

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

LEON GOLTSMAN: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Leon Goltsman

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: The first thing we'll start off with is if you could tell me your name and when and where you were born.

Leon Goltsman: I'm Leon Goltsman. I was born in 1972 in Odessa, Ukraine. It was part of the former Soviet Union, a country that no longer exists.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit of your family back story. What was happening in the country and the circumstances up to why you left and immigrated to Australia?

Leon Goltsman: My parents, my family, part of my family, was from Romania before the war. Another part of my family was from Odessa. It just so happened that during the war I suppose they were fleeing to survive the persecution. After the war they felt they were classified as Jews. They didn't feel they were welcome in their own home. They were constantly being persecuted even after the war My family, they were targeted throughout their lives. anti-Semitism was something that they experienced constantly. Even though they were living in Russia they didn't feel like they were treated as equal citizens.

Interviewer: When did they make the decision to leave Russia?

Leon Goltsman: An opportunity arose and I remember speaking to my grandparents about this when my grandmother was still alive. The decision was made when I would have been about three or four years old. My parents, they saw an opportunity to start a new life. The whole thing was that they wanted to start a better life for the children, for us, for my sister and I. I was four or five years old when we left and my sister would have been two. They didn't want us to be persecuted and be discriminated against as we got older. They didn't want us fighting in an army that potentially would've put us in danger. They believed that for the sake of the family that they wanted to ... Or mostly for us, they really wanted to come to another place, a new country and start a new life.

Interviewer: What made them decide on Australia?

Leon Goltsman: Well, interesting because it would've been easy for them just to say, "We'll go to Israel". It just so happened that a lot of their family went to Israel and they weren't really fond of going where those family went. I suppose they wanted to probably in a way get away as far they could from those people and they thought Australia is the end of the world. In all honesty, Australia wasn't something that was available to them straight away. As I mentioned earlier if people wanted to go to Israel they could have gone directly from Russia; however, anyone who wanted to go further, they would had to have gone through Vienna and then go travel through to Italy and then make their application.

They would've had to wait months. In our case it was eight or so months that we were kind of in limbo before we were given the approval to come to Australia. I remember going through Italy. We were there probably for ... Just in Italy alone we were there for about seven or eight months. It was a really long journey. Then my parents would say "we're coming to Australia". We got the authority whereas other people, some of their friends, went to America. A couple went to New Zealand but then they ended up coming back to Australia we think but no, it was really just limbo. You did not know where you were going.

Interviewer: What stacked the deck in the favour of Australia as opposed to Canada or the USA?

Leon Goltsman: Australia, my father had a cousin here who was the first person from our family to actually come here. It was him that called out to my father and said, "Look you've got to come here. This is a lucky country; you'll come here and it is not like Russia. You'll be glad that you did." My father was convinced that Australia is the place. My grandparents wanted to go to America and my uncle wanted to go to America because they had a lot of family there but my father was determined. He said, "Australia it is" because my mother was the only daughter and her brother wanted to go with my mother and the grandparents, the parents of my mother wanted to be with the daughter and the grandchildren so history was made.

Interviewer: How many of you, exactly who came out and I'm assuming that jumped on a boat or plane or ...

Leon Goltsman: Planes, trains, and automobiles literally. We would have gone by train from Odessa. I actually remember I have a very good memory in this case. I remember that we ... It was the night before and we experienced an earthquake. Things were being broken and I remember ducking for cover. It could've been a couple of days before we left but it was pretty close to the time that we had to leave. I remember my parents were taking cover. It was pretty intense earthquake but then I remember that next thing I knew we were leaving, I didn't know exactly where. I was actually saying goodbyes to my neighbours and friends. I remember having an entourage of people seeing us off.

It was a train, I believe it was a train. I remember everyone was crying and everyone was kind of saying their farewells. I remember seeing my uncle, who I was very close to, when I say my uncle it was my mother's uncle but still he was my uncle, and I remember shouting out to him from the window, "I'm never going to see you again." It was something that children do but then I noticed he was crying and I thought "Oh this is serious." It was the first feeling that we were leaving for good. Then the next trip was Vienna which was Austria and I remember this tiny little room and in that room was our accommodation. That was it. It was my father, my mother, my sister, and a couple of other people who just so happened not have a place to stay.

