

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

ALEX RVYCHIN, Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Alex Rvychin

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: We'll start off, if you can tell me your name and when and where you were born.

Alex Rychin: Sure. My name is Alex Rychin. I was born on the 18th of July, 1983, in Kiev, which is the capital of the Ukraine which, at the time, was in the Soviet Union. My family arrived in Australia on January the 10th, 1988.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you tell me what was happening in your country and the circumstances leading up to why you decided to leave?

Alex Rychin: At the time that we left, the Jews of the Soviet Union were a persecuted, despised minority group and had been for a long, long time. We were born in the Soviet Union. We were loyal citizens of the State. We'd lived there for generations, but still we were always viewed as the other, as an inferior race, living amongst the Soviet nations. In our identity documents, for example, it was referred to as an invalid of the fifth paragraph because the fifth paragraph of the passport would reveal nationality.

Regardless of where you were born, regardless of how many generations your connection was to the Soviet Union, the nationality was always stated as Jewish. Once any bureaucrat saw that document and saw that you were a Jew, you were subjected to different treatment. You were excluded from universities, excluded from jobs. There were quotas about how many Jews could go to each school or university course. It was a very difficult, challenging existence and had been for a long, long time for the Jews of Russia, back from Czarist times. The Bolshevik Revolution didn't really change things.

Then of course there was the Nazi invasion in 1941 and the Holocaust in the east. After the end of the Nazi period, the Nazi occupation, came the full force of Stalinism. There were purges of Jewish artists, Jewish intellectuals. There was a [doctor's] plot where the Jews were accused of poisoning prominent communist leaders. There was this pervasive culture of anti-Semitism and hatred, which affected every aspect of life there. My family knew that we couldn't, my brother and I, couldn't have an ordinary life, a normal life, living in that country as Jews.

Then, a couple of years before we left, there was also the Chernobyl disaster, which happened in the Ukraine, in Chernobyl, only a couple hundred kilometers from where we lived. The whole country was affected by the radiation, the lasting effects of that. Coupled with the persecution of the Jews, my family knew we had to leave. We'd applied many years before to leave. We were what was known as refuseniks, Jews who had applied to leave, but were denied the right to leave. It was that kind of double injustice because on the one hand, we were denied basic rights. On the other hand, we were also denied the right to leave the country. We were imprisoned there.

Finally, in 1987, at the end of the year, we were notified that we would be granted exit permits and allowed to leave. We gathered up what meager positions we had, sold what we could, packed a couple of bags, and went to the airport to leave on no more than a few weeks' notice, and not knowing where we were going either. So we left the country knowing that we were going somewhere else. That was good enough for us. We lived in a place called Ladispoli, on the outskirts of Rome, for about nine months. There it was determined which country would take us in.

Initially we were supposed to move to Canada. My grandfather's brother had moved there a few years prior. We were all set to move there and be there with him and his family. But just at that

point, my grandfather's brother was having difficulties with his wife. They were going through a divorce. He said to my grandfather, "Don't come. There's nothing for you here." At the last minute, our lives were completely transformed. Rather than moving to North American, suddenly we had nowhere to go, didn't know where we were going.

It turned out that we were going to come to Australia. We had no idea what this land was. This is the Soviet Union way. There's no free press and there's no outside information. We knew this was some barren kind of outpost of civilisation, of indigenous peoples and kangaroos hopping through. Again, it just goes to show that, no matter how I suppose it's misguided, but no matter how bad we thought Australia was going to be, it was still anywhere other than the Soviet Union for a Jew would do. It was enough for us to leave.

Then we arrived here after the nine months in Italy. We arrived here January 10th, 1988. We didn't know a soul here. We had no family here, no friends. We didn't speak the language. We came here penniless. It was good enough. We were together as a family and that was enough to start with.

Interviewer: Can you actually clarify which members of your family actually came?

Alex Rychin: The family that came to this country was my grandfather and my grandmother on my mother's side, my mother and my father, and my brother and me. My father's whole side, he still has a brother and a sister, and his parents. They stayed behind. They weren't able to leave at the time that we left. They left a few years later and moved to Israel. We were kind of estranged from that side of the family for a long time.

Interviewer: How old was you brother, incidentally?

Alex Rychin: My brother was two and a half years older than me, so he was 6 years old.

Interviewer: He's got no memories of home?

Alex Rychin: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. I mean how hard was it basically? Did you have to get a visa? Do you remember any of those sort of challenges? Did you have to be sponsored? Literally what did you have to do to get to Australia?

Alex Rychin: We were allowed to leave as refugees. The Jews of the Soviet Union were recognised as a persecuted minority and therefore were allowed to leave as refugees, which meant that they weren't required to be sponsored necessarily. We were granted entry permits. We still have the documents. There's a stamp by the Australian Embassy in Rome, which granted our entry permits to Australia. And that was the document that allowed us to come here in 1988.

Interviewer: Okay. How did you physically get here?

Alex Rychin: We, upon leaving Kiev, we first went to Vienna by plane. We spent a few weeks there, which was the first time any of us had been outside of the Soviet Union. Then from there, we went to Rome by train. Then from Rome, we went by bus to this little place called Ladispoli, where a

lot of these Jewish migrants who had been allowed to leave from the Soviet Union were basically living in this town and kind of overrun this town.

The Italians were very hospitable. We were all living there as a little community, this little kind of outpost of Soviet Jewry living on the outskirts of Rome. It was a bizarre thing and all waiting for news of which country would take us in. Would we be reunited with relatives in America or Canada or Israel or move to entirely new lands? Finally, we received news that our documents had been approved. It was time for us to pack our meager possessions and move to Australia.

Interviewer: That was basically just a plane trip over?

Alex Rychin: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: On arrival, and did you actually organize this beforehand ... Can you go through where you stayed originally from day one, as soon as you arrived in Australia?

Alex Rychin: We were greeted at the airport by the Jewish Welfare Society, which is a benevolent society set up to assist newly arrived Jewish immigrants and assist them with absorption. My family, we arrived. We didn't have a word of English. We didn't have a penny to our name. We didn't have any friends or contacts here. We needed all the help from the community that we could get. We were put up in a hotel. I remember it was just opposite Edgecliff Station. We stayed there for a few weeks while the Jewish Welfare Society tried to find us more permanent accommodation.

Again, no one wants to rent a property to migrants who don't speak the language, don't have jobs, don't have proper ID documents even, all these sorts of things, all these challenges. Though the assistance of the community, the Jewish community here, we were able to get those things and get on our feet to some extent. We lived in a flat in Chaleyer Street in Rose Bay. Then came the next challenge of we're in this new land. We're free to live as Jews in this incredible country. "What the hell are we going to do here? What sort of life are we going to create for ourselves?"

My family were well educated people. My grandfather was an engineer. My grandmother was a doctor. My parents were both teachers, which were prestigious professions in the Soviet Union. Despite all of the challenges facing Jews and those entry quotas that I spoke about, they were able to achieve those things and carve out a meager, humble sort of existence. They got by. They come to this country and have to start all over again. They have no language skills. Their accreditations from abroad aren't really recognised here.

It was extremely challenging in those early times. They're trying to get by. They're trying to get money to feed the family, but also establish a life here, establish new careers here, learn the language. My father was washing toilets at the Temple Emanuel Synagogue, which he was grateful to do because it was an income. My mother was working in a pie shop. At nights, my dad would drive a taxi. He would work about 20 hours a day. On the weekends, he would purchase rags effectively, old clothes, drive them out to Flemington Markets with my granddad and then sell them for 20 cent per item profit or whatever, if at all.

So, it's a very, very challenging existence in those early days. We were together as a family and we had our lives ahead of us. We had hope. We were finally free as a people to live as Jews, free

from persecution, to be judged on our character and our achievements, rather than on our nationalities as we were in the Soviet Union. So, we were happy. It was a happy time.

