

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

**Waverley Council, NSW**

**GERTIE JELLINEK: Oral History Transcript**

Interviewee: Gertie Jellinek

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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**Interviewer: Please tell us your name and where and when you were born**

Gertie Jellinek: My name is Gertrude Jellinek, but Gertie for short. I was born in Vienna, Austria.

**Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about what was happening in your country and the circumstances that led up to why you left?**

Gertie Jellinek: When I was twelve and a half years old, Adolf Hitler annexed Austria. He was Austrian not German. Very harsh measures against the Jewish people were implemented - we were thrown out of school, my father lost his job. He was arrested on the Night of the Broken Glass, Kristallnacht it's called. We wanted to get out. The only country which would take us without papers was Shanghai, China and that's where we were able to immigrate in July, 1939. My brother, my only brother, 15 months older than me, Robert, my parents, and myself immigrated to Shanghai where we lived for nine and a half years as refugees occupied by the Japanese who did not attack us, but controlled us. I got married in 1947 to a Viennese man older than me, Willi Jellinek. He had connections in Australia and we immigrated in 1949.

**Interviewer: So in Shanghai you were kind of treated as neutral, would that be correct?**

Gertie Jellinek: It was the biggest immigration in the world, 20,000. It saved our lives, coming to Shanghai from Germany and Austria. It was an international city and that was very important so everybody was welcome to come to Shanghai. But we were in the poorest section of Shanghai, the majority of us, and we were controlled by the Japanese. It was not a very easy life, particularly financially.

**Interviewer: How did you end up leaving Shanghai for Australia and who helped you get to Australia?**

Gertie Jellinek: I met my husband in 1947. He was also from Austria but he had connections, friends in Australia. The reason was that he was a very big sportsman in Vienna and sports people stick together very much. He wrote this friend, who immigrated in 1939 to Sydney, and he was more than willing to send us the papers. My poor father died in Shanghai, a lonely, broken man in 1943, but my mother and my brother were around. I told my husband, "We come as a package deal. We don't leave without my brother and my mother." He wrote to the friend and he sent the papers for all of us.

**Interviewer: That was very lucky that it all happened the way that it did.**

Gertie Jellinek: My word.

**Interviewer: Why did you decide to settle in the local area?**

Gertie Jellinek: In Sydney?

**Interviewer: Yes.**

Gertie Jellinek: This friend was very interesting. There is a street in Bronte called Palmerston Avenue. They had built new flats at that time and one refugee told the other one, "There is a flat for key money available." We had brought a little bit of money and my husband was able to put down

the key money. It became the Shanghai Village. Every house was occupied with Shanghai refugees and that is how we settled in Bronte.

**Interviewer: What did it feel like when you first arrived in Bronte? There must have been some big changes, big cultural changes. How did you adapt to those changes?**

Gertie Jellinek: I was surprised that Australia was a little bit backward because there was no rye bread and lots of other things available for Continental tastes, but I changed my mind very quickly. I really liked Sydney. I really liked the people. I appreciated that there was no anti-Semitism or anything at the time. We were welcomed and we started a very happy life in Sydney.

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

Gertie Jellinek: There were, before our time, Australian Jews, naturally. They were not exceptionally happy that those bunch of refugees arrived with their European customs and their European dressing. They were not particularly welcoming, but it changed when those refugees became quite prominent citizens. Then they were appreciative of how these refugees behaved and how many were successful.

**Interviewer: Gertie, can we explore the challenges that you and your family faced when you first arrived in Australia a little bit more?**

Gertie Jellinek: My husband was lucky that he had a profession. He was a tailor and so he got a job immediately. My brother was a motor mechanic so he got, a job immediately. My mother did home work for refugees who already had [clothing] factories. I was the madam because I was expecting a baby so I did nothing and everybody pampered me - I was pregnant when I came to Sydney.

I have this joke: She was born in China because everything was made in China and born in Australia. So I had my only daughter. The challenge was to give her an exceptional education because I left school when I was thirteen years old. My daughter became a brilliant student. She's a high school teacher today. I have grandchildren, great grandchildren, and that was my reward.

**Interviewer: Gertie, I don't think you actually told us the year you were born so I might get you to restate your name and when and where you were born so we can edit that in later.**

Gertie Jellinek: I was born in Vienna, the capital city of Austria, on the 19th of December, 1925 and lived in Vienna until I was thirteen years old.

**Interviewer: We'll move on now to some food related questions. Of course food is a very important part of Jewish culture.**

Gertie Jellinek: Yes.

**Interviewer: Can you tell me about food that you experienced before you came to Australia and memories about eating food as a child.**

Gertie Jellinek: First of all I want to point out that many Jewish people have a religious thing they call kosher food. I have never denied that I was Jewish and I'm very proud of the fact, but we were not very religious and so we ate anybody's food. I adore pork and all of those things. We never kept

kosher and we didn't keep it in the immigration and I don't keep it now. My food is a Continental way, how my mother taught me, but I eat many Australian dishes too. I like steaks and all of these other things. I am very, very fond of any food, really.

**Interviewer: Gertie, tell me a little bit about the food that your mother taught you how to cook.**

Gertie Jellinek: Yes. Have you heard of schnitzel, Viennese schnitzel? Mmm, yummy; and all of the different dumplings and so on. She taught me how to cook them. She lived with me all of my married life so I learned cooking very late in life, but I became a reasonably good cook.

**Interviewer: Would you say that your mother really taught you how to cook?**

Gertie Jellinek: Yes. Absolutely. My mother was an extremely good cook, but of course she knew only the Viennese way, only the Continental food, and that's what she taught me. I watched what she did, then when she passed away I took over very late in life, yeah.

