

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

ROSE FEKETE: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Rose Fekete

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: Rose, thanks for joining us. As mentioned, what I say is not going to be featured. We'll start off with if you can actually tell me your name and when and where you were born.

Rose Fekete: My name is Rose Fekete and I was born in Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what was happening in the Netherlands which led up to your family leaving?

Rose Fekete: Well I think I will share a little bit of my parents [story] during the [Second World] War. Because that is very relevant to my life. My father was a doctor and he worked with my mother in the Dutch resistance from the beginning of the War. He was mainly falsifying medical papers to prevent young men from being taken into the army. They did a lot of work in that area. Also because they were so involved in the resistance, they stayed out of hiding for a long time. I'm going to tell the story briefly because it's actually a very long story.

In about 1943, they finally went into hiding. I had an older brother and sister. My sister was seven years old, my brother was five years old. They were respectively three and one when my parents went into hiding. They, fortunately were looked after by non-Jewish people for over two years who saved their lives during that time. My parents were in hiding for eight months. My mother's parents were in hiding up the road. There were neighbors who were bringing them food. My parents actually also took in two other people during that time in this attic where they were.

My mother never trusted these people, though my father did. After eight months the money ran out, which my parents were giving them. They brought my grandparents to the door and my mother thought, "What are you doing here?" The next moment the Gestapo was there. They were first taken into some cells in Amsterdam. Then they were taken to the punishment barracks in Westerbork, which was a Dutch transit camp. Then from there, because my parents were in the resistance, they [the resistance] managed to get them baptism papers.

Which prevented them from going to the gas chambers in Auschwitz. They were taken to Theresienstadt. Sadly the papers for my mother's parents didn't arrive in time, it was a public holiday that day. Tragically they were taken straight to Auschwitz on one of the last transports and they went straight into the gas chambers. During my parents time in Theresienstadt, my mother worked in a factory, my father was allowed to work as a doctor. At night my mother looked after children in the children's barracks.

She became very close to these children. There were two children there that she said that if they survive she will bring them back to Holland with her. Towards the end of their time in Theresienstadt, my father contracted [unclear] and my mother begged, could she be taken into quarantine to look after him. The commander finally said that, "You will have to stay there." There are so many stories of my parents being brave Theresienstadt.

One story I will just share. People didn't go to the gas chambers in Theresienstadt but people starved to death and they got very little food. My mother was so worried about her friends who were starving to death. Because of my father's contacts as a doctor, he got extra food sometimes from the kitchen. One day, my mother on her way back from work decided to pack a suitcase full of potatoes. She was a bit scared, usually she was never stopped on her way back to the barracks.

This particular day with her suitcase with her potatoes in them, would you believe, someone stopped her. One of the people who were guarding them. He looked straight at her and he said, "What's in your suitcase?" She answered looking at him straight in his eyes, "[foreign language]." Meaning, my mother spoke fluent German, "Potatoes, of course." He just laughed at her and thus sent her on her way. Later she thought, how could she have done that? She couldn't believe it. Anyway, there's lots of stories like that.

Anyway, after they were liberated in May, 1945, my mother had to stay there longer with my father because he was so ill. The two children stayed until he was well enough for them to go back. My parents took these two children back to Holland. I will just quickly share, the boy was immediately taken by an aunt who also had his ... No, by somebody who also had his sister, non-Jewish people. No, sorry. I'm completely confused. The boy was taken by these people who wanted to take him to Palestine.

The girl was taken by two people who apparently were an aunt and uncle. My mother thought, "They're all happy." Seventeen years ago, my mother received a book with her ... her name was in it, telling the story of these children. They were called the unknown children. There was a horrific story about this boy saying that he was brought up by these people who also had his sister. Because after my mother had left him, apparently there was a court case with these non-Jewish people who came with his sister against the Jewish people who wanted to take him to Palestine.

In those days all the non-Jewish people have won the cases. They took him and they treated the girl very well. He was called a dirty Jew and a rotten Jew his whole life whenever he did the wrong thing. He had a terrible childhood. My mother was heartbroken, she rang me and she couldn't believe it. She wrote a letter to the author and she wrote a letter to this boy. Three months later she gets this phone call from this crying 58 year old saying, "I've been looking for you my whole life. Thank you for saving me."

After that, for every year until my mother was 98, she actually went to a reunion in Holland with this group of unknown children. That's an amazing thing. I was born after the war. In 1951, January, my father flew to Australia, to Sydney, to find some way for us to live. As a doctor in those days, you had to re-study for three years. Even though my father was already in his 40s and he was a very experienced doctor. My mother brought my brother and sister and myself out in a ship in the April of that year.