Interviewer: That's great. That's great. Really deciding to settle in the local area was really, it was out of your hands really?

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah. The decision to settle was very much out of our hands. The eastern suburbs has been, and remains, the hub of Jewish life in Sydney. So it made sense for us to be housed within the community, because we relied so much on their support. Once we established a small network of friends, mainly former Soviet Jews as well, and were able to actually afford our own accommodation, we would ask them, "Where should we live?" For them, it's I suppose the old ghetto mentality. There was no existence beyond that little sector of Jewish life in the city.

So the options that were presented to us were basically Bondi and the couple of adjoining suburbs. That's where we were to live. I remember my mother, she told me that she looked through the paper to look at where properties were being rented and sold. She saw all these places like Liverpool, which evoked these images of the United Kingdom, and exotic places like Blacktown. We were told, "Look, stick to these suburbs. This is where our people live. You'll do just fine there."

Interviewer: You probably made the right decision.

Alex Ryvchin: I think so too.

Interviewer: Okay. I know you were very young, but do you remember any initial impressions of Australia?

Alex Ryvchin: My first impressions were of going to school at Rose Bay Public School, a few months after arriving in Australia and just the total upheaval and challenges. I mean, we were and remain an extremely close-knit family. When you live as a persecuted minority, it creates this very defensive mentality, this besieged mentality, where you can only really trust the very closest people around you. It was for the first time that I was leaving my parents and going somewhere on my own.

And for months, I would cry in the mornings and I would cry in the afternoons, upon returning home to my parents. It was very, very tough. Then I would go to school. I couldn't speak the language in those early months. I was completely estranged from the other students, these carefree kids who had grown up here and were at ease. But everything was kind of hostile and terrifying to me. It didn't help my parents would dress me up in what they thought were appropriate clothes for my age, which were stockings and shoes with tassels that had been handed down, which didn't make my absorption into Australian life any easier as a child.

So it was a very, very difficult time as I remember it. I also remember playing with my brother and playing with some other kids, Russian Jews who had immigrated. Overwhelmingly, it was a happy time because we'd come from a place and the mentality that was passed down to me was all we needed was to be together as a family. That was the core of a happy life. We had that, so we were happy.

Interviewer: We might just explore that a little bit further, just in regards to maybe your parents' impressions or your family's general impressions of when you first came to Australia. Before the

challenges and all that sort of stuff, the reality hit in terms of everything you had to do to survive here, that time that you got off the plane and really just obviously just drank in the major differences. Can you maybe relate that?

Alex Rychin: When my parents and grandparents, when they would recall what it was like here in those early days, in those first few days, it was the very antithesis of life in the Soviet Union in every way imaginable which was, on the one hand, a delightful kind of experience. On the other hand, it made it all the more terrifying and unfamiliar. The sky was different. The temperature was different. The buildings were different. Everything was different.

I mean we were taken on our first day to Sydney Harbor by the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge to gaze out on this beautiful landscape, this beautiful, remarkable scenery. The Soviet Union, I mean it's beautiful in an entire different way. It's wild. The cities are historic and these remarkable soaring churches and steeples and squares. In Australia, it's beautiful but in an entirely different way. It's the natural beauty of the harbour and the trees and the open air and that rich, blue sky that you don't get anywhere else in the world. They were completely taken aback by it. It was a complete shock.

Then the people they found to be remarkably kind of sweet and affectionate and kind. They couldn't converse with them properly. They couldn't really engage with them in any sort of meaningful way, but they felt the warmth of the people. It made them happy to be in this country. Then there was the embrace from the Jewish community. The Jewish community in this country had lobbied for so long and had pressured and, through advocacy, had applied whatever means that it could for the release of Soviet Jewry.

It's remarkable actually that the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the organisation I now work for, was at the forefront of this move to liberate the Soviet Jews. So they led the push for recognition of the suffering of Soviet Jewry for the building of international momentum for their release. When we got here, we were embraced as brothers and sisters by the community. But at the same time, we felt that warmth that we were also, but there was a distance as well undeniably. The Soviet Jews who had arrived ...

We were among the first to come. The ones that had arrived maybe the year before were very quick to offer us a piece of advice or hand down a piece of furniture or clothing. A lot of people in the street did the same. It was remarkable. They would drive up and wealthy men, poor men, families, would give us whatever meagre possessions they had, just so we could construct some sort of a home, which was very touching. At the same time, we arrived here as Jews, as Jewish migrants, as refugees. We didn't speak Hebrew. But we didn't speak English, Yiddish.

Through hundreds of years of persecution and a forced severance from our ancient roots and our culture, we were very much Soviet people. We had that Soviet mentality. So when we were trying to relate to rabbis, for example, religious families or South African Jews who were more conversant in Jewish life, we were totally out of our depth. We had no clue. We were Soviet people, whether we liked it or not. So it was very challenging. We felt the warmth of the people. That made things a lot easier.

Interviewer: Very nice. In terms of the order in which you settled, Edgecliff and then ...

Alex Rychin: Rose Bay.

Interviewer: Rose Bay. Is that where your family was for some time after that?

Alex Rychin: We were so, when we first settled, our first home that we rented was in Rose Bay. Then we moved to Randwick. We would move on a near constant basis. My early memories was of us always moving. Moving, moving, moving, moving because we came here with nothing. So anything that we accumulated was a great achievement. My parents wanted us to have a good life. They wanted us to have a life similar to our student peers that we went to school with.

Whenever they could, they would upgrade to something, a slightly bigger apartment in a slightly further out area. So my early recollections as a boy of five, six, seven, eight is that we were always moving, always moving to slightly bigger places, slightly further out from where we began. Now I think where my wife and I and my child, we're now kind of moving back in. I guess it's that kind of continuum. We expanded outward and now, so as materially we can afford more and we're a greater part of this community, we're now moving back into it.

Interviewer: Then we'll move onto your stories there. How do you think the Jewish community has shaped the area?

Alex Rychin: The Jewish community has had a major influence, I would say, on the area. The community, I mean it's a very diverse community. So you have Jews that have come post-war from Hungary, Holocaust survivors, from Austria and Hungary and from Czechoslovakia. Then you have the newer migrants, the South Africans, that came later. Then finally the Russians, the Soviets, that came more recently in my wave of migration. And they all come with their own ideologies, their own histories, their own cultures, their own ways of dealing with the world around them. It's greatly enriched the area.

The Jews have always been a people that have valued hard work and have valued education probably above all else. Education has always been at the core of Jewish life because firstly, when you come from a place like the Soviet Union and only a few Jews can make it to a university, that encourages you, that forces you to strive, to study, to work because you know you have to be the best. You know you have to be at the very, very top. Even then you may well still be arbitrarily denied, but you have to get to the top.

That kind of spirit of learning and education has, I think, contributed a great deal to the city, to this area, to the country as a whole. But the Jews have always been an entrepreneurial people as well. We've been builders, merchants. It goes back to our ancient history of the professions that we were confined to because we left lands so often, we needed to be in fields where things were easily transferable. We tended to gravitate to the merchant classes. The Jews of the area have set up businesses created empires, hired people.

Then they've contributed to every aspect of public life, whether it be serving on local councils or serving in state governments, federal government and shaped this country for the better. So it's been a tremendous impact.

Interviewer: I think that's a great answer actually. You're right. In terms of the persecution and the adversity and all of the negatives that have actually come with you ...

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's forged a race of high achievers and who are very family and community-centric, just because of what you've been through.

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah, that's right. I mean the other thing that it's fostered is, again it's at the core of Jewish identity, is this belief in social justice in repairing the world, in curing the ills of society, these sorts of things. The Jewish community in this country has also been at the forefront of indigenous land rights and fighting for those things.

