



Ruth Budish



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Interviewer: Chad Comello
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Transcriber: Elizabeth Ceisel

Introduction

Ruth Budish has lived in Morton Grove for 52 years. She is originally from Des Moines, Iowa, and grew up during the Depression. After attending the University of Minnesota, Ruth moved to Chicago in 1950, living in the Near North neighborhood and working as a secretary. She met her husband, Lou, a direct mail production manager, in a bowling group for Jewish singles, and they married two and a half months later. After raising two boys, Ruth went back to work for a technology company before retiring. Now 89, Ruth works out at the gym daily and volunteers for the Morton Grove library, senior center, and historical society.

In this interview, Ruth talks about being a young working woman in the 1950s, her travels to Europe, and how her Morton Grove neighborhood has changed over the years. She also shares memories of her father, Irving I. Erbstein, in honor of the 100th anniversary of the United States' entry into the First World War. Irving's service in the war included taming wild horses for the cavalry and transporting messages between generals using a motorcycle with a sidecar. On his way overseas his ship was torpedoed and he was stranded on a lifeboat before being rescued.

RB: Ruth Budish

Q: Question asked by interviewer, Chad Comello

RB: My dad, Irving Erbstein, was born in 1896, which means that he was probably about 21 years old when he joined the army. I am not aware if there was such a thing as him being drafted or whether he volunteered. But he was born in Lincoln, Nebraska. He was the middle child of five boys, two of which were born in England. He was the first one to have been born in the United States, so he was truly a citizen of the United States when World War I came around. I do not know about the first two, when they became citizens, assuming that they did.

From what he told me in many years, he did certain things while he was in the army that I found very intriguing. The first one of which was after his basic training—where this was I don't know—he was sent down to either Arizona or New Mexico, somewhere in that area, and spent some time taming wild horses, which were used in those days for the cavalry. There were whole units of the army that were cavalry.

From there—and this is leaping from place to place because I don't know what may have happened in between—he was sent overseas. On his way there, his ship was torpedoed and he ended up in a lifeboat for about four days. Fortunately they were fairly close to the English coast, and they were picked up and taken there. How long he was in England I don't know, but he ended up in France, and he seemed to have progressed from horses to motorcycles, because his job was to carry messages along the front lines between the various generals

for the various armies. With him was always a partner, so there were always two of them that went together. He was the fortunate one. He twice had his motorcycle blown out from under him, but fortunately was not injured I guess. Also he lost two of his partners who were killed, so he was very fortunate. And that is really all I know about his army life in World War I. What rank he had I don't know, but I assume he was just a regular GI. He was certainly noncommissioned. That's about the extent of my knowledge. The one thing I do know was, from knowing him as my father and for myself as I grew up and as an adult, this was not what I would have thought that he ever did in the army. Of course he was young, but it just doesn't sound like the man that I knew at all. He was just a very quiet person, although he loved people.

Later on, when he got older, he spent a great deal of his time going to what we called in those days the "old people's home." He would entertain them and talk to them, all of whom were in someway disabled or old. Actually most weren't older than him. Most of the time he was maybe ten years older than the people that he was dealing with. Besides that, his other main thing was he loved children. He loved little children, big children too, but preferably little children. Both my parents were older. My mother was 37 when I was born, which was considered old in those days to have a child.

Anyway, I come from Des Moines, Iowa. After the war my father migrated there and met my mother and so forth. After my schooling, when I came back to Des Moines from college, all of my friends were already married, although I was

the grand age of 20. As I had no contemporaries to talk to, nobody to play around with, I moved to Chicago when I was 21, and I have been in the area ever since. I lived 7 years in Near North in Chicago until I married in 1957. We lived in West Rogers Park until our move to Morton Grove in 1965, so I've been in Morton Grove for about 52 years. When my husband passed away 11 years ago, I started volunteering, which is what I've been doing now. I volunteer at the Morton Grove Public Library and the Morton Grove Senior Center. I became a member of the Historical Society and all of a sudden found myself a board member, doing things I had never done before. Believe me, I was so at a loss of what to do and what to say because I had never been involved in that sort of world. I left the board this year, but will continue as a docent at the Museum house.

