

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

JODY SOMOGY, Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Judy Somogy

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer:: We'll start off first with your name and when and where you were born?

Jody Somogy: Okay my name now is Jody Somogy. I was born in a place called Satoraljauyej, on the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border, Hungarian side. A mouthful.

Interviewer:: So what was happening in your country and why did you leave?

Jody Somogy: We escaped in 1956, December, because there was a revolution and my parents found if there was a chance of getting out, that was it. We escaped so that we spent Christmas Eve in Vienna and New Year's Eve in Venice and then on to a boat to Israel. We left because my parents actually wanted to leave in '49 and they got caught. My father organised for the rest of mum's siblings to leave and left themselves last to make sure they were safe. Unfortunately they got caught so my parents were being watched and punished and observed till we left.

It made for a very difficult early life even though I wasn't aware of it because I wasn't even aware I was Jewish. I couldn't comprehend what any of that was because we were being told in kindergarten [to be] good little [Hungarians] and our father Stalin and this kind of garbage. I only found out I was Jewish when we left for Israel and thank God I had a good dose of learning about my heritage when I went there.

Interviewer:: What happened between Israel and Australia?

Jody Somogy: What can I say to you? My parents struggled like crazy because we left with the clothes on our backs. The Jewish Welfare Society helped us buy a change of clothes, be able to buy some meals on the way and my father did whatever he could. You couldn't work in your own profession you worked whatever work you could get but my mother became very sick. She was sick ever since I could remember but we didn't know why and in Israel they discovered she had a brain tumour courtesy of being kicked on the head in the German concentration camp.

She was the first experimental frozen brain tumour operation in Israel. Very soon after she had the operation we left because in Israel in those days if two people worked you could feed three mouths but if one, you couldn't. My mother's dream was when she was recovering all she wanted to be was with her siblings and they were here. Hence we're Australian.

Interviewer:: Why did you decide to settle in the Waverley region?

Jody Somogy: That's a good one. My uncle rented a place sight unseen for us in Double Bay, but it was half underground. It was damp and dark so the biggest pleasure everyday was when my parents came home from work and quickly finished with the dinner, [then] we'd go for walks. It was unliveable so my parents went and rented in Ocean Street, Bondi. We loved it and so they bought their home in Birrell Street and I grew up there. Through the years and through several other things I bought in Penkivil (st) and my mother ended up in the same building as me because we love it there.

Interviewer:: Did you have any other family or friends in this area?

Jody Somogy: No, well my uncle and aunt they were living around the eastern suburbs but there was a whole Hungarian Jewish community. There were two families that we lived with, in Israel too, that also settled here. The school was good it was fairly reasonable price-wise because Double Bay definitely wasn't. It was just a nice atmosphere. It was affordable and so we just stuck to the Eastern

Suburbs and as the place improved the more and more I liked it too. Now I'm on Penkivil street and absolutely love it. I wouldn't change to anywhere else.

Interviewer:: Why do you think the Eastern Suburbs, Bondi in particular was a popular place for the settlement of Jewish people.

Jody Somogy: First of all it has sort of a European flavour to it. Not as much as Double Bay had. Double Bay was a really European feel but there are the synagogues around, there is the community around, things are within walking distance. You've got amenities, you've got shops, you've got restaurants, the beach is close and for European people who come from landlocked countries the idea of being near a beach is wonderful. Even though we don't go that much because we burn like crazy but still we just love it, the idea of it and what can I say it's a mixed community. It's wonderful: you meet people from all over the world in Bondi.

Interviewer:: What did it feel like when you first arrived in the local area?

Jody Somogy: What did it feel like what can I say to you? For me personally it was just going to school and I wasn't that aware of anything around me except having to go to school come back and do homework and see parents at night. As a child I don't know ... friends were around the area you became friends with people. Transport was more accessible to get from one place to the other because I had to be very independent so I had to manage all that because my parents used to leave at 7:00 am and come back 6:30-7:00 o'clock at night and friends were living around the area.

Studying after high school, college was nearby. I went to East Sydney Tech. What can I say - I just like living here.

Interviewer:: How do you think that the Jewish community has contributed to the broader Waverley community?

