. What did you hear? What do you remember?

Jon: Okay.

Noel: You have notes on that?

Jon: Little bit. Many memories of the store itself. You know, the employees that worked there, as I started mentioning before. It was like an extended family. They were, out of the dozen to 15 regular employees that we had that were year-round employees, I would say that more than half of them, as the store was aging, near its final years, many of them had worked there between 30 and 50 years. And probably the junior employees had been there between 10 and 15 years out of that bunch. So they were remarkably loyal, remarkably dedicated to the store. Yeah, so, that was nice, and I worked there starting at age 12, helping out when I could during the holidays, during summer.

I worked, you know, I worked in the stock room-like setting downstairs in the basement-like setting, unpacking the merchandise and getting it ready to go on the floor. I would tag it, that kind of stuff. Check it in, to make sure it all arrived as the invoice said arrived. Make sure there were no shortages, that type of stuff.

And then I started selling on the shoe floor, although very brief. I was in shoe sales at age 12. I really loved to help customers with fitting them for shoes. And it was a great thrill for me when I made a sale.

Noel: What did you hear about the reputation of Bell's when you were a kid, a teenager, and the like?

Jon: One thing that comes to mind as far as reputation goes, just to speak to what I think we had. I think it was a really good reputation in town, and my father just, you know, being a solid member of the community. Somebody from out of town wrote a letter, and it was just merely addressed to the address, it was a "Good Department Store." Well, it was delivered to Bell's Store. I remember, we still have that letter and haven't read it in thirty years, but we still have -- it was nice to see that type of thing. When the store was written about, like when the Rolling Stone did the article in the early 80s while we were still open, they mentioned Bell's Store, that type of thing.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: So it really was a fixture of the town. And being that it was in the downtown area, it was really part of the community. We participated in a lot of the community events, like the parades and the Zozobra, and the rodeo, and all that kind of stuff.

Noel: Was there a specific role that Bell's had in Zozobra?

Jon: They did a Rodeo float once in a blue moon, yeah. But otherwise, like the program that came out, the annual program, we would always advertise in it and that type of stuff.

Noel: Where did Bell's get its merchandise? Did your dad go on buying trips? Did they rely on salesmen coming through? How did they -- where did they get their inventory from?

Jon: Both of the -- really, all of the above. Some -- there were regional markets that I remember going to occasionally as a child. Even as close as Albuquerque where they would come through and at the various hotels. There'd be many, many merchants or vendors there selling their clothes. I recall seeing other, you know, other owners of stores that my father knew; he would always visit with while they were there at the market.

There were also markets in Denver. There was a market in Dallas I remember my father used to go to, and also Los Angeles. He would travel to go to markets. But then other vendors would come to our house and I think my father made a lot of friends with some of these people that lasted well even after our store closed. They'd be in a Winnebago or something. They'd bring their clothes by, and park at the side of our house at night. I remember sitting there watching them buy their, you know, selecting the clothes and ordering for the store, that type of thing.

Noel: Yeah. Did your dad ever go to New York to buy?

Jon: While I was alive, no. It's very possible he did in the past. But yeah, back then, I'm quite certain, I -- and especially I have a kind of a solid memory of this, that all of our merchandise was made in the United States. Even Levi's was made in the United States back then.

Noel: Well, in those days.

Jon: Yeah, that's right. Well into the early 80s.

Noel: Right. I think maybe it was Marian Silver, told me that the vendors sometimes went to New York to buy.

Jon: Yes.

Noel: Especially ladies --

Jon: Sure.

Noel: You wanted to have an idea of the fashions, latest fashions.

Jon: That's right.

Noel: So, they'd go to New York --

Jon: That was definitely the case. There was also buying services that I think we used one, too. That would keep you updated on the latest trends and suggest things that were -- they'd follow trends and say, "This is really hot, and you should consider ordering this type of thing."

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: My brother and I, as we got older and into high school, we had an influence as to what was purchased in the store.

Noel: Tell me.

Jon: One thing that really comes to mind was this athletic shoe company called Vans, which are still out today, but because of this one movie back in the 80s, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, where one of the characters wore Vans, we bought them. I cannot tell you the stream of kids that came through to buy these shoes from our store. I don't think anyone else in Santa Fe had them. So, between that and the corduroy colored shorts that were really short on guys at the time. Those were things that were really popular based on the 80s trend, that my brother and I had influence on us getting for the store. (Laughter.)

Noel: Do you recall any stories that you heard growing up about the early Bell's, their wives, the store?