In those days everyone looked after each other so he kind of bumped in as well. I can't remember if he slept on the floor on the couch or where but there was always room. We always made space for people to stay if we needed to. Interesting because by the time we got to Italy it was us that were probably looking for places to stay but it just so happened my father started work since day one so he learned Italian. He got a job as a bus driver or a tourist guide or something of that sort. He'd go out there and he'd take people on excursions to Pompeii or wherever he would go, and the Colosseum. He was just working very hard to make sure that there was food on the table and a roof over our head. My mother was taking care of the kids, my sister and I.

I have some interesting memories of Italy actually. I remember Italy being kind of the fashion capital of the world. I was fortunate enough to be exposed to a lot of the fashion. I had some pretty cool jeans. By the time I came to Australia I had cool jeans, cool leather jackets, excellent sunglasses, scarves, you name it. I had a bit of a collection when it came to clothes but more importantly a lot of it was warm clothes. It got really cold there especially during winter to the point where I remember my father would even sell his clothes just to make sure that my sister and I were kept warm.

Interviewer: Very good. When eventually you did make it to Australia, what made your parents settle in this local area?

Leon Goltsman: It was cheap. Bondi was cheap there was a time believe it not. When we arrived in Australia my father's cousin had already made a home in Francis Street which is South Bondi. For about two weeks, we were staying with him and I remember a tiny two bedroom apartment with eight people living in it, eight people, so it was my cousin, my father's cousin, his wife and the two children Mark and Felix. I'm very close with that family. They are like my brothers. But in those days it was difficult because my parents had no money. They had absolutely no valid qualifications here. I mean everything that they've done back home kind of stayed back home. It wasn't recognised here. They had no language.

The only thing I suppose that they had was dreams. They had a vision and they had an opportunity. In a way that's something that a lot of the migrants share. Looking at it now I can see why so many people like my parents have done well for themselves because there was nothing holding them back. They could get up. They could get work and they could live their lives. My parents chose Bondi because it was a community of other like-minded people like my parents and like myself who would go down the beach and make lifelong friends, many of who are still my friends today. People...we'd play hide and seek back at the Pavilion, climbing trees and doing naughty things that we were told that we shouldn't be doing.

These are the sort of things that bonded us I suppose, and Bondi was one of the few places I think in Australia that provided a beautiful beach, beautiful places to visit and when I say places to visit there was pretty much for us just the beach. You see that we spent a lot of time outdoors and if it wasn't outdoors then we'd end up going to people's places because we were on a very low budget. There is not much we could have done.

Interviewer: Can you best relate to me that first time that you actually saw Bondi and Bondi Beach?

Leon Goltsman: I remember coming down to Bondi. I went to Bondi Beach Public School. To me the first time I saw it was when I was walking to school. I remember looking out there and the surfers, I just couldn't understand exactly what people were doing in the water when you had the surf and it was waves. I just couldn't understand because I've never seen that before. My parents, my mother would say "Are they crazy? It is freezing out there and these people ..." There was already a bit of a cultural difference in that sense. That was probably my first impression. People were in the water in the middle of winter. They must be crazy.

I remember coming to school. This would've been my first experience at Bondi. First I'd notice people in the water which I thought was crazy because it was cold and then I'm in kindergarten at Bondi Beach Public School. You can imagine I'm wearing my designer jeans. I'm wearing my sunglasses. I'm wearing my leather jacket and I didn't have a school uniform in those days. Everyone else, were wearing their grey pants and I kind of thought, "Oh I'm different. I'm different." My parents weren't in a position where they can actually go out there and buy me school uniform. For about a year, I wore my designer clothes to school. That's pretty much how I was in those days.