Q: Tell me about your childhood. What do you remember about being a kid in Des Moines?

RB: Well, I had an older brother, Lou, who was in World War II by the way. My father World War I, his son World War II. He was in the army, commissioned as second lieutenant. Then he went civilian and discovered that wasn't for him, so he went back into the reserve and he stayed there until he was approximately 80 years old when the army said he should retire. He finished his reserve as a full colonel, although he had taken all the tests and paperwork to be a general, but at the wrong time, because the army had decided they didn't need any more generals.

I can tell you what we thought was a rather interesting incident. When my brother retired, they had a big party for him in Des Moines and my husband and I drove there. It was in the wintertime. It was cold and miserable and when we went to park the car, we had no idea where to park it. There was this man standing there who had a stripe down his leg, and so we decided he must be someone who tells the guests where to park. So we stopped him and asked him for directions and he told us where to park. Much to our chagrin, when we got into the party he turned out to be my brother's commanding general. The stripe down the pants was because it was an army uniform, which we didn't realize.

Q: As a kid what do you remember doing?

RB: Well, as a kid, I was a pretty smart kid, I guess. I was born in November, and September was the cutoff for when you could start kindergarten. There was a little boy that lived next door whose father was our family doctor. He was one week older than me, also born in November. His mother and father got him into school by his taking a test, and he got to start kindergarten at the age of four. My mother said, "If he can do it, my daughter can do it." So I took the test and I started at four, which made me graduating high school at 17 instead of 18. Other than that, my parents were older when they had me and the Depression was only a year away. I was born in '28 and the Depression started in '29. So when I was growing up there were a lot of things I didn't have or get to do. I couldn't go to

camp; we couldn't afford it. We were the bottom part of middle class. We had a house because we rented in Des Moines. That was very common. Everybody lived in a house; nobody lived in an apartment there. So, as I said, there were a lot of things I could not do or have.

My brother was almost five years older and there was not too much connection between the two of us. When he went into the service in World War II and basic training and then came home, we did the one thing that we were known to do together: we chased each other around the dining room table. It was our way of saying "Hi." Actually when I got old enough for boys to be interested, my brother would not let me join his friends downstairs in the rec room. In his mind I was too young, but his friends would say, "Oh no she isn't."

He came back from the army and because of the GI bill he went down to Georgia Tech and had his complete college paid for. He had had two quarters of college before he went in the service. He had an interesting situation too. He tried to volunteer. There was a draft, of course, but he decided to volunteer and wanted the air corps. During his physical they said he was 20/40 with his eyesight, so they wouldn't take him in the air force. When he was drafted, which wasn't very long after that, he ended up in the engineering corps. His eyes tested perfect from the first time he had a physical in the army, and were perfect all the time after that. So we sort of felt that perhaps that saved his life, because he did get overseas, and when he got overseas it was early 1945. France was already in our hands and he was stationed in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Nobody in his

group had seen action, so when they're marching on the way to somewhere else out of Prague, they come in contact with a big bunch of German soldiers and they were really frightened. The Germans took one look at him and put their guns down. Why? It was the 9th of May—V.E. Day. They didn't know that at that time, but the Germans did. Also before Lou went overseas he had the opportunity to either go to West Point or become an officer or some other training. He decided to become an officer. The company that he was attached to went overseas. Not one single one of them survived. So here again he was lucky, very fortunate.

I went on to school, to Iowa State for a year then to the University of Minnesota. Didn't quite graduate, but the college education I have was because of the GI Bill. I wouldn't have been able to go if he hadn't been paid for, because he came first in our family and I came second. And then I came to Chicago.

Q: What did you study in school?

