

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

SUSAN BURES: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Susan Bures

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: If you could actually tell us your name, and when and where you were born.

Susan: My name is Susan Zena Bures. Long before Xena Warrior Princess, and spelled with a zed, not an x. I was born Susan Zena Klein, in London, in the county of Uxbridge. That was in 1946, in the November of '46.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Can you tell me a little bit about what was happening in England around about the time you were born, and ultimately, I suppose, the circumstances that led up to your family leaving and moving to Australia?

Susan: My father [Louis Klein] had been in the forces, in the British Army, for six years. When he was demobbed ... before he went into the army, his father, my grandfather, was the head of Simpsons Piccadilly Manufacturing. He had trained his four sons, as they said, picking up threads on the cutting room floor, all the way through the business, so they would understand the business of men's clothing manufacturing. What my father wanted to do when he was demobbed, was to set up a factory. There was no chance that was going to be in England. England was terribly depressed after the war. The rationing continued. The whole atmosphere was gloomy and grim. They decided that they wanted to move somewhere entirely else. There's a family legend that it was a choice between South America or Australia.

Obviously, they chose Australia because of the language. In early 1948, my father and his cousin and partner, Sid Sinclair, came to Australia themselves. We then followed six months later. When they came to Australia, the government of the day was very interested in encouraging manufacturing after the war. Out at St Marys, there was a huge area which used to make artillery. In fact, it was called Fuse Estates and it had lots and lots of buildings on it. They were happily handing out these buildings to people who wanted to manufacture. My father and Sid got one of these buildings and then they started to get machinery out from England, and to hire workers. They were very proud of the fact that their workforce ... ended up being the biggest, actually, of men's manufacturing.

The company was Anthony Squires. They had, I think it was in the end, a 600-strong workforce. In the beginning, it was a lot of people who'd come out after the war as the flotsam and jetsam of Europe, who actually had skills, sewing skills and manufacturing skills, and some Australians, likewise, with manufacturing skills, including a lot of women. They employed these people, they got the machinery out from England, and the company just got bigger and better, and bigger and better, and it ended as the biggest and the best men's clothing manufacturer in Australia. My father did an amazing job, and his partner, for which I'm very grateful, because it produced a lifestyle of great pleasantness. We weren't rich like the Lowys of today, or the Pratts of today, but we were very comfortably off.

There was nothing that we needed that we couldn't have, although my parents were fairly strict, so we had to have a good reason for wanting something. Nobody ever said we haven't got the money to buy x or y. That's a remarkably pleasant thing, you know, to have grown up in that sort of environment.

We lived first in Parramatta. My father had organised a house for us in Parramatta. We got off the boat and we came to Parramatta. My mother was stunned that she couldn't understand

people. They were speaking English, she was speaking English, but she couldn't understand them. The woman next door used to hang over the fence. My brother was just a baby in arms. She'd say, "G'day, Peter!" My mother's thinking, "What's g'day?" She had no idea. Anyway, at some point, she took her courage in her hands and she went to the lady. She tried to explain that she needed bottled milk for the baby.

The lady said, "You have to get up early and talk to the milko." Once she got used to the idea that the "milko" meant the milkman, she got up early and she went to the milkman. She said, "I need bottled milk for my baby." He said, "Sorry, love, you can't get bottled milk in Parramatta, only in Sydney. You have to put out the billy." I mean, she was just flabbergasted. She came from an impoverished background but in London, it was possible to go to the theatre for sixpence. That was her life, she loved the theatre and she used to go. She came here to what she thought was just a complete wasteland of culture, and so on. Anyway, we finally moved from there to Eastwood, which was pretty suburban and pleasant. From there, we moved to Pymble, and then to Wahroongah, which is where I spent most of my growing-up years.

Then, how did I get to Waverley Council area? When I got married and we started to have children, my husband's an architect, and he had bought, many years ago, the old Dover Heights post office, which was derelict. We were trying to find a place to live. We didn't like this one, we couldn't afford that one. In the end, he said, "Look, I think I'm going to do Dover Heights and turn it into a house." Which he did, and we proceeded to live there for 34 or 5 years. I have claims to being a Waverley person, even though I didn't start off that way.