Jon: A little bit, yes. And in really referencing some memoirs of my father and uncle, and grandfather wrote kind of helps bring some of those to mind. You know, in the early, early days, they literally took their wares out of a horse and wagon and that's how they traveled between locations.

They talked about a very treacherous pass in and around Tierra Amarilla that was always difficult because of the uphill and mud that they encountered with the wagons. Also, the locations like in Espanola and Taos that were actual brick and mortar stores that they had there for a number of years. One of the managers that took over the Espanola store

apparently had a drinking problem. That's one of the store that that store's early demise, because it was just mismanaged.

Noel: Where was this?

Jon: In Espanola. The guy's name, or maybe I shouldn't say it, to dishonor his memory, but.... His name was Forest Mapes and he was married to Bea Bell—Barney Bell's daughter.

Noel: That's all right.

Jon: But yeah, the store that really had the lasting power was the location in Santa Fe, New Mexico. From its early years, 1926, which opened July 30, 1926. I'm holding the ad advertising its opening day in business.

Noel: Oh. Please xerox that for me.

Jon: Oh, sure.

Noel: Copy that.

Jon: You betcha. Yeah, it was the place for the Santa Fe families to buy their clothes and multi-generations we served. They bought their baptismal outfits there. They bought outfits for their family members, for their last viewing. It was really life cycle events that they were there in our store, buying stuff. We had a wedding department so they bought their wedding dresses there. We sold tuxedos for the proms, and all the kids came in for all that.

Noel: Did they rent tuxedos?

Jon: They rented them, yes. And then we were always really good at fitting people for suits or for tuxedos, you know. That's a skill that especially today you just don't find. You don't find it. (Laughter.)

Noel: No.

Jon: Yeah, so really we were the headquarters for like Levi's and Stetson hats. That kind of stuff.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: Yeah. Middle class. You know, working families.

Noel: Do you know anything much about the decision to establish all those branches, Tierra Amarilla, Grants, Taos? Whose idea was that?

Jon: I would have to say it was mainly my grandfather and his brothers, you know, Benjamin and Barney Bell. Those are the three names that most come to mind in terms of the early days of the store. You know, as they left Trinidad I think they sought opportunity. Perhaps the mining was already dying out in Trinidad. There was a kind of -- a boom and a very fast bust cycle that happened. So, they saw opportunity in New Mexico, as they left Trinidad. So that was a logical, you know, drive down the old Santa Fe Trail, as you may call it, as they headed, you know, and made their way ultimately into the Santa Fe area where their flagship store was located.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: Yeah, I think that's where they really put their focus and efforts into, more than anything else. That location was much larger than the other stores.

Noel: But they were slow in going to Santa Fe?

Jon: Yeah, that happened in 19--, like I said, 1926. So the other stores, Espanola and Taos happened.

Noel: Before?

Jon: Yeah, mid 19-teens, that type of stuff. Yeah. Yep.

Noel: Yeah.

Jon: And the other locations, I don't know when the Tierra Amarilla store or the -- when that opened. There was one in Grants, New Mexico, also. We have pictures of all these stores, by the way, which was very fortunate.

Noel: Okay. So, getting back to yourself, you graduate from UNM. And what do you do?

Jon: As I was graduating, in the middle of my undergraduate degree, the store closed. It met its demise, with the loss of its lease after renting for 60 years from the same person. We were basically kicked out of that store.

Noel: Do you know why the family never tried to buy the property or other property that they --

Jon: They took a very strong effort. My father felt like, in his mind, like when they were ready to sell, they would give him first chance. Well, the lady, Mrs. Marshall, and whoever else was behind her, she became very elderly and I think the kids got really anxious. And here comes Gerald Peters to offer them what they thought was a very large sum of money they'd probably never seen before, for an arts store and the other ones nearby. It was like half the block that they owned. So, within a couple of days --

Noel: This was on San Francisco?

Jon: Yes. That's right. My father was still alive when he got the news. He tried to stop it. He was sick. It was really hard for him to kind of make a push to change what was happening. He was very sad about it.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: Nothing he could do. He passed away at that point in time, but us being young, to think about moving certainly, that wasn't a prudent thing to do so we closed. But so, I thought that well, I like retail. Maybe I could go through college, get some experience and reopen Bell's Store, four, five, six years down the road again. That was my dream.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: I remember in college, one of my biggest undergraduate business classes in entrepreneurialship, I developed a business plan to reopen Bell's Store again. But it never got off the shelf. So, as I graduated college, I pursued another career in retail. Now it's [inaudible] a Dillard's Store which I thought was the right store for me. I worked for them for 9 years. I became a buyer, and I was a buyer in their shoe department and their men's department.

