

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

ELANA BENJAMIN, Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Elana Benjamin

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

Interview Date: 21 May 2015

Interview Location: North Bondi

Transcribed by and date: 24 June 2015

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Interviewer: Were you aware what was happening in the country that your parents actually emigrated from, India? What was happening and what led up to the circumstances of them actually leaving and coming to Australia?

Elana Benjamin: So, to clarify, do you mean as I grew up?

Interviewer: No, before. Before you were born, were you actually aware of why your parents actually came to Australia to begin with?

Elana Benjamin: So, I understand your question now. Sorry. I thought you... anyway... so my understanding is that my parents ... Well, actually, there was a vibrant Jewish community in India. And my parents were from Bombay which is now Mumbai. For about one and a half to two generations there was this vibrant, thriving community. And then there were two historical incidents that caused the community to disintegrate. The first one was that the British, sorry that India gained independence from Britain in 1947. And then in 1948 Israel was established.

So the Jews of India had originally come from Iraq. So they weren't in India for So this is a bit complicated. The community that my parents came from originated from Iraq. There are other Indian Jews who had been there for centuries. But these Iraqi Jews tended to align themselves with the British. So once the British were gone, they felt like their, as a community rather than as individuals, they felt like their protectors had gone and that they weren't really sure what their future was going to be for them in India. Then of course Israel was established a year later. So from a Zionist point of view, there was a lot of emphasis on people making Aliyah and going to Israel. So those two events happened in '47, '48.

But having said that, my parents didn't leave until 1966, actually both of them left. My dad's family came to Australia, and my mom's family actually went to Los Angeles. That was their motivation. My dad's family's case, they kind of left individually. They didn't all leave as a group. My dad is one of nine children. A few brothers and sisters went first, and then they packed up. I think the main reason was they just felt like there was no future for them as a family and as a community in India. Does that answer your question?

Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely. Why do you think Australia was the final destination for both sides of the family?

Elana Benjamin: So my mum's family actually never came here. It was just my mum who came here to marry my dad. Why did my dad come here? I think it was actually... Well the British... All the Jews that left India at that time anyway, my dad had a British passport. A lot of them were traveling on British passports. It was much easier for them to get into Commonwealth countries. They tended to move to Australia, to the UK, to Canada or then to Israel. I think it was just a matter of my aunt who came here first managed to sponsor the other members of the family. So I think it was a bit of a matter of practicality more than anything else.

As to why my dad's family didn't go to Israel, I'm not 100% sure. I know my mum's father, when he was choosing countries, was very insistent that he didn't want to go to Israel because he didn't want his children to do compulsory army service.

Simone: Was a boat? Was it a ship? Was it a few destinations from India straight to Australia? What was the actual journey itinerary, if you could call it that?

Elana Benjamin: The journey itinerary for my dad was he left by ship. And he always tells me he nicknamed himself the penniless passenger because he had seven... I can't actually remember, but it's in my book... he had a very small amount of money. He was like down at the bottom of the ship. He could only watch all the rich people, you know, who could afford entertainment and all the other stuff on the ship. I don't know his exact ports. I think it took him about two or three weeks. I

know he stopped in Perth before he came to Sydney. And most of his family members left by ship, but his mother, my grandmother, and my dad's youngest brother came over by plane.

Interviewer: When they did settle in Australia, why did they settle in the Eastern Suburbs? If they didn't, did they settle somewhere else, and how did they eventually get to the Eastern Suburbs?

Elana Benjamin: When my dad's family came, they did settle in the Eastern Suburbs, specifically in Bondi. I think part of the reason they settled in Bondi was that was where other members of the Sephardi Jewish community were. The Sephardi Synagogue, I don't know exactly what year it was. I can go back and look. The Sephardi Synagogue had been set up in Bondi Junction. So for them, they wanted to be close to the synagogue because in Bombay the synagogue was the focal point of their community. Obviously here, when they came the distances were greater. They weren't all living in a few streets like they were in Bombay, but they still wanted to be close to each other. Plus, there was the wider Jewish community. I guess you know, there was a kosher [00:06:00] butcher at the time. I presume there was. Just to be closer to Jewish people and Jewish facilities.

Elana Benjamin: I should also say I think that other people lived in the eastern suburbs, but they might live in Bellevue Hill or Dover Heights. At that time, not like now, Bondi was like the cheap, the poor cousin of those nicer Eastern Suburbs suburbs. So that was the only... It was cheaper for them to live there. They couldn't afford to live anywhere else. They literally came with no money. My grandmother and all the unmarried brothers and sisters were all living in one house together. My grandmother never worked, so they were all working to help support her and bring in an income.

Interviewer: Okay. What about your mum? Why did she come to Australia?

Elana Benjamin: My mum's family immigrated to Los Angeles. My mum was only 16-years-old when she left. She lived in LA for about, for three years, but she never really liked it. It was a real culture shock to move from Bombay to Los Angeles. Eventually she said to her family, "I'm going to go to Israel for a year." She bought... She had intended to go back to Los Angeles, but for whatever reason, [00:08:00] she only bought a one-way ticket from LA to Israel. So she went there and did her year.

In the meantime, my dad was in Sydney. My mum and dad knew each other from Bombay. My dad is five years older than my mum. But because the community was very small, everyone knew each other. Someone said to my dad, "Oh, you should go see Sheila," Sheila's my mum. "You should go see Sheila in Israel." They knew each other. It wasn't exactly arranged as much as suggested. Anyway, my dad had a very limited amount of money. His father had died when he was on 12 or 13-years-old. He had to leave school and help ... No, he finished high school, but he never got to go to university because he had to help financially support his family. He's always been very conscious about financial security.

My dad only had enough money to go to Israel and come back or to buy an apartment. He was like, "What should I do? Should I go buy an apartment? Should I go to Israel?" He was in his mid-20s, and the Jewish women that were from the available pool he felt were very different culturally, the Ashkenazi Jewish women, to what he had come from. Anyway, he went to Israel. He was there for like three days. He proposed to my mum. My mum never went back to Los Angeles. She came here to marry my dad. She didn't know anyone here. She didn't have a single relative here. Her friends in Israel said to her, "What do you mean? You're going across the world to marry this man. He hasn't even given you a ring." There wasn't very much money. I don't think he'd brought a ring with him. That was it. She's always lived here, and her mum and dad and her brother and sister ... My mum's brother and sister still live in Los Angeles. That's how my mum ended up here.

Interviewer: Whirlwind relationship.

