

Sakowitz: A Legend in Houston Retail

By Johnny Zapata

This story begins in 1886, thousands of miles away in the Ukrainian town of Korostyshiv in the Russian Empire, when Leebe Shaikovich, like many others before and after him, left his family behind to immigrate to the United States. His arrival exemplified the changing immigration patterns at the end of the nineteenth century, when newcomers from Southern and Eastern Europe increased. Comprised mostly of Catholic and Jewish immigrants, this new wave followed the earlier one generally made up of Protestants from Northern Europe. Like many among the huddled masses that boarded ships in the Old World bound for the New World, Leebe's name was changed when officials processed him on arrival in New York City. Because the immigration officer could not read Cyrillic Russian, he invented the name Louis Sakowitz — the name Leebe would be known by in America.¹

Before long, Louis was “proselyted” in New York by a group soliciting immigrants to come to Galveston, Texas. Not only was Galveston the “Pearl of the Gulf Coast” with a bustling economy, it also had a synagogue. Thus enthused, Louis boarded yet another ship, this time headed for Texas. Robert Sakowitz recalls his grandfather Tobias saying that his father and brother Samuel came to America first and worked as peddlers, before Louis sent for his wife, Leah, and their other children: Simon, Rebecca, and Tobias.² Upon landing at the Port of Galveston, the Sakowitz family could



Tobias Sakowitz (seated) helped establish the family business. His son Bernard (left) and grandson Robert (right) carried on the retail legacy.

Photo courtesy of Robert Sakowitz.

not imagine the impact that they and their descendants would have on their new home.

Immigrants commonly recall the first years in a new place as extremely difficult. Many have unfavorable living arrangements that include living in multifamily households. They work odd jobs that they would have never done back home or depend on assistance from fellow immigrants to make ends meet. Others simply give up and return home, disillusioned by the emp-

ty promise of the American dream. The Sakowitz family initially followed a similar trajectory. For example, Louis peddled bananas for some time; in Galveston he worked in the city's cotton mills, but due to physical difficulties, he left the job and returned to peddling.³ Later, hoping to settle in an area with other Jewish families, Louis used his family's savings to buy property on the mainland and relocated to a Jewish community in Dickinson, Texas. Yet due to financial issues, the commune failed; things were so bad that at one point all they had to eat were sweet potatoes. With money Leah obtained pawning her prized candlesticks, the family was able to return to Galveston.

In Galveston, Louis and his son Samuel opened a small store near the Galveston Wharves; Simon and Tobias worked in other stores around the city. While they worked, they lived at home and paid their mother room and board. Rather than using it to live on, Leah set aside this money until her sons were ready to go into business.⁴ Finally, in 1902 they opened the first Sakowitz Brothers store in Galveston at 2113 Market Street, kick-starting what would be nearly nine decades of business. As the store prospered, Sakowitz Brothers expanded into a booming Houston, opening its first Houston store in 1911 at 308 Main Street, near the corner of Preston and Main.⁵ While Simon tended to the smaller Houston store, Tobias ran the larger Galveston operation.

As the Sakowitz family established roots in their new country, they welcomed newborns and sadly lost other loved ones. In 1915 Leah passed away, followed by Louis a few



Sakowitz opened its first family-owned department store site in 1951. The Art Moderne store at Main and Dallas, designed by architect Alfred C. Finn, became an iconic landmark for upscale Houston shoppers until it closed in 1990. Today, the building remains as a parking garage.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Alfred C. Finn Collection, MSS0019-1538.



Tobias Sakowitz (left) and Simon Sakowitz (right) operated the first Sakowitz Brothers store in Galveston from 1902 to 1915.

Photo courtesy of Robert Sakowitz.

years later in 1919. Both Sakowitz brothers married and began families of their own. Tobias married Matilda Littman of Galveston and had two sons, Alexander and Bernard. Simon married Clara Bowsky of New Orleans and had two daughters.⁶ Their sister Rebecca married Max Henry Nathan, who was in the menswear business as well, and they too had two children. Additionally, Rebecca became involved in Houston civic life and helped found the Houston Humane Society. All three of them left Galveston and relocated to Houston. Their eldest brother, Samuel, also married but stayed in Galveston, where he passed away in 1926 at the age of fifty.