In America, the Jews were at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, or combating apartheid in South Africa or, for example, the plight of refugees that followed us. So, the Jews, having been a persecuted minority, understand what it's like to be the other, to be hated and oppressed. We've always attempted to stand up to that, no matter who's the target of it.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's certainly a common thread that we've heard from a few people-

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah.

Interviewer: Like Morris Eskin yesterday and Peter Berger both were asylum seekers and obviously something that they want to do something about. Yeah. I understand. How has the Jewish community shaped you as an individual?

Alex Ryvchin: The Jewish community has shaped me in probably more ways than I can rationalise or recognise. Jewish identity was at the very core of who we were as a family, when we arrived in this country. And the truth is, it wasn't a choice that we made. It was imposed on us. No matter how Soviet we wanted to be, no matter how much we wanted to buy into the doctrines of the Soviet Union or Russian or Ukrainian culture, and in terms of language, in terms of dress, in terms of every aspect of culture, we were ordinary Soviet Russian people really.

But still we were always told, you were always reminded, if you dared forget for a moment, you were reminded that you were a Jew. Coming to this country, you know you're a Jew, but you don't really know what that means. Jewish identity can't just be about being persecuted and hated. It has to be about more than that. And being in this country and being free in this land, we can explore what it means to be Jewish.

So it allowed me to, just through my own curiosities and through the stories that my parents and grandparents told me, it allowed me to explore the history of the Jewish people in Russia and everywhere and going back 4,000 years. It allowed me to explore the history of the Holocaust, the darkest chapter in the history of our people and the rebirth of the State of Israel and everything that came with that. So I was able to, in the freedom that this country afforded me, I was able then to explore my *Jewishness* and find out truly what it meant to me to be a Jew.

More recently, I've tried to I suppose repay that debt to the community that took us in. I've returned to communal life and I work now for the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, which represents the Jewish community. My mother went to work for the Jewish Welfare, the same organisation that absorbed us and helped us when we came here penniless and without a friend. She went to work for them a year later to help them.

My grandfather worked for the Burger Centre. I say worked. He volunteered. He drove the bus. He drove elderly people around and forged wonderful friendships with them. They were very kind to him and he to them. He volunteered. They would give him \$5 a day as a lunch allowance, which he would never spend on lunch. He would take it home because we needed the money so badly. So we were taken in so warmly by the community. We've tried to repay that as much as we could.

My mother then went on to work in the War Crimes Unit, which investigated Nazi war criminals that had taken refuge in this country. She worked as an interpreter. So the community meant a great deal to us. Jewish identity was at the core of who we were as people. And we've now been able to give something back.

Interviewer: This is the final formal question for the first section. How has your sense of culture and lifestyle changed? This is probably applicable to your family as well. How has your sense of culture and lifestyle changed through living in Australia?

Alex Rychin: I guess I mean when you're comparing how the family lived in the Soviet Union, the biggest change was the absence of hatred and persecution, the freedom, the freedom to be whoever you want to be, live how you want to live, and to be judged solely on your achievements and your character. That is the biggest achievement. That allows your character and your culture to develop. But in a more practical sense, I mean my family, as I said, were educated people. They were in noble professions, valued professions in the Soviet Union. Then coming here, they were nothing.

They were right back at the beginning; no language, no recognised skill set or accreditations. They had to go right back to the beginning, whether that meant cleaning toilets, driving cabs, working in pie shops, volunteering. My grandmother worked as a nanny for a Jewish family in the Eastern Suburbs who were very dear to her and very close. So that completely transformed our life. I mean we went from I suppose having these professions and the sense of self-worth that comes with it to suddenly being at the very bottom of the pile again and trying to establish a life. That created great difficulties and great challenges.

Constantly my parents had to sacrifice and make decisions. Do I take a job or do I study English? Knowing that the English, learning and education would perhaps create greater prospects for the future, but we need to eat now. We were penniless. We had no savings. So our lives were completely different to as they were in the Soviet Union in every way, in terms of the people around us and how they related to us and we to them, the jobs that my family undertook, everything was new. Everything was different.

Interviewer: That's good. That's good.

Interviewer: Next we will just get into the story with the cab driver I think. Feel free to explore that.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what happened, right from the start?

Alex Rychin: Yeah. It's a hell of a story.

Alex Rychin: It's an incredible story that. We came here knowing not a soul. And there was great curiosity in the press, particularly from within the Jewish community and the Jewish press, but also broader than that. The campaign to liberate Soviet Jewry, it had really penetrated into all aspects of intellectual and public life in this country. The Prime Minister at the time, Bob Hawke, it was a very personal kind of mission for him. It was big news the fact that these Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union were finally coming to this country.

And a newspaper wanted to do a story. They wanted to select the family to come and take some iconic shots of that family in Sydney by the Harbour. We were chosen for the gig. We all went to Sydney Harbour. There were these beautiful photos of us standing there kind of gazing across the Harbour, with the bridge behind us, these hopeful migrants, proud and happy, but with a bit of trepidation in their faces as well. It's classic stuff. Then after the shoot, the journalist called a taxi for us to take us back to where we were staying.

The taxi arrives and, by a remarkable, remarkable coincidence, the taxi driver was a man called Jimmy [Darnell] who was our neighbour in the Ukraine. They were the only souls that we knew in this country. We didn't even really know them. We knew that they were here. They roughly, because we were pen pals, we still wrote to them and they wrote to us from time to time, they knew that we were seeking to come to Australia, but they didn't know where nor how or if it was actually going to happen. We knew they were in this country, but we didn't know where or in what capacity.

Then this cab pulls up and out comes the only soul we know in this country, our long lost friend from the Soviet Union. It was a remarkable thing. It was on the cover of the Sydney Morning Herald, under the headline of why did [Zahad], which is my grandfather's name, Why Did Zahad Hug His Cabbie? It shows them in this warmest of embraces. I mean we were strangers in this land. Everything was unfamiliar and frightening not us. And then to see Jimmy, it was just a beautiful moment. It was remarkable.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about food from your previous native country and a memory about eating your favourite food?

Alex Rychin: Food has always played a very central part in Jewish culture, and I would say Russian life as well, for a couple of reasons. The first is that eating, the partaking of food, it's where the family comes together, which immediately makes it very, very special. We also came from a very impoverished land. This wasn't unique to the Jews. The Soviet Union and Russia before it went through extraordinary hardship. Starvation, millions of people died in Stalin's man-made famine in the Ukraine. Millions of people died.

The City of Leningrad was besieged during the war. People resorted to cannibalism. So it was remarkable extraordinary poverty everywhere in Russia. To have food was a source of price. To have a special food, a beloved food, to be able to sit with your loved ones at the table and share in that was a very, very special thing for all families. And the only memory that I have of the Soviet Union, having left there as a boy of four years old, the only thing I can remember was eating the cheese there. I remember it came in these tubes of like the salami shaped foil plastic tubes or whatever. I still remember its taste.

It's a remarkable thing that that's stayed in my mind. I think it shows the centrality of food in Jewish identity and Soviet culture as well. That really stayed with me. Then coming here, the food was very different obviously. The food that's available here, I would hear these stories from my family of good and bad. We would hear about times there was no food at all. People would wait in extraordinary queues to buy whatever was on the shelves, whatever there was. There was no question of choosing your favourite foods. It was whatever was in stock, you would queue up in the hope of buying it.

It was likewise with basic home products, toilet paper, whatever else. Anything like that was extremely scarce. The food that we ate there was very much Russian food. I don't think it was so much Jewish food as Russian food, the rich salads if you could ever find the produce to compile a salad like that, the smoked fish, which was always a strong part of the Russian diet because by smoking the fish, it preserves it for longer, and all sorts of soups because again, the beauty of soup is that if you have a chicken, you eat the meat of the chicken and then you take the bones and the offal and all that and chuck it into a soup.

You couldn't let anything go to waste. You would use everything. The food that we ate was very much that Soviet tradition. In no way did we subscribe to Jewish dietary laws. That kind of bond, that connection to those laws and those customs had been lost over hundreds of years of government policy, which severed any connection between the Jews and their history or religious practices as well. It was very much Soviet food.