RB: Well, Iowa State was a college not a university at the time, which means it had a very limited group of choices, classes. So what I was aiming for at that time was dietetics, to be a dietician. There wasn't too much for girls, to say the least, so I had had enough of Iowa State. That's where my brother had his first two quarters. It was close to home and so it was less expensive. But I wanted to go away to school. I wanted to go to Wisconsin; we couldn't afford it. In those days at Iowa State, the tuition for a quarter was \$25. At the University of Minnesota

where I ended up, it was very expensive: it was \$75 a quarter. But they allowed me in, where Wisconsin would not allow me in unless I lived there, unless I came from there. I tried to establish residency there and it didn't work. When I finished at Minnesota I ended up at home in Des Moines for a short time and then I came to Chicago. And I worked. I was on my own, had a roommate, and worked for \$3 an hour. Paid all my own expenses, my apartment, my food, my transportation, everything. But \$3 or \$4 whatever it is was a fair amount then as money had a great deal more value than it would today.

Q: When would this have been that you moved to Chicago?

RB: January of '50. The first month that I was there I came down with bronchitis with a temperature of 106. My roommate had left to go on vacation. So I got through that. My brother happened to be coming through Chicago at the time and stopped in to see me. But I became very self-sufficient.

Q: So you were a working woman in the 1950s when that wasn't very common.

RB: Very true.

Q: What was that like?

RB: Interesting. I was a secretary, and most secretaries were women. Salary was not much to speak of. I had a job when I came here because my uncle who lived in Chicago got me the job. Then I took another job which paid a little more, and then another one which paid more, so I got a lot of experience. I ended up working for attorneys. When I got married I was working for attorneys, so I was making a little bit more, although my family never thought I made as much as I should have, but that's the way it was.

I married in 1957 and quit in January of 1960 when I was seven months pregnant. Then I spent fourteen years at home taking care of two children, bored out of my skull, because I wasn't used to that sort of thing. And I was not the typical mother. I did not talk about my children, and I got tired of hearing about everybody else's. So I went back to work, and I worked for an attorney.

In between, by the way, in 1954 my girlfriend and I, who was from Milwaukee, had traveled together down to Florida on vacation, and while we were there we decided we wanted to go to Europe. We were both 26, single, and we spent a whole year figuring out where to go and how much it would cost. We spent altogether three months away—two and a half months on the continent, and the rest of the time was back and forth by ship. They had planes that flew, but it wasn't the usual thing that was done. You still traveled by ship at six, seven days across. We were on the *Christopher Columbus*, which was a brand new ship, and its sister ship was the *Andrea Doria*. This is way before your time. In

1956 the *Andrea Doria* was sunk by another well-known ship, the *Stockholm*.
The other ship didn't sink, but the *Andrea Doria* did.

We were four girls who wanted to go to Europe, and then the two of us decided that four would be too difficult. It was too many people deciding where to go at this moment and whatever. So the other two girls came by themselves, but we met at various places on the continent. We went from Gibraltar to Vienna and back, stopping at all the different places, which was wonderful. In those days it cost me altogether \$1,400. It was \$400 to go back and forth on the ships. Of course it was steerage. We had four bunks in the cabin, but we didn't care. It was wonderful. Which is why I did so much traveling later on, because I enjoyed the traveling.

Q: You got the itch.

RB: Oh yes, I've been all over the world now.

Q: So when you moved to Chicago in the 1950s, what was it like then and how is it different from now?

RB: Well, as I said, everything cost less. I don't know how I would describe it exactly because we were not the norm. There were a lot of people like us, but we were not really the norm. I was 28 when I got married. That was very late in those

days. In fact my mother had decided I was going to be an old maid by that time. So I was living in a different situation than other people of my same age might have. But we had fun. I couldn't do much. I took the same lunch every single day, particularly before we went to Europe because I had to save money in order to go. Then when I got married it was different, of course. I always lived in apartments. When we married we moved to West Rogers Park and I thought I was going miles and miles away, which I was because I lived in Near North, near the Lincoln Park Zoo, in that area.