The 1900 Storm is seen as a turning point in the region's history as Galveston was decimated and the intense rebuilding process began. Houston, by comparison, survived the storm relatively unscathed. When the stronger 1915 Storm hit, Galveston was better prepared with a new seawall and a higher elevation. Nevertheless, this storm also caused the city extensive damage and reinforced the economic migration already happening from Galveston Island to its rapidly expanding neighbor on the mainland.

Feeling that Galveston was not going to reclaim its prominence, and that Houston's growth provided greater economic opportunity, the Sakowitz brothers closed the Galveston store after the 1915 Storm. Sakowitz consolidated the Galveston and Houston operations into a single, larger store in 1917, occupying three floors at a new location at the corner of Main and Preston in the Kiam Building, named for Ed Kiam, the building's former owner, who previously ran a men's clothing store at the location. Sakowitz Brothers remained there until 1929.⁷ Though at this point Sakowitz Brothers still focused on selling men's apparel and had expanded into boys' clothing, it had several competitors around the city and had not yet grown into the large business most Houstonians remember. In 1927 they bought a piece of land on Main and Walker in hopes of building a new store at that location.

As Houston and its downtown area continued to boom, a battle emerged between civic leaders Jesse Jones and Ross Sterling as to how Houston should continue to develop —

either north to south along Main Street or east to west following the bayou along Texas Avenue. To further his goals Jones decided to construct the Gulf Building on Main Street. Finished in 1929, it remained the tallest building in Houston for decades to come. Though Jones knew of the Sakowitz brothers' intention to build a new location on Main Street not far from his new building, he persuaded them to relocate to the Gulf Building instead by providing them with favorable leasing terms. The deal included five floors of space with furniture and fixtures included so that they could invest their money in inventory rather than furnishing the store. Even through the difficult economic times of the Great Depression, Sakowitz Brothers experienced considerable growth. It could be argued that the move to the Gulf Building, the favorable leasing terms that left them debt-free, and their new ability to extend credit lines to reputable clients going through hard times allowed Sakowitz Brothers to keep its doors open when many businesses around them closed permanently. Added to this was the fact that Houston was not affected by the Depression to the same extent as other cities, particularly those on the East Coast.

The new store with 60,000 square feet of space at Main and Rusk opened April 15, 1929, and kicked off with a grand fete that anticipated 25,000 in attendance. During this first day, no transactions were to be conducted; the sole purpose was to exhibit the new store to the city.⁸ As guests walked into the store, they were welcomed by beautiful art deco chandeliers, tall columns, and glass showcases displaying the goods the store offered. A grand staircase led them from the main floor to the mezzanine and the other floors. The additional square footage featured new departments, many of



After closing the Galveston store, Sakowitz Brothers consolidated the Galveston and Houston operations, moving into the Kiam Building in 1917 and remaining there until 1929. Even though the store specialized in men's clothing, it also had a boys' department.

Photo courtesy of Robert Sakowitz.



Even though Sakowitz started as a men's clothing store, it expanded into a family store in 1929. The Main Street store that opened in 1951 dedicated a floor to women's needs in beautiful displays such as this one in the millinery department.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Alfred C. Finn Collection, MSS0019-1578.

which were "leased operations" although they were all under the Sakowitz name. The store included a "shoe room" in the mezzanine, with the second floor dedicated to men's clothing, the third to women's apparel, and the fourth to boys'.⁹

Bernard Sakowitz remembered the retail space, saying, "It was a beautiful store, beautiful by design, so beautiful that even the articles in the newspapers...said it looked like a bank. It was so beautiful it didn't look like a store. People would be afraid to go into it because they would think the merchandise would have to be too expensive to support an institution that looked like that."¹⁰ This image helped build Sakowitz's reputation as a store with high-end goods. Sakowitz Brothers continued to occupy the first five floors of the Gulf Building for more than two decades.¹¹

Parallel to the store's growth and new-found recognition, a new generation of the Sakowitz family was born. Bernard, Tobias' son, married Ann Baum in 1933. Together they had two children, their daughter Lynn and their son Robert. As World War II broke out, Bernard enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force and relocated the family to San Angelo, Texas, until the war ended, and they returned to Houston.