Fortunately he found a house to rent in Bellevue Hill, Bellevue Road. We were able to live there and to make ends meet my parents took in borders. My mother used to feed the borders and look after them. I must admit I was three years old and I don't ... I do have vague memories of these people. I remember my sister taking me to preschool in the local area. I remember also our house was always open to everyone. Those early years were very difficult years.

Fortunately my parents did speak English. My mother's English wasn't as good and she quickly joined a tennis group in the Waverley area, actually, where the people helped her learn English. That was a very special time. When I was old enough I went to Bellevue Hill Public School, my brother and sister also went there. Then my brother went to Woollahra Public School. Most probably what I remember the most, my parents were very involved in the Dutch community.

My mother, after a few years when my father started his practice and things were a little bit easier, helped a lot of other Dutch people who came and were coming in to live in Sydney, Australia. I also remember that our home was always a place where people could pop in. Most probably things were maybe a little bit easier of us than many other migrants who came to Sydney.

Simone: I'm just going to say, why Australia and how did ... Just the choice of Australia basically, anything like that.

Rose Fekete: My mother actually always wanted to go and live in Israel. Many of her religious friends went to live in Israel. My father very, very strongly felt he wanted to get as far away as possible from Europe. He very strongly felt that he wanted to come to Australia. He had heard about Australia where some other friends had come to live. Particularly people by the name of the Slades and the Aaronsons.

Interviewer: How do you think that the Jewish community has shaped the area? I guess the Eastern Suburbs area.

Rose Fekete: I think the Jewish community has really enriched the area. A lot of leadership places in Waverley and Woollahra and all the surrounding areas have been occupied by Jewish people [unclear]. I even think my brother who was the most brilliant young student, he went to ... even as a migrant, he went to Woollahra Opportunity [School] and then went to Sydney High.

He actually came first in Mathematics One and Two in [the Leaving Certificate in] New South Wales. Then later [he] was [unclear] with an Australian honour. During his years like so many other Jewish people [he] contributed to different areas of medicine, of politics, of literature and every area, I presume.

Interviewer: Jewish people don't tend to sit on their hands, do they?

Rose Fekete: No. I think they're definitely very active and involved in every possible way. In the schools actually, taking positions. I mean in 1979, I was president of Bellevue Hill Parents Club. A lot of my committee was made up of Jewish people during that time. I have friends in local schools as well. People definitely became very involved in every area possible.

Interviewer: I think we're fine to move on to our next topic, which is of course food. Food is an important part of the Jewish culture of course. Can you tell me a little bit about ... I know that you're only three when you left, do you have any memories of food when you were a child? About eating your favorite food whether it was in the Netherlands or here in your early years of Australia?

Rose Fekete: Most probably as a very young child I already ate Dutch herring and croquettes which later on when I went back to Holland I just loved and everything. That was a very popular thing in our household. My mother made something called [unclear], translated butter cake. It has some ginger in it, it's very rich and in small pieces. Every fourth night it would last most probably for about two weeks if we didn't have too many people dropping in. Both in Holland and in Australia I do remember that there was always this beautiful glass dish filled with butter cake.

That was very popular. My mother also made this wonderful apple cake with pastry in a pattern across the top of it. It was delicious. Then most probably the things that stood out, I know coming to Australia, that was our home was always a place where everyone popped in. Though maybe not expensive food, there was always an abundance of food for everybody who would pop in. I remember that very clearly.

Interviewer: Do you remember your thoughts of Australian food when you were younger versus all these amazing food that you were having at home?

Rose Fekete: Look, I must admit, in the early days when I was very slim I haven't ever really appreciated food. Personally I actually do not remember an emphasis on food. I do remember an emphasis as far as the Jewish festivals, the Jewish chagim. That's always when they were relevant traditions that we enjoyed as far as food was concerned. Everyday living I remember a very busy life, but I must admit I do not remember such an emphasis on food for all of us here.

Interviewer: That has obviously changed in your life.

Rose Fekete: Definitely.

Interviewer: Tell us about how your food journey has been over the years.

Rose Fekete: I just love good food. I must admit after I've spent three weeks in Israel and there you have this amazing Israeli breakfast. I sometimes think, "It would be amazing to bring that to Australia and have it here." No, when good food is available, I must admit, I really enjoy it. In my early years of my marriage I was a good devoted cook and I most probably did a lot of cooking. Then as I had to put three young children and the position where I worked, literally nearly 24/7.