Jody Somogy: Good question. You see the Jewish community is not just one type of community because there's the religious ones, the irreligious, the ones that don't keep anything and we're all part of this community. I think we contributed to the colour – we're doing festivals in the park and the whole community joins in, not just Jewish people. I think that's a wonderful one. We get children from all backgrounds being brought to the businesses. I think the businesses improve too because the demand is there for things, for merchandise, for products, for all sorts of things so I think that brings the businesses into ... I don't know how else. I think the Jewish community is quite charitable in a lot of things so they probably would have been good at promoting certain things to be started up in the community.

There's kindergartens, there's schools, there is everything in the community.

Interviewer:: What sort of challenges have there been for you and your family in Australia?

Jody Somogy: Getting used to distance was an enormous challenge. Parents having to go first by bus and train, and then by car from Double Bay and then Bondi to Hornsby then Burwood. One thing is also that coming from Israel, all the neighbours' doors were open all the time. You could go from one apartment to the other – that's not that done here. Language for my father wasn't such a problem for him ... English was his seventh language and he learnt it pretty well. For my mother it

wasn't because of the brain tumour because unfortunately it grew back and had to be re-operated years later.

For her, she didn't have the feel of languages as much. The distance was a thing. I think my parents didn't have that much time to sit in cafes and socialise like most people do. For them I think the challenges were just making a living and living every day and just being you. Also coming in 1960 it didn't fit into any particular group of immigration so we were the outsiders all the time. That was a problem for me especially.

Interviewer:: How long did your sense of culture and lifestyle change through living in Australia?

Jody Somogy: I have to be honest with you it took me many, many years to get used to being Australian. I used to cry myself to sleep for about a year. I didn't want to be here because I had within three and a half, four years I had two new languages, two new countries to pick up and all this plus puberty plus handling it on my own because parents were working such long hours. For me it was a difficult one. My parents – I don't think they had time to just think about it between getting up, making sure I was up, going to work coming back, food, walk and bed. That was the routine for years.

I tell you what though, on one of my trips back suddenly I realised how it feels good to hear an Australian accent before I got on the plane. I thought it's great and I love it. I absolutely love being Australian. I wouldn't be anything else except Australian or Israeli.

Interviewer:: Fantastic. What we might do now Jody is we'll transition to our first kind of main topic.

Jody Somogy: Okay.

Interviewer:: Which is of course my favourite topic – food. We're going to start off if you can tell me about your native country's foods and your memories about eating that food.

Jody Somogy: I have some funny stories with it. My father was a good cook too and in fact he loved doing it for relaxation but ... I don't know if you've heard of the word cholent which is a Jewish dish made of beans and smoked meat etcetera and you cook it 24 hours and it's a delicious dish but because in Europe they were very aware that it was a Jewish food my parents used to call it something else. Something called [inaudible] which was made up of capsicum and sausages and stuff.

I didn't know any different so when we went to Israel and we went to stay with some people and they were religious. I went with their children to take the cholent to be baked during the night to a place because nobody had a proper big kitchen and my mother asked me afterwards when we came back where have you been? I said, "At the [inaudible] baker." My mother thinks what the hell is she talking about? Because she forgot that I was told a different name just for our own security, for my own security.

Food wise what we ate pretty much lighter than Hungarian cooking was because in Israel we got used to modifying the heavy Hungarian cooking because of the climate. Food my mother used to cook on Saturdays – she used to stay home from work, I'd go out and help my father on Saturday in

the shop and she'd cook for the whole week and she'd make up a whole lot of dishes and then when they came home at night during the week then take some of it out and that was dinner.

Sundays were terrific. My father used to take over the kitchen and make his own special dish for mum and me. Mum and I used to stay in bed and he'd have the kitchen until he called out breakfast or brunch is ready. That was one memory. Food wise ... he used to make wonderful latkes. I don't know if you know what latkes is. It's potato pancakes that are made at Chanukah from grated potatoes. Otherwise we ate just European food but not as heavy. I of course got into the Asian food and the Chinese food. My parents love Chinese food. I eat all different nationality food but I like living on salads, none of the heavy Hungarian stuff anymore.

