

**EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Waverley Council, NSW**

**MELANIE LINDENBERG: Oral History Transcript**

Interviewee: Melanie Lindenberg

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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**Interviewer ... and set. All right Melanie. We'll start off with ... If you could tell me your name and when and where you were born.**

Melanie Lindenberg: My name's Melanie Lindenberg. I was born in 1961 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

**Interviewer: Okay Melanie. Can you tell me what was happening in South Africa before you left? What circumstances led up to you coming to Australia?**

Melanie Lindenberg: As a child, South Africa was a very easy place to live. However, we weren't so aware of it, but obviously apartheid was [inaudible]. My parents had thought about leaving South Africa, but it had never really materialised as we grew up. Things weren't that bad, but progressively as I got older, things like this always ... heard riots happened. Things got progressively worse and basically my father saw the writing on the wall, established a contact of business in London, and he always thought that he would take all of us and move to London. What happened then was that we very early on ... My sister and I got married. We were quite young.

I was 21 and a month, and my sister was 21 and a month 21 months later. He suddenly was faced with a position where my brother was about to finish school and he hadn't done what he planned to do. We now had husbands attached with whole families. Collectively, we sat down and spoke about the options. One of those was obviously the UK, because we were more set up for that, but my husband's a sportsman, he's an outdoor person. He couldn't bring himself to live in a climate like that and didn't think he could pursue those passions as they were. He was a Springboks sportsman at the time, and didn't feel that that would be a place he'd like to live.

We all went to look at the States. Again, we came back feeling not so sure, kids leave home when they're sixteen. Do we really want to do that? We all came to look at Australia, and I mean how could you not love the place? We stepped off the boat, and each one of us individually loved it. By then, I had one child, and we decided to put in papers. My father always said he would never leave unless the whole family left together. At that stage, we had the commitment of the in-law families too, but over the years they've never materialised. They decided to stay in South Africa, my husband's family. My brother-in-law's family, however, all came as well.

In 1985, I had a 23-month-old, and I was six months pregnant with my second child. We got our visas, which in those days, you had six weeks to get out the country. We had to do that, because I was that pregnant, I couldn't fly after that. If we stayed, we'd have to reapply with the fourth person in the family, another child. We literally sold our house, packed up, and left with my parents on the same plane and my brother who was about 18 at the time. No, yeah, about 18 at the time. My sister and her husband's visa hadn't come through, but it did a few months later. We migrated on the first of June 1985, and my second child was born on the 29th of August 1985, in what feels like a deep, dark grey blur right now, because we never really knew where we were or ... We hadn't found the resources that one needs when one moves to a new country, but we were together and that's how it began, and that's what we needed to do.

**Interviewer: Where did you initially settle in Australia?**

Melanie Lindenberg: That's always a good question. People often ask me that and where did we settle in Australia. We all came to the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. It wasn't an entirely financially

clever thing to do, but we figured the fact that we traveled across millions of miles ... it certainly wasn't an opportunity for us to now divide ourselves up around Australia, so my parents chose the Eastern Suburbs. We felt it was appropriate for all of us to live within reasonable proximity, because of course, at that stage we had no extended family. That was definitely to change over the years, but at that stage, it was just this little family unit, and we all settled in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney around this area.

**Interviewer: What do you think made your father settle on the Eastern Suburbs? Was the local Jewish community part of that decision?**

Melanie Lindenberg: The reason he chose the Eastern Suburbs was unquestionably the Jewish community. Look, it's beautiful. I mean, who can't love the Eastern Suburbs, let's face it, but it was definitely that this was the center of the Jewish community at the time. We had lived in a very [close-knit] Jewish community in Johannesburg. It's a much bigger Jewish community than Sydney. We felt that that was where we wanted to be as a family, and schools and that sort of thing for the kids as they grow up, the grandchildren.

**Interviewer: Okay. That's good, that all makes sense. When you first arrived ... and what suburb was it that you settled in?**

Melanie Lindenberg: Actually Bondi Junction, Woollahra, just off of Edgecliff Road is where we lived. My parents were in Elizabeth Bay at the time, and my sister and brother-in-law Darling Point. My brother was living with my parents.