Again cooking was not an emphasis. Now again that I've retired in the last 10 years, I must admit it is wonderful to make special dishes that my grandchildren enjoy and all of that. Most probably the legacy that my mother has left, one of the things that ... I make few dishes, but made the few dishes well. One of them is pavlova, which most probably my mother learned here. She makes the best pavlova.

Most people don't use the yellow of the egg, but she made this wonderful custard with the yellow of the egg with lemon and pineapple. I make this big pavlova with lemon and pineapple custard, then cream and then the traditional passionfruit, strawberries and kiwi fruit. That's always very popular thing in our household.

I make a very good chicken soup or vegetable soup, depending who's vegetarian that's coming along with matza balls. Not only at Pesach (Passover) time, but also throughout the whole of winter. My grandchildren love that and the egg dip. I usually get someone to help make the [chopped] liver, which everybody really enjoys and different things like that.

Interviewer: How do you think your migration waves influenced food in the local area?

Rose Fekete: My personal migration wave?

Interviewer: Yeah. People who migrated just after the Second World War.

Rose Fekete: Definitely there was a major influence I think in restaurants in particular. Very soon the European restaurant opened up with the chairs outside and the schnitzels. I think because there's such a ... I actually married, in my first marriage, a Hungarian man. I learned to speak Hungarian because he had a wonderful mother who helped me during my working years. My mother-in-law. She cooked all the tradition Hungarian dishes. A lot of the restaurants in the area cooked Hungarian food.

I think the Dutch, there's not something that stands out that's really traditional besides the croquettes and the herring and all of that. The Hungarians have a lot of specific food. I think there was a lot of influence. Because in the Jewish community, in New South Wales there's a majority of Hungarians. The Poles went to Melbourne and the Hungarians came to Sydney. I think there's been a lot of influences as far as the Hungarian dishes in the Eastern Suburbs community.

Interviewer: What can you tell me, you said before that your mom is going strong at 101. What emphasis did she place on food across the years? Do you have any good memories of food with her, like in the kitchen?

Rose Fekete: Associated with, I think the dishes that I have mentioned, she taught me how to make a pavlova and the chicken soup and the apple cake. The butter cake she did teach me, but I must admit I didn't continue making that, it's just too fattening. Most probably because [she] worked as a young child, I led a very busy life. I must admit, because my brother and sister were a lot older than me, I was almost like an only child. I would say my father worked very long hours.

I did spend a lot of time with my mother, even to the extent that we only went on holidays together. My father could never go, he couldn't afford to have a locum of anything like that. Until about a year before he died, that was the first time he went on a holiday with my mother. Then certainly he already died in 1969. I actually had spent a lot of time with my mother, but not necessarily in the cooking department.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a little more about special foods that you prepare or ate during family get togethers or Jewish holidays.

Rose Fekete: Of course at Chanukah time we enjoy having doughnuts and latkes and the traditional things of Chanukahtime. Since I'm fortunate to have seven wonderful grandchildren and now that I've re-married eight years ago, I now have an addition of six grandchildren through my husband Frank. When we all get together we have Friday nights every second week, Shabbat is a very important time where we all get together. During that time my children like me to make this same thing every fourth night.

We tend to have, during the summer we have dips with salmon and egg dip and avocado and things like that. Then we have rare roast beef and baked vegetables and usually have a nice pudding or cake or different things. That's every fourth night. As I mentioned at Pesach, most probably the things we enjoyed most is the matza ball soup and also the gefilte fish, which is always very popular. Most probably make it ...

Actually another thing my mother taught me was this wonderful mashed potato where you put butter around ... You first cook them and you mash them and you put butter with a course matzo meal around the container. Then you put the mashed potato in and then matzo meal over the

top with lots of butter. You put it into the oven and it's got this wonderful crisp around that are now on top which is really special.

Interviewer: We now move on to the pray section now.

The essence of Judaism is it in its rituals and observances. In this section we'd like to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions, how you track your identity and the passing down from generation to generation. How are your religious practices now compared to before you migrated or the early years of the migration.

Rose Fekete: My mother and father in Holland, my father actually was brought up in an orthodox Jewish orphanage. His father died when he was very young and his mother was very poor. The orphanage educated him and then he became the doctor of the orphanage. When he met my mother, they had a lot of orthodox friends. They had a kosher home in Holland before they came to Australia, because otherwise their friends were not able to eat in their home.

When we came to Australia, they decided they would not have a kosher home. We've always followed the traditions of Judaism. We never brought treif (non-kosher food) to the home, but we didn't have a kosher home. We always growing up had the Shabbat dinner and our house was always full with lots of people. Also because my father had the knowledge, he ... There was quite a large Dutch community and we had no relatives besides one aunt, they nearly all perished during the war, just our immediate family.