Interviewer:: Is there any particular dish over and above anything else that triggers memories of home or your childhood and why?

Jody Somogy: No, goodness. Well I'll you what childhood in Hungary there used to be fabulous sausages. Homemade sausages you know and those I loved, otherwise not in particular. I just know I never liked sweets when I was little. Wait a minute there was one kind of sweets I liked and it looked like rock crystal on a string, in Hungary. I used to love biting that off; it looked like glass. It was the only thing that I can remember that I loved in sweets. Otherwise I loved food like you.

Interviewer:: What did you think of Australian food when you first arrived and how do you think it's changed?

Jody Somogy: Australian food for us was Chinese to start off with. We didn't know really Australian food. It seemed more like English food – the very basic sausages and bangers and mash that kind of stuff but Australian food now is so international. What is Australian food right? Australian food is a combination of everybody's food. The one thing coffee, coffee, coffee ... my mother loves a good strong cup of coffee. In Hungary during the Communist period you got dish water. They'd wash the coffee over and over, so she loved her coffee here but a story with it. In Vienna when we got across the border she asked for a really good strong coffee. She forgot she wasn't in Hungary anymore and they gave her one so strong she got palpitations from it.

We're coffee drinkers so that was one thing; and before, you didn't have good coffee here but it didn't take long - then you had some pretty good coffee. We're up to like everybody else.

Interviewer:: How do you think your migration wave influenced food in the local area?

Jody Somogy: I think it brought in more variety because I know for example for Hungarians there was a little eatery on Bondi Road which was specifically Hungarian food. It wasn't a restaurant it was a little eatery. Hungarians would go there and slowly other people. And there is a cake shop on Bondi Road which people come from long distances the same as the Gelato Bar's cakes, right? I've met people from the North Shore coming over and having cakes there and they said, "Oh we come specifically for the cake." Go figure, you know.

Interviewer:: Absolutely. Tell me about special foods that you prepare or during festive occasions or religious holydays?

Jody Somogy: What do I do? Well I personally because I'm on my own I usually do a bucketful of something and freeze some of it but I do a good chicken soup, good roast chicken. I like making vegetables because I eat a lot of vegetables and salads. Nothing specific. I don't go into big cooking so you modify not just by nationality or taste but also in your situation whether you've got a family or you don't. If I have visitors then I'll make some Hungarian dishes. Then I make something called rakott-krumpli which is layered potatoes. That seems to really bring them in but it's fattening as hell but delicious. What else - layered noodles with jam and walnuts in it beautiful. I can't think of what else specifically.

My parents used to ... My father used to make fish in aspic which was fabulous. I would like it as an entrée. I can't think of anything specific. Sweets we never went in for - my mother loved it but she said it wasn't worth it just for herself because neither daddy or I would eat it. That was it.

Interviewer:: Okay that's okay. What do you think your favourite Jewish dish would be?

Jody Somogy: You got me – as I said I love food so I love latkes. I don't know I just love good food and try and be moderate about how much I eat of it. It's not easy.

Interviewer:: I know what you mean. Are there any particular recipes that have passed through generations that you know that you're aware of in your family?

Jody Somogy: The Sunday morning breakfast. What my father used to make which was do you want to know the ... Okay alright. He'd slice raw potatoes very fine. Start with those in the fry pan. Then he'd add onions, a little bit fried, whatever vegetable bits and pieces were there would fall into it. Whatever salami or cold cuts, that would go into it and at the very top break an egg on top of it. It was delicious and that was breakfast with some good bread. Bread was a very big thing with us. Good bread so that was one specific, the potato pancakes, the latkes were also good and the fish, the fish in aspic. Those three that I can think of because I'm not that food orientated I'm sorry I can't give you what you really want about food.

Interviewer:: We might actually move on the praying aspect which is about, I suppose it's about religion not just religion but traditions as well.

Jody Somogy: Okay, alright.

Interviewer:: How did your religious practice compare to when you were back home?