Elana Benjamin: Yeah. When I was researching my book, I was like, "Didn't you think of living together first? Did you have to get married?" They said, "Well, people didn't do that then. It just wasn't socially acceptable. No one did that kind of thing. My mum said she didn't want to go back to LA. She knew my dad, and she knew he was a good man. He'd looked after his mother since his father had died. He was kind and responsible. She said she wasn't in love with him when she moved here, but the love came, and she respected him as a person. For her that was more important. How times have changed.

Interviewer: Oh, they have, haven't they? Do you recall your parents telling you about what it was like, the culture change, and their first impressions of the Eastern Suburbs area when they first arrived and first started living here?

Elana Benjamin: When we were growing up, it was funny. I've written about this. I said India was like the invisible lodger in our Bondi home because it wasn't really spoken of overtly because my parents were busy building a new life here and raising children and working and doing all the things that you do, especially when you have small children. They kind of referenced it here and there, but nobody ever really sat down and said, "This is what it was like in India," or "This is what it was like when we first came to Australia." We'd kind of hear bits and pieces. It was only later when I asked them, and actually when I did the form this Eat, Pray, Naches..., the application form. I went to them and said, "So, what were your first impressions of what Sydney was like," was really the first time we'd talked about it in such an, I guess, direct manner.

Interviewer: Okay. Did they talk about any specific challenges that were greater than others when they first got here?

Elana Benjamin: My understanding is that my parents both faced lots of challenges. I think one of the big ones... well, for my mum one of the challenges was that she didn't have her family here. For both my parents there were financial challenges, that they didn't have a lot of money. See, I don't know if it's cultural challenges or me reading into it too much or not. I know that as the Sephardi community struggled to get itself recognized as equals to the Ashkenazi community, I think there was some ... I mean, it's difficult because I didn't live through that time, and it was their struggles not mine. I'm conscious so I don't want to read into it too much. I think there were some struggles to be recognized as equals within the Ashkenazi community, within the wider Jewish community. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: Absolutely, absolutely. Understood.

Interviewer: I guess you've indirectly answered the question about why the local area was a popular place for settlement for Jewish people. Really, the synagogue and everybody just gravitating. I think we're okay there.

Elana Benjamin: Also, I think Jewish schools. My parents, when they first moved here, I guess they weren't thinking about that sort of thing, but maybe that's the reason that they stayed, I think the main reason they stayed actually is because my dad's whole family lived within a one kilometre radius. They were all close to each other. Part of that was most of them sent their children to Jewish schools. It was very important for them to be part of, within that infrastructure.

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

Elana Benjamin: That's a good question. I think the Jewish community has had a significant impact on the area. In terms of numbers, Waverley is like 25% [00:14:00] Jewish. So if you look at... If I can kind of think about... My kids go to the local public school. The children in that school know a lot about Jewish practices and cultures because of the children that go there. Hebrew is one of the

languages on offer. There's that culturally. There's probably also a greater awareness of what it means, a greater awareness in the wider community of what it means to be Jewish. For example, my work life, when I finish university, I would go and be out in the city. I was sometimes the first Jewish person that a person had encountered. They didn't know anything about it, whereas people in this area, as a generalisation, tend to know a little bit more about what it means to be Jewish. That doesn't exactly answer your question.

Food-wise probably. You were talking about the Gelato Bar, those European/Hungarian type cakes. There's that. That's all that springs to mind.

Interviewer: Before I get onto the next questions, why don't you talk to us a little bit about the book that you wrote and why you wrote it.

Elana Benjamin: My book is called, "My Mother's Spice Cupboard: A Journey from Baghdad to Bombay to Bondi". It's the story of my family's immigration from Iraq to India to Australia intertwined with the history of the Baghdadi Jews of Bombay. It's partly memoirs. It's partly my reflection of growing up in a Sydney community, [00:18:00] in a different situation to what I perceived was the environment that other Jewish kids grew up in. It's partly a historical account. The main reason I wrote it was because I had grown up in a very strongly affiliated family. I went to day schools. I didn't learn anything about the history of my ancestors. I felt that it was a gap that needed to be closed.

I only became interested in it when I was at university. It was a very long project that spanned ten years while I was working. I dropped down to four days a week. I would go and interview my grandparents. My three grandparents were still alive then. My other grandfather died before I was born. I would go and spend time with them. With my tape recorder, because these were the pre-iPad days, and record their stories.

I don't know if you've heard, Kate Grenville has just published a new book. I can't remember what it's called. It's a memoir about her mother's life. I was listening to an interview with her on ABC radio the other day with Richard Feidler. What she's done, her mother died, and my understanding is she's gone through her mother's journals and notes. It's the story of her mother's life. She's pieced it together to write this story. What Kate Grenville said was these oral histories, if they're not recorded, they're lost within a generation. I thought that was really apt because that's exactly what would have happened, not necessarily that I did such an amazing job, but once these people die, if their stories aren't recorded, then they literally disappear which is why I think this project is also such an important initiative.

Elana Benjamin: The book was published in 2012, so I feel like it's old news. I don't know. I'll tell you, what I'd really like, part of my goal for doing this was that one day it would become part of, maybe not the book, but that the stories of the Sephardi Jews would become part of the high school curriculum, high school Jewish day school curriculum. I have gone in and spoken at Moriah and a few of the other schools. It's obviously a big thing...

Interviewer: I think we should actually say that as part of this project anyway, that that's one of the driving forces behind you writing that book to start off with.

Elana Benjamin: Change is slow. Also, I think you need someone who's prepared to spearhead that kind of effort. You need a lot of time and a lot of energy to do that. I'm not in the school system, so it's hard for me to do it. The teachers, they're swamped.

Simone: Just so you know for the piece we're doing, I'm actually hiring a curriculum writer. Just by you guys being in the project, the child would have to know what does Sephardic mean? What is a Sephardic Jew? Where did they come from?

Elana Benjamin: Beautiful.

Interviewer: What a great, great reference already.

Elana Benjamin: I think the other thing, and I don't know if it's something you could include, is the really nice thing about the Jews of India is they have, and I have quoted it in the book, they're in a unique position of never having experienced anti-Semitism. Basically the story of the Jewish people is they got persecuted, they got persecuted. They got killed. They survived. I think in terms of identity, it's really nice to have a story of something positive. There's also some Jews who went to China as well. They weren't persecuted. They were able to live in tolerance within, tolerated with their neighbours, and they thrived. It's amazing. What a nice way to instill Jewish pride in children instead of just saying ... Obviously the other stuff is important. I'm not saying do one or the other, but to do both because it's a nice balance I think between dark and light.

Elana Benjamin: Thank you.