Interviewer: That's fantastic. I must say, you're pre-empting almost every single question that I'm about to ask to get you to tell your stories.

Susan: I must tell you one funny thing. I don't really remember it, it's a kind of trace memory, so I don't know whether I'm remembering it, or I'm remembering the story. Apparently, after we'd been in Parramatta for a year or something, we came to Bondi for a holiday.

We got a little unit somewhere, because there were the two little children and my parents. Somehow or another, one of us got a tick in the head. Somebody must've told my parents that you have to take the tick out really carefully and so on. Anyway, the tick was taken out, I'm not quite sure by whom, because my father was as squeamish as my mother. They kept it in a little Benson and Hedges tin for years, because they couldn't believe that in a civilised city, you have some insect boring into your head like you were in the jungles of Southeast Asia. The tick story became part of the family legend.

[In Eastwood] we lived in a very nice suburban street. In fact, I had a nearly dreadful accident. I used to go and visit the neighbour who sewed. I used to perch up on her sewing table, so I've been told, and talk to her while she was sewing. On this particular occasion, the table collapsed, and I ended up on the floor with pins, needles, and scissors. I don't know how I didn't lose my eyesight, because there's a scar that goes right to the corner of my eye. Anyway, so that's my memory of Eastwood. We had an aster garden, I remember. I remember being hosed by the gardener in summer, you know, to keep cool. He put the hose on my brother and me, no swimming pools in those days.

Interviewer: I might just ask you a nice, kind of generic question before we move on to food. That is, in regards to the local area. How do you think the Jewish community has shaped this area?

Susan: I think the answer to that is probably quite a lot. Partly because, when Jews gather, one of the earliest things they do is form a prayer congregation, a synagogue. There are innumerable synagogues in the Eastern Suburbs now. We had, I think, a fairly light footprint until the fervently Orthodox came up with this thing about the crossing, not being able to press the button, and could they have automatic lights to cross the road, and so on. I think that made an impact on the non-Jewish population, as did seeing the people walking to and fro synagogues. Some people, I was one of them, of course, but I'm Jewish so it was kind of self-pleading, but I looked at that and thought, "Don't we live in a wonderful country. Where people can wear funny clothes and walk up and down the street." Other people looked at that and thought, "These people are alien."

In terms of synagogues, Jewish food, shops, and suppliers, it all accreted around Bondi. Then it sort of crept up the hill to Dover Heights and into Rose Bay. Just by sheer weight of numbers, I think, we established a presence here, that as I said, was fairly lightly trodden, but it's getting more and more obvious that there are Jews here, whereas in my day, we were much more circumspect. We didn't necessarily, you know, show ourselves as Jews. Silly really, but that's the way it was.

Interviewer: Okay, so we're going to move on to food now. Food, of course, is a very important part of Jewish culture.

Susan: There is a saying, "They tried to kill us, we survived. Let's eat."

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about the food? You were very young when you came over.

Susan: I was.

Interviewer: Do you remember food back in England?

Susan: No, I don't, but I know from my mother that because of the rationing, food was limited and not all that pleasant. She does tell a wonderful story, told a wonderful story, coming to Australia on the boat. As they got closer to Australia, at one particular dinner they were served ice cream for dessert, and it had little black specs in it. She sort of looked around, and she said very carefully, she took all the little black specs out. She had no idea that it was passion fruit and that she was supposed to eat the little black specs. That was a bit of a shock to her system. Unfortunately, my parents had a very narrow range of foods that they would eat. In fact, I hadn't eaten a capsicum or a mushroom till I met my husband. I mean, we had peas and beans. Fruit was apples and pears. The most exotic fruit we had was watermelon.