Noel: In Albuquerque?

Jon: In Albuquerque, Santa Fe. Well, the buying spot I was in Phoenix and El Paso. Kind of more as a regional thing. But for me, I had the opportunity to become upper, you know, like assistant store manager, would be the fast track to store management. At that point in time, I had already discovered that my track in retail at this company was not going to get me what I

wanted. So, I left and turned down their offers. At that point in time, I steered my thoughts and direction into other pursuits.

Noel: And so, you decided eventually to get a degree in accounting?

Jon: I got my degree in accounting after kind of a spell of time where I wasn't sure what I really wanted to do. I started a business in the travel industry where I was a broker of frequent flier miles and travel rewards, and I actually got fairly successful at that for a part-time pursuit. It was at the start of eBay and I became a very well-respected seller on eBay.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: The airlines started to get a little unfriendly about my activities. I got letters from their corporate attorneys that, "We would prefer you don't do this anymore." So, I took that very seriously. I went ahead, at that time, I was fortunately on my way towards a degree in accounting, so I kind of let that thing slide. And I started working at H&R Block when I was getting my accounting degree and also --

Noel: Where at? I'm sorry.

Jon: At H&R Block.

Noel: Oh, okay.

Jon: Yeah. So, I worked five tax seasons at H&R Block. While I was at H&R Block, I decided to get my master's degree in accounting. I liked it. It was something I really liked. I saw the opportunity. I saw a reasonable effort would get a master's degree at a very reasonable cost. It was my ticket into a new profession and the opportunities, you know, were enormous for me ever since I got that degree.

Noel: Were you married at the time?

Jon: I was married and actually had my first son, Alec. He was born in 2005.

Noel: So tell me about your marriage to your wife.

Jon: Okay.

Noel: Your wife's name?

Jon: My wife's name is Sherry Bell. And I met my wife when I was living in El Paso, Texas, at Dillard's Department Stores. She was in the same store I was. I was living in El Paso for about three years. And I met her about after two years of living in El Paso. So, we sort of --

Noel: Her maiden name?

Jon: Her maiden name is Estep. Her father's a well-respected realtor in El Paso, Texas. So, we started dating and I moved back to Albuquerque, New Mexico to help Dillard's open up their new store at Cottonwood Mall. And she was finishing her education. She did remarkably well in school and was very determined to finish and come up to Albuquerque to be with me. I think it in the course of one year, if I'd -- one year and maybe a summer, she had earned something like close to 50 credit hours. It was quite exceptional. And yeah, she had to get special permission from the dean to take like 21 hours in the fall and spring, but she did it. I think she took like, 8, 12 or 15 hours of summer school. It was just really remarkable. So, she graduated and moved up to Albuquerque to be with me and we got married a short time later.

Noel: And what was your -- what is your anniversary date?

Jon: We were married in the year 2003, August 24. So, we just finished our 14th year anniversary. Our first son was born on January 11, 2005. That's Alec Irving Bell. Irving, his middle name, is after my father. Alec will become Bar Mitzvah on August 25, 2018.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: And our second son, Aaron Jordan Bell, Aaron was my father's middle name. He got that as his first name. He was born June 12, 2008, so he's 9, and Alec is 13.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Jon: August 25 of this year, he will be in a Bar Mitzvah.

Noel: At Congregation Albert?

Jon: At Congregation Albert.

Noel: Well, very nice. Congratulations.

Jon: Thank you.

Noel: I was thinking, what would you say was the strength of your father as a businessman?

Jon: Well, he was a hard worker. He definitely showed me at a young age what hard work meant. You know, you work in retail, the store's open six days a week, year-round. You know? The traditional closing day was Sunday, we closed on Sunday. Certainly, the long hours, you'd go back at 9 and work after dinner and work, that kind of thing. But it was fun for us as a kid to go in the store at night when it's kind of dark and play hide and seek or what have you. Just kind of run around crazy in there. Sometimes we'd break things, that kind of thing.

But my father was not only a businessman at heart, and you know, a very good businessman, but he also showed me at a very young age what it meant to be a real member of the community with his participation not only in Jewish organizations like the Temple Beth Shalom or B'nai B'rith, but also other civic minded organizations like the Lions Club. He was the president of all these organizations.

And also, just helped with other volunteer pursuits, like taking blind people to go bowling. We would pick up blind men and take them to the bowling alley. That type of thing. Yeah, so my father was a really good role model and left a great name for us to be proud of.

Noel: Did he seem very ambitious?