**Interviewer: You were close to the beach in Johannesburg. It's lovely isn't it? That's where you were.**

Melanie Lindenberg: Yes, but it's not coastal. We were inland in a big city. Incomparable. Beautiful big sprawling gardens, lovely homes, an acre and a half of ground was the norm, but a holiday for us was Cape Town, where my grandparents lived. My mother had originally come from Cape Town, and that's most like Sydney. I would say Sydney's a mix of Cape Town, then thrown in a bit of London somewhere. Yeah.

**Interviewer: Fair enough. Can you discuss any particular challenges that you and your family had when you first arrived?**

Melanie Lindenberg: When we first arrived, none of us had jobs to come to. Soon after we arrived, my parents bought an electrical retail business, Retrovision, in Bondi Junction on Oxford Street. My brother ran that store with my parents involved to a degree, although they traveled a lot and they were semi-retired. My husband and I ... it was very different. He had a boat business in South Africa and it wasn't going to be a possibility in the early days, so he actually got a job in a furniture factory in Revesby, and he worked there for a while. That was heavy-going. He'd leave home at 5:00 in the morning because the factory opened at 6:00, and then he'd come home at 3:00 in the afternoon.

We had, for some mad reason, bought a house. We thought that was the right thing to do. After he'd paid the mortgage, we had \$19 a week left over. We had now two baby children. I wasn't working because my career at that point was radiography, and I couldn't at that stage. It was heavy-

going, so what he did was when he left the factory in the mid-afternoon, he would go and work as a handyman in the Eastern Suburbs and on weekends as well to supplement his income. He did that for about four or five years, so he really worked seven days a week, honestly 15,16,17 hours a day. Until I was able to go [back to work], the kids were in preschool, or daycare or whatever it was.

We then were able to ... He bought a small boat business in North Parramatta, and he used to do that seven days a week, because obviously he had to be opening a boat business. He had that for about five years and it was going nowhere. It had lots of expenses associated with it, as you'd imagine. He had these very expensive boats on the floor. There was a recession brewing, so when his lease expired, he closed that business and fortunately we were able to exit from that reasonably unscathed. He went back to the trade and he began doing the handyman work for the Eastern Suburbs real estate agents for their management properties, their rental properties.

He also started doing a bit of fly screens and security doors, and that sort of thing. He gradually built that business up. He subcontracted to tradespeople like plumbers and electricians. Slowly but surely, he built that business, and 30 years later, or 23 after the boat business, he's still doing that. That's provided a wonderful base for us. It's not been easy for him, that was obviously not what his intended career path was, not at all. He never started off doing that, but that's how it's had to play out because we had two children to raise, we wanted to send them to a Jewish day school, we lived in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney, which comes with a whole lot of mortgages.

Gradually, we were all able to do all of that through that business and as I was able to work more. I did that. What I was able to do was ... I always wanted to be there for the kids in the afternoon, I felt that was important, or as much as possible school holidays. I was employed by the Scottish Hospital St. Margaret's. I did 24-hour call for both of those hospitals, so I used to get called out. I used to dodge and duck and dive and move the kids around to my mother, to friends, take them with me, put them in the dark room while the films were being developed, leave them there quietly, feed them. Over the years, that's how that played out. As I was able to do more hours as they grew up. I specialised, I did CT angiography, and that's what happened. I only went to full-time work in my current role, which is out of radiography, about 10 years ago. That was our pathway.

Melanie Lindenberg: I would've definitely worked with her, no question. It's been such a long time now, but I'm sure. It's funny, most people say, "Scottish"; was there ever a Scottish hospital?"

**Interviewer: Your relationship with your husband has obviously stood the test of time and gone through a great period where you probably didn't have a lot to do with him for a long time. The times that you would've seen him, is just really a conk out and you go to sleep.**

Melanie Lindenberg: Exactly, passing ships.