Transportation was available everywhere, so I didn't drive. Because primarily in Des Moines between the end of college and coming to Chicago, I took driving lessons with my father and my brother. I had a permit. We were driving one day and we were going to the drug store where they usually went, which was on a little bit on a hill, and you parked diagonally, not horizontally. I had a couple of kids behind me who were, shall we say, on my tail. I turned into the drugstore and my car jumped a foot-high curb into the soda fountain of the pharmacy. For years afterwards, the people who owned it, who were people my mother knew, every time she went in there they used to thank her because they had wanted to modernize the soda fountain and couldn't afford it. Now they could afford it because they had insurance, so I was sort of like their angel in a way. But anyway, this is why I didn't drive in Chicago and I didn't drive until after I was married. By that time I was 37 years old and had a couple of kids, so that was very late to get a license.

I really feel like I sort of had different phases of my life. There was school, there was Chicago, there was marriage, there were children. Then after the kids were grown, my husband got sick and I spent the last three years 24/7 with him. Then just three and a half years ago I lost my older son, who had had all kinds of problems, and that was another phase. So all of a sudden, when my husband passed away, I started with the volunteering because I had nothing... You can't be 24/7 with a situation like that and then have it taken away from you. It's like, what do you do now? So I came to the senior center at Morton Grove and saw the social worker and said that I want a group. There must be a group who had the same problems I do so they can help me with what I do next. We talked for a while and she said, "You don't need that. Go volunteer. Try the library first." Which is what I did. That's why I've been here for eleven years. So that was another phase and that's about up to where we are now.

Q: How did you meet your husband?

RB: Bowling. My two roommates at that time kicked me out of the apartment one day and said, "Go do something. You aren't social enough." So I decided to try bowling. I bowled a little bit, and I got on his team. The whole bowling group were young people, comparatively young, who were single, and out of that group I think there were at least five marriages, one of which was mine. My husband Buddy and I really had nothing in common except for the fact that we were born

in the same year, and our religion, because this was through the temple in Near North that we bowled. But we found something together, because he was a little older than I was, same year but a little older. I had lived with girls for so long and felt that if you can live with girls, you can live with a man. Because it's much harder to live with girls, I'll tell you. So we just meshed, and that was it. We met in September of '56 and married in '57, but we never really dated. Only twice before we were engaged.

Q: Two dates?

RB: Two dates. But we saw each other every week at the bowling and we would go out with the whole group and have something afterwards. He would usually drive me home because I had no car. It made it easier, so we were sort of together but not in the normal way that you would with dating and dating. So we really were engaged for only two and a half months before we got married. And in that two and a half months we only missed one day of seeing each other. He lived with his mother about four or five miles away from where I live, but we saw each other every day.

During our engagement I went with him to visit his family in Cleveland, Ohio, where his brothers lived. We weren't there very long when I got a call from Des Moines to find out that my mother had had a heart attack. This meant that we had to scale down my wedding to just very close relatives. All the invitations

were out already and I had to call everybody and say, “I’m sorry, but we can’t have you.” We had a very small wedding in my brother’s home, and my mother was not allowed to go to the reception.

Q: So you had the ceremony close to home just so she would be able to come?

RB: Yes, in my brother’s house. My brother and his wife and two children lived only about four or five blocks away from my mother and father, so that was close. That was all the doctor would allow. So it wasn’t the wedding that I had expected, but these things happen. However, my aunt and uncle had given us a party the night before—what they usually call rehearsal party—which we didn’t have because there wasn’t any kind of rehearsal necessary. But they made that into a spectacle, practically, with fountains of champagne and big steaks for dinner and all this sort of thing. So we had our good time.

And then we honeymooned in New York. And I had an aunt and uncle in New York. My uncle was a very unusual man. He was probably about five feet tall. He was the youngest of my father’s brothers. I don’t know how much time was between the brothers, but he was not in World War I. He “rode the rails” during the Depression, like from place to place. He has some talent and he used to spend some of his time in the Catskills, which was very well known for entertainment up there. He ended up in New York and became a PR man and was a PR man for Revlon. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of it, but one of the

first quiz programs that was on TV was *The \$64,000 Question*, and there was a big scandal with that because they gave some answers to one of the contestants and so on. But that's where my uncle took us during our honeymoon, because he had to be there since Revlon was a sponsor of the program. He had to be there to make sure everything was going all right.