There were about four or five couples, Dutch families who had virtually decided to give up their Judaism. Often for Shabbat and definitely every Pesach and every Rosh Hashanah, they would come to our place. We had a large dining room with a large table, which my father was given actually by a patient that he was devoted to. All the people ... so I remember growing up having 25 to 30 people every Pesach and every Rosh Hashanah. My father led the most amazing Seder.

He would study to bring different ideas and different thoughts of Judaism to the Seder. It was so special. When I was 10 years old and I've actually brought the Haggadah, because most probably it's one of my most treasured possessions. When I was 10 years old he gave me this little Haggadah which you follow during the Seder, for my recital of the Ma Nishtana as the youngest child. After he died, I use to find the holidays very difficult.

Fortunately my brother had learned from my father and he would then carry on the Seders, which was very special. I do remember this warmth and my parents singing. On Friday nights we never went out, we always had dinner then we played games. There's this Dutch game called Sjoelbak. After dinner, there's this long wooden thing where you push these things down into little holes. We would play Sjoelbak or other board games and different thing.

Friday night was a wonderful thing. When I had my family, I tried to bring that into our home. My husband didn't have the same [inaudible] as me. We tried very hard to bring it into our home and our children also didn't go out on a Friday night. We carried on the traditions and everything also of Judaism.

Interviewer: I think you answered that very well. It's your religious practices across the years. Do you attend synagogue? Can you tell me a little bit about your [unclear?]

Rose Fekete: From 1951 we have been members of Central Synagogue. We would go occasionally for Shabbat, but mainly for the High Holydays. I remember as a child walking with my father, so we were in walking distance. On the main holydays we would walk home, which was a very special time that we had together. I most probably didn't see a lot of my father because he worked such long hours. That was very important to me. During the years, my children came with me to Central Synagogue.

Then sadly I had a divorce from my first husband. Even though we're now still very friendly and that's very special. I've been very fortunate to meet a wonderful man who has the same interests in Judaism, traditions and love for Israel. He moved from the North Shore to the Eastern Suburbs. Both of those, he was very involved in the Seder. I was very involved, I was director at Mt Sinai College preschools, where most of them are all in Waverley, for 17 years. That also enriched me; I worked outside the Jewish community for the first 18 years.

I feel coming to Moriah College and having Kabbalat Shabbat on a Friday morning. I felt that I had come home professionally and it brought my personal life into it. Going back to Central Synagogue, so for the last eight years my husband Frank sings in the choir at Central Synagogue. Also for the last six or seven years, I actually co-ordinate the daycare for about 25 children on the High Holydays, on Rosh Hashanah. Also for many years I coordinated the transportation of the elderly who meet on a Monday morning at Sparks that belongs to Central Synagogue. I feel I am involved and my husband is also involved. I was very fortunate, one of our teachers Velvel Lederman was a Jewish Studies teacher at the Moriah College preschools. I feel he also enriched my life as far as my [unclear] and bringing Judaism into my home with my children and now with my grandchildren.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what traditions you feel most important or that you're most passionate about?

Rose Fekete: I feel very passionate about the weekly Shabbat. Coming together as a family, the joy now of being with my three wonderful daughters, Yvette, Tiffany, Anita. Their husbands Dave, Saul and Denny and my seven wonderful grandchildren. My oldest grandson just had his Bar Mitzvah last December and that was such a special time. In two weeks time my oldest granddaughter is having her Bat Mitzvah. I already feel very excited. I think their milestones in our Jewish life are very important.

Also I love the traditions of Pesach and Rosh Hashanah ... coming together and having the traditional meal and singing together. Just now again being in Israel and standing at the Kotel [the Western Wall] and praying and feeling very blessed. That my mother is still alive at 101, still living a quality life and that I have my wonderful family and my grandchildren and my husband. Also that I've had the opportunity to really contribute to the community in many ways.

Interviewer: We might just finish the pray section with, what traditions are passing on to your own children and grandchildren?

Rose Fekete: What traditions am I passing onto the children? Most probably my strong feelings about coming together on Shabbat with the family. The importance of family. I must say, which is another thing that brings tears to my eyes. I married very young, I met my first husband very young. Though we had wonderful times in our family with our three daughters, we grew apart.

Because we had a lot of different beliefs and they were mostly related to Judaism and our love of Israel. He's a very good man and I don't think I will ever get over the pain of losing the family unit. I never saw myself as someone who would leave the family unit. When you realise that you have different understandings of what's really important to you, you realise that you need to move on.

