



Teresa James

Hruska's Bakery and Store

* * *

Date: June 2, 2023

Location: Hruska's Bakery and Store, Ellinger, TX

Interviewer: Evan Stern

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription, LLC

Length: 29 minutes 8 seconds

Project: Keepers of Kolaches

0:00:00

Evan Stern: But just to—oh, and I’ve got to record a damn backup here. And I’m recording, so they’re gonna hear me say—cussin right now. [laughs]

Teresa James: It’s not workin right?

Evan Stern: No, it’s fine. So just to test my levels, could you tell me your name and what you had for breakfast?

Teresa James: Teresa James, and nothing.

Evan Stern: You know, that is probably the most common answer that I get from people, is absolutely nothing. I figured there’s all these kolaches, you’d probably be—no? [laughs]

Kolached out, maybe? So, excerpts from this oral history interview may be shared on the *Gravy* podcast, which is a production of the Southern Foodways Alliance. Do we have your permission to use this tape on the *Gravy* podcast?

Teresa James: Yes.

Evan Stern: This is Evan Stern. I’m speaking today with Miss Teresa James at Hruska’s, in Ellinger, Texas. First of all, for the record, could you state for us your name and occupation?

Teresa James: Teresa James, and I am the owner of Hruska's Store & Bakery in Ellinger, Texas.

0:01:08

Evan Stern: No matter whom I’m talking with, I always like to start off by asking, could you describe for us your childhood home, and tell us about where you grew up?

Teresa James: I grew up in—I was born in Houston. At the age of 11, I moved into Ellinger with my grandma and grandpa. And, went to La Grange High School. Started baking when I was 11, and then just gone on from there.

Evan Stern: If you were to describe Ellinger and this region of Fayette County to someone who has never been here before, what would you say?

Teresa James: It’s a small community. It’s a Czech community, German people. Just—good people.

Evan Stern: Reaching back into your heritage and family history, could you tell me about where your people were from, and how they came to settle in Texas?

0:02:01

Teresa James: They came from Czechoslovakia, and I believe they came in across from Galveston. And that’s all I can tell you.

Evan Stern: That’s all you know? Do you know the circumstances they were leavin, or have you heard anything over the years about any of that stuff? No? It’s been a long time since then.

Teresa James: Well, my deal is is—I was raised by my grandmother, and I was 11. And when grandma’s doing family history at 11 years old, you don’t care. You don’t care! And now that you’re older and they’re gone, it’s too late. It’s too late.

Evan Stern: Yeah. There’s a lot of truth to that. Speaking of your family history, can you tell me about how, when, and why Hruska's got started?

Teresa James: Well, my grandfather, Frankie Hruska, his daddy was in business downtown in Main Street of Ellinger. He had a general mercantile store.

0:03:02

And then when he passed on, the two brothers took it over. And then the two brothers split, and my grandmother and my grandfather built this store, here. Back then, before Walmart and the big H-E-B came in, it was an old general store. You could buy dry goods here, all your groceries. People brought eggs in—fresh eggs—fruits, vegetables, and it was all sold here.

Evan Stern: When and what caused them to move here to Highway 71?

Teresa James: Family. Family issues. Two brothers not getting along; the wives can’t get along. You know, just family. It was time to split.

Evan Stern: But I imagine, too, that it made business sense to get here on the highway. Is there anything that you’ve heard about that?

Teresa James: When I was visiting grandma, and my grandparents, the highway used to only be two ways right here.

0:04:06

Two way, yeah—there, to Austin, and back, just one lane on each side. And that’s—they moved to the highway, and yeah, it was better for business for em.

Evan Stern: Do you remember around what year that would have been?

Teresa James: I think like ’48, ’50? In the fifties?

Evan Stern: I know you grew up around this being your family business and everything. What are some of the earliest memories you have of comin here to this place?

Teresa James: Well, now, we're just convenience—the snacks, and we have the kolaches. My grandma and grandpa didn't have the kolaches. They didn't bake in here. How it was is, some ladies baked at their homes and then on Fridays and Saturday, they would bring the kolaches over here.

0:05:03

Sunday they were closed. They would haul the kolaches over here and sell em. And we used to package em up in what you call a beer flat—you know, what 12-packs of beer comes I when they haul it, you know, deliver it—with the piece of wax paper. And cover it up with a piece of wax paper. That's exactly how they were sold here. And then, another thing is is too, we got like our items, our merchandise and everything, was always packed in cases. I mean, we sold cases of green beans, corn, feed, screws, hardware. We sold a lot of stuff.