Jody Somogy: Back home you call what? Well, people say back home is Hungary but I never felt back home. If you say back home Israel then I can say that okay but let's start from the beginning. I didn't know anything about religion or no concept okay. My parents didn't hide that they were Jewish but for me it wasn't safe in kindergarten because the kindergarten teacher picked on Jewish kids. My mother used to light the candles, Friday night candles, in a room and she trusted me enough to make it our secret and that was the special thing between her and me.

My father used to have a wonderful voice and he used to sing and we used to sing together. We had our secret songs which were Yiddish songs but I wasn't to sing that in front of anybody outside of the house. We'd have Czech songs, Slovak songs, Hungarian, but Yiddish was just ours. That was as far as I knew about Judaism and because they also taught us no hocus pocus which they

meant that was the term they used for children about religion. Once my parents said they'd take me to a friend's place and that happened to be a Passover night and my parents, I remember saying to me, just enjoy it, don't say anything, don't make any comments, just enjoy it.

I remember when we came out I practically went mad at my parents that we were taught no hocus pocus. That was as much as I knew about Judaism. That was the parents that came from orthodox homes can you imagine what that felt like. Anyway one day I came upstairs and called a pedlar to sharpen knives and the other kids were saying ... oh the Kulak Jew. Now Kulak was used in Russia to a derogatory term. Kulak is meant to be like in the comics' big stomach, big fat cigar, money hanging out of his bottom, really disgusting caricatures. I had no idea it's another word. And there was this poor peddler in the back yard of building. I said to mummy, "Oh the Kulak Jew is here to sharpen the knives." I just thought that was a name.

My mother said, "You don't ever use that," and then she said to me we are Jewish but I didn't comprehend it. When we got to Israel I was put into a semi-religious school so that not just learning Hebrew but learning traditions and everything else. There was such a difference in the atmosphere in Hungary and the welcoming-ness of Israel and I became a kind of Jew that's not religious in particular but there I felt – wow I'm Jewish, I've got an identity. That took me through for many years, even those years that I didn't feel Australian because you feel sort of lost, you don't know where you belong. Because to the Israelis you're Hungarian, to the Australians you're Israeli, to the Hungarians you're Jewish – you know what I mean.

My father was practicing already in Israel so we kept the High Holy days. Work wise he had to work on Shabbat, on Saturdays, he had to but on High Holy days we'd go to synagogue here in Australia. When the extended family was smaller here in Sydney in Birrell Street, my bedroom would become one long dining table, the whole room. My father made sure, made sure that we kept the Yontovs as we called the High Holy days and sometimes on Shabbat. In fact it was funny; some Hungarians that came after the war, they put their children into the Church of England schools. They didn't say that they were Jewish because they thought that would protect them as they thought it would have in Hungary.

In the first place when we lived when we were flatting, I had my first friend in Australia who thought he was Church of England. I couldn't stop talking about Israel, singing Hebrew songs. One day he went to synagogue with my father and the mother came to tell my mother: Lily – you know George went to synagogue with Jody? My mother said so what, but he wasn't brought up Jewish. Now we had to have a kosher home after that. That's the kind of thing, so it was never the religious Judaism but it was the identity, the feeling of belonging somewhere, love the customs – they make sense. They are such a beautiful tradition. I'm very Jewish even though a lot of people say, "You're Jewish?" I love using Hebrew – I use Hungarian and that's it.

Interviewer:: How regularly do you attend synagogue and if so which one?

Jody Somogy: Before my mother was in the Montefiore nursing home, we'd go to Central Synagogue on High Holy days. My father had a seat in the big section, big shul, next to my mother's brother and mummy and I would be in the overflow in the cheaper section because that's all we could afford. When the synagogue burnt down I was going between Chabad Double Bay and

Emanuel Synagogue but I found that when I was in trouble the Emanuel rabbi was so there for me and practised what true Judaism is there. It's about people.

I went to Emanuel but for me it's difficult because I'm used to more traditional ways of praying and all this. I love that families can sit together but now I'm with my mother every Friday night in the nursing home. I go to all the holy days there and we keep everything there and I light Friday night candles. That's it.

Interviewer:: What learning, beliefs and traditions do you feel are most important of all do you feel most passionate about?