Then we come to this country and we look for what's familiar to us. We look for salamis and smoked fish and cheeses and all these sorts of things. They're here in abundance. Then we also discover everything else that was here. I would hear stories of this rich, black, fertile soil in the Ukraine, which would grow strawberries and apples, deep rich colour and strong fragrances. And here we have new fruits that we'd never eaten before. I don't think we'd ever had bananas before, for example. They were foreign to us. It was all new.

In those early times, the food in this country was actually it was more a source of angst and alienation than anything else because I remember going to school. I was so different to everyone. I was different already. You know? I was different in the way I looked. I was different in the way I spoke, my language. I was different in the way I dressed, thanks to my parents. And so the food was just another way that I was different. I didn't like that. Everyone would have these lovely Tiptop bread sandwiches beautifully cut. I would come with my smoked fish. It's ridiculous. That's who we were.

Then it was later on it became a source of it showed our financial incapacity. It showed how much poorer we were than everyone else. I remember being jealous of kids that would come with Roll Ups, those Uncle Toby's Roll Ups. In hindsight, they were disgusting. I was probably better for not having them, but I was so jealous. All the kids had them in their lovely little lunchboxes. I didn't have a lunchbox. I carried my food in a plastic bag. The fact that I couldn't have those Roll Ups, that I couldn't have their food. I couldn't be like them in so many ways.

It was a source of anguish for me and for my family more so because they knew they couldn't give this to us, to me and my brother. We just couldn't afford it. Later in life, as I found my place in the society, the fact that I was different in that way, that my food was different and my

dietary habits and tastes are so different, it's something to be celebrated I think. Now when we eat, obviously I eat food like everybody else in this country of all kind of ethnic denominations and all sorts.

But still, that Russian food, the [salat d'Olivier] or the [kukliet], the chicken schnitzel, all these dishes, they maintain that connection to the past. That's the food that my parents made for me when we first came to this country, that their parents made for them and so forth and so on. It's gone from being a source of anguish and separation to being something of great pride now.

Interviewer: Did you ever find that cheese when you moved to Australia?

Alex Rychin: I don't think it exists. Then again, the dream and what remains in the mind is always so different to the reality. So that cheese from Russia is always a kind of encapsulating, engraved in my mind, in my memory. I don't think I'll ever taste it. I could taste that same cheese and it wouldn't taste the same to me because that tastes of the Soviet Union, that tastes of the old country, of thousands of years of horrid history in that brutal, brutal place. That's what that cheese represents to me. I'll never find it here. Probably that's a good thing.

Interviewer: Well said. Can we explore a little bit more about the food that you ate here at home as a child?

Alex Rychin: As a child, the food that we had would be the Russian food. That's all my parents knew how to cook. That's what was wholesome in their view. It goes against every kind of conventional teaching of what is wholesome and nutritious for a child because it was always very, very heavy food. Lots of meat, potatoes, very greasy, oily food, but it was the food of love and the food of home. It was familiar, I think for my parents and my grandparents, it was also a way of maintaining that connection with us.

They knew that we were slowly, gradually becoming Australian children, this was their way of maintaining that connection with us and maintaining that connection with our ancient traditions and histories. The food remained very, very Soviet. Then in time, it also became more Jewish. Living in this country and we were free to explore our traditions and Jewish culture, Jewish food, matza ball soup suddenly appeared on the table. We would have Seders to celebrate the Passover, something which was unimaginable in the Soviet Union. It just couldn't have happened and it didn't happen.

I remember our first Seder in this country. We have beautiful photos of it. My grandfather reading from the Haggadah in Russian of course, the prayer book on Passover. We had the beautifully ornate decorated Jewish table. In time, our food changed. It became more Australian of course. It also became more Jewish. The food always reflected who we were, our identity. It started as very Soviet and then it became more Jewish and Australian.

Now it's this happy mix of the three. Now in my home now, we celebrate Shabbat dinner here every Friday night. The food is again it's that happy mix of the three. It's Jewish. We have the challah. We bless the bread and the wine. Then there will be Russian food as well, the salted herring as well will be on the table. Then there'll be Australian, typical Australian food as well. The food has very much kept pace with our own assimilation into Australian life.

Interviewer: Obviously before you came to this country, you just wouldn't have the luxury to buy kosher food. Here, is that something that you've embraced?

Alex Rychin: We came here with no understanding of kashrut whatsoever. Firstly, in a technical sense, what it meant for food to be kosher, and secondly why it was important to keep kosher. We ate pork. We ate shellfish, not that we were able to acquire shellfish in the Soviet Union. Whatever came to us, we ate. That was the peasant existence of Soviet Russia. That was also the secular existence there. The food there wasn't shaped by religion or religious dietary laws in any way.

Coming here, we maintain those traditions. I never felt the need to become kosher. My Jewish identity expanded and I explored what that meant. That, for some reason, it never really meant adopting the dietary laws and refraining from certain foods. Then came one fine day. I don't know what really prompted it. It was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. I would have been about 16 years old. I decided on that day, I would stop eating pork. I don't know what really prompted it.

The fact of the matter is that eating shellfish or eating beef that's not kosher is equally, ritually unclean as it were, as eating a piece of pork. But for me, the pork symbolised I suppose the quintessential Russian Soviet food. This was my own personal way of breaking that tie, breaking that connection, and embracing my Jewishness. I was going to make the symbolic gesture to the heavens, but more so to myself, to show that I'm now becoming more and more Jewish and this is my way of showing it. I've maintained that since. My wife refrained as well from eating pork. My daughter does as well and won't. We don't go further than that.

The beauty of it is, is that in this country, if you want to be kosher, if you want to lead an entirely kosher existence, you're free to do so. If you want to dip in and out of the laws and customise it to your own identity, all good and well. If you want to base your Jewishness on something entirely different, you're free to do that. It's that freedom in this country to explore your identity, to develop your own Jewish identity, which is so dear to us and something that we really cherish.

Interviewer: Very good. It was certainly worth exploring. Okay. When you eat something now, what dish in particular triggers memories of your childhood and why?

Alex Rychin: Eating salted herring. It's a peculiar thing because salted herring has such a strong, distinct taste. It's not for everyone. But every Russian Jew that I've come across likes and eats herring. It's kind of like a rite of passage. I remember growing up and my mum would tell me that a great tradition in their home before she was married, with her parents, my grandparents, every Sunday they would have herring. A very simple, humble meal; a plate of herring, chopped onions soaked in vinegar, potatoes, and rye bread with healthy lashings of butter on top. That was the dish.

When I eat it now, again it's again that quintessential Russian dish. Even though my connection to the Soviet Union, it's so tenuous now. I lived there for just four years before I left. I understand the history of my people in that country and the history of that country generally. It's a dark, horrid history. But still it's my history. I have no desire to wipe it out or obliterate it. Eating that food reminds me of the land that I came from, for better or for worse.

It reminds me of the traditions that my mother shared with her parents and perhaps her grandparents shared with their parents. It's something that I want to perpetuate. It's very important to me to know where I came from. It's something which I'm going to pass down to my daughter and hopefully more children to come. It's that one dish that encapsulates it more than anything else.

Interviewer: What did you make of Australian food when you first arrived?

Alex Rychin: I don't remember much of Australian food, to be honest. We didn't have the money to eat out. Everything that we ate was within the home. Every lunch was packed carefully by my grandmother. Every breakfast and every dinner was had at home. It was always Russian food. It was that continuity. It wouldn't have mattered where we were in the world, we're still eating that old food from home.

Then I guess my first contacts with Australian food were seeing other people have it and coveting that and wanting that food, not because it looked so good but just because it symbolised Australia to me. It symbolised assimilation into the country, being accepted, having a level of basic wealth that you could afford these things. That was my experience with Australian food I guess.