Jon: Well, besides being a store owner, I mean, he did a lot in his life, I would say, in terms of community participation. He also enlisted in the air force, army air force, right before he was even 18 during the, you know, the peak of World War II. Enlisted, not drafted, and served admirably during that time.

But could he have maybe been a little more aggressive buying his building? We think so, that type of thing. That was a regret of ours that we were forced to choose -- we didn't have control at the end of our store, as Bell's Store, it was chosen for us. That's something hard to take.

Noel: So, tell me, why, how, when did your father form a fraternity? ΑΣΠ?

Jon: I would imagine he had a very strong grandfather/grandmother based on what family members that told us before, in terms of them believing that

their kids should have a Jewish life. So, I think that must have played a role in his interest in becoming an ΑΣΠ, and meeting other people, participating with other Jewish people. I imagine, sadly back then, it was a small close-knit community because they didn't have the building until the mid-1950s, but the opportunity to meet other Jewish people and you had to call [inaudible] level was -- that must have played a role in it. As it did for me when I was, you know, trying to restart the fraternity. I wanted to have more of a Jewish identity and meet other Jewish people. You didn't really have a huge opportunity when you lived in Santa Fe back then.

Noel: Was the fraternity exclusively Jewish?

Jon: Yes, it was. It was back then.

Noel: And what did you hope to get out of fraternity life?

Jon: I just wanted to hang out with other Jewish people. I felt like I could identify with more. Not always be the one, the one apple in the barrel of oranges type of thing. I wanted to be with other oranges. I felt like I had more in common with those people.

Noel: Did you have any problems getting back the charter? Restarting?

Jon: The University was not entirely receptive to our idea to restart this fraternity.

Noel: Why?

Jon: I don't know. We met with the Dean of Students and that type of thing. He even denied acknowledging that the fraternity was ever on campus in the past, that type of thing. It was, you know, we questioned their motive for not allowing us to do what -- they seemed to put up roadblocks to keep us from restarting our charter, but we got past that. We were very persistent with them at that time.

Noel: Do you know if your dad had any problem in starting the first chapter?

Jon: I don't. I don't. To my knowledge, he did not. No. No.

Noel: Mm-hm. Okay. Why did the fraternity lapse?

Jon: I believe just the amount of participants, you know. The fraternity started in let's say, '46, '47, with their first pledge group. I think by the early 1960s

or so, that there just wasn't the number of students involved to make it worthwhile to continue. And it may have stopped and restarted a couple times. But I don't think its continued existence other than from the mid-40s, and early 60s, that was really the longest continued existence of the fraternity at the University of New Mexico.

Noel: What was the atmosphere like for you when you were a student at UNM?

Jon: Let me think. I lived in the dorms. As a freshman, I became a resident of the dormitories.

Noel: Did you always live in a dorm?

Jon: I lived there most of my time, although the last couple of years, I had an apartment off campus. But I lived in the dorms for four years. I thought it was a great way to meet people, and I still have friends to this day that I met. One of my college roommates is a very close friend of mine. And the circle of friends outside of my Jewish life, I also had and we've maintained a very close relationship to this day. All right, it was a pleasant time to be at the University. I really miss those --

\nl You enjoyed?

Jon: I enjoyed my education, the quality of it was quite high. Yeah.

Noel: Mm-hm. That's nice to hear. Okay. What Jewish activities are you involved in? I know you said this treasurer.

Jon: I was the treasurer of the Jewish Federation of New Mexico.

Noel: I mean, it's not something I would want to do.

Jon: Fortunately, we are a very fiscally sound organization and with, you know, a very comfortable level of reserves to where it makes my role easy. The staff at the Federation, from the financial accountants that we're very lucky to have, to the other members of the Federation are very good. So, it makes my life very easy as the treasurer, really. I've been very happy to participate in that organization. I wish I could do more, but given my business pursuits and other family interests, that's the extent of what I could do at this point in time.

Noel: I understand, especially in the last year with --

Jon: Right, right.

Noel: -- the, and have you been active in the Congregation Albert?

Jon: I'm very happy to consider myself a member of Congregation Albert but it really has not gone much further than that. I had my kids in their religious school and I feel like being affiliated is a start. I do have wishes to be a little more involved down the road with brotherhood or the cemetery committee, or what have you, but that just hasn't happened yet.

Noel: Okay. Anything you want to add? You've exhausted my questions, I think, that I came up with.

Jon wants to say something about his grandparents.

