

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

BOB SITSKY: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Bob Sitsky

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

Interview Date: 27 May 2015

Interview Location: Bondi

Transcribed by and date: 5 July 2015

Copyright: Waverley Council

Interviewer: If you could tell me your name and when and where you were born.

Bob Sitsky: My name is Bob Sitsky. I was born in North China in a place called Tianjin in 1939.

Interviewer: You can actually go on and tell me a little bit about how your family came to be in Australia

Bob Sitsky: After the Communists' take-over of China in 1949, people like my parents who were stateless and other people in a similar situation were told to leave China. They were given time. It wasn't rushed. My parents had to find [an] alternative place for us to live. The initial plan was to move to America because my mother's parents and her brothers were living there. But because my brother and I were born in China, we were considered by the American authorities to be Chinese statistically. Consequently, we didn't meet the quota so the USA was out. They also applied to go to Israel. They thought about that, but in the end they decided it would have been too hard for them to learn a new language at their stage of life. Luckily, my mother had a cousin who lived in Sydney, a lady who lived in Dover Heights. Her family sponsored us to come to Australia. We came to Australia in February of '51.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about the journey across?

Bob Sitsky: Yes. It took us about a month or so to get here. First, we boarded a ship, cargo ship, that left the Port of Tianjin to go to Hong Kong. Even though Tianjin is located probably 100 kilometres from the sea, it's connected to the sea by wide canal. Tianjin is still regarded as a port city. We had accommodation on the cargo ship, us and maybe 20 other families. It took about 10 days or so to get to Hong Kong. Then my parents had to find a way to get to Sydney. In the end it was decided that the easiest way would be to get a Qantas flight. After a couple of weeks, we caught a Qantas flight which stopped in three different locations before arriving in Sydney in February '51.

Interviewer: Fantastic. That was quite the early days of Qantas back then as well wasn't it?

Bob Sitsky: I think it was called Qantas Imperial Airways. I might be wrong, but that's how I remember it.

Interviewer: When you first arrived in Australia, what were your initial impressions and how did you find yourself living in the Eastern Suburbs?

Bob Sitsky: My mother's cousin who sponsored us lived in Dover Heights in Myuna Street. We ended up living with them for a couple of months to give us time to find alternative accommodation. We had a couple of months to get used to Sydney. As a child, I was 11 years old at the time, it didn't take me long to acclimatise. In a relatively short time I fitted in. Things that I noticed which contrasted vastly with China was the lack of security and the fact that you could walk out on the street and walk around without worrying whether you'd be mobbed by Chinese people or stared at, which always used to happen to me in China. That was a very pleasant feature of the change to Sydney from Tianjin. Also, because I had a knowledge of some English. It wasn't perfect but I had working English. Again, it didn't take me long to get used to the school system here. I joined sixth class in Bondi Beach Primary School, and then moved on to Randwick Boys High School.

Interviewer: I know you were saying that you adapted quite well. I'm sure there must have been some big challenges for your parents at the time. How did they settle in? How did they get up to speed?

Bob Sitsky: My parents had some problems in settling in. My father, because of personal circumstances of family circumstances in Tianjin, never received a proper education in China. He had to leave school when he was 14 because his father suffered a stroke and my father had to earn an income for the family, bring an income in. He worked for thirty years for the British American Tobacco Company in Tianjin. When the family came to Sydney, my father went to the local tobacco factory, which in Sydney was called W.D. & H.O Wills, the same company, to seek employment. He was told that he could get a job, not at the same level as he had in Tianjin but a more basic level. But he decided he needed a change from the cigarette business. He decided to find other work. He ended up in many short-term unskilled type of work which didn't bring in a lot of income. That was a struggle for the family. My mother never worked. She never worked in China and she never worked here. That was the system in those days. My father was the sole wage earner. So, yes, it was a struggle.

Interviewer: How do you think the Jewish community has shaped this area?

Bob Sitsky: When we first moved from Dover Heights to Bondi ... we had two moves actually. We moved first from Dover Heights to live in Ramona Flats in Campbell Avenue Bondi Beach. Then we moved to a flat in Tamarama on Kenneth Street. During a lot of that time, my father was unemployed. The family received some support from my maternal grandparents in New York until he could find some work. When we finally moved to our "permanent" (inverted commas) flat in Kenneth Street, Tamarama, and my father found some employment, things settled down more-or-less to a routine. The family started to function in the normal way families do.

Interviewer: Okay. Getting back to the Jewish community, do you think the Jewish community has actually shaped this local area?