But then later in life, the more Australian I became, I became I guess like everybody else in terms of the food that I ate. I still obviously maintain a connection to the past, but my dietary habits would have been very close to everyone else's by that point.

Interviewer: No. How do you think your migration wave has influence food in the local area, if at all?

Alex Rychin: I don't think the Russians have had that much of an impact on food. Our food is so offensive to the majority of palates that I don't think it's really penetrated broader life in the city and in this country. There's the odd Russian deli which serves things like pig fat lard effectively, which was a staple of the Russian diet because it's so high in calories and it tastes very good as well. On rye bread, just a thick piece of lard. It's a ridiculous thing now thinking about it. It was a treasured dish. Things like the Russian dumplings.

Beyond that, it's very much remained our own, which is a nice thing I think because we've opened up to other communities. We've adopted their ways and their practices and their foods and customs and cultures, which is a nice thing. It's what Australian multiculturalism is all about. Yet there's still this aspect of it that's still all ours, which no one really understands. You can speak to a Russian Jew born in this country now who will still have these foods, these peculiar foods. They remain distinct and unique to Russian Jews. I think that's a nice thing.

Interviewer: You don't still have the lard though, do you?

Alex Rychin: No. Well it's pig. I can't have it. I wish.

Interviewer: Of course.

Alex Rychin: I long for the lard.

Interviewer: Is there special foods that you prepare or eat during family get togethers or Jewish holidays? I know we slightly covered that before, but can we re-explore that again?

Alex Rychin: In the family home on these special occasions, it still remains a distinctly Russian/Jewish table from which we eat. It will be a mix of those old foods from the Soviet Union. The pickled cucumbers and tomatoes, which is a very Russian dish, and the salted herring. Then you'll have the challah, the Jewish ceremonial bread, and the red wine, which I'll bless.

I guess the greatest feature of our table on special occasions is that it is overflowing with food. There's no orderly three course meal of an entrée and the plate's taken away and then a main course and a dessert. You arrive and sit down. Even now when I go to my parents' home, the table is absolutely covered. There's no room to put anything, to put a glass. We've all sorts of different salads and pickles and different meat and fish dishes, all these sorts of things. That's the feature of our table. It's part Jewish and part Russian, but there's this abundance of food.

I still believe that even though it's how many years? Twenty-seven years since we arrived in this country. It's a long time. This is very much the only home I've ever known. Yet we still take pride in the fact that we can fill a table. We remember the stories. I remember the stories of the war period and post-war period of people surviving, my family surviving, on potato peels, boiled potato peels, or grains prepared in remarkable, extraordinary ways to extract any sort of nutrition from them at all.

So the fact that we can now, we've reached a country and reached a certain means where we can cover a table and eat as much as we want, that's a source of great pride. The traditions remain. So, for example, if I don't finish something, my mother will implore me to eat it, force me to eat it over and over. "Finish your food. What's the matter with you? Eat the food." The Jewish guilt comes in as well, "Why won't you eat this food? I made it for you" over and over. "Take some of it home. Share with people in your building." It's insane. But it's that traditional history.

And it's not going anywhere and it's here now. I see my wife, who came here round about the same time as I did. She's acquired the craziness of her mother. My daughter's a goner as well. She's going to inevitably have that as well. That tradition just continues on.

Interviewer: Nice. Do you have a favourite Jewish dish?

Alex Rychin: Favourite Jewish dish? Favourite Jewish dish? I'm partial to a good gefilte fish I suppose. Again, to me it seems like it's a very Jewish dish. I think it's made from a very low quality fish, European carp, which is considered a pest, all kind of minced up with its bones and then ... I don't even know how it's made. I think it's put in the fridge for a while to give it a consistency or something. Then it's smeared with red horseradish. It doesn't seem very appetising as well but, again, it reminds me of the Soviet Union because of the bitterness of the herb of the horseradish and the fish and the fact that other people don't really get it. They don't really understand it and don't eat it. So it remains ours and unique to us. At the same time, it's a very traditional Jewish dish. I feel like I'm honouring my history in both regards.

Interviewer: That's not our first gefilte fish story actually.

Alex Rychin: No?

Interviewer: No, no, no. Actually I'm going to have to try it.

Alex Rychin: No, you're missing nothing. Believe me.

Interviewer: You cook yourself?

Alex Rychin: Yeah, I cook from time to time. It's interesting actually because the dish I enjoy cooking the most is chicken Kiev, which is of course ... I don't know whether it's actually a Ukrainian dish or whether it's one of those things that has come to be associated with it afterwards. It's basically a chicken fillet sliced and then stuffed with butter and garlic and herbs. It's a very rich, horribly rich, dish. Great smell. It's got a very Jewish Soviet smell, the smell of the herbs and the smell of the garlic as well. It oozes the butter.

It kind of signifies the best of the Soviet Union, that old Imperial opulence and wealth or maybe it's not a Russian dish at all. I don't know. It carries the name of Kiev, the city where I was born, which is nice. It maintains that connection. I made it for my wife and my daughter the other day. It was a spectacular failure, but the fact that I made it and they ate a little bit of it, it was a nice thing. It's important to carry on those traditions I think.

Interviewer: Absolutely. I totally agree. That said, are there any recipes that are passed through generations that, aside from chicken Kiev, that will get passed through to your own daughter?

Alex Rychin: There are recipes. They won't come from me. Mine aren't worthy of being passed down to anyone. They'll die with me, which is a good thing. My mother-in-law makes these incredible pickled tomatoes. It's a secret recipe. She tells no one how to make them, but she told my wife. So far, my wife hasn't made them for me because I still have the benefit of my mother-in-law's cooking as well. But that's something that will be passed down to my wife.

She'll make it herself one day and she will teach it to her daughter, to our daughter, as well. It's a dish that, it's a Russian dish. It's not really a Jewish thing. Again, it's pickled to preserve it because otherwise the tomato would go rotten. This way it can stay in its juices and marinated in vinegar and garlic and all other ingredients, which I haven't been told what they are. It's a very traditional Russian dish. When I eat it and when I think about it, it encapsulates Soviet identity to me. It's a bizarre thing. It's just a piece of food, but it means a lot to me. I treasure it when I eat it because the Soviet Union has great richness, incredible beauty, natural beauty.

There's a beautiful side to the people. There's incredible culture there. The great writers, the great poets, the historians, the composers, it's a land that gave so much. I am fond of the connection. I'm indebted to that country. It was the Red Army, the Soviet forces in World War II, that repelled the Nazis ultimately. Had that not happened, I wouldn't be here today. I would never have been born. So I feel this great warmth to that land as well and yet it chills me at the same time when I think about what my family endured.

When I think about that ravine on the outskirts of the city of Kiev where I was born, where 33,000 Jews were machine gunned by Ukrainians and Germans side-by-side during the Holocaust. I loathe that place. I detest it. Again, it's part of who I am. I can't escape it. I have no desire to escape it. It's important to understand our histories, to know where we came from, why we are who we are. That food, those pickled tomatoes, they will be that way. They'll be the vessel to transmit that past from generation-to-generation. They taste bloody good as well. They're fantastic. They go very well with vodka actually.

Interviewer: Very good. Have you been back there?

Alex Rychin: It's a weird thing. My wife and I lived in London for four and a half years. Right? In that time, we travelled everywhere. Every weekend, we'd be somewhere else. We travelled to the east. We went to Riga. We went to St. Petersburg. We went to Prague, Krakow. Yet at no point did it even occur to me to go to Kiev, the city where I was born, the city where relatives of mind are buried, where my parents were born and raised. I think it's just partly because I was so young when I left that I have no memories really to try and connect with.