Everything else was just too fancy. My mother, God bless her, she wasn't very interested in cooking. She had about 10 meals that she would rotate, so we knew what were getting. For Shabbat and for festivals, it was one of two things. It was either overcooked chicken or overcooked beef. Her idea of a really nice piece of beef was to cook it to cardboard. You had to slice it very, very thin, otherwise it probably wouldn't have gone down. Yes, that's all I remember. Chicken for some festivals and roast beef for others.

Interviewer: Suffice to say you don't have any particularly pleasant memories of food as a child.

Susan: No. Although, oh yes, I have one very bad memory. My grandmother, every now and again, would make for my father, something called kasha, which is buckwheat. The smell was so disgusting I'd have to go outside while she was cooking it. That was awful.

Then, every now and again, the only time my father went into the kitchen was to make a cup of tea, or to grate the potatoes for latkes. I don't know if anybody's talked to you about latkes, but in my view, latkes are probably the greatest Jewish contribution to civilisation. They are grated potato pancakes with onion, so it's potato and onion, salt and pepper, a little bit of flour to hold them together, and you fry them. They're associated particularly with the festival of Chanukah, which is at the end of the year. Any time we could make them happen, we would have them because they are utterly delicious. That was my father's starring role. He would grate the potatoes on one of those pedestal graters. Yes, that was it, and make tea. He was good at making tea.

Interviewer: Most people have been actually saying, that when they arrived in Australia and looking at Australian food, that it was very kind of bland and boring, but for you ...

Susan: Yeah, but we brought bland and boring with us, so I didn't have any of those problems when I was a child. I had problems with the odd word, so if somebody asked me home for tea, I didn't know whether that was afternoon tea, which it would've meant to us, or dinner. Words like "brim" – I would've thought it was "bream". Odd things like that, that we had that slight difference. Otherwise, no, my food was just as boring as their food.

Interviewer: Pretty much the same? You took the same sort of thing?

Susan: I think so. I think so. As I recall. Of course there was a kosher element. My mother was mostly kosher. She didn't actually keep separate sets of plates and cutlery, but she would never cook milk and meat together. If we had a meat sandwich, it had to have margarine on it, couldn't have butter. In those little ways it was a bit different, but not in any of the radical ways, no.

Interviewer: All right. Susan, can you tell me about any special foods that were prepared, I don't know if they were that special, now that you've been telling us these stories, but can you tell me about any particular foods that were prepared or eaten during family get-togethers or Jewish holydays? Shabbat and so forth.

Susan: Apart from the incinerated chicken and roast beef, yes. Things like gefilte fish, which I'm sure other people have told you about. My grandmother used to make that. Chopped liver, which is a Jewish-style paté. They would be made on a regular basis. Soup, chicken soup. My mother made the best chicken soup. That was de rigueur for any family dinner. Other than that, no. Just those 10 boring meals, over and over again.

Interviewer: The essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances. In this section, we'd love to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions and how it shapes your identity today, and really, the passing down of traditions from generation to generation.

First of all, how do your religious practices compare now to when you first migrated to Australia?

Susan: When we migrated and went to Parramatta, as I said, there were government incentives to set up business in that area, so a lot of other Jewish families also came out. A lot from Britain, but one or two from other parts of Europe also settled in the Western Suburbs, because they were also having factories in the Western Suburbs. So, what do Jews do when they find themselves together? The pattern repeats over and over. The first thing that Jews did in Australia, was form a burial society, but the next thing is a synagogue. My father was one of the men who founded Parramatta Synagogue. We went to Parramatta Synagogue for many, many years, while we were living in that area. Then we went to live on the North Shore and we joined the North Shore Synagogue. My father got very involved there and at one stage, in fact, was the president.

We used to go to shule, as we call it, to synagogue, pretty much every Saturday. I used to go with my father. People thought we were really religious because we went to shule every Saturday. We drove to shule every Saturday, but we went. I grew up regarding going to shule as part of my life. I'm not personally religious. I have a Catholic friend who says that faith is a charisma, it's a gift from God, in which case, I wasn't gifted. But I am devoted to tradition, so for me, when we moved to the Eastern Suburbs, one of the first things in my mind was, "What synagogue am I going to join?" Largely, of course, for my children at that point. Still today, when I go to the Great Synagogue, which is an utterly magnificent building, the services are almost identical to the services that I grew up with at North Shore synagogue, the same sort of tunes and the same orderly conduct of the services.