Bob Sitsky: I'm not sure whether shaped is the right word for it. Sure, it has a large influence. In our time, when the family was living in Bondi, there was quite a strong Jewish presence there. In my class at Bondi Beach School, there were several Jewish students. When I moved to Randwick, again, there was quite a significant number of Jewish students there. I'm not sure whether you could say the Jews shaped the community.

Interviewer: No. That's fair enough. We might just move on to the food section now that we've got a little bit of an idea of your back story. Can you tell me a little bit about the foods that you would have in China? Maybe a memory about eating your favourite food as a child.

Bob Sitsky: In China our diet was Russian Jewish. It wasn't Chinese. We had traditional Russian and Jewish foods like pelameni, pierogi, borscht, gefilte fish. It was a mixed sort of diet. I would call it a European sort of diet. When we moved here, our diet sort of remained the same. My mother followed the family tradition of Jewish and Russian food. We just continued on in the same way.

Interviewer: Did you have a personal favourite?

Bob Sitsky: Yeah. I loved the pierog, the Russian pierogi which many Jewish families also adopted. Pierogis usually came in three ways, either meat, salmon, or cabbage. My favourite was the salmon and rice pierogi.

Interviewer: Okay. That's nice. When you first arrived in Australia, obviously Australia had very different food compared to the food that I'm sure you were used to. Did you get to experience Australian food at that time? What did you think of it?

Bob Sitsky: I can tell you a funny incident that happened to me. It's only funny when one looks back. On my first day at Bondi Beach Primary School, I was in a class of 40 students. I didn't know one person. For lunchtime, my mother gave me a sandwich to have. I was sitting by myself on one of those long benches that we had in school in those days. I was just tucking into my sandwich when another boy from the class saw me. He rode up to me on his bike and said, "What are you eating?" I said, "It's just a sandwich my mother packed for me." He said, "Let me see." Without my permission, he went and flipped over the sandwich. Now, my mother gave me an eggplant sandwich, a chopped eggplant sandwich, which was absolutely unheard of in Australia in those days. In a wink the boy whistled and the whole class arrived, and I was looked at by 40 kids. I was wondering what the hell was happening. Then this kid announces to everyone, "This new boy is eating a shit sandwich." One can laugh at this. This happened in 1951. One can laugh at it now, but at the time I was rather confused when confronted. It wasn't a pleasant experience for me. So, that's a good example of a conflict of food in terms of culture.

Interviewer: Kids can be very cruel.

Bob Sitsky: They can be quite cruel.

Interviewer: Do you think your migration wave has influenced food in the local area at all?

Bob Sitsky: Undoubtedly it has. Australia is a different country because of migration. I think we're so lucky in Australia that we can walk out and go to a multitude of different types of restaurants. That wasn't available in 1951. That has changed over the years, of course. At the same time, I'd like to say that I enjoyed the traditional Australian food as well. When we went to a restaurant and maybe had a mixed grill, I enjoyed the idea of having meat and potato and peas. That's something we didn't have in China.

Interviewer: We'll just move on to any special foods that you prepared during family get-togethers like Shabbat or Jewish holidays?

Bob Sitsky: Here I'll have to qualify my situation. When I was a youth, my family followed the Jewish tradition. It was never a religious family. I'll start again. My grandfather in China was a religious man. He was on the board of the Tianjin Synagogue. After his departure from Tianjin to the United States, my parents took over, of course. Their religion was different to my father's. They never went to synagogue. They followed the tradition in some ways, like they would fast at Yom Kippur and they would have a traditional dinner at Passover or the New Year. But generally, the Jewishness in the family eased off. When we came to Australia, that sort of family tradition continued. My parents never went to synagogue unless it was for a wedding or someone's Bar Mitzvah. Even though they carried on with the same food and the same religious practices. Not religious, sorry, not religious practices. With the traditional practices.

Interviewer: We were just talking about the fact that your parents didn't really have the religious practices, but we were talking about the traditions I think. The traditions of whether you actually ate specific foods for family get-togethers, Shavuot and that sort of thing.

Bob Sitsky: The only time we ate specific foods was during the holidays, not during the Shabbat. Because of the lowering of importance of following a religion in Australia, I also lost a lot of interest. Although, I must say, I joined a Jewish youth group, Betar, after I finished school. I was a member there for a few years. That was a Zionist youth group, of course. After I left Betar, my interest in maintaining my Jewishness eased off. I now don't follow any religion.

Interviewer: You don't attend synagogue or anything like that?

Bob Sitsky: No.

