

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

DALIA AYALON SINCLAIR: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Dalia Ayalon Sinclair

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: Dalia, first of all could you tell me your name, and when and where you were born?

Dalia Ayalon: Dalia Ayalon Sinclair. I was born in Israel in 1947.

Interviewer: When did you leave to come to Australia?

Dalia Ayalon: 1973.

Interviewer: Okay. What was happening in Israel just prior to 1973 which led up to the circumstances of you coming to Australia?

Dalia Ayalon: Just needed a change, I guess, in our lives with a young family. We had an opportunity as we had family here who suggested that we should come to Australia. We said, "Yeah, why not?" Simply.

Interviewer: That's easy

Dalia Ayalon: It's not so easy, but we have been accepted pretty quickly I would say.

Interviewer: A good move, do you think?

Dalia Ayalon: Once you land you say, "what have I done?" as usual. A lot of people feel that sense of, "What am I doing here away from home? Is it right? Is it wrong? How long am I going to be here?" and all that stuff. Yes, it was a good move. It opened a lot of opportunities later in life once the kids were grown up more. While they were young I wasn't working. I was more at home. Once they grew up I was able to engage in other things. It was exciting.

Interviewer: Can you just confirm with me who ... which parts of your family actually came to Australia?

Dalia Ayalon: I came with a husband and two children, a daughter and a son. They were very young. My daughter was three and nine months. My son was two and six months. It was a very difficult period when we arrived because three months later the Yom Kippur War broke in Israel. We were faced with a lot of trauma because family were called up in the war. We were watching that on television, the war. My husband actually wanted to go back because he felt that we need to go back and help. He was warned by his mother, "Don't come. I've got a few sons already there." It was worrying. One of his brothers was missing for a while.

Interviewer: That was probably the biggest challenge, just being...

Dalia Ayalon: Three months in Australia

Interviewer: Were there any other challenges that you and your family had when you first came to Australia?

Dalia Ayalon: Yes, of course. Adjusting to a lot of things: a) to the language. We spoke English but we didn't understand Australians. There are a few different ... I don't have to tell you that. Lots of people do, but work, my husband found work pretty quickly which was good.

The kids eventually went to kindergarten. My daughter came home and she said, "Mum, I can't believe it. We were told to eat a hot dog." She was shocked by the idea that she is going to eat a hot dog. She couldn't understand that, the meaning. I remember those things, the little things. Big challenges? Yes. Every step like that is a big adjustment, but [with] kids in kindy, we immediately got a lot of friends, mainly Israelis to start with.

[After] A few years my husband then opened his own coffee shop and pizzeria, and working. Again, that's difficult and wasn't easy, because the hours were crazy. It was a young family. Once the kids started school and they went to the Yeshiva School in Flood Street, Bondi, it became easier. I started working a bit and helping my husband. Later once I got to do ... I'll jump straight to the fact that the Israeli club was established and I was very much involved with that.

Again it became home away from home. We engaged with lots of Israelis, Israeli culture. We had lots of Jewish festivals. I started [an] Israeli dance group. They were invited to perform for inter-culture ... what you call it ... multicultural events, which were fantastic. Even at the Opera we won the prize. It was a lot of excitement. That actually took me to yet another level, which was working for Radio SBS.

I often became the master of ceremony and a person who organised events. When they were looking for someone to work for SBS, someone told me ... a friend said, "Look, actually you'll be fine." I went for an interview and I was accepted. And then again it opened another huge opportunity. First of all engaging with people with so many cultural differences, languages, cultures – 68 languages at the time. Fantastic, lovely people to work with.

Later I became a coordinator of the program, the Jewish Hour. It was Hebrew, English, and Yiddish; all languages I could speak, which was good. Then one of the events, it was really ... actually two events were really exciting while I was working for SBS. I was invited to go to report in Queensland about Celebration Shalom, a Christian organisation supporting Israel and the Jewish people. I was to do my investigative journalism there, to see what the mob is doing.

We became the best friends ever. I met lots of amazing, amazing people that had really true feelings for the state of Israel, for the Jewish people supporting at the time, which was quite difficult with Intifada and all of that. After that I was invited each year to be a guest speaker and I met another person. After one day showing a film about the Holocaust, I was confronted by a Christian nun who started to cry.

She came from Germany and she said to me, "I really feel sorry that what we've done," and she started to cry. We actually both cried because I said to her, "Don't take it upon your shoulders. This is something, it's not your generation. It happened before and today we have programs about it, conciliation and all of that."