**Interviewer: By the look on your face is schnitzel your favourite food?**

Gertie Jellinek: Schnitzel is my favourite food till today.

**Interviewer: Very nice. What did you think of Australian food when you first arrived?**

Gertie Jellinek: Not very much. I had to adapt to certain things, but as my mother cooked, it was mainly Continental food. But when we went to a restaurant we liked steaks, we liked many things. Today, it took me a while, I like a lot of Australian food, their vegetables and so on.

**Interviewer: Can I explore that first comment that you made when you said, "Not very much." You didn't think much of Australian food? Can you tell me why you felt that way?**

Gertie Jellinek: Because I was used, very much, to Continental food. I had to change and I had to learn how to like it, and I did eventually, of course.

**Interviewer: We're not trying to tell you that Australian food was good.**

Gertie Jellinek: Today it's a different story.

**Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about how Australian food has changed since you got here to the current day?**

Gertie Jellinek: It has changed because Australian food is many times a bit Continental as well, therefore we learned from you and you learned from us, and that is the idea.

**Interviewer: I have to agree. We've learned food from the rest of the world.**

Gertie Jellinek: Of course.

**Interviewer: We were very boring before, weren't we?**

Gertie Jellinek: No comment.

**Interviewer: Exploring that a little bit further - how do you think your migration wave influenced food in the local area?**

Gertie Jellinek: A lot. As I said, there was no rye bread and there was no decent coffee when we arrived, but Australian people are extremely adaptable and extremely lovely. They were very happy to learn to make a good coffee and all of these things. We learned from each other.

**Interviewer: Gertie, can you tell me a little bit about the special foods that you prepare or eat during family get togethers or Jewish holydays?**

Gertie Jellinek: Yes. When it's a Jewish holyday it is mainly chicken. There is a certain fish which you would call gefilte fish. I didn't learn how to do it, but you can buy it in the kosher section and it's just as good. That is an entrée, and then the matzoh ball soup and then a chicken dish. So we eat very well on holydays, very well.

**Interviewer: We'll move on to the pray section where we're talking about the rituals and observances of Judaism. How do your religious practices now compare to before you migrated to Australia?**

Gertie Jellinek: I might have mentioned that we were not very religious, pretty assimilated in Vienna, but we kept the High Holy days, Passover and the New Year [Rosh Hashanah] and the fasting day [Yom Kippur], these are the three main holy days I was taught, as a child, to keep. Exactly what my mother did, I did. My daughter has taken over now. She married a Jewish boy, and this is what we keep. Out of, maybe not so much religion, but tradition. It's tradition.

**Interviewer: Do you attend synagogue at all?**

Gertie Jellinek: I belong to a synagogue. I belong to Central Synagogue. I could go more, but on the High Holy days I do go. My children, who live on the North Shore, became members and I meet my children there and the grandchildren, that's very important. Yes, I go two or three times a year.

**Interviewer: You mentioned before about Jewish traditions. What traditions do you feel are most important or that you're most passionate about?**

Gertie Jellinek: The tradition to be a decent, honest, Jewish person is most important to my heart, never to offend anybody, never to make any difference whether they're black or white or green or anything. These are my traditions. As well, keep the High Holydays and be a proud Jewish person.

**Interviewer: Do you do Shabbat as well?**

Gertie Jellinek: I used to do Friday nights when I was younger, when my husband was alive, when my brother was alive. They're all gone. But my daughter takes over and she does the Shabbat. I can't come regularly because she lives on the North Shore, but a few times a year I join, otherwise I'm alone at home, that's how it is.

**Interviewer: But those traditions have been passed onto your daughter?**

Gertie Jellinek: Absolutely.

**Interviewer: And she is passing them onto your grandchildren?**

Gertie Jellinek: Absolutely. That is our tradition - my daughter is passing it onto the grandchildren and the grandchildren are passing them onto the little ones, the great grandchildren. Yes. I've got three great grandchildren.

**Interviewer: That is great.**

Gertie Jellinek: I'm doing all right.

**Interviewer: I think we'll just go on now to the final section which is about naches. What does naches mean to you?**

Gertie Jellinek: The translation of naches is what a great-grandmother feels when she looks at her great-grandchildren and grandchildren, that is naches, that's the best I explain it.

**Interviewer: With that in mind, what do you hope for your daughter and your grandchildren and great grandchildren?**

Gertie Jellinek: My daughter became a marvellous person. The grandchildren, I am very, very proud of. They have all good professions. My grandson in Melbourne has two little ones. My granddaughter in Sydney has one little one. I am hoping that they continue our traditions, which I am sure they will, and pass it onto the next generation, that is really my hope.

**Interviewer: Lovely. What do you think is your biggest achievement in life, Gertie, and why?**

Gertie Jellinek: I certainly didn't become a rich woman, that is not my biggest achievement. My biggest achievement is that I brought up, following in my mother's footsteps, a very, very valuable person as a daughter who married a very, very nice man. I think that is my biggest achievement, to pass on the right traditions and the right values.

**Interviewer: Across the years, what activities have you been involved with in the wider Waverley community that also bring you naches?**

Gertie Jellinek: I don't know. I was a very loyal member of the Waverley community.

**Interviewer: Perhaps you can tell us about your role as a Sydney Jewish Museum survivor guide - does that give you naches?**

Gertie Jellinek: I am a survivor guide. I come every Friday to the Sydney Jewish Museum to tell school children my story. They can ask me questions. I was chosen by Austria, after many years of denial, to be a living historian. I went to Vienna twice and I spoke to the school children there. I think I did a pretty good job there to explain what happened and that it should never happen again.