Also the stories that I was raised on, the stories I heard from my mother of ... She would tell me the story about how every day she would catch a bus from work to home that would go past this ravine that I mentioned where the Jews were massacred. It's called Babi Yar. She said that every time, every time without fail, there would be some drunkard on the bus that would be dosing in and out of this drunken stupor. Every time, as they would pass the ravine, he would suddenly, miraculously, wake and start yelling about how, "Ah all the Jews are here. How good would it be if all of the Jews were here."

You can imagine, for a Jew, what it would be like in this hostile land, in this enclosed environment of a bus, to experience that and how it would shape one's own views of the world and one's identity. And so, hearing stories like that, I had no warmth towards the place. I had no desire to rekindle any connection to it. If anything, I wanted to sever it. Then as time has progressed, I recognise the good with the bad. Like I said, it's a part of who I am, whether I like it or not, the good with the bad. But no, I haven't been back. Maybe one day I will have this burning desire to go.

Interviewer: Okay. All right. What we might do we might just explore that story about how you met your wife.

Alex Rychin: Sure. My wife and I both went to Woollahra Primary School, just down the road from here. I was in the 5th grade. My parents told me this great news, this great announcement, that they were going to start teaching Russian in the classes. I thought, "Amazing. I already know Russian. I'm going to be top of the class. This is wonderful." What they didn't tell me is this was going to be after class, an extracurricular activity for the already Russian kids in the school to get together to maintain the language.

I guess it also showed that kind of bipolar connection that my parents had with the Soviet Union. They experienced far more than I did and far worse than I did. They had much more reason to sever that bond entirely. But they knew the beauty that came from that land as well. They knew the richness of the language. They knew that language is a way of maintaining a connection to the past. They wanted me and my brother to have it. I would go to these classes after school. There were maybe four or five students there, all reluctantly forced there by their parents who knew better.

One of the students there was this little girl with big round cheeks and pigtails and her cousin, Igor. We sat in these classes. The classes were taught by their grandmother. I remember those classes very well. She's a wonderful teacher and, they were kind of enjoyable, despite the fact that we were made to stay after school. They were kind of enjoyable. I learned a lot and it was nice.

Then 10, 12 years later, I'd finished high school and, through a friend of mine, who I'd met working at a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Randwick, he'd just finished high school. I was in the year

above him. He said, "Look, come out. Meet my friends and we'll have a drink." We went to a park in Double Bay. I see this girl, still with those full cheeks, no longer with the pigtails.

I said, "Oh I remember you. You look very familiar." No, sorry. She said that to me. She said, "I know you from somewhere." I said, "Yes. Your grandmother taught us Russian back when we were in Woollahra Primary School." One thing led to another as they do. We started dating. She was very young. She was 16. I was 18. The rest is history. We were married again quite young. She was 22 years old. I was 24. Her cousin, Igor, who was there in that class as well became one of my best friends. He was one of my groomsmen at the wedding and remains one of my closest friends. Yeah, that's the story.

Interviewer: That's lovely. That's very nice. Very nice. It's at this time we're going to be talking about pride, which of course is about religion and traditions and the essence of Judaism and its rituals and observances. We want to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions and how it changed your identity and the passing down from generation to generation. How are your religious practices now compared to maybe your family's religious practices before they came here?

Alex Rychin: My family's religious practices were none. There was nothing at all. In terms of, for example, the life cycle events. A wedding would be done, under Jewish law, it would be what's called a chuppah, this canopy, with a rabbi presiding and blessing a marriage contract. In the Soviet Union, none of that was done. One of the foremost customs of Judaism is what we called brit milah, circumcision. On the eighth day, every boy is circumcised. That's his entry into the Jewish faith.

In the Soviet Union, that couldn't be done. It couldn't be done. In some cases, it was done in secret. In most cases, most Jews, it just wasn't done at all. They had no knowledge whatsoever of the Hebrew language, of prayer, of customs, of doing tefilah and Bat Mitzvahs. None of this happened at all. The one trace of Jewishness that would have survived with my parents' grandparents, was the Yiddish language. But again, they didn't speak Yiddish. They would speak a couple of words.

Even today, and I've inherited it as well. I don't even know that I'm speaking Yiddish. For me, it could be Russian. I don't know what it is, but just a few words that were just passed down for generations, back from a time when Jews lived in little communities in what was called the Pale of Settlement, those territories in the Soviet Union where they were allowed to live. Yiddish was generally the spoken language. After that time, the Jews lived in the cities. It was part of a conscious attempt to forcibly assimilate the Jews. A few of those little words of Yiddish survived.

Coming to this country, my parents and grandparents, their Jewish identity was shaped by being persecuted and hated and despised. Those stories of pogrom and Holocaust passed down. It wasn't at all about religious practice and observance. Coming here and being embraced by the Jewish community, they were very keen the community for us to live more fulsome lives as Jews. That's why they fought for us to be able to come here and live as Jews. We had no basis at all. We were Soviet people. That was our mentality.

You can't just click your fingers and suddenly change the way you think and change the way you interact with the world and your belief system and all that. But gradually in time, our identity and our understanding of what it means to be Jewish has expanded because we've had that freedom

to delve into our history, to understand, to learn a bit of Hebrew, to be Bar Mitzvahed. My brother and I were both circumcised here in this country at a later age, long after the eight days had passed, painfully circumcised as it were.

We were both Bar Mitzvahed at the age of 13, which couldn't have happened in the Soviet Union, which my dad and granddad couldn't experience. Gradually, we've been able to become more Jewish in terms of identity and also in terms of ritual and prayer, the wrapping of tefillin, holding Shabbat dinners, observing all of the High Holy Days, with all the prayers and customs that go with it. The greatest thing is that we're free to do all this or not do it. That's the beauty of being Jews, as free people in this country.

Interviewer: Do you attend synagogue and, if so, how often? Can you tell me about your congregation?

Alex Ryvchin: My synagogue attendance is shamefully patchy and low. I always religiously go on the High Holy Days. I'll always go on Yom Kippur. For many in the Russian Jewish community who, again, are very detached from Jewish ritual and custom generally, Yom Kippur is that one day where we all fast, where we all go to synagogue, and where we really partake in the rituals and customs that go with that one Holy Day.

There was a period of time, it was a time of personal difficulty in my life where I was going much more regularly. Every Shabbat I would go to shule. On all the holidays, I would observe. Also, in terms of the High Holidays Days, there's the religious component, which is central to it of course, the liturgy that goes with it. At the same time, every Jewish holyday has a kind of mythology, a custom around it, whether it's the Exodus from Egypt, which is the Passover story, which always resonated with me because the whole international slogan to liberate the Soviet Jews, it was called "let my people go" which of course is the words Moses said to the Pharaohs.

It just shows that through thousands of years of Jewish history, that continuity and the repetitiveness as well, the challenges that we faced over and over again of being enslaved. Other holidays are more joyous occasions where we drink and get merry and celebrate life and family. I tend to observe all the holidays now quite fully, but not necessarily from a religious point of view, much more from a cultural point of view and what it's meant to our people over the centuries and millennia.

Interviewer: It's traditions, basically?

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah, it's more the tradition rather than the laws, I suppose.

Interviewer: That's fine. That's quite a common thread through these stories as well.

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah.

Interviewer: On a related note, what learning's, beliefs, traditions do you feel are most important or what are you most passionate about?

Alex Ryvchin: For me, Jewish history is of extreme importance. Understanding our past, where we came from, how we developed as a people, the challenges we faced and overcame, and where we are today and why we are who we are and what we are today and the challenges that we're likely to

face in future; for me, the answers are as much in history as they are in the kind of mysticism or the Jewish laws. For me, a historical understanding of our people has been really, really important.

With that has come an awareness of how important it is for the Jews to have a national home and to have sovereign self-determination, to be able to determine our own destiny as a people, to have a state where we can have the Jewish symbols as part of the state, the Jewish Holy Days as the public holidays, all these things to maintain those traditions and never again to be led like lambs to the slaughter, as we were during the Holocaust. So for me, that has created a very strong belief in the State of Israel and the importance of that State to the Jews today. That occupies a very central place in my Jewish identity.