It's like a zen thing. You sit there and this washes over you, the choir. It's absolutely gorgeous. I suppose in many ways, my attendance at synagogue is aesthetic more than anything else. I'm trying to ... I've taken my little grandson a few times. I want to make him comfortable with going to the synagogue. I always used to take my children for the festivals. Not all the festivals, but for the High Holidays, I used to take them, and for Purim, which is a fun festival for children, and for Simchat Torah, which is also fun for children. Now I'm trying to do this again with my grandchildren, only one of whom is really old enough, at the moment, to understand. For me, identifying as a Jew means, among many things, belonging to or identifying with a synagogue. That's important. It's important to me. I think my daughter feels that it's important for her children as well, and my son.

Interviewer: You mentioned before that you felt very strongly about traditions, more than anything else, really.

Susan: Yes.

Interviewer: What traditions do you feel are most important and that you are most passionate about?

Susan: There's an old saying, "The Jews don't keep the Sabbath, the Sabbath keeps the Jews." What that means is that you need to have some Jewish practice to identify and to solidify your membership of the community. It's important to me that my grandchildren, now, are comfortable going to synagogue. Understand that there are certain times where going to synagogue is more important than other times. It's fairly important to me that they learn a little bit of Hebrew. I mean, I have almost no Hebrew, but that they learn a little bit so that they identify with the Hebrew language and with the history of Israel.

Also, I think, the other thing that I desperately want to pass on to my children is that sense of the need that those of us who are comfortably off have to donate our time and donate our money to help other people.

It doesn't have to be people within our community, it can be all sorts of things. That sense of charity, in the English word, is something that I think is very important to Jews, and most Jews are, I think, very charitable, both financially and in terms of their own time that they give as volunteers, and so on. I want to extract these meanings out of Judaism and pass those on as best I can. There's a famous saying from the Jewish writings that Rabbi Hillel was asked to define Judaism while standing on one foot, and he said, "Do not do unto others what you would not ..." I've got the grammar wrong, but it was in the negative. I know it's in the New Testament as well, but it's in the positive. In the Jewish writings it's, "Don't do unto others what you would not want them to do to you. That is the law, all the rest is commentary" he says.

It's pulling out those, the essence of Judaism, and trying to make sure that somehow or another I can pass that on now to my grandchildren.

Interviewer: I think we're fine to move onto the final section, which is naches. Every Jewish person wants some naches in their life, of course. It can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community. What does the word naches mean to you and does it have any special significance?

Susan: The first thing that pops to mind is my children and my grandchildren. They've given me and continue to give me a great deal of naches. It's almost the quintessential definition of naches, is watching your grandchildren do things, get involved in the world, and in life. That's it. That's naches for me. I've said to my children on many occasions that they have two blessings. One is that their great-great-grandparents left Europe for London, for England. The other is that their grandparents, in my children's case, my parents, left England for Australia. What a blessing to grow up in this country! We are so fortunate to be Australians. To me, I get a lot of naches out of being an Australian, and I, like most of us, I get excited when Australians do this or Australians do that. I suppose that's another thing that gives me naches.

It also, just watching the broader family grow. My nieces and nephews and their children. My cousins' children and their children. When we get together on a Yom Tov, or for somebody's birthday, seeing all these little people running around living in total freedom, in what's really one of the most, if not the most, stunning countries in the world. That's all. That all produces naches.

Interviewer: What do you actually hope for your children and grandchildren?

Susan: Oh, gosh. Continued peace. Involvement in community, both Jewish and the broader community. That they grow up understanding their blessings and try to give back. What else do I want for them? I mean, I can't say happiness, because what does happiness mean, but I want them to be content with the decisions that they've made in life. That's obviously my children, not my grandchildren yet. I want them to have their naches from their children and that we're all still a family at the end of the day. At the moment, my children believe in family and they are very happy when we all get together. I'd like that to continue. That's it. I can't think of anything else.