I have been very fortunate, through my life now I feel that I can pass on my love for Shabbat and love for coming together at the main High Holydays. I think also the importance of ... contributing to your community. To me that comes into my love of Judaism, of tzedakah [charity] and mitzvot.

Interviewer: Nicely said Rose, that's lovely. We move on to the nachas section. Every Jewish person wants some nachas in their life. Nachas can also be seen as learning and giving back to the community. What does the word nachas mean to you and does that have any special significance?

Rose Fekete: Nachas to me is definitely the joy of feeling my life and in the way I feel very blessed in my life. I suppose starting from the beginning, having my mother in my life at the age of 101 and sharing so much with her, that really brings me nachas. Also my children and my daughters and my sons-in-law and grandchildren, having met someone in the latter part of my life that we really are so happy together.

We have the same traditions and beliefs and together we are really giving to the community, that really brings lots of nachas to me. The main areas I will just share that I feel that I brought to the community, most probably my 17 years at Moriah College. Particularly in building Randwick, which is one of the preschools, [unclear]. To me I put so much work in to that. I had a vision there that there would be an enrichment of the elderly and the young.

Because next door is the Montefiore Home. My vision was that the children on [the eve of] Shabbat and the holydays would go into the home or the elderly would come into the preschool and there would be an enrichment between the two groups mixing together. That has really happened and that most probably brings me a lot of nachas. Also my involvement originally at Bellevue Hill Public School, I was involved in two [unclear] community awards where I worked on this project for six months.

We actually won \$5,000 for Bellevue Hill Public School. Even to this day, [it] brings me a lot of nachas. My other very important ... I always talk about my life has three passions. Which is my family and friends, the early childhood field, particularly Moriah College and Mt Zion preschools and WIZO. WIZO is the Women's International Zionist Organisation, which has 800 projects in Israel.

From 1973 I've been very involved in WIZO in contributing as much as possible in bringing younger people to the organisation, raising funds which are sent to these important projects in Israel. Because WIZO actually helps one in four Israelis. My involvement in these different areas has given me a lot of nachas, praise God. I try to also help my children understand and my grandchildren how important it is to contribute to the community.

I feel very strongly when you're helping others, you're helping yourself. I feel very special about that and it's wonderful. Now my husband does a lot of pro bono work for different Jewish organisations. Together we're very involved.

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

Rose Fekete: I'm most certainly would have to say my children and my grandchildren, my three daughters. Sadly my sister already died in 1967. That was very tragic and she was only 28 years old. That has always been a terrible loss for my mother and me and the whole family. To see the closeness between my three daughters, the love and the support they give each other most probably has been, I feel great nachas and also great achievement. Also most probably my 17 years at Moriah College. I feel most probably, have been my greatest achievement.

I mentioned Bellevue Hill, didn't I? Actually there's something else I have been involved with which is very important to me that I didn't mention. I will just mention, during my years at Moriah College, I've always been very interested in children with disabilities. When I retired from Moriah College, Robert Schneider approached me if I would help him set up a [unclear] for adults with disabilities. For the last six years; this has been the seventh year though.

At the moment I'm concentrating on looking after my mother. For six years every Monday I supported him in running his [unclear] every Monday. We had 13 clients and that was a very rewarding experience. Leading on from that, for the last seven years I have been involved in Sababa and Lagamba. Which is a hand for children with disabilities to give their parents respite.

It's amazing, this is actually the children, the campus looked after by [inaudible] from Moriah College, Emanuel and Masada College. Wendy and I coordinate the volunteers who do the shlepping [carrying] and the cooking and the cleaning and all of that. I've been involved with that and I've been also volunteering in that area. I'm very interested. Now I'm looking forward to being involved in the Big Kitchen actually. Because the Big Kitchen is setting up an area also for young adults with disabilities. I'm looking forward to being involved there.

When I think of nachas, I think of joy and blessing and being very blessed. I think of my mother who is now 101 years old, who is still well and leading a quality life living at home. My daughters and my grandchildren and what comes to mind the most is for the last 13 years, my mother takes me, my three daughters [and] recently of course the seven grandchildren to Terrigal, every school holidays.

We have the most special time there. We've been doing this since my eldest grandson [who] is now 13 and a half, was three months old. As I've said we go four times a year. My mother takes my daughters out for dinner, they have their margaritas and glasses of wine. We just have such a joy, she enjoys this, the children's noise. It's just a very important part of our relationship and everyone being enriched by each other's company and that's a very special time.