**Interviewer: That must have been a great time when you could actually get to know your husband again and have a relationship with your family.**

Melanie Lindenberg: What happened was ... I think for my husband Allen, the challenge was, he had left a very close-knit family. His brother was his best friend. They're 19 months apart in age. His father was the manager of their barefoot water skiing team that traveled the world when they were skiing for South Africa. He left that at the age of 25 ... it was when we emigrated. He really sacrificed a lot emotionally. Of course then, arriving here and having to really work in a different way ... He had

a successful business there, working a different way that wasn't always regarded as the optimum career path, was challenging for him.

Seven days a week while we had little children ... it was obviously complicated, but we just did what we had to do. We were migrants. We were in a better place for our children, we'd moved here for the children. The line is, "We could've lived our lives out there." Everyone says that. We did it for the children. Of course, we have a completely different life to that which we may have had there under the current circumstances, but it was just the way it was. As the kids have grown older ... The other thing with us is we started very young. We are now at a stage where our kids are grown up and married, and we've got a baby grandchild who's a second-generation Australian on our side. Now we have plenty of time together. We worked together. We did what we had to do.

**Interviewer: Fantastic. That's great to hear. I just want to ask you a little bit of question about how you feel the Jewish community has shaped this area.**

Melanie Lindenberg: Not personally, but for the whole Jewish community in this area? Yeah. Okay. I love being immersed in the Jewish community in Sydney. I feel like it really has ... it plays a very big part in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney in the Waverley and Woollahra area. I've been lucky enough to ... I was on the board of this school for 12 years, so I've had lots of interaction with the community. I've worked in a lot of the organisations. In [inaudible] currently I'm employed at the Montefiore Home, which I'm a director of the group, which is a group of Jewish age care facilities. I do feel that this Jewish community has a lot to do with the history and the growth of the Eastern Suburbs.

The Eastern Europeans, before the South Africans, the Russians, since and during the same time as the South African migration, and the Aussies, the Australian Aussies.

**Interviewer: Well said. I think we're ready to move on to the food section.**

Melanie Lindenberg: Yay.

Interviewer: I'm interested to hear the South African slant on food here. Food's always a very important part of Jewish culture. Can you tell me about South African foods and maybe memory of eating your favorite food as a child?

Melanie Lindenberg: Food is a big part of our life. I'm an avid cook, I love to bake, for me it's essential to our lives, I entertain a lot, my mother did before me, my mother-in-law ... we're all very enthusiastic cooks. I wouldn't say we're chefs because we're not. Food had always played an important part in our lives. The traditional foods, the Jewish foods, certainly for the High Holydays and our Shabbat dinners. The food in South Africa was quite different to what we got when we arrived here, but it didn't faze me that much. I think I was so happy to explore different things and try different ways that it was fine.

Subsequent to us coming here, probably about 10 years after we arrived, which was 20 years ago I'd say, South African food started to be brought into Australia by various importers. By then, I was so acclimatised and so used to trying the Australian foods that I wasn't drawn to it. However, it always evoked memory. It always evoked a memory of a childhood. Even yesterday, one of my colleagues at work said, "There are Romany Creams in the kitchen," and that's a chocolate biscuit

that's made in South Africa, and it triggers memories. That's what food does for me. I tried to hand it down to replicate it to show my children how it was for us, and I think without them even realising it, and without me even realising it, it's deeply infused in who we are.

**Interviewer: Can you tell me typically, when you say it's different, what are we talking now? What would be a typical South African dish?**

Melanie Lindenberg: Are you talking about South African Jewish dishes, or just dishes in ...

**Interviewer: You can say South African Jewish, or South African.**

Melanie Lindenberg: For us, it was very different when we arrived here. My Australian friends were, for instance eating rice on Passover. That was something we never did, but I've learned that that's a Sephardi custom, and most of the South African Jews are Ashkenazi background. We do crazy things like chopped herring, the way we make chicken soup. The things that are traditional Jewish dishes are made differently and done differently here. Most of my Australian friends are of Hungarian or Polish background, my Jewish friends. It's so different. I can't even pronounce the food that they make. It's delicious, I have to say. There's lots of it always, but very different stuff I'd never seen before. My family were Lithuanian background, and the food was much more that sort of style of cooking, and it's infused. That's what I do now.