Then there were people, some of my friends at school, they didn't have even shoes. Parents used to send them to school with no shoes. When I say my friends I mean people that I met who I became friends with. Bondi was a really rough place and I remember coming to school and people

were ... They didn't even have lunch. Their parents used to send them to school with no lunch, no money and the school would actually have to ask people how many people have lunches and how many people don't. If we had lunches then they put us to the other room or they would take us to the side and they'd keep the ones who were hungry and they would feed them.

For the sake of not fitting in, I remember I'm actually quite ashamed to say this, but I remember even throwing my food out just so I could be with those people. It was an interesting time.

Interviewer: Before we move on to food because I think you've actually covered quite a lot of this first section, how do you think the Jewish community itself has shaped this area?

Leon Goltsman: I think the Jewish community they've ... First of all I think the fact that they had an opportunity to do things. I think the first real encounter that I have had at Bondi with the Jewish community. Apart from other fellow immigrants who were kind of doing, following a similar journey to myself was when we were at school. They walked around. They said "All right who's who? What religion are you?" I said "No, I don't know. What am I?" My parents said "You're Jewish." I said "I'm Jewish" so they gave me a yarmulke. That was probably my first real appreciation of being a part of that community was when I was given a yarmulke.

I do remember though in Italy, before we arrived to Australia, my parents were socialising me with other Jewish kids. We were singing some Jewish songs and I already knew a couple of the songs. I already had a sense of what it means to be Jewish but it wasn't something that we were encouraged to do. I can understand why because back in Russia it could've meant being, I suppose, picked on or having somebody discriminate against you. Some people changed their names; we didn't. That would have been one of my first experiences when we did arrive to Australia that now it was okay to say you are Jewish and feel good about it. After that, it wasn't long, say, when a Jewish boy is eight days old they circumcise him.

Now I wasn't eight days when I got circumcised – I was five years when I got circumcised but that's okay. Better late than never in terms of ... as far as the rabbis are concerned but it was actually... its considered a mitzvah when you do something good for somebody else. My father met a lot of good people in the first couple of years of arriving to Australia. I suppose they all say the people who changed the world are the ones that show up. My father would show up to every opportunity that was presented. He met some real good people. They were the ones that actually wanted to make sure that I am circumcised and that the family understands what it is to be Jewish.

Interviewer: That's good.

Leon Goltsman: One of the ways that the Jewish community has shaped the area, I believe, is that because they now feel comfortable being Jewish they feel free to open up shops. Gelato Bar is a perfect example. Hakoah Club was another one. Couple of Jewish schools came about as well and scripture and Hebrew lessons were offered in public schools. One of the ways that it shaped the community was that it gave an opportunity for people to be themselves and to have a choice in how they want to live their life. I think that it shaped the community because now apart from having quite a few businesses owned by Jewish people, we've also got some Jewish schools, synagogues, Shabbat. You get to see more people following the tradition of Shabbat.

I think the values, the Jewish values, we've a huge percentage. I think it is 17% plus Jewish people at Waverley as well as Russian being the most spoken language after English, it's certainly moulded and shaped it to what we have today.

Interviewer: We will go on to food now and of course food is an important part of the Jewish culture no matter what kind of Jew you are really, where you are from. In this section what I'd like to hear about is maybe Russia's native country foods. The sort of food that you had on the dinner table at home and do you remember about eating your favourite food as a child?

Leon Goltsman: Ah food, music to my ears. One of the sayings, I don't know if it's the saying, but one of the observations that I've made when it comes to Russian food is if you can see the table cloth, there is not enough food on the table. Food is a very important aspect of the culture. I believe one of the reasons being is because during the war times there was never enough. Never enough. My father doesn't eat buckwheat and he always, as an example, makes us eat it and I've grown up on that stuff but he never ate it. The reason being is because there wasn't anything to eat and his mother he would tell me that his mother would sometimes pick up little granules and wash them and clean them during war times or just post-war times when the country was being built up.