Both Robert and Lynn remember working at the Sakowitz store once they were old enough. Robert began working in the store from the age of nine and felt that being the boss's son he had to prove himself to other employees by giving 150% to everything he did.¹² In a *Vanity Fair* interview, Lynn recalled a memorable experience working as a salesgirl in the pre-teen department, "'How do you think it looks?' this girl asked me after she tried something on in the dressing room. I thought, 'Should I lie and make the sale, or tell her

the truth?' I said, 'It doesn't do anything for you.' Then I brought out some things, and she loved them, and then people started to come and ask for me. I learned then that being honest and truthful was the way to go."¹³ These early experiences gave the siblings an appreciation and sense of responsibility for the business they would later inherit.

In 1949 the Sakowitz family's decades-long dream of having their own department store building was consummated with the groundbreaking of their new downtown location. After two years of construction Sakowitz moved to its new building on the corner of Main and Dallas in February 1951. The spacious 225,000-square-foot Art Moderne style store became the symbol of high-end fashion in the city, and the Sakowitz organization took over the previously leased departments like shoes, millinery, and women's apparel. The five-story building was designed by Alfred C. Finn, the same man who designed the Gulf Building and many of Jesse Jones's projects. Its marble-clad exterior was only a teaser to what lay inside, "a shoe department with a mural depicting exuberant tropicals worthy of Palm Beach; an epicure counter brimming with delicacies, most notably boxes of luscious Sakowitz chocolates; the intimate apparel shop stocking lingerie and corsets; a bridal salon arrayed like a theater set; the accessory bar for mid-century Lucite and leather handbags; the Coronet Shop for fine ladies' sportswear; an oak-paneled Red Coach Room for gentlemen's accoutrements; a fabric shop boasting the latest textiles and Vogue and McCall's patterns; and a toy shop with its own Tom Thumb Theatre for screening kiddie films while parents shopped."¹⁴

These fresh and unique offerings reflected Bernard's new



The exterior of Sakowitz stores were impressive, but the interior ambiance and offerings drew customers there to shop. One of the most popular areas included the Tastemaker Shop, adorned with a soaring mural and offering items such as specialty chocolates.

Photo courtesy of Robert Sakowitz.

strategy of sending out questionnaires to charge account customers asking their opinion on what goods and experiences Sakowitz should provide at its new store.¹⁵ The store with its open spaces, Gulf Coast colonial style Sky Terrace restaurant, and lavish decorations, yet with a minimalistic look, helped the shopper feel right at home. Clients did not just visit the store to buy but to live the Sakowitz shopping experience. As consumerism grew during the post-war decades, demand for higher end products increased with the growth of the city, and the 1111 Main Street location became the flagship store of a growing retail empire.

In 1956 Sakowitz opened its second location as one of the anchor stores at the newly built Gulfgate Mall in southeast Houston, the largest shopping center in the region at the time. The following year Bernard became president of the business, and under his leadership the store expanded to other locations around the city, including the colonial-style Sakowitz store at the corner of Westheimer and Post Oak. Opened in 1959, the store made Sakowitz the first retailer to open in an area that became the heart of Houston's retail industry with the addition of the Galleria a decade later. These new stores followed the long-standing tradition of top merchandise and a first-class customer experience. Given the city's rapid expansion, the new customers were increasingly suburban. This spurred the opening of additional stores in areas far from the Houston downtown, such as locations at Nasa Road 1, Town & Country Village, and Champions Road, with smaller shops in the Shamrock Hilton and Four Seasons Hotels.