Interviewer: For that, I'd like you to just do a little piece about what one of your driving

Elana Benjamin: Okay, so let's do it to you. One of the driving forces, I guess, the driving force for me to write, "My Mother's Spice Cupboard", to write my book was to record stories that I felt were previously untold, that were unspoken, that were unheard. These are the stories of the Sephardi Jews who have [00:24:00] in historical times were a majority actually. Back in Baghdad in the post-Temple era, Baghdad actually was the centre of the Jewish world. It made religious decisions. Over time, the Sephardi Jews, especially in Australia, have been a very small minority. Going through high school, I didn't learn anything about the history of my ancestors. I know that it wasn't just me. We never learned anything about the Jews of Egypt or Morocco or Assyria or of China, of all those countries. Their stories are just as important as the Jews of Europe.

Something that's really fascinating and I think instills a great amount of Jewish pride is hearing about the Jews of India who have a unique distinction of never having been persecuted by their non-Jewish rulers, which makes such a nice change from the stories of European Jews or even Jews historically, back from the Roman times, who were constantly persecuted and killed and murdered and experienced anti-Semitism simply because of the fact they were Jewish. This is a nice contrast, the light versus the dark of a story of a people who lived in harmony with their neighbours and who survived and who thrived.

Interviewer: We'll go from the top.

Elana Benjamin: Ready? My name is Elana Benjamin. I'm the author of "My Mother's Spice Cupboard: A Journey from Baghdad to Bombay to Bondi". It's a story of my family's journey from Iraq to India to Australia. I should say my Jewish family's journey. Sorry, I have completely lost what I was going to say.

Interviewer: You can start with it's the story.

.Elana Benjamin: It's the story of my Jewish family's journey from Iraq to India to Australia intertwined with the history of the Baghdadi Jews of Bombay. The reason I wrote it is because I felt that the stories of the Jews of India, and also more widely the Sephardi Jews of countries like Egypt and Morocco, Syria, China, even Afghanistan haven't really been told. It's really important to tell these stories because in the case of the Jews of India, not only is their story really interesting, but it's quite unique in that the Jews of India never experienced persecution or anti-Semitism at the hand of the rulers of India. They were able to live side-by-side with their non-Jewish neighbours and thrive and live peacefully and practice Judaism in a way that Jews throughout history could only have dreamt of.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about your previous, in this case, not your native country. Your native country is Australia I guess. If we're talking about the food that your

mother and your parents used to eat when they were in India or Iraq. Obviously, if you've got any memories of eating favourite foods when you were a child.

Elana Benjamin: Let's start with the food my parents used to grow up eating. In India they obviously ate a lot of rice. I think my dad's family tended to eat spicier food than my mum's family. It's the typical Indian food: curries, rice, flat bread called chapatis, fish, chicken, that sort of thing. There wasn't sliced bread or the kind of food that we eat here. I should say for a start, my dad doesn't really cook. My grandmother used to cook.

When I grew up here, my grandmother lived up on O'Brien Street, so literally a five minute walk away, five, ten minute walk away. Every Saturday evening all the extended family would gather at her house for what we would call a Hannah Benjamin home cooked Iraqi feast. She would make all these really labour intensive dishes that I never used to eat because I just didn't ... It was not really child friendly food. She would make things they called kuppas which are like meatballs coated in semolina. She'd make that with beetroot. She'd make chatani, which is chicken and onions and spice dish. The adults all loved her food.

The kids never ate it. What she used to make that the kids loved were these potatoes that were called aloo makalas. That word, 'aloo makala' is a hybrid word. 'Aloo' means potato in Hindi. I think I've got this right. 'Makala' means fried in Arabic. These potatoes that are literally apparently, I didn't know this at the time, you cut the potatoes, and you soak them in oil overnight to absorb the oil. Then you deep fry them. They're not healthy at all, but they're amazing. We'd go into her house and she'd literally be pulling them out of the hot oil. They were so hot that she'd wrap them in paper towel for us. I'd always have to be careful not to burn my mouth because they were just so yummy. No one makes them anymore because they're just a complete health risk. Also the idea of soaking potatoes and frying them. It's the kind of food that women cooked when they didn't have jobs outside the home. That was my grandmother.

Growing up in my mother's, in my parents' home, my mum worked. She didn't have time to make those labour intensive dishes. Also she'd never really cooked before because in India, although the family was middle class, labour in India was very cheap, so they had a cook. They also had, they used to call them the servants. Very un-PC. Help in the home. I always thought, as an aside, "They were always telling me they never had much money. How did they manage to have a cook and help around the house?" My mum never did any of the cooking. When she moved here, her mother lived in Los Angeles, and she would get my dad's older sister who lived around the corner, and she would get my grandmother to teach her to cook those traditional Indian recipes. She'd stop in on the way home from work. She'd go, "Okay, this is what I want to cook tonight. Can you teach me to cook it?"

Then she expanded to make more multicultural type dishes like couscous. Not pasta so much. I think even in the 1970s Asian food wasn't as popular. You couldn't really get those ingredients. I think things like spaghetti bolognese, that sort of food. My mum did cook more of the traditional Indian foods like aloo bhaji which is potato bhaji, which is spicy potato. She would make chapatis. My brother and I wouldn't touch anything with spice in it. She used to make two separate dishes. She'd make one with spice for my dad and one spice-free for my brother and I. As we got older we grew into the spice flavour. Now, even still I don't really like very spicy food, my brother does.

I also now cook. My daughter actually in the last year has suddenly started eating spicy, loves Indian spicy food. My son doesn't, so we tend not to eat such spicy food at home.

Interviewer: Have you learned cooking on your own or has your mother been of assistance there?

Elana Benjamin: My mum does help me. I think when I was growing up and I was living with her, I tended to make more biscuits and cakes. It's only when I moved out and had to actually sustain

myself on real food, you can't eat chocolate chip cookies for dinner, that I learned to cook more substantial meals. I do. Sometimes I call my mum, and I say, "This is what I want to make." She helps me with that. It's been a bit of that, a bit of Bill Granger type cook books, a bit of whatever.

Interviewer: The memory of eating the chips, the oil soaked chips was nice. Do you have a memory about eating your favourite food when you were a child?

Elana Benjamin: My favourite food when I was a child. That is a hard one. I don't know that I had a favourite food as a child. Probably like chips. I don't know that I had such a mature palate when I was a child. Actually, I think one of my favourite things to do ... My parents live about a ten minute walk from Bondi Beach. On summer evenings we would often walk down to the beach. They would buy us gelato from the pavilion. I can't actually remember. It's not there anymore, who operated that shop. Simone remembers who it is. I might have put it in the application form, because I said to my dad, "Who was it?" We used to go there and get chocolate gelato and lemon gelato and pistachio gelato. That was the best thing ever. If I think about it, that was probably one of my favourite foods as a child.

Interviewer: That is the gelato bar?

