Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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# Martin (Marty) Brashem

## SUMMARY

Marty Brashem, born in Los Angeles and raised in Seattle, served in World War II before attending the University of Washington and starting a family. He worked in the scrap metal industry, became involved in Tacoma's Jewish community, and played a key role in merging its conservative and reform congregations to form Temple Beth El. Reflecting on a fulfilling life with his late wife and their children, he cherishes their memories, his family, and his ongoing connections with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Okay. Yay!

Marty Brashem: Okay. All right.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: So, Marty, which floor do you live on in The Bellatini?

Marty Brashem: I live in apartment number 421.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Okay. I don't know if I mentioned it to you, but my mother-in-law moved in last January. I think she's on the third floor.

Marty Brashem: What's her name?

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Her name is Helen.

Marty Brashem: Helen. What?

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Helen. Wilson.

Marty Brashem: I may know her.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: She's very spry, and she's very energetic.

Marty Brashem: Oh. Very good. Well, I think I may know Helen. I know Helen, and it may well be her.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Okay.

Marty Brashem: All right.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: So we have that in common. So, Marty, I've been tasked by the Washington State Jewish Historical Society to talk to you a little bit about your life and a lot about the Jewish community in Tacoma. So I'm going to ask you just a couple of questions, but I'm kind of going to let you tell me whatever you want to tell me. So first of all, give me a very brief introduction about you, when you were born, where you were born, and a little bit about your childhood.

Marty Brashem: I was born in Los Angeles, California, on December 25th, 1926, and my father had moved to Seattle. He was four

years of age in 1890, 1893. And then they and my parents got married in Oregon and lived in California for a short while, and, and, uh, moved back to Seattle, uh, when I was seven years old. So that would have been 1933. We were back in Seattle, and I was raised in Seattle. And, um, went to high school here. Was, uh, entered the US Army, uh, March 2nd, 1945. Completed my infantry basic training in Camp Hood, Texas, in August of 1945. Um, at that time, uh, the bomb had been dropped in Japan. So instead of being part of the invasion forces, I spent a year in Japan as an occupier. True, I got out of the Army on December 2nd, 1946. I went to the University of Washington and graduated from there in June of 1950. Eventually met my wife, Joanie, at a friend's house. We were married on April 20th, 1952, and had our first son, Mark, in March of 1954. Have five children. Mark is the oldest. Kerry is two years younger. She was born in 1954. And number three, Linda was born in January 1958. Dena was born in March 1959. And our youngest son, born August 30th, 1960. Uh, we moved to Tacoma in, well, I got a job in Tacoma in the spring, in the summer of 1956, and was employed by Mr. Leslie Sussman, General Metals of Tacoma. We moved to Tacoma on Memorial Day 1957, and moved into our house in January 1958. And I started to work in a general metals company in their scrap business primarily. Excuse me. Involved in the export and shipping of scrap metal to Asia. And gradually, grew into employment and eventually became the manager of General Metals of Tacoma for Mr. Sussman as he was busy with other activities. We joined the temple, which is now Temple Beth El. At that time, I can't remember the name of the temple, in about 1958. Joni and I became lifetime members of Temple Beth El, and I am still a lifetime member from many, many years ago. And Temple Beth El was a very nice synagogue for us. Uh, our rabbi was Richard Rosenthal, who was capable of melding together the conservative Jews in Tacoma to the reform synagogue, which was now Temple Beth El, and he was. And so some of the Jews, uh, were still rather conservative, but most of them joined Temple Beth El, which was a very nice synagogue. They currently, to the best of my knowledge, have some 350 to 400 members, and a new rabbi who just joined the synagogue in the last few months. And we were very active in the synagogue. Joni was in charge of the Judaica shop for many years. And, also, we used to have Friday night dinners, and we would always get Kentucky Fried Chicken. After we finished that, Joni would never touch Kentucky Fried Chicken. She'd had her fill of it. But we had a lot of good relationships chips with, with a lot of Jewish people in Tacoma. Unfortunately, there are very few of them still alive. But we had a very good relationship with the synagogue, and we used to go to temple pretty much on Friday night and enjoy our synagogue with them. And, and, uh, Joan was quite strict. And so the kids behaved themselves; they didn't dare run around the synagogue like some other children did. And we had a very, very good relationship. We were good friends with, uh, Rabbi Rosenthal and his family and many other families in the city of Tacoma. And, uh, I don't know what else to tell you. So you. If you want to ask a few questions, I will try to answer them.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Perfect. Thank you. That was a great, great overview. I appreciate that. So, Marty, when you joined Temple Beth El, were you was your family Reform Jew or a Conservative Jew?