**Interviewer: Did your parents keep a kosher home?**

Melanie Lindenberg: They never kept a kosher home. My grandfather had two sisters, and they used to do most of their cooking and their entertaining for the High Holydays, and they did, but we never kept a kosher home. Even though I grew up in the Jewish community, I never went to a Jewish day school. I went to a school like Ascham, which was quite unusual.

**Interviewer: What did you think of Australian food when you first arrived? I know you said that it was very different, but ...**

Melanie Lindenberg: I like the diversity of Australian food. I felt that it was influenced by so many different cultures. We just never saw the influence of the different areas of Europe as much as I saw when we arrived here. Here, there was an Italian restaurant, maybe a Greek restaurant. Indian food was completely different because it was from a different part of India. We didn't even know that there was other Indian food. Japanese and Chinese ... It's just so diverse and I love that. I love the diversity of food and the culture that it brings with it.

**Interviewer: We'll go straight to a question just about the special foods that are prepared and eaten by the family during get-togethers, Shabbat, Jewish holydays, and so forth.**

Melanie Lindenberg: Shabbat for me is probably the most important thing that we do as a family. People often say to me, "Your kids are now married, they're lovely partners, and you passed the teenage years. How did you do it? Why are they close to their cousins?" My sister's kids. I always just say, "Shabbat." Every Shabbat my family gets together. My parents come, my sister and brother-in-law and their kids, my own kids and their partners, and whichever ring-in we choose to invite. My brother doesn't live in Sydney now. He lives in [Cairns], so their family doesn't come in, but the rest of us do. Usually we try and make it so that everybody has something that they love.

My son-in-law, who's actually ... his mother is a few generation Australian-Jewish, and his father is Polish Holocaust survivor. He comes in loving things like egg salad and schnitzel. Of course, he gets whatever he wants, and chocolate ice cream. My kids have got used to the more traditional way of making a soup. We mix it up as much as we can, but there's always something that someone likes. My mom is a keen ice cream maker. Every Friday night, she makes a different ice cream, and the kids give her their choices. She'll try anything, so of course they'll test her. The most recent one is something to do with a coconut pandan ice cream that they saw at [unclear]. She'll make the coconut pandan so we step right out of the traditional, and we go for whatever they choose. If it's a birthday, they get to choose what their favorite dinner is, and we do that. For us, the Shabbat dinner is the connection of all of us each week, and truly the reason that we're a united close family. I do believe that. Our kids are interchangeable, they love sitting at the Shabbat table. I know I'm going to get a phone call just before Shabbat just to say, "Mum, what's for dinner? Who's coming? Can you FaceTime me what the table looks like? I'm missing you." The rest of the week? Nothing. I'm chopped liver. Don't hear from them.

**Interviewer: We're going to move on to the pride section now. The essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances. In this section we'd like to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions and how it shapes your identity today, and the passing down of traditions from generation to generation. How do your religious practices compare now to before you migrated?**

Melanie Lindenberg: Religion for us in South Africa was ... we call ourselves modern orthodox as a family. We celebrate Shabbat and two days of each High Holyday.[inaudible]. Since we've been in Australia, given that our children went to [Jewish day school] Moriah College, a lot has changed. My husband and I never attended Jewish day schools in Johannesburg. I was at a school called [inaudible] King Edwards, very out of the Jewish community. Though my grandfather was fairly observant, and we certainly had that tradition in our home, there was a lot I didn't know. For us, it's been the most incredible journey because we put the kids into Moriah a little bit against what we thought was our better judgment, but because we were following the masses.

