

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

DIANE ARMSTRONG: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Diane Armstrong

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: Diane, can you tell me your name and then where you were born?

Diane Armstrong: My name is Diane Armstrong. I was born in Poland, in Krakow, in 1939, six weeks before the Germans marched into Poland, which marked the beginning of World War II.

Interviewer: Can you maybe expand on what was happening in your country and what led up to the circumstances of you migrating to Australia?

Diane Armstrong: By 1942, my parents and I were living in an eastern city of Lvov, where the Russians had walked in. My parents believed they were safer with the Russians were rather than where the Germans were. By 1942 the Germans were already in Lvov as well. By then they killed off almost all the Jews. They were hunting for Jewish children. My parents knew that unless we got away from there, our chances of surviving were nil. My father, who was a dentist, got false papers and he found a village which was looking for a dentist and that's where we spent the rest of the war years, living under false papers pretending we were Catholic. We were the only non-Catholics in that village. We were hoping that the locals wouldn't guess. They actually did and it was only thanks to the support of the village priest that we survived the war in that village.

When the war ended, we went back to Krakow. By then the Communist government was entrenched. There was still a lot of anti-Semitism. In fact, one of my father's dental colleagues said to him, "There's no future for you here being Jewish." That made my father realise that he needed to leave Poland. At that time, my mother's only surviving relative was the sister who'd gone through Bergen Belsen and who'd come to Australia.

My father had the motive of wanting to get as far away from Europe as he possibly could and my mother was keen to reunite with her only surviving sibling – so that meant Australia.

Interviewer: I understand. In terms of the way that you got a visa ... can you expand on anyone who provided assistance and any Jewish organisations assisting in your country or anything like that?

Diane Armstrong: I'm not very clear on the circumstances of our passage to Australia. I think that the, perhaps the Jewish Welfare were in some way involved. They certainly were once we arrived, but I'm not sure about the actual passage because at that time, the Australian Government imposed a 25% limit on Jewish migration by ship which meant that no ship was allowed to have more than 25% Jews on board. That law was far more observed in the breach than in the observance because in actual effect, our ship, which was a clapped-out post-War hell ship carried close to 65% Jews. A lot of them travelled pretending to be non-Jews.

I'm not sure exactly how we got to Australia financially, who helped us. I know that once we got here that the Jewish Welfare Society did help.

Interviewer: Okay. Why did you family decide to settle in the local area?

Diane Armstrong: When we first arrived in Australia, we didn't come to Sydney initially because my aunt, my mother's only surviving sibling, was in Brisbane. My father, being a dentist had to study dentistry all over again. In Brisbane he would have had to study four years. In Sydney, only

three. Saying "only", we had no money. That one year made a big difference because one year is one year. We came to Sydney.

How we came to be in the Eastern Suburbs was that my aunt's distant relatives in Brisbane contacted somebody they knew in Sydney. It was a Doctor Brenner. He organised first to rent a cottage in Walter Street, Bondi Junction. I guess a lot of Jews had come to live in Bondi Junction at the time. It's the usual progress of migrants. You go to where your people are. I think in my parent's case, it's just that this is where the rent and the cottage were organised for us. That's where we lived. It was a little street at the back of Bondi Junction.

Interviewer: What did it feel like when you first arrived in Australia and specifically Bondi Junction and the Eastern Suburbs? Obviously you must have made a big change and how did you adapt to those changes?

Diane Armstrong: My first vivid memory was Cracker Night because we arrived in Sydney around the time of Cracker Night. That was the 24th of May and it celebrated the Empire. It was actually Empire Day. In fact, my last novel is called Empire Day and it's set in Bondi Junction. It describes the very scene that is the most vivid in all of my memories of coming to Sydney to Bondi Junction. What happened was, on this particular night, there was a huge bonfire blazing in the middle of the street. Everybody was out in the street, adults and kids. The kids were running around whooping and letting off fireworks. I had never seen anything like it. I'd never seen adults that took part in children's games. I'd never seen or experienced such a lively, friendly atmosphere. That in a way, became in my mind, symbolic of life in Australia. It was light-hearted. It was bright. It was friendly and welcoming.

Interviewer: Can you tell me maybe about some of the challenges? I do understand that your father had to re-educate in dentistry to get his qualification here. Obviously that meant that income was a problem and making ends meet. Over all the challenges that you and your family had when you first arrived acclimatising yourselves in Australia.