Marty Brashem: We were reformed. We were both raised. Both Joni and I were raised at Temple de Hirsch in Seattle, so we were very much reformed.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Tell me a little bit more about how Rabbi Rosenthal melded the two. The reform, um, well, the conservative.

Marty Brashem: He was a very flexible individual and and the conservative synagogue was in a great deal of financial difficulty, and they could no longer continue to run their congregation financially. Therefore, he was able to convince them that it would be to their benefit for us to join a temple together. And so it changed the name from I don't remember what it was originally to Temple Beth El. And he put quite a bit of conservative activities into the service to make the conservative members comfortable.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: And that seemed to work.

Marty Brashem: Well, it seemed to work because the temple is still the only existing temple, the only Jew. Well, I shouldn't say it's the only Jewish temple now because Chabad House came into existence, or I would say, see, today we've been gone. We've been gone from Tacoma for 11 years. And so I'd say Hobart House has been in Tacoma probably about 20 years now.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: So you mentioned going to Shabbat services on Friday night. What other activities did you and your wife, or your children, participate in? In the temple?

Marty Brashem: Well, I was on a journey. As I say, she was in charge of the Judaica Shop for many years all by herself. And she would open the Judaica Shop at certain hours and, of course, sell what they had to sell. I became active in the temple and was president at one point in time. Some years ago.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: And the children, did they go to religious school?

Marty Brashem: Well, uh, they all went to religious school, and they all finished high school, uh, in Tacoma and high school in the synagogue. And once they got out of high school and went to college, none of them ever returned to Tacoma. So my oldest son,

Mark, stayed in Seattle or Bellevue while my youngest daughter, Dena, and Carrie. She moved to Seattle and, um, Marvin moved to Seattle. And Linda moved to Phoenix, Arizona. So. None of them stayed in Tacoma. And we stayed in Tacoma until the spring of, let me think, uh, 2011. And then we moved to Kirkland, and we were there for seven years or so until Joanie became ill, and we had to put her into a group home. And then I sold the condo and have been here in the Bellatini for shortly over three years.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: So, backtracking a little bit. Did the kids have B'nai Mitzvahs, bar mitzvahs for the boys, or bat mitzvahs for the girls?

Marty Brashem: Pardon?

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Did the children have a bar mitzvah or a bat mitzvah?

Marty Brashem: They had all of the same. The boys were bar mitzvahed, and the girls were bat mitzvahs. Yes, they were.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: What was that like in Tacoma? You know, these days, usually you have the ceremony in the synagogue, and then a lot of children have big parties. But what was it like back then for your children?

Marty Brashem: Well, you're asking me to research how many years ago? Because my oldest son is 68, he would have been bar mitzvahed. Um, 50, 55 years ago. That's a long time. Well, as I recall, we had a very nice bar mitzvah and bat mitzvahs, and we would have the children have parties thereafter. Put it that way. Okay.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Got it.

Marty Brashem: So everybody had a good time.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Excellent. And what about? Were the kids involved in any youth groups when they were younger? Well, they.

Marty Brashem: They were my oldest son, Mark, who was an Eagle Scout, as is his son. And, um, I'm trying to remember they were busy. The girls were busy with Campfire Girls, and Marvin was a scout for a period of time. And as far as Jewish activities at the synagogue, they were all well, they belonged to see that there was a from Seattle there was what a Catholic what you call it anymore. There was a Jewish organization that the kids were involved with to some degree, but I don't remember the name of it.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Okay, maybe B'nai B'rith, like Bebe.

Marty Brashem: Bebé, Bebe, Bebe. Y'know. Okay.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: And then, as far as the Jewish community in general in Tacoma, was there anything Jewish outside of the synagogue?