Evan Stern: But do have like a favorite early childhood memory that was connected here?

Teresa James: Comin to grandma and grandpa's and bein able to get anything you wanted, because it was their store.

Evan Stern: That's a good memory.

0:06:00

You mentioned the kolaches. As I understand, the woman that you were first getting the kolaches from here was by the name of—

Teresa James: Krenek.

Evan Stern: Adolphine Krenek. What can you tell me about her, her kolaches?

Teresa James: I don’t remember that one as much. I don’t remember until Agnes Polasek. Because when I was 11, I didn’t want to work in the store, so my grandma made me go work. And so I went—it was across the street, the highway here, and I helped Miss Polasek bake. And then on Friday mornings and Saturday mornings, or when they would run out, my grandfather would go pick em up, and then they would bring em back over here. We used to sell em what they used to call a—we called them fryers, chickens. And chickens used to come like 24 in a case, and they were in these wax boxes, with the lids on em.

0:07:00

And they would take the lid—and I don’t know what size of lid it was—and we would wax it—I mean, lay it with paper towels on the bottom, and then you lay the wax paper on, and it would probably hold about four to six dozen in there. Then we would bring it to the store, and they had like a—I don’t know, I’d say almost like a trash can, turned it upside down, a basket or something, and that’s what that box set on. And then, it wasn’t no gloves back then. It was no worried about germs. Everybody just picked up what they wanted out of there. It was—it was just—

Evan Stern: And you lived to tell that, huh? Everyone lived to tell that just fine! But are there any stories that you can tell me about Miss Polasek?

Teresa James: Miss Polasek was a hardworkin lady. She had 13 children. And I don’t know, I just always had a good time with her. We could talk, and she’d bake, and we’d stay up late at night bakin, sometimes bake all night long.

0:08:06

Just—a lot of memories. I can remember the thing I hated the *most* when I went to her house is when she’d fix me a pressed ham sandwich, with mayonnaise and big old thick pieces of tomatoes on there. But to this day I wish I could have one.

Evan Stern: [laughs] Do you remember what specific tasks she would have you do for her, at 11?

Teresa James: I did everything. I rolled the cinnamon rolls. I filled the pi...kolaches. I made the pigs. I ran the oven. Greased. Prepared for the next day. Went and got the groceries for her across the street, from my grandma and grandpa, and hauled em back for her. I helped her, you know, wash clothes.

Evan Stern: But do you have like any guesstimate of like how many kolaches she was making for y'all each week back then?

0:09:01

Teresa James: I won't share that.

Evan Stern: You won't share that. No? Okay, that's fine. [laughs] If there is one that you can name, are there any important lessons she maybe taught you?

Teresa James: Structure. I think that's where I got it, too, from my grandparents. Structure, discipline. And the work ethic, to working. The drive. That's what I would say.

Evan Stern: Speaking of that work ethic and drive, I know you started with her when you were 11. What was the first job you ended up workin here, at the store?

Teresa James: Oh, I was workin already. I remember grandpa payin us 75 cents an hour. And I worked here when we were little. I mean, yes, I mean, we didn't *work-work*; I mean, we were

probably more aggravating—aggravated for the employees. Because you know, we were jackin around.

0:10:00

But running the marking gun, the different marking guns then. And riding around in the carts, pushing the carts. Puttin stuff in our baskets, then we’d have to unload em. So, I mean—we—we were here. And we—we were like, you can’t just stay at home. You have to go work.

Evan Stern: I know you ended up assuming a management position in 1995. Was there anything about this work that spoke to you, where you said, “You know what? I really *do* want to get more involved with this family business”?

Teresa James: Well, I worked here all through high school. When I got home from high school, we worked here. We didn’t close until about nine, ten at night. My grandpa—my grandma died, and then when my grandpa was doing not the best, and we put him in the nursing home, nobody else wanted it. None of the other family members wanted it. We didn’t bake in here at the time, and we weren’t—I wasn’t baking across the street anymore, because that’s when the new whatever law came in; you have to have a different place to bake than out of your home.

0:11:11

And, just thought it was a good thing. I had the opportunity to buy it. My family was good to me, you know, purchasing it. And, here we are.

Evan Stern: I know it was important to you to bring the kolaches back. First of all, when you were no longer allowed to have them here, do you have any memories of how the customers reacted, not havin access to the kolaches?