Elana Benjamin: No, in the pavilion, it was like an ice cream shop, but it wasn't ice cream. It was gelato. Now gelato shops are everywhere. Mostly back in the 70s and early 80s it was ice cream. Gelato was not really so popular. It was when you walk into the pavilion where those food eateries are, it was in one of those.

Interviewer: It's where the café is now.

Elana Benjamin: Yeah, yeah. You know where I mean? Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Okay. When you eat something now, is there any dish in particular that triggers memories of your childhood and why?

Elana Benjamin: I have to think about that. I think any food my mum cooks triggers memories of my childhood, a lot of the food my mum cooks. I often make chapatis which are Indian flat bread for my kids, which is something that my mum used to make for my brother and I. Those flat breads were supposed to be an accompaniment for a bhaji or a curry, except my brother and I never ate the bhajis and curries. We'd spread them with margarine or butter and put cinnamon and sugar on them and roll them up. I never let my kids do that, but I think that reminds me of my childhood, just the hot bread coming straight off the hotplate and eating that. I don't know. I think my memory food is ...

I was thinking about challah which people eat on Friday night, but I don't really have such a strong memory of that from my childhood. I think if someone was to make one of the dishes that my grandmother made, the beetroot koobahs or something like that, that no one really makes anymore. Or if someone was to make, once in a while my auntie makes these aloo makalās, that would be a very strong memory of my childhood. The one other thing is, my grandmother who was an amazing cook used to make a cucumber salad, which is a very European cucumber salad where you chop the cucumbers, and you put vinegar and water and dill on it. My grandmother used to make that. I never ate it. That's not true. I did like that one. She used to put sugar in it. That reminds me of my childhood as well. Maybe I have stronger memories of food with my grandmother than with my own mum.

Interviewer: Sounds like sugar is a common element here to making things taste good.

Elana Benjamin: Yes.

Interviewer: Again, thinking back to when you were a child I guess, the food that your mother was preparing, the contrast of the traditional food to general Australian food at the time, do you have any comments on that?

Elana Benjamin: The food my mum cooked was very different to general Australian food at the time. I was born in 1974. For a start we very rarely ate out because we kept kosher. Although we would eat vegetarian food out, it was very hard to get vegetarian food in the 1970s. It was more like burgers and chips at the local, like at Bates Milk Bar on the corner there. Generally Australian food at that time was very much like a meat, potatoes, white bread. People weren't really cooking with spices at all. Even my Jewish friends, if I would go to their house, they might have had more of a diverse range of food, more European influenced food, but it was very different to the food my mum cooked because it didn't have those spicy flavours.

I think even back when I was a kid, I can't even remember even being able to get things like pasta. You could get pizza. My mum didn't make pizza at home. We'd go out for pizza and fish and chips. That was a general Australian food. Things like curries ...

At north Bondi there's a yoga school now. There was a supermarket called, I don't know if anyone's mentioned this to you, it was called Moses Spice Centre or Izzy and son. We would make these regular pilgrimages, it wasn't really that far, on a Sunday. It was closed on Saturday because Izzy Moses was a very religious Jew, so he wouldn't open his shop on Saturdays. We would go there on Sundays, my parents would go there to buy groceries. His shelves were filled with all different kinds of spices and things like dried lentils and chickpeas.

We used to get these bottles of rose flavoured cordial, pink, colored rose flavoured cordial. I loved this stuff. No one I knew had heard of it, had drunk it. Bottles of mango pickle, jars of mango pickle, those kinds of things were the things that we were bringing into the house. I never saw them anywhere else. Obviously, that was why we went to Izzy Moses, because there was nowhere else you could buy them. Coles and Woolies in those times didn't have their nice international food aisle that they do now. That's where you went to get those kind of food.

Subsequently I found out that, actually I worked with a woman who was Australian born of Indian descent. This was in my corporate life. She told me when she was growing up her family lived in Newcastle, and there was nowhere to get Indian spices. Once a month on a Sunday they would drive from Newcastle to Sydney to go to Izzy Moses to buy all these Indian ingredients, she wasn't Jewish, so they could make their traditional Indian food. Bit of a tangent.

Elana Benjamin: It's a dharmashala yoga school now.

Interviewer: Fantastic. I'm a sucker for lime pickle myself.

Elana Benjamin: My mum just made some. There's some in the house. I smelled it last night. I was like, "Oh, that smells good."

Interviewer: Very good. How do you think your parents' migrations wave influenced food in the local area?

Elana Benjamin: I don't think my parents ... Well, I guess my parents' migration wave did influence food in the local area through Izzy Moses Spice Shop that I just mentioned because Izzy Moses, he was from India although I'm not sure which part of India he was from. He started this import/export business. I think it was primarily through him rather than a wave of migration because I think mostly the Jews that came in that wave, they cooked at home. It wasn't an outside the home enterprise other than Izzy Moses and his grocery shop. They weren't starting restaurants or cafes or anything like that. They cooked at the Sephardi Shule, but it was very much a contained cooking for the community. I don't know that it really influenced the wider community. I know the Monday Morning

Cooking Club, that cookbook that's come out, they've included Sephardi recipes. I still don't think that the type of food that the Sephardi Jews cooked, especially the Jews of India were seen as typical Jewish food or typical food of the area at all.

Interviewer: Are there any special foods that you prepare or eat during family get togethers or Jewish holidays? Do you observe Jewish holidays?

Elana Benjamin: We observe Jewish holidays. There's a whole range of food that we prepare that's different to I guess what's seen as traditional Ashkenazi food. For example, on Rosh Hashanah, which is a Jewish New Year, usually people eat sweet food to symbolise that the year ahead will be sweet. Traditional Ashkenazi families eat apple dipped in honey, which when I went to school, everyone had apple dipped in honey. What my family and what the Jews of India used to make and my parents still make is apple jam, which is a jam made out of apples. It symbolises the same thing. It's just a different little bit of a twist on it.

I'm just trying to think of any of the other holidays, because there definitely are. On Passover, on Pesach, one of the traditional Sephardi foods, it's called Haleg. It's a date syrup. During the seder, one of the symbolic foods is called charoset which is supposed to represent the bricks and mortar of the buildings that the Jews made when they were slaves. Ashkenazi Jews make it out of nuts and apple and some people add sultanas and wine. The Sephardi Jews make this date syrup and add nuts to it. All the foods symbolise the same thing, but they just choose different food to represent the same thing.

You asked another part to that question. I can't remember exactly what it was. It was a two-pronged question I think.

Interviewer: That was it. Special foods that are prepared during family get togethers and Jewish holidays.