We were new migrants, and felt that's what one had to do as a new migrant. It was the most fantastic journey. Our kids loved the school. We immersed ourselves in as much as we could of the parent support, stuff that we could do. I must say that over the years, I learned so much through that from the kids, from being involved in catering for music camps, from being on the board of management, from being on the Parents and Friends Association, and putting on functions. I learned about kashrut, I learned about all the different [inaudible]. We've been able to draw that into our own home and make that very much a part of our every day. I wouldn't call us religious and highly observant, because we're not, but we certainly are very traditional, and it's very much something that my kids have chosen to be a part of and I have no doubt will pass on to their own families.

**Interviewer: Did you mention whether you attended synagogue?**

Melanie Lindenberg: Maybe not. We do go to ... not a lot, but we do go to synagogue on the High Holydays. We have a relationship with the synagogue and a rabbi, and we enjoy the time that we spend with them. We've become quite good friends with them. They're very nice people, and we learn a lot from them. It's part of our lives.

**Interviewer: What traditions do you feel are most important or that you're most passionate about?**

Melanie Lindenberg: I think the tradition that I love most that I'm most passionate about is definitely that around Shabbat every week. I also love the High Holydays. I love that we have Rosh Hashanah, and we have the whole extended family. Our family has grown over the years. When we arrived here, there were just the few of us, but gradually my mother's sister who lived in Cape Town, so we didn't live in the same city, and her husband and whole family ... children and children's children migrated. My father's sister, who lived in , which is like from Sydney to Wollongong, so we didn't live near them either. Her family migrated.

We are more than 50 of us living in Sydney, immediate family who never lived together in South Africa, which is just phenomenal. On the High Holydays, we really do get to have that amazing time with the extended family, the cousins and all the family. Then of course when there's a Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah, or a new baby, or a wedding ... we spend time with them, but we also have a close connection to all of them the rest of the time.

**Interviewer: Okay. I'll just finish this section by asking you if there's any specific Jewish traditions that your parents have passed down to you that are also passed down to your children, and consequently grandchildren as well.**

Melanie Lindenberg: The tradition that I think we have had passed down to us from my grandparents and into parents, and now us and to my children, and to our little granddaughter now, is definitely the observance of a Shabbat dinner every Friday night. It's the most beautiful thing and we all really enjoy it, and it certainly has been generational.

**Interviewer: I know we've got that same answer a few different ways.**

Melanie Lindenberg: I do have to say that I don't believe the strength of Judaism in our lives would've been the same in South Africa. I think the Sydney Jewish community has had a large part to play in that, and that's quite ironic, because people often say the reverse. They say there was a very strong, tight-knit Jewish community in Johannesburg, and here it's less so because many of the Jews in Sydney are Holocaust survivors, and for very good reason they've let go of that connection. For us, having the kids immersed in the day school and the community in the Eastern suburbs has been very much a lead for us to continue that tradition.

**Interviewer: That's nice. We'll move on to nachas, and every Jewish person wants some nachas in their life. It can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community. I guess the first question is, what does nachas mean to you?**

Melanie Lindenberg: Nachas to me, apart from my magnificent, gorgeous, amazing little 20-month-old grand-daughter, and my beautiful children ... it's really the family unit that really has been ... At the end of the day, I think that's what it's about. However, having said that, it's been a very important part of our journey as migrants in Sydney, to give back to the community. I've made it my business as much as I can, literally from the day I stepped off the plane, to be involved in communal giving. Time, because it wasn't always possible for us to financially support an organisation ... I've been involved in myriad different areas of the community as a volunteer.

I started off as the P&F president of the preschool that the kids attended, Mt Zion in Bondi Junction. I did that while the kids were there. That was in 1986, so it was just after we arrived. Then when the kids went on to school, I became P&F president of Moriah College, and ex-officio board member. That's the way the process worked at the time. I also became president of the band support group, so I supported the music program at Moriah by fundraising, we took them overseas, we did music camps for a few hundred children every year, provided a kosher kitchen for them and catered for them. My time on the board of management of Moriah was the most amazing opportunity to give to the school back to learn so much. I always say that as a volunteer in this community, although it wasn't my intention, I learned more and received more than I gave, although that was not the intention.