Diane Armstrong: When I think about it, I'm full of admiration for my parents. The way that they coped with living in a strange country where basically they didn't know anybody when they arrived. They had no money. My father went to university with a whole lot of young students. He was then 47 or 48. I can remember coming home from school and finding him sitting over his desk and he would be looking at the notes that he'd written in the lectures and beside him was a Polish/English dictionary because he'd written words down as he heard them. As we know, English is not a phonetic language. When he tried to look up the words that he had written down, some of them or a lot of them weren't even in the dictionary. It was hard. I never ever heard him complain or say it wasn't fair or someone wasn't being kind to him. He just got on with it.

While he was doing that, my mother supported us. She got a job in a dress factory. She used to hem coats and skirts and jackets. She used to sometimes bring home great piles of these clothes and she'd be sitting up until way past midnight sewing and hemming. That's how she supported us. But, again, I never ever heard either of them complain or say how life was hard and how things weren't fair. I think that's made a huge impact on my life and my attitude to life. They were wonderful role models.

Interviewer: That's lovely to hear. I'm sure just feeling safe made a big huge difference in their lives.

Diane Armstrong: My parents just loved living in Australia from the first moment. It wasn't just that the neighbours were so friendly, they were helpful. They used to include me, we were the only Jews in the street. I was invited to all the Sunday school picnics and whatever else, phyzzie (Physical Culture) after school. Whatever was going, I was included. They were just wonderful people. The lady next door made special party dresses for her children and the ones up the street. She made them for me as well.

Apart from that my father was absolutely overcome with the knowledge that we were living in a country where a train driver had become prime minister. That was Ben Chifley. In fact, after my father died, this was in 1978, I went through his papers and I found a letter, a copy of a letter he'd written to the then minister for immigration, Mr [Harold] Holt. He had then just become naturalised and he wrote a letter to Mr Holt. He said, "I know I'm not expected to reply but I just wanted to say what a privilege it is to become an Australian citizen and that's an honour I'll cherish for the rest of my life."

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

Diane Armstrong: Because so many Jews settled in the Bondi Junction area, I think they made a huge impact. First of all there was a synagogue in Grafton Street. I remember going there. My parents were not religious. But I had Jewish friends at school, especially when I started going to Sydney Girls High. I don't think there were many Jewish children in the Waverley Public School where I went. At Sydney High, there were. One of them was quite observant and she used to take me to synagogue with her. That was really my first introduction to Jewish religion because my parents were very secular. My father had grown up in a very orthodox household with 11 children and a very observant orthodox father. He, himself, was anything but. He was an independent free thinker.

My mother grew up in a socialist household. Her father was a socialist. He certainly had no time for religion. I wasn't brought up ... Of course, during the War, being Jewish wasn't anything that you ever mentioned. I didn't actually find out that I was Jewish until I was about seven years old, after the War. My father broke the news to me very diplomatically and very gently because he didn't want to shock me too much, knowing what I might have heard about Jews in my early years in the village and even in Krakow in the school I went to.

Religion did not play a big part in my life, or hardly any part. Once I came to live in Bondi Junction, I started going to synagogue occasionally with my friends, started observing some of the Jewish holidays. My mother used to keep Passover, when I say keep it she used to make a special dinner at Passover, bringing in the eat part. She used to make a special evening on Rosh Hashanah, New Year. Other than that, we really didn't do any particularly Jewish traditions at home.

Interviewer: Obviously food is an important part of the Jewish culture. Can you tell me a little bit about if you recall your Polish native country's foods and any memories that you have about eating your favourite food as a child?

Diane Armstrong: My mother was an excellent cook. She used to cook Polish food. She also cooked Jewish food. In fact, cooking Jewish food was one of the problems when we were in hiding in the village because there we were very anxious, as you can understand, to blend in with the villagers and not give away the fact that we were Jewish. One of the first meals that my mother had when she invited some of the locals for dinner, people that they befriended, one of the women said, "That tastes like Jewish chicken." My mother had to think on her feet very quickly and make an excuse, "Oh yes we had a Jewish neighbour when we lived at home and she taught me how to cook this." She used to cook both ways.

The Polish food which is very tasty. Beetroot soup, pierogis. Pierogis are like, something like a little bit like ravioli, stuffed with cabbage or potatoes or meat, goulash, stuffed cabbage, things like that, cheesecake, poppy seed cake, yeast cakes, all that kind of things that she cooked, all of that. As well as that she used to cook fish in the Jewish way and she used to cook ducks and chicken with lots of garlic which was the Jewish style. So I had both at home.

Interviewer: Do you have a favourite?

Diane Armstrong: I don't think I was that into food when I was ... I certainly made up for it in later years. At that stage, I think I liked chicken soup of course, couldn't have any kind of festive meal without chicken soup and of course matza balls. Borscht, I used to like. I think I liked everything that she made. I don't think I had any particular favourites other than maybe cheesecake and poppy seed cake.