Elana Benjamin: Yes. That was it, Jewish holiday and family get togethers. On Shabbat, which is the once a week day of rest, it's usually traditional to make ... You're not allowed to cook. People make a slow cooked pot meal. I'm not being very coherent. A slow cooked dish so they can leave it in the oven overnight. The Ashkenazim make something called Cholent which is like a bean, meat, potato stew. Something that my mum makes and my grandmother made and the Indian Jews made is called Hamim. It's also known as Hamin I think in different, depending on where you're from, if you're from Syria. It's a very slow cooked dish with rice and spices and chicken, sometimes people put in boiled egg. You can just come and go. The basis of it isn't potato. It's rice, which is symbolic of the countries that they've come from where rice was more of a staple. That's the Jewish holidays.

Family get togethers, yes. My cousin actually got engaged about a year or two years ago. It was catered by one of the kosher catering companies. It was all the usual smoked salmon and cream cheese. My aunt and my cousin who cooked the cheese samosas, this is what they call them. They're cheese pastries, which is a traditional Sephardi food. I think the traditional Sephardi biscuits. I'm jumping all over the place. Cheese samosas are one thing.

My cousin is having his Bar Mitzvah next weekend. It's a big thing at shule, at synagogue. They've asked my dad to make his coriander chutney which is made with coriander leaf and desiccated coconut and lemon and garlic. They spread it on sandwiches and have it with cucumber and tomato. There always these unique to the family dishes. There's another one called chut pate. I don't know how to make any of these things. With spice and potatoes and peas. The funny thing is if you go back and look at family photos of my grandmother's birthday 20 years ago, the food, you often see the same dishes which they might serve again next week at my cousin's Bar Mitzvah. It reappears over and over again.

Interviewer: Very good. Very good. You don't really have a favourite traditional dish?

Elana Benjamin: It's really hard to choose one favourite traditional dish. I like the humim. I've grown into the spices. I can't think of one in particular.

Interviewer: That's okay. No problem. One of the final questions in terms of food, are there any recipes that you learned from your mother or grandmother that you'd like to pass on to your own children?

Elana Benjamin: Absolutely, but I think they skipped me, and my mum has passed them straight on to my daughter. My daughter is ten years old.

Elana Benjamin: There are lots of recipes that I'd like my mum to pass down to me that I can pass on to my children. I haven't done that. My daughter has actually been very good. At school holidays she sometimes comes over to my mum and dad's place. She cooks with my mum. She has been very good about typing up the recipes. She'll send them to me as a word document. She's been very good about doing that. My dad's coriander chutney, the one I talked about, my daughter's actually recorded the recipe. If you ask me to make it, I couldn't do it. I have a vague idea.

I think my mum is also an excellent baker. I'd want some of her recipes for some of the traditional cakes and biscuits. The cheese samosas. There are these ring biscuits, I think they're originally of Iraqi origin called kahkas, that again my daughter has nailed, can do them much better than me. There are these other biscuits, they're filled with dates, called date babas. Yes, I'll add that to my to-do list to get her recipes for those kinds of things.

I think my grandmother's food, as tasty as it is, I would probably not have the patience to make that kind of food. Some of my mum's curries as well. That would be good to get the recipes for.

Interviewer: It must be very, very satisfying to see those recipes actually going through generations even if you haven't been particularly a proactive part of that. Seeing your daughter picking up on that. Maybe she'll be sharing those with her children as well.

Elana Benjamin: Yeah. It is really gratifying to see my daughter being interested in it. I think the most gratifying part is seeing that she has pride in this heritage. On my husband's side she's Ashkenazi. She definitely gets the mix of all the different foods as well as the different cultural traditions. It's really nice to see that. I really like that she has pride in it. I think as a child I felt much more conflicted. I felt like we were very different to everyone else. I was very conscious that I didn't want to stand out and that I wanted to blend in.

I think a generation on multiculturalism is much more accepted and practiced. It's actually expected that everyone will have different foods and different traditions. When she goes to the playground, she's got her Chinese friend bringing in whatever to school. She'll bring in sometimes these Indian flat breads called chapatis for lunch. She'll say to me, "Can I take an extra one in for my friends, to share with my friends." My mum never put chapatis in my lunchbox. Even if she did, I think I would have been going like this because I didn't feel that same sense of pride that she does.

Interviewer: You're going to actually finish off your story about foods that bring back memories when you were a child.

Elana Benjamin: There are two particular foods that bring back quite strong childhood memories for me. The first one is mangoes, and the second one are coconuts. The reason is my dad has always been obsessed with mangoes. When he first moved to Australia, I don't think he could really get mangoes very easily. Over time that changed. Every summer my dad would come home with a box of mangoes and we would know summer has started. He'd always cut them up for my brother and I. He'd cut them up in porcupine shapes, crossways and then crossways again. Every time I have a mango I always think back to my childhood, my dad cutting them in porcupine shapes, which is what I do for my kids sometimes. When they let me. That's one very strong food memory.

The other one is coconuts, which of course have now become very popular. You can buy coconut water in tetra-packs, that Cocobella brand. There's another brand I can't think of the name of. You can even buy the whole coconuts with the husks taken off also at Coles and Woolies, at local cafes. They're the new, trendy health food drink. My dad's been drinking them for years.

When we were kids he'd go out to a place. I don't know if it's still there. It used to be called Fiji Market out in Newtown. I think it was on Kings Street where you could buy those. He would buy Fijian coconuts which were apparently never as good as the Indian coconuts. He'd have these knives where he would hack them open and pull the top off and put a straw in. Now whenever I see people drinking coconuts, although they're not my favourite drink, that always reminds me of my childhood and my dad being obsessed with coconuts.

Both the mango and coconut are symbolic of his country of origin, of India. It was also not anything we saw Australian, local community people eating and drinking. People started to eat mangoes. Coconut water is still a bit out there for a very long time. Certainly, within the Jewish community it wasn't really a done thing. It seemed to be this unique, not unique, but unique practice of my dad and his brothers and our extended family.

Interviewer: You mentioned that your dad used to climb the trees.

Elana Benjamin: My dad as a boy used to climb coconut trees. Go up there, shimmy down with the coconut. Many years later when I was in high school, we went to Cairns. He must have been in his 40s. I don't know how old he was. He climbed up a coconut tree in Cannes, but of course he hadn't quite realised how old he was. By the time he got back he had scrapes on his arms. Those friction burns. "Oh, you're not a boy anymore." Yeah, he used to climb coconut trees as a boy in India.

Interviewer: Nice story there. All right. We're going to move on to the pray section. Pray is obviously about religion, traditions as well. The essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances. In this section we would love to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions and how it shapes your identity. The passing down from generation to generation. Again, no right or wrong answers here. How do your religious practices now compare to maybe your parents' before they came to Australia?