Again, it opened another door to another group of people. So Australia for me was really an opportunity to meet people from various diverse cultures. Through SBS also there was another exciting moment for me, not so much for others. I worked with the Arab language coordinator and

we worked together behind the scene, to bring in the Israeli ambassador to speak on the Arabic radio program. That didn't go down well for the Arab audiences and there was a lot of repercussions about that.

I won't go into the story. Front page Arabic Page...me...Tough, very tough. It was very worrying but a few months later, it was interesting that The Australian newspaper wanted to cover the story, because they saw the positive side of it. At the time Bob Hawke was very much involved with bringing the Russian Jew to Australia. I felt that Australia is really a place where people can work together and achieve ... even if they are enemies somewhere else ... in Australia they should be working together. I thought that was fantastic.

Interviewer: How did you settle into the Eastern suburbs?

Dalia Ayalon: It was natural because my relatives were living in North Bondi, so Eastern Suburbs. At first we were in North Bondi for a short time. Then we bought an apartment in Curlewis Street in Bondi. Then we moved to North Bondi, then ... yeah, mostly in the Eastern Suburbs.

Interviewer: What were your initial impressions of the area?

Dalia Ayalon: I loved it. We had everything we needed. I have to tell you another story, yes. When we arrived and we lived in Brisbane, naturally we have a Friday night dinner and wine for the blessing, it's very important. I went into just a supermarket and I said, "Could I get some wine?" They said, "No sorry, you have to go to the hotel." I said, "Why do I have to go to a hotel to get wine?" I was ... I couldn't understand it all. Of course later I realised, but things like that. Questioning.

Yes, the kids went to Jewish school and they went to Yeshiva, then they went to Moriah. Eventually they went to Vaucluse. Life was good, lots of friends.

Interviewer: That's good. We might have to skip forward to the food section, because I know that you've got some food stories. What we might start out with is, do you have any recollections of eating your favourite dish as a child and food from Israel that maybe you could tell us about?

Dalia Ayalon: Ah, when I was younger. Yeah, first of all I come from a very traditional family. So, obviously the Jewish festivals ... each festival has its own food, which are full of symbols. Food is symbolic, in relation to the festivals of course. What's beautiful about living in Israel is, like in Australia, Jews come from all over the world. They bring with them their own dishes as well. What is relevant to the Yemeni is different to the Hungarians' dishes and Moroccan. My first husband was Moroccan, so I got used to that too.

Customs, they bring different dishes attached to those festivals and relevant countries. Favourite dishes ... well, I was never a great eater, but yes, my mother ... I still cook my mother's dishes today. For Shavuot, I cook blintzes. Recently we had a Shavuot meal. What else ... I don't like very oily food, but every holiday has its dishes. Friday night is a Friday night. Because we were religious, we were not allowed to ... My father wouldn't ... we wouldn't light the fire to heat up our food. We had cholent which is the usual dish.

I was every Saturday morning getting up early in the morning, because the smell, the odours were so strong. Opened it and have a little taste before my father went to synagogue. I often visited

synagogue as well on Saturdays. I was going to speak about the festival of Purim rather, because it connects me to Queen Esther].

Anyway, my grandmother who perished in the Holocaust, her name was Esther. I never met her. I don't even have a photo of her, but I know that she was a kind and capable woman. I remember my mother always telling me that they were in Budapest and she was in Sziget. They told her when they heard about what was happening and they told her, "Come to Budapest because here we will be sheltered," she said no because she was actually feeding people in Sziget, that was. She was feeding young Yehiva boys at home, so she would never ...

My mother and sister went back and they were all taken to Auschwitz. My mother, that's her story. Esther, also has connection of Esther to Australia, because Esther was the first convict Jewish woman to arrive here from England and she became the first lady of New South Wales. That's a lovely story. There's the connection and that connects me to the organisation that I'm working, involved with, the National Council of Jewish Women, where we remember Esther every Purim. The week before Purim we go to synagogue, Shabbat Sechol, to remember the story of the heroine Esther, how she changed the face of the people.

We identify with that because we feel that women can make a difference, and they do.

Interviewer: Tell me about any special foods that you prepare during Shabbat or Jewish holidays, that kind of thing.

Dalia Ayalon: Well, we have ... I have to say something. Today we're very lucky that we, in the Eastern Suburbs, have in the supermarket lots of kosher dishes which are ready-made. We have restaurants that provide us with kosher dishes. It's much easier to prepare holiday I used to cook gefilte fish. I don't do that anymore. I buy that. Of course we've got challah, and a different challah for different holidays. What else? What I cook? Chicken soup of course and everything that goes with Shabbat dinner I guess. We have kiddush. We are very traditional so we have kiddush on Friday nights, and we sing along.

