

Robert Sakowitz

The onetime retail royal is still minding the store.

IN DECEMBER 1985 THE BOYISH VISAGE OF HOUSTON'S reigning retail mogul, Robert Sakowitz, stared out from the cover of *Texas Monthly*, his mischievous smile and famous vertical dimples betraying little of the trouble he and his company were in. But the headline next to his face referred to his "fraying empire," and was it ever apt. For most of the century the Sakowitz family's eponymous specialty stores had served shoppers across Texas, yet a few months earlier, reeling from the oil bust and buried under a mountain of debt, Sakowitz, Inc., had filed for federal bankruptcy protection. Two and a half years later, the eighteen-store chain was gobbled up by Australian conglomerate L. J. Hooker, and 2 years after that, Hooker itself went into provisional liquidation (tantamount to bankruptcy). In the summer of 1990—88 years after Tobias and Simon Sakowitz opened the first Sakowitz Brothers, on Market Street in Galveston—the last Sakowitz store closed its doors.



ways been fascinated by corporate governance and strategic planning," he says. "Those things interest me much more than the day-in-day-out administrative operations that I'm no longer involved with, though at Christmas I miss the incredible adrenaline rush from taking care of customers." And if the money isn't as good as it was during the boom—in their heyday, the Sakowitz stores logged \$145 million in annual sales—it's certainly respectable. Large clients pay him a retainer based on an hourly fee of \$250 to \$350, depending on the scope of the work. A start-up, such as Houston's FreshBrew Coffee Systems, might give him an equity stake and a seat on its board.

Work isn't the only aspect of Sakowitz's life that's different. When he appeared on *Texas Monthly's* cover, he had recently married his second wife, Deer Park native Laura Harris, and their first child, a daughter, had just been born. (Sakowitz had a

son with his first wife, New York real estate heiress Pam Zauderer.) Two more daughters would be born in quick succession, but a fairytale family life was not to be. Last fall, Bobby and Laura divorced, though they worked out what he describes as "a rather amicable joint custody" of the girls, who are now fourteen, twelve, and ten and are enrolled at Houston's posh Kinkaid School.

Once upon a time, the breakup of Robert Sakowitz's marriage would have been fodder for the society pages, but not today: It barely merited a mention in Maxine Mesinger's *Houston Chronicle* column. That too is just fine, Sakowitz says. "As the old Texas expression goes, 'The gun kicks as hard as it shoots.' There's a plus and minus to being in the fishbowl. The plus is that it helps your business. The minus is that you're a public persona and you're always subject to scrutiny: You don't necessarily have a life of your own. Still, I do get recognized sometimes, and I appreciate it. I had this call the other day: 'You don't happen to be *that* Mr. Sakowitz? I miss your store, the quality.' It was so nice. I have really nice memories."

Where is Bobby Sakowitz today? Still in Houston, and still smiling. A decade after he reluctantly relinquished control of the business that made him a household name, he has refashioned himself as a retail power of a different sort. At 59, Sakowitz is the CEO and president of Hazak Corporation, a consulting firm whose mission is to help companies big and small help themselves. ("Hazak" is Hebrew for "be strong"; the firm's logo, an H with two outstretched arms holding up a line, symbolizes a pledge of support.) Drawing on his many years of experience, he advises clients like Saks Fifth Avenue and IKEA about everything from store layouts and merchandise mix to advertising and marketing. "I'm a business doctor," he says. "Some businesses I work with are doing extremely well but are so preoccupied with the trees that they don't have time to see the forest. Others are in some trouble, so we figure out where they're headed and look at restructuring."

Although this kind of advisory role is less powerful than the one he played for most of his career, he insists that he likes it. "I've al-

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Exxon-Mobil, \$80 billion, Irving
Industry was over a barrel. Despite layoffs, oil's well that ends well.

USA Waste-Waste Management, \$20.5 billion, Houston
Bayou City now Solid Waste City. What's that smell? Money.

Continental-Northwest, \$430 million, Houston
Justice Department trustbusters ground airline alliance—for now.

Ultramar Diamond Shamrock-Phillips Petroleum, \$1 billion, San Antonio
Finicky feds fear refinery deal will siphon off competition.

SBC Communications Ameritech, \$62 billion, San Antonio
Sorry, wrong number? Unhappy Indiana regulators could hang up deal.