Jon: So, my paternal grandparents that really is the reason why I'm here today, more than anything. Morris Bell, who was born in Merkinė, Lithuania, in 1883, and Ethel Bell, who was born in Jassy, Romania, in 1882. As they immigrated to America in the early 1900s, they were both involved in the retail world, and that's how they met. So being that what I'm also a product of retail family, it really interested me.

So Ethel, when she arrived in Denver, she got a job at the Golden Eagle department store. Which apparently is a very large and respected department store. The founder was Leopold Goldman. He was one of the most philanthropic people in Denver, and was credited with donating and helping to start Denver's first Jewish community center. So, I thought that was a very interesting little tidbit.

And then when Ethel went to work for the Denver Dry Goods Company, which was fondly known as "The Denver," and that was the largest department store west of Chicago. And I believe she worked there --

Noel: And who owned that?

Jon: The owner of that store, I don't have that information. I believe it was bought out by the May Department Store company at the end of its life, lifespan, and shortly, for whatever reason, a few years later, was closed or renamed to that. That building still stands today and it's a very high-end condominium location in Denver.

Noel: Downtown Denver?

Jon: That's right. My parents are very -- my grandparents are very Jewish-minded people. They very strongly identified their Judaism. They never tried to hide it or become unaffiliated in any way. But they are also very liberal, tolerant about other people's religious views and certainly never disrespected anyone else for their faith or beliefs, whatsoever. They were just very generous with their time and charitable causes.

So I'm just skipping back to Morris specifically, when he first came to America, he stopped in New York and Philadelphia and worked in clothing factories there. And he had TB so I think that's maybe one reason why he also ended up in Colorado, I should mention.

Noel: Mm-hm. Yes.

Jon: And as I mentioned already, he would peddle from a horse and wagon in southern Colorado, northern New Mexico. The goods he sold consisted of notions, dry goods, and wearing apparel. That lasted about five years. And his brothers Barney, Jack and Benjamin also settled in Trinidad and Denver and together they saved up money to open up their first stores in the Colorado and northern New Mexico area.

The one brother, Jack Israel Bell, who I recently met the granddaughter of, moved to Beverly Hills around 1910, 1915, after living in Trinidad with them. He actually was the president of Temple Aaron. We have information on. He opened a very successful men's store in Beverly Hills, California that the Hollywood elite back in the day.

Noel: Good move.

Jon: Yeah, that's right. That's the end of it.

Noel: Okay. Tell me something about your identification with Temple Aaron in Trinidad.

Jon: So, John Feldman, the rabbi that was the rabbi at Temple Aaron for about ten years, -- I always knew about this place, but never until I actually made an effort to go up there one year for High Holidays, the service of which he led, just didn't have a connection. So I immediately just became very, very much tied to this congregation. I wanted to know all about my family's participation in the congregation and where my grandparents maybe even got married at. I don't believe they got married there, but my grandfather, when he became a citizen of the United States, he was living in Trinidad at the time. And his address was right around the corner from Aaron, so it

was only very natural for me to assume that he was a member of Temple Aaron and then the 19 teens, with the Jewish community arguably had been dropping down in Trinidad, kind of rapidly, he must have been a key member of the temple back then. And as I mentioned, his brother Jack Bell was a president of the temple. And then the Yahrzeit tablets, Jack Bell tragically had their first child die at a very young age, and that's written in, I can see it handwritten in the Yahrzeit tablet by the Rabbi, back in 1914, and that child had died at a very young age. And the Yahrzeit was recorded for him.

So, as I go to this congregation and their Torah scrolls that they have, I can only imagine that my grandparents must have read out of these scrolls back in the day. And when the temple closed, temporarily, we expect. I have high hopes that their future will be brought into the future because as we stand here today, Noel, the temple would be considered about 130 plus years of age, since it was built. They were starting to sell the Torah scrolls. I went up there with a member of our community, Sabra Minkus, and we negotiated the purchase of one of these scrolls. My family contributed for about half, and she contributed the other half for this Torah scroll. A couple other people contributed a little bit as well, -- which also helped to repair the scroll and to build an arc to store it in at John Feldman's Chavurah. But this Torah Scroll we have, we feel as if it is kind of set aside. It wasn't on their bima. It was kind of just in a little closet. We feel like we recovered it. I feel very proud to have that here in Albuquerque, and my son will read out of it for his bar mitzvah.

Noel: That's cool.

Jon: Yeah.

Noel: Keep the link, right?

Jon: That's right.

Noel: The connection.

Jon: Exactly.

Noel: Okay. Thank you very much, Jon. I think we'll close up now.

Jon: Okay, thank you.

[end of recording]