Interviewer: Susan, what do you think your biggest achievement in life is and why?

Susan: I'm tempted to say my biggest achievement is I didn't give birth to any axe murderers, but no, that's not fair. I need to say that my biggest achievement is children who are loving and their children, now growing, that that gives me a great sense of satisfaction. I'm also grateful that I had the opportunity to give back to the community in various different ways. I feel that in that way I'm fulfilling my father's expectations, because he was a leader of the community, and in fact he was, for some years, he was president of the whole Jewish community of Australia. Had he lived, unfortunately he died at the age of 57, but had he lived, he would have wanted me to continue doing this sort of thing, and I did. I don't know if I did it in his memory, or whether I did it because that's just what the world sent me, and I often said "yes".

I spent a lot of time with issues of multiculturalism, both at the Ethnic Affairs Commission, and I was Chair for six years of NAATI, which is the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. It made me realise just how grateful I need to be that I came from an English-speaking background, and how difficult, concomitantly, it is for people who don't come from that background, to find their feet in Australia and to become part of the society. That's all quite important to me, that I was able to do that. Then for a number of years, I also sat on the board of WAYS, which is the Waverley Youth Service. Again, I felt proud that I was able to contribute to that. My kids had such a, you know, ordinary, pleasant middle-class upbringing. At WAYS, we see kids who are, some of them, the third generation of poverty. There were children that were looked after by WAYS when no one in three generations had a job. It's just heartbreaking.

It's important that those of us who have the skills and have the understanding, that we help somehow, in whatever way we're asked to. That's another thing that I found very important. I'm also, I suppose I'm a scholar manqué. I started off life as an ancient historian and I sort of lost my way, but I'm still very devoted to history. That's another way of learning to value what you have. Looking at what people didn't have, not all that long ago. Even in a country like Australia. We're blessed to be here. We're blessed to be English speakers because it makes life very much easier. It's important that we help others up the ladder, as people helped us when we arrived. My parents made friends and they helped, so we need to do the same for other people. To me that's really important.

I tried to pass that on to my children. I think I managed. I think they understand.

Interviewer: The activities that you're involved in the wider Waverley community that also bring you naches.

Susan: Absolutely. As I said, the Waverley Youth Service, WAYS, I was very, very happy to be involved there and to do what I could, and it wasn't a lot. I sat on that board for quite a number of years. The other things that I've done are mostly Sydney-wide, or in the case of NAATI, Australia-wide, so they're not focused specifically on the local community. But now that I'm in my retirement, in my "grandmothering" phase, it's entirely possible that I'll find something to volunteer with in the local area. I just haven't quite got my head around it yet, but I will. I think we're living in one of the most amazing areas of Sydney, this plus the Woollahra municipality. The two together just have given all of us so much, that I think I want to give something back locally, as well as all the other things that I had done in the past.

I can't think of anything else that I did specifically in Waverley. No, not really. Not really.

Okay. The book is called *The First Ten*, and it's about the first 10 years of Anthony Squires in Australia. This is how it begins.

"How about South America?" one of the partners said. "They don't dress very well in South America." "We don't know Spanish." the other partner said. "We would have to learn Spanish first. Besides, it's like France, they keep changing their governments." "The climate's good in South America." the first partner said. "You might not know what government you've got, but you can be sure of the weather." "You can be sure of the weather here in Britain." the other partner said. "That's one of the reasons we're leaving." The wives went on with their knitting. The first partner pondered, "Why don't we write down all the countries on a list, and then give them marks, and go to the country that gets the most marks?"

"Very well." the second partner said. "Write this down. The country should have a democratic government. The people should speak English." "It should be a good, sunny climate." the first partner said. "There should be brains and skills we could use in the business. The people should have a fashion sense." the first partner said. One of the wives put down her knitting. "It should be a good country for the children to grow up in," she said. They went on writing down the "shoulds". When all the marks were counted, Australia won. The partners looked at each other. They got out an atlas to find out how to get there."