Elana Benjamin: How do my religious practices compare with my parents' religious practices? My parents are more religious than I am. When my parents first got married they kept Shabbat very strictly. Then when my brother and I were born and were growing up, we did sports and things like that. They weren't so observant. My dad has always been a very committed shule goer. Now he wakes up every morning, and he goes to shul. You can hear the door at 5:30, 6:00, he's out the door. I'm not really much of a shule goer. I go on the holidays, but not as strict. My parents keep a kosher home, have always kept a kosher home. I keep a kosher home. I guess we keep bits and pieces.

I would say we're more culturally affiliated. I mean, we are culturally affiliated and so are they, but they're more strictly religious observant and follow the letter of the law than I do.

Interviewer: That's fine. Do you attend synagogue?

Elana Benjamin: I do attend synagogue on the high holidays, on the Haggim, on the festivals, but on a week to week basis I don't go.

Elana Benjamin: This is a really loaded question for me to tell you about my congregation. I grew up going to the Sephardi synagogue in Bondi junction. Every week my dad would take us to shule. My mum would rest. That was her morning off. All my cousins and I would go. It was great fun. There were lots of kids. There were lots of young families because they had basically established the synagogue. The synagogue is now a very old congregation.

The people of my generation have almost without exception married Ashkenazim. There's one Sephardi spouse, one Ashkenazi spouse. We're dividing our time between different families, different communities, different cultural observances. I think also we're probably, in that community, just less of a synagogue going group. All the kids I grew up with, we might go on the festivals, but we don't go on a week to week basis.

It's a very old congregation. I actually wonder what the congregation will be in 40 or 50 years time and whether those practices and those customs are going to die out with the generation who established the synagogue, who came from India, who came from Egypt, a very, very few who came from Iraq or who came from China, because they haven't really succession planned. They've pass it down on a family unit basis but not really on a community basis. There's not really a young generation who've stepped in to take up the leadership of the community. If you look at the board, they're still quite old. There's not really anyone young there. That's part of the reasons I don't go to synagogue because if you go to an Ashkenazi synagogue, the tunes and the customs, it sounds completely different. Completely different. I love the Sephardi synagogue, and I love those tunes that I grew up hearing, but there's no youth there. It's a much broader issue, but as a woman in an orthodox synagogue there are issues for me. We don't really need to go into them. I don't feel comfortable in an Ashkenazi synagogue even though I can follow the service. My heart is in the Sephardi synagogue. I guess I'm just not that religious, and I don't feel like the service has that much to offer for me, which is why I don't go so often.

I think it is an important distinction because there's actually a different siddur, a different prayer book for Ashkenazim and Sephardim. My husband is Ashkenazi. When he first came to the Sephardi synagogue, he walked in and said, "It sounds like they're speaking Arabic." It really does. They're really just completely different tunes. That old movie, "The Jazz Singer". Who's the actor in it?

Interviewer: Neil Diamond did the album, didn't he?

Elana Benjamin: Yeah. There's the Al Jolson jazz singer. The first time I went to a Yom Kippur service. I went to South Head Synagogue which is an Ashkenazi synagogue. I had never ever been to an Ashkenazi synagogue for Yom Kippur. It's the holiest day of the year. It was Kol Nidre, an evening service. I was sitting there listening. I was like, "This is the jazz singer." It was so far removed. It was so different to my experience of Kol Nidrei. It's just really interesting that you think a Jew is a Jew is a Jew. Actually, there are so many different traditions, so many different customs. There are a lot of differences. Even though there's obviously a commonality, the customs actually make the day-to-day practice very different.

Interviewer: Lovely. That was worth exploring. Very good, very good. What learnings, beliefs and traditions do you feel are most important or that you're most passionate about?

Elana Benjamin: I think if I had to choose one thing that I feel really passionate about it's Jewish education because I feel like that's passing on information, knowledge, customs, traditions to the next generation. Ultimately the next generation is the one that's going to be around when we're not, so I feel really strongly about Jewish education. I think the Jews have survived for such a long time. The reason that they've survived is principally of the importance that has been placed on education and schools.

Interviewer: Okay. I think we can explore this a little bit later in a different way. I think you have already answered this in terms of observing Jewish life, holidays and festivals. Can you tell me about your favourite times of year and what you do?

Elana Benjamin: My favourite times, you mean in a Jewish cycle?

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Elana Benjamin: My favourite times of the year have definitely changed from my childhood to now that I'm a mother because I've realised that all those wonderful events, and I've actually heard this being said in relation to Christmas as well. As a child you go, "Wow, these are great." As a woman, you're the one doing all the cooking and the cleaning and organising the kids. It loses the magic of how you experience it as a child. I think for me, I would have said Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah was my favourite, and I still do love it. I feel like there's a huge domestic burden that comes with it.

I also really like Hanukkah which is the eight days at the end of the year which has very little domestic burden and is all really lovely. There's not that much that you have to do except go out and buy your jam doughnuts and light the candle. It's much easier. The thing I like about Hanukkah is it usually coincides with the end of the school year and the beginning of summer holidays. And the connection ... I should go back.

All the Jewish holidays have a certain connection with me. The weather patterns have changed so much, but it used to be when the weather would turn cooler, I would say, "Oh, it's Pesach weather. It's almost Pesach." Hanukkah is definitely, "Oh, it's summer holidays," which is always a really good memory as an adult. I do love Jewish New Year as well and all the food, and the coming together. The sweet food especially. Being with family. It's a really nice time.

Interviewer: What Jewish traditions have your parents and grandparents passed on to you?

Elana Benjamin: My parents and grandparents have passed on a lot of Jewish traditions to me. Their values as well. Do you want me to talk about values or just traditions?

Interviewer: You can start again actually. The traditions or values and traditions that you parents and grandparents have passed on to you.

Elana Benjamin: There are a lot of traditions and values that my parents and grandparents have passed on to me. The importance of giving to charity and the importance, regardless of how much you have, to always be aware that usually there are others that are more needy than you. To be kind to others. To be hospitable to people, to welcome people into your own home, to cook for other people and have guests. Then I guess more religious traditions. Having Shabbat dinner every Friday night, the importance of family as an individual unit, but also the importance of extended family. I grew up in such a big extended family. Those are the ones that jump out at me at the moment.

Interviewer: That's enough. That's fine, that's fine. I guess we've already covered this in a way, but what traditions are you passing on to your own children and what would you hope that they pass on to their children?

Elana Benjamin: Okay. Going back to your earlier question, one of the other big important values that have been passed down from my parents and grandparents is the idea of honouring elders, which is very outdated now. The idea of respecting your elders. When we were kids, all the adults would be Auntie whatever or Uncle whatever. It was always very important to be respectful towards them. That's something that I try to hand down to my children although perhaps not so unquestioningly because I think along the way I developed this idea that respect also had to be earned.