The Jewish history is incredibly rich and diverse. I look at our history in biblical times, our history of slavery in Egypt. Then I look at our more contemporary struggles, like in the Soviet Union. All those things are very important to me and form a great part of my identity. But what we always fought for was the freedom to practice our faith. I believe that to completely discard the faith and to develop a Jewish identity which is entirely secular and divorced from Jewish custom and law, in some ways it's almost a betrayal of what our forefathers fought for.

I don't want it to be lost. It's been important for me, even though I didn't have a Jewish education in this country, to educate myself and to ensure that my daughter is more learned than I am and to be able to feel free in a synagogue and feel comfortable, to be able to understand and speak a little bit of Hebrew, be conversant in it, to understand the Jewish rituals and customs; why we wrap tefillin, why we're Bar Mitzvahed, why we're circumcised, why the dietary laws are important. I believe that is still a very central part of what it means to be Jewish.

Interviewer: All right. What Jewish traditions have your parents and grandparents passed onto you?

Alex Rychin: In terms of traditions, laws and customs, I would say bupkis, nothing, simply because they were lost to them. They weren't raised with them. They didn't understand them. It's something that my brother and I willingly explored and delved into and I suppose recreated again, after it was lost for so long. But what they have passed down to us I suppose is more Jewish values. The central value is family, the sanctity of family, the importance of family above all else.

That's certainly something that they've passed down to us, and also a love of education, a love of learning, not just in a symbolical or practical sense of acquiring a degree in order to get somewhere else, but to actually enjoy learning and engaging with ideas. I think that's something which, without knowing it or not, it's something which they got from their Jewish forefathers and which they've passed to us. The Jewish tradition of learning has always been not just about reading but about engaging with ideas.

Talmudic scholars and students today, they still study in pairs. They'll read a passage and then they'll debate it. It's all about engaging, exploring ideas, arguing. Arguing is a central Jewish kind of thing. Our dinner tables are very lively places where all aspects of social policy and political issues, anything, religion, everything is explored forcefully, very emotionally. I think it's those things, more the culture. Family, learning, engagement with ideas, and just a belief in the sanctity of life.

That's probably when you go back to the very core of what it is to be Jewish in Jewish law, going back thousands of years. It is all about life and leading a good life and a happy life and appreciating what we have, that we're here for such a short period of time, a moment in history we're here, and how to use that, how to appreciate it and how to live good lives, how to love and be loved, these are Jewish values I believe. These are certainly things that my family have passed to me.

Interviewer: Okay. This I guess is very much part of that same, or an extension of that same question. What traditions are you passing onto your own children?

Alex Ryvchin: Very much those same beliefs, which I believe to be the core of what it means to be Jewish. Not simply rituals, but more so those kind of cultural things, those great traditions of study and learning and family and a belief in life. All those things I want to convey. But at the same time, the rituals have their place because the rituals remind us of our duties. They remind us of higher powers. They also reinforce that connection with the past.

When you put on tefillin, I anyway have this sense of history, the fact that a Jew in Judea or Samaria or subsequently Palestine, that he completed the same rituals makes me feel connected to that past. Once those rituals are lost, I think it's very easy to lose the rest, to lose the more substantive things, to lose the themes of the faith. I want to impart those things. Also everything in Judaism has a very practical purpose.

The Shabbat dinner, for example, or the importance of Shabbat, it's not just about lighting candles and blessing wine and bread. It's about ensuring that for one day of the week, everything is put aside and you focus on rest and recreation and family and the things that are truly important in life. Today that's more important than ever. With so many distractions and so many pressures, Shabbat has never been more important for the Jewish people. That's my belief. The practical aspect of, a further practical aspect is that it brings the family together.

The family knows that any other day of the week, they're free to do whatever they want, live in their separate homes, lead their separate lives. On Shabbat, one day a week at least, the family comes together. It's that ritual that then reinforces the traditions. That's why I want to pass down all of it. Ultimately, I can try and impress this on my daughter and future children. They might turn away from it all entirely. They might have a different Jewish identity. There's only so much that I can do.

Interviewer: Here's hoping that's something they do keep. I mean certainly from my own perspective, that's something that's probably missing from my family. I think this week has certainly taught me a lot. I think I'll be making an effort to ...

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah, for sure.

Interviewer: I'm not Jewish. I think that's a very, very valuable part of what should be part of Australian culture.

Alex Ryvchin: Yeah, I agree. I agree. It leads to happier lives as well. Where the use of religion is, is that it gives a firm law. You might say to your family, "I think every Friday night or every Sunday night, we should all have dinner together." If it's not grounded in religion, a law, a firm law, then people will say, "Look you know I've got other things. I don't want to do that." If they believe it's a law, then they'll abide by it. That leads to the happier home.

Interviewer: I see the sense in it, for sure. What do you think the best thing about being Jewish in the Waverley region is?

Alex Rychin: I think being in the Waverley region for anyone is there's probably few places in the world that I would rather be or are better to be raised and to live than in this council area, beautiful park lands, the beach. Having lived abroad and having lived in Israel, having lived in the Soviet Union at the start of my life, having lived in Europe as well, in the UK, coming back here, it makes me appreciate how blessed I am to live in this area, how remarkably beautiful it is.

I can go jogging on Bondi Beach every day or look out onto the harbour. It never ceases to amaze me, just the sheer beauty of it. For anyone to live here, they should feel extraordinarily fortunate. For a Jew, it's a particularly special place because we've been able to create our own little community. We've been able to put down roots here. We're welcomed here. We take an active part in the future of this area as well through active participation in the life of this place.

For example, Rabbi Ulman has a shule, a synagogue there, which caters to the Russian Jewish community. It's kind of the centre of Russian Jewish life in this place. We've erected a monument to the victims of the Babi Yar massacre, together with Waverley Council actually. It further puts down roots and makes this place all the more special to us.

Interviewer: Thanks. Do you think Bondi has become a melting pot for different cultures? Has this influenced the character of the local area?

Alex Rychin: It's certainly a melting pot and a melting pot in the strictest sense, in the sense that different people come here and then they melt a little bit. That's the key of the melting pot. You come and then you have to melt a little bit. The hardest parts of yourself, the most stiff necked, the most stubborn aspects of yourself, you have to give way to them. You have to relinquish them and become a part of something greater, the greater pot, as it were.

The Jews have been a part of that. We've been able to come here and continue our practices, revive our practices and tradition. We've also melted a little bit. We've melted into the essence of what it means to be Australian, to be a Sydney-sider and to live in Bondi and Waverley and these sorts of areas. Other communities have done the same. We all give something of ourselves and we take something from others. That, to me, is the core of Australian multiculturalism.

Interviewer: That's great. That's actually the end of the section. We'll now move on to naches.

Alex Rychin: Naches.

Interviewer: Every Jewish person wants some naches in their life. Naches can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community. What does the word naches mean to you. Does it have a special significance?

Alex Rychin: To me, naches is purely joy, but joy is an abstract and enormous ideal. When I think of naches, I think of a very specific type of joy. It's the joy of family. It's not the joy of necessarily success in career or material success. It's that primitive, primal, basic joy that comes from being with family. When I look back at those early photos of when we first came to this country, the six of us

together as a family, and I can only imagine, and I know something of the troubles and the struggles that we went through. I look at the photos and there's pure joy. There's pure joy.

The naches that comes from the family being together. Interestingly, as time has gone on and we've achieved things in profession, we've acquired some small measure of material wealth, these things. As the family has broken up for a variety of factors, that naches has gone to a large extent. It's given way to other things, to other joys. That primitive, basic joy that comes from having the family together, around the family dining table, sharing in happy occasions together, to me, that's the essence of naches.

Interviewer: How would you describe naches to someone who doesn't know what it means?