The Sky Terrace dining room, designed with a Gulf Coast Colonial flair, treated diners to periodic fashion shows and popular menu items. Some of the restaurant's recipes, like the shrimp salad, can still be found online.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Alfred C. Finn Collection, MSS0019-1606.



Many family members accompanied young brides to the Bridal Salon, hoping to find the perfect dress for the perfect day. The store could also fulfill the needs of the entire wedding party. Although Sakowitz was a high-end store, it offered some dresses suitable to a middle-income budget as well.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Alfred C. Finn Collection, MSS0019-1583.

In 1968, Bernard's son, Robert Sakowitz, became executive vice president and general merchandise manager, having launched the first top European designers boutiques in America. Acquiring White & Kirk, Sakowitz began operating its first out-of-town store in Amarillo, Texas, in 1969 and opened another in Scottsdale, Arizona, in 1974. Elected president in 1975, Robert continued the company's expansion to Dallas, Texas, in 1981; Midland, Texas, in 1982; and Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1984. Sakowitz extended its offerings and experiences such as fine fabrics, a fine wine department, the first ready-to-wear French and Italian couture in-store boutiques, themed annual festivals with imported goods and visits from world-renowned figures. It had extravagant seasonal catalogues, which offered such items as "The Gift of Knowledge" from celebrities, "The Gift of Health," and even a "life size replica of Rome's Trevi Fountain...plus being bathed in diamonds."¹⁶

The Houston economy remained heavily dependent on oil, and the city fell on hard times with an oil bust in the mid-1980s. The effects were deep and reverberated across every sector of the Houston economy, leading to more than 225,000 lost jobs, wide-spread foreclosures, and bank failures.¹⁷ Given that Sakowitz had expanded into cities linked to the oil industry, such as Tulsa, Midland, and Amarillo, Sakowitz's sales in those locations also declined due to the oil bust. Robert Sakowitz explained, "One of the strategies

we employed [in our expansion] was to follow the natural resource industry...We would go to places we thought were recession proof."¹⁸

The hard economic times, coupled with growing competition from other department stores and the banking concerns and failures in Texas, led the store to file for bankruptcy in 1985. An investment from Australian developer L. J. Hooker helped Sakowitz reorganize and emerge in 1987, consolidating with New York's Bonwit Teller and B. Altman, but Wall Street 1989 crises forced L. J. Hooker to liquidate its entire \$2.5 billion portfolio, including all the Sakowitz stores, in the summer of 1990.

In the words of an August 1990 *Houston Chronicle* article, "Sakowitz as Houstonians knew it ended a long time ago, but it officially ended last Saturday night, when the store at Westheimer and Post Oak shuttered its doors after the last day of the last sale. Look for the Red Dots for Special Bargains, the signs had said, but exactly where are Houstonians

to look for new memories? What will replace the tea room's shrimp, chicken and fruit salad plate? The spicy little cheese straws? The turkey Mornay? Where will their college students cut their retail teeth during Christmas vacations? Where will the next generation of brides choose their dresses? And as grandmas, the christening dresses? Melancholy. That's how one employee described the mood. Not bitter. Not sweet. Just melancholy."¹⁹

Sakowitz no longer graces our shopping areas or the sheets of Houston newspapers where since the early 1900s, they placed daily ads. The downtown location on Main is now a white-marble parking garage. Although younger Houstonians may not know the Sakowitz name or understand the deep significance the stores held for those who shopped there in its heyday, it was the place where the earlier generations purchased their first tuxedos, their wedding dresses, their first high-end garments, or where they enjoyed dining at the Sky Terrace. For those Houstonians, they still carry fond memories of the store as a national fashion innovator and local cultural icon.

Johnny Zapata is a graduate of the University of Houston Honors College with degrees in political science, history, and Spanish. A former intern at *Houston History*, he was awarded a Fulbright to teach in Turkey for year and has received a Thomas R. Pickering Fellowship to attend graduate school upon his return.