Wash it, clean it, take all the dirt off it, cook it, and feed him with it. He used to say "I don't want this crap." She would give him a bit of a smack and saying ... It was very hard because she would cry to him and say "I've had to get on my knees. I have to go hungry myself to feed you and you've just insulted me like that." You can see the value of food and so when we have an opportunity to show our gratitude then we want to put as much food on the table as we can but also the other thing which I'm proud to do this myself is that I love having people over. I love having friends over and neighbours over. I find that by having them over and sharing a laugh and couple of drinks perhaps but food, the enjoyment of sharing food, sitting at the table it says that the people are welcome to your home and then you have appreciation for them being there.

I think that food amongst friends is really special and with family it brings people together. I suppose Shabbat is probably one of the reasons why I'm a big fan of having Friday night dinners. That is because it brings people closer together. It keeps the work away. It keeps the unimportant things out. Shabbat is an important time because you can't have your TV on although some people I'm sure still do. I prefer not to. In fact I prefer not to have TV on at all when I'm eating but one of the things about having food is that I believe is the most essential thing because we've had good food and good company and good people at the table. Life is just so much empty without that.

Interviewer: Very true. I have to agree. Going back to when you first arrived in Australia, what did you think of Australian food when you first arrived and can you maybe comment on how that maybe changed across the years?

Leon Goltsman: Australian food kind of was an acquired taste. Now I've grown up as an Aussie, a Russian Australian. I think growing up probably more Aussie so I got to try my Vegemite sandwiches and my devon. I remember the meat pie, sausage rolls. At first I still preferred my piroshkies and I preferred my salami and everything else that my parents fed me which sometimes was a bit embarrassing because it had a bit of a ... let's just say people could smell it miles away. It was a bit embarrassing. It was a bit embarrassing. So the cultural difference made me feel uncomfortable [about] what I was eating.

I turned to Australian food again just to fit in but as I grew up on that I suppose I got used to it. Look I can't say, I do like Vegemite since it is one of those things that I'm very fond of but apart from that I don't really think that it was enough to sustain me, let's just say. I might eat Australian food during the daytime but I always come home to a nice cooked Russian meal which my grandmother was just an expert on. My grandmother and my mother, nothing ever beats their cooking.

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

Leon Goltsman: Well because there wasn't much of a choice of what people could buy. I remember growing up, Campbell Parade, you might have one Chinese restaurant but the rest is just milkbars. That's it. Somebody had this idea I thought well hang on. The law of supply and demand. We've got people demanding more than just a devon roll or a salad, chicken, egg sandwich or something like that. Let's make food ... so they would either make food, prepare it and then sell it. I see an opportunity, but then also they would import. You have again more businesses sprouting up that actually are able to provide that, support that supply.

Interviewer: I guess the Gelato Bar is a typical example.

Leon Goltsman: Gelato Bar was an amazing ... I don't think we could ever drive past without stopping at the Gelato Bar. We didn't go in there. My family and I didn't go in there for the food. It was the cakes that we were after. Also I wonder how many children would have been bribed with Gelato Bar because I can recall that if I cleaned up my room, I might get myself a strudel or something but it wasn't strudels that I was after. I still love the truffles and those chocolate pyramids . That were my favourite.

Interviewer: Very nice. To finish up the food section, can you tell me about some special foods that you prepare or ate during family get-togethers like Shabbat or Jewish holydays?

Leon Goltsman: I get my mum to make pumeni. Pulmeni are like a dough with meat in it. Russian language is very rich. We've words and so sometimes you got to steal ... even though I've been speaking the language for so long it still takes a while to try and translate it. The best way to put it is pulmeni is like a dumpling. It is created kind of the way that the Russian mother could only make. Borscht, borscht is like a beetroot soup. That's also one of my favourites I suppose but I like lots of mustard in there. Hot English mustard with no sour cream. My mom always says, "You must have sour cream with your borscht." No, no, too many calories I'm aware of my cholesterol so I like my mustard.

The other thing is well I suppose eating kebabs even though other cultures claim that it is theirs, we make it a special way. There's about two kilos of meat on just one kebab stick but that's the Russian way.