He had such a fascinating life. During World War II, not completely sure what he did, but we think he was a liaison man for the U.S. government—a spy perhaps, or something like that. But he was in China, he was in Africa, he was all over the world. He also prior to that time was a PR man for Batista in Cuba before Castro came in. I don't know if you've ever heard of Walter Winchell? Walter Winchell was an extremely famous columnist in New York but also in the whole country. He had written books and so forth, and he and my uncle were friends. When Castro came into power, he immediately put out word that were my uncle to set foot in Cuba, he was a dead man. One of the very famous nightclubs in Cuba was part of his doing. He really got around, to say the least. But as I said he was this little man, and I had a postcard from him from Africa one day that showed him with a bunch of pygmies—pygmies are little natives—he was down here, that's how small he was. Anyway, that's two wars that were involved with the family.

Q: So you get married, you're still in Chicago...

RB: Yes, until 1965.

Q: '65—that's when you moved to Morton Grove?

RB: And I thought he was taking me out into the hinterlands somewhere.

Q: Back then it was a lot less populated.

RB: Yes, well, it was because where we are located, where my house is, is just a half a block from Niles. It was unincorporated until that builder came along and built there, and that's when it became part of Morton Grove.

Q: Did you have kids at that time?

RB: Yes. My oldest had just turned five and my youngest was two and a half. And in those days, you sent them *out* to play. You didn't worry about them being out there by themselves—even my young one. So one day when my oldest was in kindergarten, I sent the other one out with his boy friend from next door to go outside and play. They were gone about fifteen minutes and came back in the house, I said, "What are you doing here? Get out." "I can't go, mommy, because there's a man in the backyard with a gun, says I have to go inside the house." And my eyes are open wide, and so I look back there and there's somebody on

his knees, in my backyard, with a gun, in a uniform. So I called Morton Grove police and I said, "What's going on?" "Well, your neighbor back there was just robbed." Just robbed about an hour and a half before? I guess they were waiting for him to come back or something, I don't know. But I was furious, like mother hen. When the man who was in the backyard finally came to my door, I let him have it. And I said, "Don't you ever do this to anyone again! If you're going to be in someone's backyard with a gun, in a family probably with young children, you come and knock on my door first, and *then* you go back there so I know what's going on." Never happened again.

What actually happened back there was the maid was at that house when it was robbed. They came to find out the maid was probably in on it. She claims they put her in a closet and told her not to leave there for an hour and then she could go next door and call the police, which is what she did. So by the time the police came to my house, at least an hour had passed since the house had been robbed, so why were they doing that?

I did not go back to work until my youngest was 11, so they were well able to take care of themselves. What I found out, though, was that a lot of things happened while I was working that I didn't know about. Like I was very upset when I realized, after I started at the library, I felt bad that they hadn't been to the library more often, because there's so much for them here, so much available. And my younger son looked at me—this was not that long ago, maybe a year ago when I mentioned this to him—he said, "Mom, we were at the library all the

time.” I said, “How did you get there?” because it’s three miles from where we live. He said, “We took our bikes.” I never knew it. You feel like you sort of got lost somewhere along the way.

Q: So what else do you remember about Morton Grove at that time?