Interviewer: That must have been a little bit of a food culture shock when you first came to Australia. Can you tell me a little bit about what you thought about Australian food when you arrived?

Diane Armstrong: When we first arrived, I think that the food was more of a shock to my parents than to me because children adapt. If they like something they like something. It wasn't a big issue. My big issue was that the food wasn't Australian enough. If my mother packed rye bread with salami or something like that for school, that was mortifying. I would have much preferred to have had sliced white bread and Vegemite with lettuce, which is what my school friends had. There was a little corner shop on the corner of Walter Street and Newland Street and they sold things like Devon, which was pretty tasteless kind of nothing. There were little jars of Kraft Velveta and Kraft Spread cheese which again was sort of nothing. There was white bread. To me the biggest treat was fresh white bread with golden syrup, which is what my school friends had for afternoon tea, not rye bread with salami or tomato or sardines or something like that.

The food that my mother liked, she could buy in delis because having such large influx of Jewish refugees in the Bondi Junction area, there were delis. There was one I remember was run by a Mr and Mrs Brook, which was I think somewhere in Bronte Road, I'm not entirely sure. I know my mother would say, "I'm going to Brooks." Going to Brooks meant that she could get cottage cheese that we all liked, rye bread, unsalted butter which was very hard to find, salami. Things that they liked. The Polish food was very strange to Australians.

When I had my first birthday party, my mother said, "What should I make for you?" I said, "cocktail frankfurts and tomato sauce." My mother said, "Yes but what do you have with the

frankfurts?" She couldn't understand that you could just eat frankfurts. I said, "Sausage rolls." That was even stranger to her. Anyway, came my birthday party and 10 little girls from the street were sitting around the table and out came the cocktail frankfurts and the tomato sauce. That was good. So far, so good. Then she brought out a dish of semolina. Everybody looked at this in absolute horror and the little children from the street said, "Ew, what's that?" I could have disappeared under the table. My mother said, "Well you had to have something with the frankfurts." She was still not used to the Australian food. I think that was sort of a wonderful illustration of the culture clash. She did her best and I think the next birthday party there wasn't any semolina at all.

Interviewer: That was your 10th birthday, wasn't it?

Diane Armstrong: The first birthday party that I had in Bondi Junction was my tenth birthday.

Interviewer: If you could tell me a little bit about the special foods that you prepare during family get togethers or Jewish holidays?

Diane Armstrong: Whenever my family get together, they find it a big treat when I do make Polish dishes. They absolutely adore pierogis, which are the ravioli kind of pasta. I make a sour pickle cucumber soup which my mother use to make and that my son would kill for. In fact he's told everybody he knows about it. I make borscht sometimes and of course, no family festival especially the religious festival is complete without chicken soup and matza balls. I make goulash like my mother used to make. I'm sure it's not quite as good but I do my best. Roast chicken. Of course we have to have gefilte fish when it's a special holiday. We have to have chopped liver. We have sugar cake which again, is her recipe. I think I cook the kind of traditional food that my mother used to cook and my children all love it.

Interviewer: Nice to see the food kind of bridging the generations.

Diane Armstrong: Yes.

Interviewer: We'll move on to the pray section. Of course the essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances. In this section, we'd like to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions. How it shapes your identity and the passing down of generation to generation? We'll start off, if you can tell us about your religious practices now compared to before or around about the time of your migration to Australia.

Diane Armstrong: When we first arrived, I didn't really have very much connection with the Jewish community or with Jewish traditions. As I married, I married a Jewish doctor, Michael Armstrong, who is very prominent in the Bondi Junction area. In fact his practice was in Bondi Junction, although he had patients from all over, not only all over Sydney but all over the state and some from overseas as well.

When our children were born, we both felt that we needed to give them a Jewish identity, stronger than they would have had because I reasoned that I would never ever lose my Jewish identity. It was very strongly ingrained in me because of what had happened, being a child Holocaust survivor. There was no way that I would ever lose my Jewish identity. Michael also had a very strong Jewish identity. But we felt that the children didn't have those kind of ... didn't have that history that certainly, that I had. They needed something more to anchor them more strongly to Judaism. So I

started making Friday night dinners with lighting candles and saying a few blessings which I had never done before in my entire life. I felt that it was important. That's continued till the present day and now we do that for the grandchildren as well.

I kept the festivals, Passover. We went to synagogue on the first day of Passover, certainly on New Year on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The children went to Jewish scripture. They went to Jewish youth camps when they were old enough. They ended up ... I never ever, as my parents never did, made any kind of limits about their friends. A lot of our friends were Jewish and non-Jewish, that was never an issue and it was never an issue for us who the children were friendly with. The important thing was to have good friends. But they did have a lot of Jewish friends as well, especially as they got older and moved in the Jewish community. That became stronger for them. It anchored their identity more strongly. Their children also now, two of my grandchildren go to Jewish schools and I think the third one will be going to a Jewish school when she's old enough.