Interviewer: Okay. Okay. Are there any particular traditions that you feel are important? Religion aside, any particular Jewish traditions that you feel might be important?

Bob Sitsky: I like the Jewish tradition of families. We have carried on with that tradition very strongly. I think that's a very good thing.

Interviewer: In terms of carrying on the tradition of being very family centric even though you don't do Shabbat, do you still do regular family gatherings and that kind of thing? Just expand on what kind of family-centric traditions you would have.

Bob Sitsky: Yes. I think family traditions are quite important. We have regular family meals and family outings and family get-togethers. That includes birthdays or any other special events. We're lucky that our children have remained with the same partners since they were married and we have three grandchildren. Statistically, that's quite interesting. I think the stats are close to 40 percent of marriages nowadays end up in divorce. We're a strong family that way. That link hasn't been broken in any of the chains.

Interviewer: That's very nice to see. I'm sure that's a reflection on you as well, in the way that you brought up your children.

Bob Sitsky: Yes. I like to think that my wife and I have made our family bond well. I think the bond starts right from the early days and just carries through. So, even though I'm not a religious person, I think that's one tradition I'm quite pleased to carry on with.

Interviewer: Okay. We'll move on now to naches. Even though you've obviously told us that you wouldn't classify yourself as being particularly religious, you probably still would want some naches in your life. You're familiar obviously with the word naches?

Bob Sitsky: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: What does the word naches mean to you?

Bob Sitsky: Naches is a word one can associate with a lot of feelings and situations. It's family. It's joy. It's pride. It's attachments. It's security. It's all those things. I think that's still very important. If I can mention China. When our family in China had grandparents, parents, and grandchildren, we had a very close family unit. We all lived in the same house, grandparents, parents, and us children. That atmosphere generated naches in my opinion. I like to think that, even though we're in a different situation now, that feeling of naches still permeates our family, even though we don't call it that.

Interviewer: That's fair enough. What do you hope for your children and grandchildren?

Bob Sitsky: We're quite proud of our children. We have a son, a daughter, and they both are gainfully employed. They love what they are working on. All I can hope for my children is that they'll be happy, they'll be secure, and they'll maintain the family unit.

Interviewer: I guess the same for your grandchildren.

Bob Sitsky: Yes. Our grandchildren are quite young so we've got quite a long way to go.

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

Bob Sitsky: It's very hard to say what one's biggest achievement in life is. I think it's a number of achievements one has to look at. I think one achievement is I brought security, financial security, to my family. That's very important. I've lived a happy married life, and that's important. I have brought up two great children. I think that's a great achievement. I have three grandchildren, and I think that's a great achievement too. I like to look upon life as a series of achievements rather than one big one which overwhelms everything else.

Interviewer: That's absolutely fair enough. Do you do anything in particular or are you involved in a wider Waverley community that also brings you naches?

Bob Sitsky: Since my late 20s, I haven't been living in Waverley. I've been living in Woollahra Municipality in Paddington. My involvement in the community is currently limited to being a member of Probus Club where I do volunteer work. I'm on a committee. I can't think of any current community work that I do. Probus Club is a club for people who are retired or semi-retired. It's a social club that meets at least once a month. There's a meeting once a month and an outing once a month. It's an outlet for people who maybe are stuck at home and haven't got friends. They can come to a gathering once a month. In our Double Bay Probus Club which meets in Rushcutters Bay, there are very many Jewish people attend. Even though it's Double Bay, it's called Probus Club Double Bay, it attracts people from a wide range including Bondi Junction and Vaucluse and Kings Cross. It's got a wide base.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Bob Sitsky: There's one thing I wouldn't mind mentioning about my Bar Mitzvah. It was an unusual Bar Mitzvah. I was taken by my father to see Rabbi Swift in Bondi Central Synagogue in Bondi Junction. He was an American Rabbi. When I saw him, he told me he would look after me and guide me through the whole process. The first discussion we had, he showed me which prayers I have to learn and how to put on tefillin. Then he said, "I want you to see this other boy who I thought ... I showed him how to do it. He had his Bar Mitzvah. He knows all about it. I want you to see him and learn from him." I thought at that time that was rather strange. I didn't actually see Rabbi Swift again until the week before my Bar Mitzvah. He made sure I knew the prayers and I knew how to put on tefillin. I had the Bar Mitzvah. After Rabbi Swift left Australia and went back to America, I was approached by other members of the hierarchy of the synagogue. They told me they were very unhappy with what went on, the fact that I wasn't given proper tuition, that he only saw me twice in all the six months. They were embarrassed by the fact that that went on in their congregation.