I'm definitely very strong that my children need to respect their grandparents and always be mindful that they're older. Because they're older and they have more experience and more wisdom, sometimes more wisdom, that even if they disagree that there are ways to disagree, and to always speak ... To be able to put your point of view across but not speak in a disrespectful way. That's one thing. Can you read me the question again because there's something that I was going to say that I forgot.

Interviewer: Traditions that you're passing on to your own children.

Elana Benjamin: Okay. The other traditions that I feel that I'm trying to pass on to my own children is the Sephardi customs and traditions. On a Friday night with the Friday night prayers, there's a prayer called Eshet Chayil, which is a woman of valour that we always sing in the Sephardi tune that my parents sing in their home. I know that if I don't pass it down it's going to be lost. I'm trying to think of any other examples. There are definitely just that idea of the Sephardi mode of prayer that I'm trying to pass down to them, because I know that in their wider Jewish education in the community they will learn the Ashkenazi style even if they don't get it straight away because that's the default option. I try and instill those, it's called the Baghdadi mode of prayer, the Iraqi mode of prayer because it's something that I want them to learn.

Interviewer: What do you think the best thing about being Jewish in the Waverley region, Eastern Suburbs, is?

Elana Benjamin: The best thing about being Jewish in the Waverley area is ... I have to think about an answer to that one just because of the idea about being the best. The best thing about being Jewish in the Waverley area is being part of such a big Jewish community and for the most part, a tolerant wider secular community. Having access to the Jewish community, having access to Jewish facilities, infrastructure, education, day schools, butchers. You can go to Coles up Bondi Junction and get your kosher meat, and still being able to enjoy all the benefits of the wider community. Being around the corner from Bondi Beach. Just all the benefits of all the arts and other things. All the goings on that happen in the Waverley area. I think it's a nice marrying of both. Access to the diverse range of food in the Waverley area that we now have, just the multiculturalism of the Waverley area. Obviously, there are all different cultural influences and the fact that they're celebrated.

Interviewer: Very nice. I think that you've answered this one pretty much there. The question is do you think Bondi's become a melting pot for different cultures, and has it influenced the character of the local area?

Elana Benjamin: Yeah, I do think Bondi's become a melting pot for different cultures. The character of the local area has changed a lot. I think whereas it used to be much more Anglo, it's definitely embraced all different kinds of cultural identities, cultural backgrounds. There's Miss Chu Vietnamese restaurant. There's the Italian gelato and pizza places, that kind of thing. Just if you look at the food places it's an indication of the diversity of the people in the area.

The other thing I want to add is probably the best thing about being a Jewish person in the Waverley area is being close to my family. Obviously, being close to my family and extended family. My parents live close by. A lot of my aunts and my uncles and my cousins. My husband's family also live in Bondi. In fact, when we were dating people used to joke that where we lived and my parents lived and my in-laws lived, it was like the Bermuda Triangle. Because we were raising our children, it means that they're grandparents can be very involved in their everyday lives, which is really special because it's not something that I had. When I was growing up my two grandparents lived in Los Angeles. Every time we spoke to them on the phone it was \$1.20 a minute. It was like, "Get off, get off!" There was no Skype. There was no Facebook. There was no email. They just didn't really feature in our everyday lives. We'd go visit them every two or three years. I think that that is really special, to have that extended family involved.

Interviewer: Naches questions this time around. I ask everybody what it means. There are certainly very common threads between everybody's definition, but there's also a few variances as well. Every Jewish person wants naches in their life. Naches can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community as well. What does the word 'naches' mean to you and does it have a special significance somehow?

Elana Benjamin: The word 'naches' when I think of it, it means the joy that's derived particularly from children and grandchildren. That's my automatic association with the word 'naches'. Does it have a particular association with me? Not at all. The reason is it was not a word that was bandied around in my household, my family of origin, because it's a Yiddish word. I knew what it meant, but my parents, my grandparents don't come from Yiddish speaking backgrounds. We were more likely to have Arabic or Hindustani words thrown into conversation. Although I know what it means, I don't feel it has a special significance.

Interviewer: That's a good answer because they say that Australian people, it's a group of feelings and all sorts of stuff that all blend together for this one thing, isn't it. That doesn't have a particular word in Australia either. Do you know what I mean?

Elana Benjamin: Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: I can totally associate with that. How would you describe naches to someone who doesn't know what it means?

Elana Benjamin: To describe naches to someone who doesn't know what it means, rather than give them the definition I might give them an example. The classic definition of naches is you're a parent. You have a child. This is a bit of stereotypical definition, but your child produces a grandchild. It's like, "What naches!" All this time, all the trouble that you have raising a child. All the hassle that they give you. All the difficult times. Now they've produced a grandchild. This is naches. This is joy. This is what we go through all the hard times for. Maybe a more or less over the top example is your child does something nice. Your child makes a salad. Your six or seven-year-old makes a salad for dinner to help you out. You're like, "Oh, that's naches. That's lovely." Maybe it's more achievement oriented. The stereotypical naches is, "Oh, my son went to university and became a doctor." That's naches.

Interviewer: Kind of pride.

Elana Benjamin: Yeah, it is pride. Yeah, pride in achievements.

Interviewer: Not pride for yourself. To be proud of yourself, that's not naches.

Elana Benjamin: No, absolutely.

Interviewer: Being proud-

Elana Benjamin: Being proud of others, but not being proud of a friend. It's particularly that lineal descent, the children and the grandchildren. It's not pride in yourself, and it's not pride in ... You can still have pride in a friend and have joy derived from a friend, but you wouldn't describe that, I don't think, as naches.

Interviewer: That's good. Thanks. What do you hope for your own children?

Elana Benjamin: My hope for my own children is, I guess this is so cliché, to be happy, to be healthy. Also to have really strong Jewish values and a strong Jewish identity. To know where they came from and where their family came from. Also I think to have an appreciation of how lucky we are and they have it compared to generations before us, in a Jewish context and in a secular context. To live relatively free of anti-Semitism and also to live in a relatively affluent society. They don't have to worry about where the next meal is coming from or really to struggle. I think about what my great-grandmother. She was pregnant 16 times, and her babies kept dying and dying and dying. She eventually had four living children. I think that is such a contrast to the way that we live now. People say, "First world problem." Obviously, people have problems now, but their different. They're less survival based problems, at least where we live in this little corner of the world.

Interviewer: Have you ever head Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It's kind of like that, isn't it?

Elana Benjamin: Yeah.

Interviewer: Your grandparents. Are your grandparents still around?