I then went on to work with the Sydney Jewish Museum for the 50th anniversary of the liberation [of the concentration camps]. We did a huge function there. I've been involved peripherally in WIZO [Womens' International Zionist Organisation], I've done some work with JCA [Jewish Communal Appeal], with UIA [United Israel Appeal]. Over the years, I've really enjoyed communal contribution as a volunteer. Ten years ago, I became a staff member at the Montefiore [Home]. I never dreamed I'd actually work as a professional in the Jewish community, but I have. I feel like I've had the most amazing opportunity to engage with these extraordinary elders of the community who are a mix of migrants from every corner of the earth. Again, that's never the intention that I got much out of it, but I certainly have got probably a lot more than I've given.

**Interviewer: That's lovely. That's very, very nice. What do you hope for your children and grandchild?**

Melanie Lindenberg: My son's currently working in New York with his wife of six weeks. I hope they come back. That's what I hope. They will come back eventually one day, but not until they've done their thing. I feel very proud that they are doing what they've dreamt of. This is their dream. I do hope that one day they'll come back. My [other] son and daughter-in-law live just in Bondi Junction, so just down from Waverley Library with their little girl. I hope for all of them, apart from of course all the usual things, health, happiness, and success, I truly hope that they will immerse themselves in this community in a way that they feel comfortable so that ... Because they can make a difference. We all can. It's a very strong, amazing community steeped in history.

Not only the Jewish community, the community in general. I do hope that they will make a difference whether it be in the Jewish community or the community in general.

**Interviewer: I think the final question really is ... And you do have a lot to choose from here, of course, but what do you think your biggest achievement in life is?**

Melanie Lindenberg: I know that my biggest achievement is my family. I think that goes without saying. I'm very proud of them. I feel very blessed to have been given this opportunity which Australia offered us. I imagine our lives may have been very different in South Africa in so many ways, but I think our greatest achievement was to land on Australian soil. As a family, how unique is that. You don't often find many families where the entire family is here. It's just remarkable, really. I feel that's our greatest achievement by far. I guess my parents were the drivers. It didn't go without some sacrifice from everyone, but it was the best thing we ever did. Every day I count my blessings.

**Interviewer:** That's lovely.

Melanie Lindenberg: I'm very proud that we've got two generations [of Australians]. That's what I worked out in my head. I was six months pregnant with her, so she just [got in].

One of the things in the photographs that I've brought with me today are pictures of the family taken at my children's weddings. The significance of that for me is that when we arrived here, the first lot of us, there were five of us in an airplane ... actually, there were six of us, one in utero. At my daughter's wedding, there were more than 50 family members and subsequently I've had a granddaughter, I've got a baby granddaughter and my son has just recently married, so there are even more of us. That's phenomenal. We didn't live in the same city in Johannesburg in South Africa. The family were dispersed around South Africa, but now we all live in Sydney together. For me, the significance of these photos is just how remarkable it is that we all live in Australia and within about a six kilometer radius of each other mostly.

There are a few here and there dotted around in further places, but mostly we're all around the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney pretty much.

I also brought with me two volumes of a book written about my mother's family, the Katzenellenbogen family who were first settlers in South Africa. It's a very well-known Jewish family. My grandmother was a Katzenellenbogen. They say it goes back as far back as Rashi [mediaeval Jewish Torah scholar]. People like Helena Rubenstein, [inaudible], said to be members of this very large family. It is a very interesting family history. I also brought with the two history books, I call them history books, the life stories of my father on his 70th birthday and my father-in-law on his 80th birthday. We interviewed them. I got their life story through a series of questions. I managed to secure the most amazing documents like naturalisation certificates of my husband's grandparents when they came from Germany to South Africa and have photographs in these books. I'm hoping that my children will really own these books and be able to reflect on the family history and the migration through many countries, ultimately ending in Australia. I really do hope there will be many, many generations born in Australia because this is the lucky country.