RB: Well, we were in as I say an area that had just been built up, and everybody was new to the place. We were sort of in a ghetto. I say that with quotation marks around it. Because we lived on Lyons, and it goes a long block and it dead-ends a short block further. Cul-de-sacs were built opposite us. When we moved there, there was nothing but pheasants and animals across the street, and the synagogue that was there already. And a year later they built in the two cul-de-sacs. So you had all of that area, that was Lyons, and down Maple to the next street and that was 100 percent Jewish. Why? The synagogue was there. Which is one of the reasons why we have so many people living in the area now who are related to the church, which was the synagogue. The church is the St. Mary’s Knanaya Catholic Church. They are all part of the group that went from the Near East to India and lived there for a long time, and then migrated to the United States. All the women wear saris once they are of age to do so. And the men wear very strange-looking things. I saw one the other day that looked like he was ready for the swimming pool—weird-looking. Anyway, things were changing in the block itself. Now we are a complete mixture of people from everywhere, and

very few of us are original. So that's changed. Nice area. Of course it's well known: it's called Mortonaire. It has a title. That's what it's called. I have a small house, most of the houses are larger. But it didn't matter how big the house was; it was considered Mortonaire—considered a very, very nice neighborhood, and it still is. It's what's called in the real estate jargon: location, location, location. Now, it's well kept and so forth. The whole area is nice, but as I said the whole area has changed considerably.

Q: What kind of work did your husband do?

RB: That's a good question. I have to describe it I suppose. He was a production manager for direct mail businesses. All family-owned, so at the most there maybe were thirty, forty people in the organization. But his job was what you would call second to the top, the top were the owners. He did this all of his working life from the time he was sixteen. He moved from place to place because the first company he was at, and the one he was at the longest, went out of business. So he went to another one and did the same thing. With these huge machines that kick out thousands of advertising and that sort of thing in one day. So as a production manager it was quite a job. Then at the last one he worked for, the owners decided his job was too expensive, and at the age of 64 they let him go. He was too far along and too close to the retirement age of 65. He had the year of the money that he got from the government for having been let go. But he

never, ever, ever got over the fact that he was let go. He'd worked since he was sixteen. And he just couldn't handle it. I continued working. I worked until I was 70.

Q: Working for the lawyers?

RB: No, I worked for a company that sells the machine that cleans your audiobooks—RTI is the name of it. When I went back to work at the age of 45, nobody wanted me. I was considered too old. Today 45 would not have been considered old. I would go to places and try to get a job from people that did that—you know, that supplied workers, and look at their Rolodex. I could read it upside down and it would read “young” on it. So I went temporary. The first job I got temporary was only for about week and then I got a temporary position with RTI. They liked me and they bought me, which you had to do. They had to buy my contract with the temporary people. I worked for RTI for 25 years. But I had a rather unusual boss. Number one, he was six foot four and weighed about 350 to 400 pounds, and there was me at four foot nine. Anyway, he called me into his office one day when I was 65 I think. I was still working and I had no intention of quitting. And he said to me, “I want a five-year notice of when you plan to quit.” I was his secretary. He was the president and owner of the company. And five years later I walked in and said, “I'm quitting.” I didn't want to quit then, but my husband

needed me. He had too many doctors' appointments. But most of my working life was there.

Q: And you've been volunteering here ever since?

RB: I've been volunteering here. I volunteer at the senior center. I have been working out at the gym for 11 years. And I also as I said was on the board of the historical society, and I'm still involved with them, which is why I'm here. I'm still involved with them, except that I just could not stay on the board any longer. I felt that they needed people who were younger. I was too old. Because now I've got a year and four months until I reach my goal, which is 90. My father was 95. His mother was 96 when she died, so there's good genes sitting there. But working out has helped and I intend to continue. I just renewed my membership.

Q: That's great. So what have you learned over your life?

RB: What have I learned? Well, I've learned to be very self-sufficient. I thought all the time I was married that my husband got his way with most everything, until I found out long into my marriage that I was wrong. I was getting my way most of the time. What my husband did was when I had to quit work because I was pregnant—I had to quit work because I couldn't reach the typewriter anymore—he immediately handed over all the bills and the checkbook to me and never

again did he write out a check for anything in the house or utilities or anything. I handled all of it, which was very good because there were so many women in those days—particularly who would lose the husband—who find themselves not understanding how to do anything, how to take care of anything, how to handle anything, so that was very good in its way. It also gave me something to do.

Q: Anything else you'd like to share?

RB: I think I'm talked out.

Q: Well, I appreciate you taking the time.

RB: Thank you.