Teresa James: Well, no, I don’t really remember that. But, the highway wasn’t as busy as it is now. So it was mainly the locals. And then the locals could go buy from Miss Polasek now. So we still kind of baked, but it was just buying direct out of her house; it wasn’t coming through the store. And if, you know, my grandma would do some wheeling and dealings—if somebody called her and wanted some kolaches, my grandma would go pick em up, have them over here for the store, you know. But, I really don’t recall how that all happened.

0:12:08

Evan Stern: But you did take it upon yourself to build an in-house bakery once the laws changed. Could you tell me about everything that you had to do to get a bakery up and running here?

Teresa James: This store has been added onto three times. So, it was a smaller store. And I started off with one oven. Three of us, messin around in the kitchen. It was small. And I just—I’ve grew. I’ve grew over the years. And then as I got bigger I’d have to add on, and have to add on. This was my last remodel. Now I’ve got 9,000 square feet.

Evan Stern: Can you talk about how many kolaches you're probably—your people are probably bakin each day, and like how that schedule is for them?

0:13:00

Not willin to share, huh? [laughs]

Teresa James: I mean, I come in at one o’clock in the morning. The rest of the employees come in at three. I have one lady, Mary Vrazel, that’s worked for me about 32 years. She’s one of my girlfriends’ mothers. And she usually, when—she bakes two days a week, and she comes in

about one forty-five, two o’clock, twice a week, and helps me. She’s an elderly lady. But—and then at three o’clock, I’ve got five more during the week, and then I’ve got eight, on the weekends, that come in. And a lot of my girls have been with me a long time. I’ve got some that’s been with me 10, 15, 20 years.

Evan Stern: But you come in here close to one o’clock in the morning; do you still every now and then get back there in the bakery and help out?

Teresa James: I make the dough.

Evan Stern: So you yourself make the dough?

Teresa James: There’s only two people that make the dough. Mary has helped me, like I said, 32 years. Now she’s down to just two days a week. And I make the dough.

0:14:01

Then if I go on a little vacation, because now I can’t work Mary as much as I used to, I have one girl who worked for me when she was 14. And I have taught her kinda over the years. She’s a school teacher now. And she’ll help me if I decide to take off on a weekend or something like that—which isn’t very often; a couple times a year—and she’ll come in and bake for me. But, nobody else knows the recipe.

Evan Stern: I’m not going to ask about the recipe. But is there anything you can tell us about the process of what goes into making dough for so many—however many batches of kolaches you’re makin here?

Teresa James: Well, I use an 80-quart mixer. And I use about—I use one and a little bit more bag, 50-bag pound of flour. And—

Evan Stern: [laughs] That’s all right, that’s all right.

0:15:00

You've obviously made hundreds of thousands of kolaches in your lifetime, if not more. Looking back on all of your years of baking, is there a particular batch that you have made for someone that felt especially meaningful, maybe?

Teresa James: No, because I make all my batches the same. I mean, don’t get me wrong; sometimes there is incidents where you forget the sugar, and you gotta throw away a whole 80-quart bowl. But on an average, I just have my little pattern down, and I know what routine I have, when to put everything in, to try not to miss anything. But most of the batches are pretty consistent unless we have problems with the product.

Evan Stern: Can you tell me what kinds of flavors you sell here?

Teresa James: We got prune, cheese, poppy seed, apricot, pineapple, cherry, cream cheese, cream cheese cherry, cream cheese chocolate, cream cheese strawberry, cream cheese blueberry. A lemon.

0:16:10

We make cinnamon rolls with plain, pecans, raisins. We make a cream cheese strawberry roll that’s rolled up like a cinnamon roll. We make—pigs. We make the pigs. We have all different kinds of meats with cheese and jalapeños, we have a pan sausage, and then we have a pure pork and beef sausage with the casing on it, that we split down the middle. But the best kolache in the world to me is a prune.

Evan Stern: That’s a real traditional one. And it’s getting harder to find the prune kolaches, wherever you go. I know, too, you make an important distinction on your menu where you say, you know, klobasnikis and pigs.

0:17:00

What do you think of people that call savory pastries “kolaches”?

Teresa James: So when a traveling person from the city comes in, they ask for a kolache; their kolache is a meat kolache, where we call it klobasnikys or pigs. You know, they’ll come and they’ll say, “Can I have a kolache?” And we already know to say, “Are you talking about a fruit-filled, or are you talking about a pig, with meat in it?” And we have to tell them, but—just—people have that mixed up. They have the—but we call them, you know, pigs.