Marty Brashem: No.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: No. Okay. And would you say that the majority of.

Marty Brashem: Oh, excuse me. That's not correct there. They've had a Jewish community fund for many, many years to collect money. And we had a big organization, and they still have a very, very active Jewish community fund in Tacoma. Okay.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: And would you say the majority of Jews in Tacoma did belong to the synagogue? Was it a high affiliation rate?

Marty Brashem: Well, I know the ones that did. So I would, uh, that's a very good question, because you don't know. You don't know who's Jewish. You don't know who isn't Jewish. But, uh, for a city the size of Tacoma, I would say probably a fair amount did belong. But you're asking me numbers I do not know.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Right, right.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: And then what was it like being so you grew up in Seattle? You were part of Temple de Hirsch and part of Seattle's Jewish community as a young person. And then you moved to Tacoma for a job, and with your family. What was it? What was the difference between the Tacoma Jewish community and being a Jew in Tacoma versus Seattle?

Marty Brashem: Well, we were quite young in those years. I think I was probably about 29 when we moved to Tacoma. So we

became acquainted with a lot of Tacoma Jews, and we had a fairly large group that we would play bridge together. The women would play mahjong, and we'd play poker. We had three, I think, three different groups that we would socialize with. So we had a very active social life in Tacoma.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: And was that through the synagogue? Yes.

Marty Brashem: All Jewish, all members of the synagogue.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: But did the synagogue sponsor those? You know, the bridge group, the mahjong group?

Marty Brashem: That was just our own people. We would find that we had something in common with and associated with.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: So you mentioned the man that you worked for.

Marty Brashem: Mr. Sussman. Sussman. Lesley Sussman.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: That sounds like a Jewish name to me.

Marty Brashem: Well, there they were very active in the Jewish community, the Sussmans. Unfortunately, uh, their daughter passed away a few years ago. Their son is an attorney in New York. He's been in New York for many, many years. And so their family and they had a large family in Tacoma. But to the best of my knowledge, it is pretty much all dissipated now. But we'll go back a long way.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Absolutely. There were quite, quite a number of Jews who owned businesses in Tacoma.

Marty Brashem: Well, there were a few. There were mostly retail businesses. There were a few that had clothing stores. There were a few that had pawnshops. Uh, there were, uh, the Simon family was in the scrap metal business, as the Sussman family was. And then there was Floyd Lampkin. He had a surplus store and oh, let me think the waxes, they ended up with a rather large, surplus or surplus steel or steel steel business, where they sell, sell steel products. And I would say there were a few others in miscellaneous latest businesses. So, probably you know, I don't know about numbers, but I'm just thinking offhand of who was in various businesses in Tacoma and Pipe.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Was that another one?

Marty Brashem: Pardon?

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: The Rosens?

Marty Brashem: Yes. Oh, I didn't think about them. They were in the they had the plumbing business. Yes. They had a very large business. Forgot about them.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Do you have any sense as to why there were so many? I mean, okay, let's just say whatever, a dozen or so Jewish businesses. Was it just an opportunity? Was it the inability to get jobs elsewhere? Any sense of that?

Marty Brashem: Well, I think it's a little bit of everything. I think that, you know, when it comes the technology Today and the technology 60 and 70 years ago. There's there is something different. And most, most of these people, not all of them. Some of them had a college education, some did not. And it was their opportunity to make a living. And it's different today because there was you'd start a small business, and you'd try to survive. And in most cases, these people worked hard, they worked put in many, many hours a week, and they earned a living and scrounged out of business. What else could I say?

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: What was the reaction from the rest of the community towards the Jewish businesses? Were they well supported by the rest of the community?

Marty Brashem: Well, that's a I don't have the slightest idea. I know that if people needed plumbing supplies, they went to Rosen, and if they needed other supplies, they needed retail. They went to the retail clothing stores downtown. And I suppose a lot of them went to pawn shops to pawn their products. And the businesses were there, and they thrived.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Excellent. And what about any antisemitism? Did you experience any antisemitism?

Marty Brashem: Well, you always experience a little bit, but you have to ignore it and move along.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Okay. So Marty, I'm going to switch the direction a little bit. And I want to ask you a little bit more about your work and your business. So you went to work for Sussman. Tell me about. And you rose to a management position. What happened after that?