Interviewer: Is borscht a cold soup or is that hot?

Leon Goltsman: There's two types of borschts. There's the red, the beetroot, that's hot. Then there's the, they call it the green borscht which is probably a bit less common or less people know of it but that's a cold one and that's a little bit sour. With spinach. Very good for you.

Interviewer: We move on to the pray section now. We get people talking about food all day and we get really hungry actually. Pray section. The essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances of course. This section we'd love to hear about the mitzvots and traditions and how it shapes your identity – things have been passed down from generation to generation. First of all, can we start with your religious practices now and how they compare to maybe your family's religious practices before you migrated to Australia?

Leon Goltsman: My grandfather was one of those people. He actually learned how to speak Romanian before he spoke Russian because Romanian was a very... it was the Jewish capital in let's say Russia. He was very....grew up understanding the values of being Jewish. It was after the War or I'd say during the War and after the War that people were afraid to practice it. When they came to Australia, my grandfather was the one that really would pray every morning and he'd pray every night and he sometimes would sit there and just be grateful and ask God to protect the family. I had my Bar Mitzvah. My grandfather, I was just so blessed my grandfather was able to make it. Unfortunately he passed away three months after my ... That's three months, three months, he passed away just three months after my Bar Mitzvah. It was that year, but having him there was just amazing.

I don't think I've ever seen him so proud and I suppose for me, being Jewish is really important. It is important because it honours my family. It acknowledges what they've been through. I also really enjoy being Jewish. I love the religion and I love the culture. I believe that it teaches us good values. It teaches us the value of family unity. It teaches us how to be responsible. It teaches us how to be a good citizen. It teaches us how to love, how to appreciate. It teaches us that there's something much bigger and more grander than just us. For me it is not saying that the Jewish religion is the only one that does that because I have a lot of friends who are also Christians and Catholics and from other faiths.

Their beliefs to them is just like my belief is to me and we find similarities and common ground. I've got friends who I haven't missed the Christmas with them ever until they moved to Queensland. They know who they are, but the thing is being Jewish for me is special because it means that I'm able to not just live and practice what I preach but it also gives me a chance to share it with other people.

Interviewer: Wisely said. Do you attend synagogue?

Leon Goltsman: I do. I do attend synagogue and I do on a regular basis. I don't go to Shabbat every week but I am fortunate enough to be, as a community representative, I don't just have one synagogue that I call my own, I call all my own so they all play an important part. I see the value that they instil in individuals, the hope and the support that they provide and I do attend synagogue. I attend some of the Shabbat ceremonies and I attend, sometimes I'll come along as a guest for certain events. I certainly observe Yom Kippur. I like to be there during Rosh Hashanah and so many other festivities that we are fortunate enough to have.

Interviewer:Nice. What traditions do you feel are most important or that you are most passionate about?

Leon Goltsman: I have to say Shabbat. You can't say one thing or the other. I think they are all just as significant and important. I think one of the things that resonates with me more than anything is gratitude. I think it is something that anyone can have irrespective of what religion they are. Gratitude is just being glad to be you, being glad to be me. Being glad to be here in the moment. I have to remind myself regularly because it is very easy to forget that we've all the things that are going on around us but I think taking the time out to just observe what we have and how lucky we are to be here. You've got to give thanks for that.

Interviewer: Are there any particular Jewish traditions that your parents or grandparents have passed down to you?

Leon Goltsman: Some of those words that still ring in my head that some of the things that my parents ... occasionally I catch them saying or I catch myself saying. It is the Yiddish words. Some maybe I shouldn't say but some I've just thrown around loosely. I think just the little mannerisms as well. I'll give you an example. You have to really be Russian and Jewish to understand otherwise you might probably have me committed. When someone says something good about you, there is this tradition where you got to go tu-tu-tu, you kind of spit three times. It's got to spit because otherwise they are going to jinx me.