My grand-daughter who was born here, she knows all those things. We light the candles on Shabbat. That's the traditional Shabbat. We are not religious but we observe. That's the difference.

Interviewer: Obviously the traditions are very important to keep a nice tight family unit?

Dalia Ayalon: I think it is, but you know what, I was thinking about that question when I was told that I will be asked, but I think when you look at other cultures in Australia, which I have been ... I've learned about and engaged with ... all of them have special foods. Going back to that festival of Purim, I would like to say that within the National Council of Jewish Women, we have trans-cultural events. We had events for Succot, where we invite women from all cultures and we teach them about our traditions.

We'll see Muslim women and Christian women shaking the lulav, which is a traditional thing for Succot, or for the festival of Purim we had Persians and Iranians playing music. One of those things we learned from them which we never knew was that in that March ... every March ... they have a special celebration relating to the same king that we ... relate to our story of Esther. They

have special food for that event too. It's a fantastic opportunity to learn from all these other cultures here in Australia and engage with them.

Interviewer: You mentioned before that you're not overly religious, but you do very much ... you're observant. You're very much into the traditions.

Speaker 3: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: What traditions do you feel are most important and what do you feel most passionate about?

Dalia Ayalon: Tradition is tradition. I don't know about most important. It's tradition. Well, tradition is important because it's [to] keep our identity within the big picture. For the [unclear] we have a celebration for every Jewish holiday. For Shavuot we have erev Shavuoth. The next day usually we have the second night, so we get together and we sing the songs from back home in Hebrew. We do the blessings and the wine. We bless the fruit or whatever it is.

We always reminisce about what happened maybe in Israel when we were kids and we used to gather the first fruits and the first vegetables, and put it in a basket and take it to school. We had ceremonies. These things we reflect. It's a lovely opportunity not only to have it happening, but also reflecting what we used to do. We can still do it here and we can still teach our kids about it. My grand-daughter she now goes to ... she doesn't go to a Jewish school ... she goes to Rose Bay Public School, but there she studies Jewish studies about the holidays.

When she went to Waverley Council Kindy I think she may have been the only Jew in her class, but we were allowed to bring our tradition and to tell the story of Passover and Chanukah and the Jewish New Year. They actually were accommodating. We brought in things and I was sitting in front of the kids telling them about Passover, the story of Passover, which was fantastic. The day before she said, "Rebecca is telling me you have a New Year tomorrow, dinner and all of that. Can you tell me what is this about?"

I told her teacher and I bought her a special challah. I had apples with honey and sent them all the stories. It's fantastic.

Interviewer: That's great. We've got one more question. It's about naches. Of course every Jewish person wants naches in their life, but what does the word naches mean to you?

Dalia Ayalon: It's a lot. It's wonderful to see the tradition carrying on. I was brought up in a certain way. I was brought up in a home that was a giving home, that ... helping others. The word tzedakah means a lot, that you're not only focusing on yourself but beyond that. You live in a community, you don't live alone. You give of yourself, you help others. I have a lot of naches. I see that my kids are the same. We all follow that. We help others, we are caring people, and so is my granddaughter and so are my grandchildren. My son lives in Japan but they certainly are caring. He's coming back to Australia. That would be a big naches. Saying that, my granddaughter, yes she follows. She speaks Hebrew like her mother tongue, and English of course. It's great to see that we can do that. Sometimes we worry about things around the world. If we can help, help beyond the borders, which we do, which we do a lot. Support each other, educate.

Yes, I think I guess naches that I feel ... that I've also been able to engender change through my work and meet fantastic people and work together, and bring in from Israel, import programs, like Mum for Mum, which is a fantastic program, to bring program like Hippy from Israel, that education system in Australia is using for the Aboriginal people. It gives me a sense of pride to feel that we work together, bringing in, taking out, working ...

Now I'm working with the groups of people about harmony in Australia, trying to achieve that when there is so much trauma everywhere. Hopefully we can achieve that too. It's a difficult ask. However, challenges don't worry me, I'm full on when there's a good reason to be there.

One of the things today after retiring from most of my leadership roles etc, I'm thinking that I've actually not spent enough time on my own career, and sort of given up on that. It was my choice, because I saw the community as something which is more important, to work with community. My art can wait, but there's always another calling. It's about making choices. It's the time for making choices now.