Alex Ryvchin: I would say it means whatever they want it to mean. In the basic sense, it is a very high joy and a happiness and a fulfilment. Their own path to naches, as it were, is their own to make. For some people it does come from success or giving back to community, where are very, very important things. For me, as I said, it's a more basic, primal thing of just simply family, the togetherness, the unity of family. It's each to his own to find what their true naches is.

Interviewer: That's good. There is a bit of a diversity in the answers of course.

Alex Ryvchin: Is there? I would be interesting to hear that actually. Yeah.

Interviewer: Some are saying it means pride, but not in yourself-

Alex Ryvchin: Okay.

Interviewer: ... in children, grandchildren. Anyway. What do you hope for your own children?

Alex Ryvchin: Naches really. That is to me the highest form of fulfillment and happiness. If they say they have naches in their lives ... That's why on special occasions, on life moments, important moments, we wish naches to each other. To me that symbolises that highest form of fulfillment and happiness and joy. That's what I want for my daughter. Again, it's for her to find what that means.

I hope that something of what I've experienced in my belief system, in my traditions, will impact on her and that she will understand the truest joy doesn't come from material possessions, that truest joy doesn't come from momentary successes in life, which are fleeting and quickly fade. They come from family, from the unique love that you give to your family and they give back to you. I hope she always has that. She'll have it from me and my wife and our extended family. I hope she'll find it for herself and believe it.

Interviewer: That's good. You're good. Obviously you mentioned that your grandparents are no longer with us, yeah? What would your grandparents make of your life in Australia today?

Alex Ryvchin: For my grandparents, all they ever wanted was for the family to be together. Right? All they wanted was for us to achieve things, to make the best of the opportunities that we have. When they came from a place, they took us out of a place where our opportunities were so confined and so limited. They would want us to take the full advantage, the full enjoyment, the richness of life in Australia that we're offered. I think they'd be happy that we've done that.

They were hard to please as well. They had very high standards for me and for my brother for what they wanted us to achieve. I hope, I can only hope that I'm living up to some aspect of that. They were always very proud of me I think no matter what I did. I think they'll be proud of the life that I'm leading here.

Interviewer: I'm sure they would be. Can you tell us about a time that you've given your grandparents naches?

Alex Rychin: I can't really think of a single moment because for them, naches was about us all being together as a family. Whenever we were together, without all the complicated things that come from life as you go along, all the distractions, to them as to me, that was true naches. Just by being present and just by loving them and taking their love is what gave them naches. They also took, to expand on this idea of naches and broaden it out a bit, there is that degree of pride, of being proud of achievement.

They were always very proud. They were proud when I did well at school. They were proud when I took an interest in something, when I set myself a challenge and saw it through. These are the things that just gave them such immense satisfaction. It would have vindicated their decision to take us out of that place and bring us here. They would have seen that their sacrifices, by leaving good professions, taking the enormous risk of coming to a new land, that it would have fulfilled. It would have come to something. That's what gave them real pride.

Interviewer: That's nice. What do you think your biggest achievement is in life and why?

Alex Rychin: My biggest achievement? I was always proud of having become a lawyer for a number of reasons. Firstly, it's something that I know. I mean my grandparents didn't live long enough to see me become a lawyer. It's something that would have filled them with immense pride. I always viewed law as being the noblest of professions. It's a difficult path as well to actually to achieve that, to get into university, to study well, and to get to that point. It's something which I viewed as my own, no one else's.

I had all the positive influences of my family, but it's something which I had to do for myself. No one sat the exams for me. No one forced me to study. No one could make me take in the information or take a love of knowledge and learning. Having achieved that and having become a lawyer to me was the fulfilment of my own ambitions, but also the expectations of my family, which I willingly and joyfully took on.

Before my wedding actually, my parents were going through some of my things to find old report cards and things like that, get a bit of material for their wedding speech. They found this assignment that I did when I was nine years old where I answered what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote I wanted to be a real estate lawyer. I've no idea why I wanted to be that at that age or what I thought it entailed, but I fulfilled that and I became that.

Now I'm no longer in that profession. I'm now working full time for the community, which gives me an entirely different level of enrichment and joy and satisfaction. Having achieved what I set out to do from such a young age, having stepped into that noble profession that my grandparents would have wanted for me as well, that's something that I'm very happy with, very proud of.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Now this will be an opportunity now to talk about your community-based work. What activities are you involved in for the wider community that also bring you naches?

Alex Rychin: Since becoming a lawyer and practicing for six years here and in London, that gave me satisfaction, but it was limited. It was brief. I felt that I had to do more, that I had something more within me that I had to do and achieve. A lot of that stemmed from my Jewish identity and my love for my people, my belief in my people. I found myself more and more drawn to communal life, defending something, fighting for something, skills that law had equipped me with, but I felt were being kind of wasted in the corporate world.

I started writing. I had this great desire to write, which was something else that my grandparents always nurtured. That led to me getting some articles published. I wrote some pieces. I didn't know whether people would take interest in them, whether they would read them, but the feedback was really overwhelming. They touched people. They impacted on people. I had a measure of success with them. Newspapers were running them. It was very satisfying as well. That led me more and more down this communal path.

I became a spokesman for the Zionist Federation in the UK, speaking on some of the great issues confronting Israel and the Jewish people, anti-Semitism, hatred for Israel and defending against that. That gave me a great deal of satisfaction. I finally felt like everything that I had aspired to, all of the skills that I'd been developing, I was now putting towards something that I truly believed in. It was that that then took me to Israel, where I worked at a think tank. Again, that kind of allowed me to explore my Jewish identity further and give something back.

Then on returning to Australia, I was offered this position with the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, an organisation I knew a little about, but I quickly learned was at the very center of communal life in this country, and at the centre of the great fights and battles that have been waged on behalf of world Jewry, none more important than the liberation of Soviet Jewry.

I learned that had it not been for the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and their effective advocacy and their fighting spirit over a period of decades, Soviet Jewry may not have been liberated when it was. The course of my life would have been entirely different. That really showed me the importance of doing something for the community. It instilled in me a belief that if you're passionate about something, if you believe in it, you have a duty to explore it. You have to do it because I find that so few people truly are passionate about something. It's a rare thing. When you have it and you have the skill set to go with it, you owe it to yourself and to your community to go down that path.

This new career has let me do something which I truly believe in, which is fighting on behalf of the Jewish people to ensure that we can continue to lead wonderful, productive, prosperous, secure lives in this country, free from the horrors that we fled, free from the scourge of antisemitism and hatred, the right for Israel to function and exist as a State and engage with the world, are free from slander and attacks on its very basis, on its very existence. That's something which my work allows me to do and to give back to the community. That's very, very important to me.

Interviewer: Very nice. I guess as an extension of that, and I think I already know the answer to this. How do you feel about your place, not just to the Jewish community, but to the community overall?

Alex Rychin: The beauty of Australian society is that it gives you a fair go. If you're willing to contribute to this remarkable country, then that faith that you show in it is reciprocated. You're embraced and you're given opportunities. Now it doesn't mean that there isn't hardship or elements of discrimination. Every society has that, but there is nothing stopping a Jew or anyone from joining a profession or fulfilling their destiny in business, in sciences, humanities, whatever that may be.

I feel that myself personally, and the community generally, has been able to contribute a great deal to Australian life. We look at the great builders, some of the great people who have shaped this country, people like Sir John Monash, our greatest ever soldier and military leader, Sir Isaac Isaacs, our first Australian-born Governor General were Jews.

To me, that's evidence firstly of the acceptance of Jews in this country and, secondly that reciprocal, that giving of Jews, that contribution for the betterment of this country and this society. Certainly I view my place in the society not just as enriching the lives of the Jews and contributing to their advocacy and their interests, but of contributing to public policy and the debate in this country and the discourse and all aspects of public life in this country generally.