There's a lot of superstition in the Jewish culture. I sometimes have to laugh at it because I'm not a very superstitious person but I still won't go under a ladder. Just in case, just in case unless there's a short cut to get from A to B, but that's another story in itself.

Interviewer: Do you have children?

Leon Goltsman: No I don't have children. I've just been recently married and it's something that we are working on.

Interviewer: Is there anything particular, any traditions in particular that you feel passionate about passing on to them when and if they turn up?

Leon Goltsman: Yes. When I have children, with my children I'd like to pass on to them the importance to remember. Remember the journey that their parents and grandparents and that the people like them went through before for them to be where they are because we've got everything. We've got those dots, we've got those connections. They wouldn't be who they are. I wouldn't be who I am and I think that our journeys and I suppose our arriving to Australia in a way has turned us into outliers. It has helped us become more resilient. It helped us to adapt. It helped us to seize opportunities, seek opportunities, and then go for them. It has helped us become survivors.

I think that's why we are doing so well because we've got that. It is now ingrained us. We've gone through the school of hard knocks. I think we are very lucky to be where we are because if it wasn't for all those things before us we may not be the people that we are today.

Interviewer: Definitely a common thread. We certainly had similar discussions across the last couple of weeks so it is not just you who say that. We might move on to the final section, being naches and every Jewish person wants some naches in their life. It can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community. I'd like to know what the word naches means to you and whether there is any special significance for it?

Leon Goltsman: Naches to me because of the context that I hear my parents kind of throw at me regularly, I always hear "I want to see naches in you. I want to see naches." It is interesting because it is what they want to see. It is not what I want to see but now that you've asked me what I think naches is I think naches is joy and happiness. That's it. Joy and happiness. I want blessing, to be blessed and I think if you are happy and you are in a place where you are enjoying yourself then that's a blessing in itself. That's what it means to me, to have naches is to be happy and to have good people around you.

Interviewer: Ultimately when you do have children and you do have another generation to consider what do you think you hope for them?

Leon Goltsman: I'd hope that they find themselves and they become the people that they want to be. You see I think the generation gap that I'm sure that that what I've experienced and I'm sure a lot of my other friends and peers have experienced as well, is their parents always wanted them to become doctors or lawyers or take on a profession because they perceive it to be an opportunity that they never had perhaps when they were growing up. What I want for my children is for them to find out what they want to do. It would not matter to me if they wanted to become rocket scientists or if they wanted to become a mechanic or a street sweeper.

I would want my children to find exactly what makes them happy. I would do everything I can to make sure that they live the life that they want to live. I think that is naches.

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

Leon Goltsman: I think not giving up. My biggest achievement in life is not giving up. I've experienced a lot of tests in my life. Everything from arriving to Australia and I know that when my parents were growing up in Russia they were treated as Jews. They weren't treated as Russians. They didn't treat them as Russians. They treated them as Jews. When we came to Australia, we were treated as Russians. There were some probably not so nice words that we were called in those times. We had to overcome that. I've also experienced couple of other things with my arthritis which I was able to overcome.

Learning new languages and practicing new skills. So my biggest achievement I think is hanging in there, persevering and never giving up just keep going. I've done a lot of things that I feel proud of. One of the things of course is to be able to get on my bike and cycle to Melbourne and raise the money and awareness for arthritis, some of the charity work that I do in the community. Being a representative of my community and when I say my community, I mean every person that lives in Waverley is part of my community. It's just such an honour. The community that took me in, the community that prepared me, the community that taught me sometimes the hard ways, that's thrown a lot of things at me and still throws a lot of things at me today. I have an opportunity every day to live my dream and that's my accomplishment.

Yes. With the Waverley community, by being able to do the things that bring joy to my life, I get to work with such amazing people. The rabbis and the determined individuals who want to give to the community, who want to build on their dreams, who want to provide services and just bringing these fantastic people together. The fact that I'm a part of that is giving me naches. It is

giving me a chance to really, I believe, make this place a better place and we are. We are making it a better place every day.

Interviewer: Very nice. Thanks very much for sharing some of your story.