Evan Stern: I know getting here, working the long hours that you put in—I mean, this is very hard, taxing work. But what about it do you enjoy, and what maybe gives you fuel and energy?

Teresa James: It’s a challenge. I like a challenge. I like a routine; it’s my routine.

0:18:00

I like to take a break, but I’m ready to come back to my routine. And it’s just—making a good product, and seeing people enjoy it I guess it’s the pride in it. It’s something I’ve been doing a long time.

Evan Stern: Speaking of that, are there any particularly meaningful exchanges you remember having with customers, or witnessing people who have experienced your kolaches?

Teresa James: Well, I think it’s really neat when we go somewhere, and we say—or you meet somebody, even if you go on a cruise ship out of Galveston, or run into somebody in New York

because they see your hat or your shirt, and you just say you're from Ellinger, and they know Hruska's. “Oh, we stop in Ellinger all the time. We got to Hruska's.” It's a small world.

Evan Stern: I know I kind of brought this up before we started recording, but I know driving here from Austin today, I did pass by a billboard for Buc-ee's that said, “Kolaches ahead.”

0:19:07

What role do you think Hruska's has maybe played in creating that? [laughs] [pause] You don't want to talk about that.

Teresa James: I don't like doggin anybody. I don't like talkin about other people's business. I concentrate on what I have, doing the best I can here, and the employees doin the best they can here. And there ain't nothin wrong with a little bit of good competition.

Evan Stern: Well said. But I think just forgetting like about competition, though, it is now regarded as kind of a road snack, kolaches. Do you think that Hruska's has played a part—can you maybe talk about how Hruska's has played a part in making that happen? And if not, that's fine.

Teresa James: I think it's the hometown country feeling.

0:20:02

I try to and my employees try to give the best we can service. I've taught that. I've tried to teach them that customer service. I hope we are able to offer a good feeling, a variety of different stuff. And—

Evan Stern: That’s okay, that’s okay. And this does kind of go together with some of that. And if you don’t care to expound beyond that—but is there anything that you personally feel that makes your kolaches unique and special?

Teresa James: I think everybody’s kolaches are good, but it’s a different dough. It’s a different type of pastry. I want to say mine are the traditional old-timey kolach. That’s how I want to explain mine. I don’t knock anybody else’s pastries; it’s just everything’s different. And I want to say that I think mine are more traditional.

0:21:02

Evan Stern: Sure. Reflecting on your years here, I might be mistaken about this, but I think I heard that back in the nineties, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright might have come by here for some kolaches. No? No memory? But are there any notable famous figures that you can remember comin by here?

Teresa James: Yes, I do know, but I can’t think of any of em.

Evan Stern: You can’t think of any of em. Well, if any—

Teresa James: Yeah, I can’t think of the names. I’d have to ask somebody else.

Evan Stern: No problem. Well, if anything—

Teresa James: Oh, yeah, I got some that could tell you.

Evan Stern: [laughs] But are there any stories that you can maybe share about lengths people have gone to get your kolaches?

Teresa James: Well, we ship, and we've shipped all over the place. We've had people that'll, you know, come and book for a wedding, and we do a wedding for em, you know. We do a miniature kolache.

0:22:00

We've had people drive from Austin, Houston, Katy, not just—you know, comin here to get stuff maybe for a party and goin back. But how far, I really don't know.

Evan Stern: Do you have any concerns about the future of kolaches as they maybe grow in popularity?

Teresa James: I don't know. I've never really thought about that.

Evan Stern: Reflecting on—I asked you about early memories, but reflecting on your time here, if you can name it, do you have a favorite memory that you can name?

Teresa James: A favorite memory that I can name. [pause] No, nothing offhand. I don't know what it would be.

Evan Stern: Well, that's all right. [laughs]

Teresa James: I'd have to really think about that.

Evan Stern: But this is something I always like to ask people. It's kind of in regard to the future.

0:23:07

Decades ahead, after you've left this Earth, say someone wants to get—go someplace where they can get to know a little bit about Teresa James and commune with your spirit. Where should they go? Where should they look?

Teresa James: Website. [laughs] I don't know where they would find anything. I guess—I guess your article next! [laughs]

Evan Stern: But I know—I mean—I love—I like—I love the Texas hill country. I feel connected to the Texas hill country. I feel like that's where my spirit is at home and comfortable. Are there any places like that, that come to mind for you?