Jody Somogy: Look I feel very passionate about Israel because I know what it's like to have to hide your Judaism and I feel like I'm feeling it on my skin what my parents must have gone through. Coming from those beautiful traditions, having lost so much family. My father lost five siblings and a mother. My mother lost one sibling and a mother and extended family besides that plus my father lost his first family. It's really funny – I feel so connected to his first family losing my brother because he was my brother and he was a baby when they gassed him.

I mean I'm very passionate about my religion in that respect I'm also ... I feel that it's got so much good to give the world. It's the basics of civilisation. Human beings would butcher each other at this rate the way we're going if you look around now. It doesn't hurt if people have rules and some good rules to live by. I also feel very passionate that the hardest thing to protect is democracy and freedom and ... Oh God now I've lost the question.

Interviewer:: We were just talking about the beliefs and traditions that you feel most important.

Jody Somogy: For me in Judaism the fact that everybody counts. Everybody has something to offer. I accept people whichever way and whatever they practice as long as they accept me and as long as they don't do me harm but now if they want to do me harm, heaven help them. If I wouldn't have had Israel I don't know if I would have felt that strongly about it. You know what I mean because I can see my family back in Europe ... what a different kind of Jewish person they are to what I am and to what the rest of my family is, let's say in America and in Israel. It's a different kind, honestly.

If you started out being born into a Communist system [it] was awful even though in '56, believe it or not, in Budapest they already had a list of the Jewish people, the Hungarians. Thank God for the Russians coming in, because they saved the Jewish people in Budapest. You know, but then the Communist system in Hungary, the biggest party meeting was always on the night of Yom Kippur, the holiest night that we have, that's when they did the big party meetings so that any Jewish member better turn up. This kind of thing even now gives me the shivers when I think about it. I'm really I'm feeling the shivers through me.

Interviewer:: I appreciate what you're sharing with us anyway. We might just wrap up this particular session with how does it feel to belong to a group of people with common history and traditions?

Jody Somogy: Look we're all different even if I've got the Jewish people around me. We're all unique, I feel unique, we all are. It's belonging to Judaism ... I'm glad I belong to it because I think it's

a very special thing to belong to. I don't see anything that's bad that they're offering. Judaism offers good things. How you practice, how much you practice is up to you. If you get the really religious ones, the orthodox ones, you know you get the mad ones that are fanatical. Every other religion has fanatics. It accepts everybody and a good orthodox Jew is not going to criticise you for not keeping things and you're still going to be welcome in his home and it's not a problem.

I love my religion what can I say. I love the history, I love the literature. I've got books galore every room in ... my place has got like a whole book shelf in it. There is a lot to read on it; I'm studying now and continue studying about it because it's fascinating. You can never stop studying about it. The history, the ethics, the politics, everything and it's never simple that's all I can tell you.

Interviewer:: What does the word naches mean to you?

Jody Somogy: Naches is getting something good back or getting a good feeling out of something that you've done. You do something for people but the good things come ... You are the one who feels that it's good, not what you've done for them. That's naches for me.

Interviewer:: How would you describe naches to someone who doesn't know what it means?

Jody Somogy: I think just what I said about it now. You can say in the English language – it's a warm fuzzy pleasurable feeling. Something that puts a smile on your face, something that makes you feel good.

Interviewer:: Okay so it is a very selfless thing isn't it.

Jody Somogy: To my mind, yes. If you want to know what I get naches from because I don't have children. I get naches because I do a volunteer program at the Montefiore Home for the residents. When I get the feedback how much they enjoy it or when I see them interacting and laughing and talking to me while I'm doing it that it the best feeling and also when my mother says I'm actually proud of you because she was never too much for giving compliments. She is happy when I do what I do and to see the smile on that face of hers it's absolute blessing – it's naches.

Interviewer:: Fantastic. Do you have any recollection of your grandparents?

Jody Somogy: I never knew anybody.

Interviewer:: Never knew your grandparents.

Jody Somogy: Never knew them. In Israel we had neighbours, an older couple, and that's when the idea of what grandparents were was explained to me and they said, "Well, we're adopting you and we're your grandparents and you're our grandchild." I should have brought in – I [have] even got a letter that they wrote to me "to our dear little granddaughter".