Marty Brashem: Well, what happened after that? In 1981, Mr. Sussman sold the business to a Portland firm, Acme Trading and Supply. And it was required that I take a five-year contract to consummate the sale. After a year and a half, I did not care for the new management. And I resigned from the business and started my own business, started brokering a little bit of scrap metal through some of the clients I knew in Asia, in Taiwan and Korea, Japan, etcetera. And was brokering that. And, in 1988, Jo dy and I. With some friends of ours, we took a trip to Europe. And my son Marvin, who had another job, asked if he'd want to come in, if he was interested in, uh, if he would like to answer the phone for me. I said, Sure, that'd be great. And when we came home, we enjoyed our relationship together, and, um, and I wanted I was always interested in importing some products from Asia to sell to steel mills in the country. So I hired a retired Purchasing agent from Bethlehem Steel. And we started importing graphite electrodes, some of which were from Europe. And then I went to Asia. I spent quite a bit of time finding people there and eventually developed a relationship with some people in Beijing, and started importing products from Asia. And that business has grown over the years. And, uh, unfortunately, my son Mark has become ill recently and had to retire. So my youngest son, Marvin, is now the sole owner of that business, which has become rather large.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Wow. Good. Good for you. That's good. What do you think about that? The fact that, you know, you were able to start this business and it's grown.

Marty Brashem: Well, it just happened to work out. So you don't know. I just enjoyed what I did.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Excellent.

Marty Brashem: And I still enjoy life.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Great. And are you personally still involved in the business at all?

Marty Brashem: No, I retired. I turned it over to them a few years ago.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Got it. You mentioned you graduated from the UW.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Right. What was your major?

Marty Brashem: Economics.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Got it. Okay. Nice. Okay. What else do you want to tell me about your life? Well, you have my undivided attention. What am I missing here?

Marty Brashem: All I can say is, I was very fortunate to meet to marry a wonderful person, and we had a wonderful life. And as I say, we raised five wonderful children. They're all excellent people. Joni and I, unfortunately, she passed away about six months ago. And she'd been quite ill with dementia and other physical problems. And we have ten grandchildren, all of whom are spread around the country and actively employed individually from age 25 to age 38. And two great-grandchildren, one of whom was born, ironically, the same morning that Joni passed away. And so she's just six months old. So we have the two great-grandchildren and have a wonderful family. We've done a fair amount of traveling. We've seen a lot of good things, and I've had a wonderful life. And I still and I'm still having a wonderful life.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Good for you.

Marty Brashem: I have my son and my two great-grandsons. My two grandchildren are bringing dinner over tonight. So, how much better could it be?

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Excellent. Tell me a little bit more about Joni. Where was she born? And I know you.

Marty Brashem: Joni was also born in Los Angeles. She was born May 13th, 1931, and her parents came back up to Seattle. Her maiden name was Flax. Cass. And, uh, there is also a family that has been from Seattle for many, many years. Her mother was born in Brooklyn, and her father was born, in England on the whatever the river is on the Tyne, where they have the coal mines. And he came to the United States, I think, in 1906 or something like that. And there was a wonderful family. Unfortunately, Joni's brother was an Air Force pilot, and his plane crashed, and he was killed when he was 28 years old. And so the Flaxes were that was a very tragic situation for them. And, we've just had a good life. I don't know what else to say.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Excellent, excellent. Well, Marty, this has been a pleasure. I appreciate you filling me in on your life and a little bit about Joanie's life and the Tacoma Jewish community. It's all important for the Washington State Jewish Historical Society to capture all of this information, because it's all part of our Jewish heritage in this state.

Marty Brashem: Right.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: You know, we mustn't we don't have a Jewish newspaper anymore, unfortunately. So we're missing a lot of the.

Marty Brashem: Newspapers seem to be hard to come by anymore.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Exactly, exactly.

Marty Brashem: Well, you're very welcome. It's very nice to meet you. And I wish you well.

Cynthia Flash-Hemphill: Thank you so much. We're. I'm going to hit the stop record right now. Bear with me a second.