Elana Benjamin: No.

Interviewer: What do you think your grandparents would make of your life in Australia today if they were still here?

Elana Benjamin: My one grandfather died when my dad was 13. It's kind of hard for me to comment on what he would think of our life in Australia now. My grandmother moved here when the family left India. She came in the mid 1960s. My mum's parents who immigrated to Los Angeles actually also eventually moved to Sydney in the 80s. They all lived here, and they also lived up on O'Brien Street. In this weird twist of fate they were neighbours at the end. All my three grandparents lived next door to each other. I think overall they'd be happy with our lives.

I often say the way Bondi has changed, especially recently, Hakoah's been demolished. The whole new Hall Street redevelopment, the new Bills café. I can't think of all the names of the restaurants there. My one grandmother died in 2003, ten years ago. I always say can you imagine if they came back in time machine, I said this a week ago, and they came back to Bondi where they used to live. They lived above the kosher butcher where all that recent development has gone on. They would never recognise this. The face of Bondi has changed so much. It used to be such a working class suburb. Now it's really become quite elite, very trendy, very fashionable. They wouldn't recognise it. That not really about my life. It's just about a take on how they might view the area now because it's really changed.

Interviewer: That was fine. That was good.

Elana Benjamin: Can I also say, going back to the question of what I want for my children, I also want them to have a very strong sense of community and the idea that they should be giving back to the community. There are obviously times, this goes up and down, but that part of being Jewish is about helping others in need. Not just on a one-to-one basis but also on a group basis. I would want them to feel like they have an obligation to the community to give back at some point later.

Elana Benjamin: My biggest achievement in life so far is to be married and my children. That would be my biggest achievement.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Elana Benjamin: I think having children ... There's a self-interest element, but it's a way of perpetuating yourself, right? God forbid something happened to me tomorrow, my children would still be there. They're my legacy. That's what goes on beyond me.

Interviewer: That's fine. What activities are you involved in in the wider community that also bring you naches?

Elana Benjamin: You mean the wider Jewish community or the wider secular community?

Interviewer: I think it could be either.

Elana Benjamin: I've got to say my activities in the wider community at the moment are quite limited just because my children are ten and six years old. The writing that I do in the wider community, that gives me naches. My book gives me naches. Going into my children's school, my

daughter's too old now, and helping with reading in the classroom, that gives me naches. I can't really think of anything else at the moment. I coordinate the Jewish arts writers' group. That gives me naches. Yeah.

Interviewer: This is really our final main question anyway. How do you feel about your place, not just in the Jewish community, but in the community?

Elana Benjamin: How do I feel about it? In what way?

Interviewer: Was there any specific photos or memorabilia or items that you had photographed by Belinda the other day?

Elana Benjamin: Yeah, do you want me to show you?

Interviewer: No, but I'd like you to tell me about them.

Elana Benjamin: One of the photos that Belinda photographed was my mum and dad's wedding photo which was taken, I think it's 1970 or 1971. It's a black and white photo at the Sephardi synagogue which is special to me in many ways. I think part of what was really special is I also got married at the Sephardi synagogue. That was a really nice continuum. Even though I don't think I had a photo taken in the same space or anything, that was really nice to get married in the same shule that my parents got married in. There's that.

There were also some really old family photos that Belinda took photos off. Pictures of my dad's family in India with my grandmother and my grandfather, the grandfather who I never met, and my dad and his siblings. They weren't all born yet. As little children which I love because you never really think of your parents as little kids. You always think of them as perpetual grownups. Even my grandmother I used to look at her and think, "Wow, she was so young."

I think another striking thing about those family photographs is if I tell people my family is from India, they automatically conjure up an appearance of dark skinned people. My family aren't that because of this Iraqi connection for the most part. They're olive skinned, but they don't look Indian. It's a little bit perplexing. If I tell people I'm Jewish but my family is from India, it's like, "What?" They can't really make any sense of it. I think the photos help give that sort of sense, to say, "Well yes, they were in India."

That's kind of like all Jewish people. It's a sojourn on their destination. It wasn't somewhere they lived for a very long time. It was just somewhere they lived their lives for a while, and then they moved on to another country. Yes, I have a very strong connection to India even though I've only been there once. I was 22 when I went. I have a strong connection to India, but primarily the connection in my family is to being Jewish, not to being Indian, if that makes sense. There's that.

The last lot of photos that Belinda has of mine are photos of the two synagogues in Mumbai that were taken actually when I visited India. I went to India for the first time with my dad and my husband, Ariel and my brother back in 2003. I'd heard bits and pieces about these synagogues. The buildings aren't in very good condition. One more than the other because one's in the hotel district. It has regular services because a lot of business people use the synagogue, and travellers.

The other synagogue which was my parents' synagogue had pigeons flying in and out of the windows. The photos don't capture that, but I know that they're such special buildings, special places for my parents and for my family. It's very special for me to have photos of them. I've also heard stories of how this one synagogue in Barkala area, which is where my parents lived, was full to capacity on the festivals. On Yom Kippur, which is a fast, people used to bring their mattresses in and sleep on the floor. They have an association for me even though it's a vicarious connection, even though they were never my synagogues. They're so important to my parents.

The other thing that is really important for me is the one when I went to India, we spent one Shabbat in Bombay, in Mumbai. We went to the services. As I explained earlier ...

Simone: I was going to say I wonder how old the synagogues are?

Elana Benjamin: Yeah. The synagogues, one was established in 1860, and one was built in 1882 by an Iraqi Jew who was very wealthy. His name is David Sassoon. Actually if you go to Mumbai there's a Sassoon library. He was this huge benefactor. Even the city now they've got the Sassoon docks. It wasn't just Jewish institutions. The Sassoon family was very big benefactor.

There are two synagogues that were built in Bombay which is now Mumbai. One was built in 1861, which was the Magen David Synagogue in the Byculla area, which is the area that my parents grew up. The other one was built in 1884 in the Colaba area. It's called the Knesset Eliyahoo Synagogue. That synagogue in Colaba still holds regular services. If you were ever to travel to Mumbai on business or on holiday you could go to services there. When I visited India about ten years ago, that was where I went to services.

It was really amazing for me because other than the Sephardi synagogue here in Bondi Junction, it's the only synagogue that I've ever really felt at home, where the tunes and the customs and the traditions were all completely familiar to me, unlike being in an Ashkenazi synagogue where even though I'm completely able to follow the service, and I recognise the tunes, I don't feel like they're mine. They're not my family's. They're not the ones that I grew up hearing in my home, even though I heard them at school and in the wider community. It was a very strong connection to the Bombay synagogues because it's very similar to what's been replicated here in Sydney in the Sephardi synagogue.