Interviewer: Do you think that you might have given them naches?

Jody Somogy: I probably did. I loved them, I loved being with them so that probably gave them a good feeling. Probably. We were very close.

Interviewer: What do you think is your biggest achievement in life and why?

Jody Somogy: Surviving it all I think oh God what can I say to you? That's a hard one. For a long time the only thing I could ... Can I say the only thing I could say about myself if I am somebody is by my profession. I didn't know who the hell I was or what is me. As long as I was a designer, I love doing it and gave me a lot of pleasure and I didn't go for the money I made money for other. I just did it because I loved doing it. But now I think my biggest achievement is to have the relationship I have with my mother. To be able to be there with the other people too and I love seeing the other older people gravitate to me and light up when I come in and say hello. At different times its different things. I loved it when I was a designer. That, then, felt like an achievement and it was because 42 of us got in from people that applied. Eight of us graduated and very few of us made a proper career out of it.

I didn't make a big amount because I didn't have the finances or the backing but I did design and I love designing and I did things for other people. In those days that was a big achievement for me. That was sort of the natural thing for me to do. That was the only thing I ever wanted to do. Now it's my relationship in this nursing home I think. My ability to give and be there. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: Absolutely of course.

Jody Somogy: It's just natural for me. That I think is my good achievement because I don't know if I even achieved the biggest, probably could achieve much bigger. I don't know.

Interviewer: That's fantastic what we might do is we might explore the things that you brought along with you today.

Jody Somogy: Okay.

Interviewer: What did you bring with you today?

Jody Somogy: The first and most important thing is the Siddur which is a little prayer book about this size which was given to my father on his Bar Mitzvah. It has his Hebrew name on it and it also has that he notated in Hebrew because he spoke perfect Hebrew then too, his son's birth date in 1943. In his own writing in Hebrew in the book. He carried it with him when we escaped across the border. We were in the same set of clothes, one set of clothes, nothing, but he had it in his pocket. That was so dangerous because if my father would have been caught he would have been shot on the spot.

And this Siddur came with him all along and now I have it. That's one item with me. The other item is the candelabra which as I said to you before my mother lit candles even when it was a big secret and dangerous and she always lit candles on Friday night and so I continued it. Even if I go out and I don't have a proper kosher meal or whatever ,the candles. What else? Then I brought in photos. I brought a photo of my father. That's a funny one it's a blow up of his head. My father never danced. Except once he got caught dancing at a friend's wedding when my girlfriend pulled him up, the bride, and he just did it. And the face is so sweet and its one of the best photos so that's the photo of him.

There's a photo of my parents and me when I'm about 15, 16 with them. Then there is a photo of just the two of them and a photo of my father holding up his son. You can his back and you can see his strong hands holding up his baby son. That's what I brought in.

Interviewer: How do you think items like the prayer book connect you with your journey or early years in Australian? Journey to Australia and the early years in Australia.

Jody Somogy: I wasn't that aware of the prayer book I mean I knew but I feel the significance of it the older I get. The older you get the deeper you think about things and the more you go back. Every age has its own importance, the things that are important to you. I find that now I'm very retrospective about a lot of things. It's almost like I can feel what my parents would have gone through. Mind you I felt that before too but I think I've got more understanding of that too now and it's very important. People say you got to look forward only but I think what makes you is what your past is also. That's it.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about before we finish up?

Jody Somogy: Look I didn't mention that I was active. I always liked to do something that makes a difference. I never was one to belong to organizations or women's groups or whatever but I was on the executive of holocaust survivors and descendants at one stage for quite a few years. Then I was on the executive national committee of Australia which was started back in Russia still. To give people a trade so whenever they immigrate wherever they've got a trade to start with. I was involved with the Jewish museum. I did some publicity work for them at the beginning and now I feel I'm quite involved with Montefiore because I'm there every day and I see everything.

I feel that I have to give feedback and I have to tell them what I see. I'm not going to win a popularity contest but I think if I don't tell them how are they to know on the hands on. I feel that it's part of my duty to do that. I don't mean to big note myself for anything I mean you know I'm just me but if I can do something I think it's important to help people. That's all I can say.