Teresa James: Work. Here. Memories, you know. Even though I've changed this from what it was, 40, 50, 60 years ago, you still think about all the memories.

0:24:06

And the best memories are—is your grandparents. I had great grandparents.

Evan Stern: You've talked about them a few times, but are there any stories that you'd care to share about them that feel illustrate their character?

Teresa James: I'd have to think about that.

Evan Stern: Sure.

Teresa James: I'd have to think about that.

Evan Stern: You got it. And is there anything else you care to share?

Teresa James: No.

Evan Stern: That’s fine. I think we covered everything. I’m just going to scour my notes for one moment, just to see if there’s any burning questions I’ve gotta ask you here.

Teresa James: So you're good at this.

Evan Stern: Oh, am I?

Teresa James: Yeah!

Evan Stern: Well, that’s good to hear.

Teresa James: I could never do that.

Evan Stern: [laughs] You're kiddin me! [laughs]

Teresa James: You have to have an act for that, or a talent.

Evan Stern: Well—can you talk about how important kolaches are to the brand you have here at Hruska's?

0:25:00

Teresa James: Well, Hruska means “pear.” It’s a Czech name. And kolaches are a Czech food. So, I think that’s how it goes together. Kolaches are a Czech food, Czech pastry.

Evan Stern: But so Hruska's wasn’t a family name?

Teresa James: Yes.

Evan Stern: Okay, it was a family name.

Teresa James: Hruska's is a family name. That was my grandparents’ last name. It was my grandfather’s last name. And there was a Hruska's in Ellinger on the Main Street. And then when

my grandfather and his brother took it over, it was called Hruska Brothers. And then it came up here and it was called Hruska's—Hruska's Store. And now it's Hruska's Company, is what I am. And we just call it Hruska's Bakery.

Evan Stern: And you are the CEO. You are the—

Teresa James: Head honcho bottle washer.

0:26:00

Evan Stern: And again, you talked about it, but just so that we have a clearer idea, could you take us through your typical day start to finish, when it starts the tasks, and when it ends for you here?

Teresa James: Well, I come in in the morning at one. I start fryin eggs, bacon. We make a burrito. We make a croissant with ham, egg, and bacon. And then, probably about one forty-five, two o'clock, I start my dough. And then, we bake, and most of my girls bake until eleven o'clock. And I hop around. I make the dough as I knead it. I'll help the girls for a while. If I'm shorthanded, I *totally* stay in there, and I don't leave until I'm finished. I hop around. I've got more than one job. I have 52 employees here. And I help put all this tchotchke stuff out, I call it, the giftware. I do my own bookwork. I have a family. I just juggle it all.

0:27:04

Evan Stern: We were just kind of talking casually amongst ourselves, and we were kind of sharing some of our ideas about work and whatnot. But if there's one piece of advice you could give to someone, what would it be? [pause] If you remember like kind of what we were talkin about. And if you don't want to go there, that's fine.

Teresa James: Well, it’s a drive you have to have. You have to want to succeed. You want to have—you know, more is always better. And, you know, to get somewhere in life, to save, to have nice things, to buy things, you have to work. You have to work. And sometimes you have to start at the bottom and work your way up. But the harder you work and the better you are at it, I always feel like you can achieve anything. Anybody. You gotta have the goal and the want.

Evan Stern: What do you think—like that 11-year-old girl who was helpin out in the kitchen across the street, if she were to see where you are and where Hruska's is today, how do you think she’d react?

0:28:06

Teresa James: Well, I even try to teach my employees that. Some of em talk about what I have, or you know, even the public—what I have, what I live in. Well, I work. It wasn’t given to me. I come to work every day. And I try to teach my employees that, too. “Hey, I started off this big. And I’m this big. And I still wanna get bigger.” You know? So I tell everybody. And if you don’t work, and you don’t have the drive to do it, you're not gonna get anywhere.

Evan Stern: I guess where would you like to see Hruska's in another five or ten years?

Teresa James: Bigger.

Evan Stern: Bigger?

Teresa James: Bigger.

Evan Stern: Like in what ways?

Teresa James: Bigger store. More parking. Yeah. Bigger.

Evan Stern: Well, I see no reason why that can’t, because you've grown a lot, since 1912, was it? What year was it again?

0:29:00

Teresa James: This store—well, it was in town, 1912, it started.

Evan Stern: 1912. 1912. Well, thank you again. It has been a real pleasure.

Teresa James: Thank you.

[End]