Interviewer: That's interesting. The traditions and the religion have really been a recipe for a tight knit community and a tight knit family. If it's obviously given your children more of a Jewish identity, but it's also carrying on that kind of family and community sort of integration that I think is just inherent of the Jewish culture.

I'm still not a synagogue goer. I go on very special days. I go on the yahrzeit of my late husband who died four years ago. I go on Rosh Hashanah and I go on Yom Kippur. Some Friday nights I go if there's some special occasion but I never feel the need to go to synagogue to feel Jewish.

Interviewer: What Jewish traditions have your parents and grandparents passed on to you, do you think?

Diane Armstrong: When I think about family traditions, I don't really feel that they were passed on to me by my parents. Certainly, I was not alive, or my grandparents were not alive when I was small. They really were not able to have any strong influence. The one that could have had the strongest influence was my father's father who was the patriarch of 11 children and very orthodox. Although not intolerant, very unusually he was tolerant about the people's beliefs, but he had a very strong belief himself. But he died before I was born. The other grandparents were killed during the Holocaust. So they had no influence on me at all. As I explained earlier, my parents were not religious in the slightest. In many ways, I was the one who began the family religious traditions such as they are in my family. For me they were more to do with cohesion, with keeping the tight "knitnes", if you can say that, of the family. Keeping them connected to the Jewish traditions and Jewish life and Jewish identity more than religion per se.

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

Diane Armstrong: The Jewish language has some words which have absolutely no equivalence in English. They have a lot of richness of connotation which is very difficult to explain, impossible to explain in a word. Sometimes it takes several sentences. Mensch is one of them, which means a decent good human being, that you can rely on to always do the right thing. Naches is another one

of those words. I think traditionally, naches is used as meaning the pleasure that you get from your children and grandchildren. It means the great, the rewards that you get after putting in a lifetime of effort and hard work. I certainly get a lot of naches from my children, from the kind of people they are, more even than from what success or achievements that they have had in their life. Of course the grandchildren provide me with a great deal of naches. It's wonderful to see them growing and thinking and becoming the delightful young people that they are.

From a personal point of view, I've been extremely blessed because from the age of seven the only thing I ever wanted to do, which my mother tells me I told her, was to be a writer. I am a writer. I've written thousands of articles and I've written five books, many of which deal with the Jewish experience and with Polish Jewish identity and with settling in Australia in Bondi Junction. I now get emails and letters from readers from all over the world telling me how much they were moved by what I've written and thanking me for sharing the stories with them and saying how wonderful, how wonderful, how thrilled they are that my parents survived the Holocaust and that I did too. That to me, from a personal point of view, is the biggest naches of all.

Interviewer: That's lovely. What do you hope for your children and grandchildren?

Diane Armstrong: When I think about my children and grandchildren. Well my children are adults already. They have carved out a good life for themselves. They're both pursuing ... my son and daughter, are pursuing vocations in their lives. They both are people who do things that mean something to them. They have never chased money, which for me is a very important part of life, not being governed by money. I think money is a wonderful servant but a terrible master. I'm glad that neither of them have chosen money as their master. They've always pursued vocational occupations. They're good people. They're kind, they're thoughtful. I couldn't wish anything more for them.

For the grandchildren, I hope that they live in a safe world. I can see that they're going to be very interesting and kind and thoughtful people which I think is the most important thing as far as personality goes. I just hope that the world in which they grow and become adults in will be a safe and peaceful one.

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

Diane Armstrong: I don't actually ever think about what I've achieved. I do what I love doing. I wanted to have children. I have a wonderful son and daughter. I was hoping I'd have grandchildren and that certainly is not my achievement but it's a great pleasure in life. I wanted to be a writer and I'm very grateful that the things that I've written have found such a receptive and appreciative readership around the world and that if you're going to call that an achievement, I think it's a blessing, but whatever it is, that's been a highlight in my life.

Interviewer: What activities are you involved in for the [wider] sort of Waverley community that also bring you naches?

Diane Armstrong: I take part in a number of charitable activities. I support local charities and I try to be involved in whatever's happening in the Bondi Junction area. I think that I'm a great patron of the Library which is a wonderful Library. It's beautifully run. It always has very interesting

activities, musical as well as literary. Even though I no longer live in the Bondi Junction area, I still have a very warm spot and a very... very grateful memories for the time when I lived here.

Interviewer: Would you like to talk about your books now?

Diane Armstrong: The first book that I wrote is a family memoir called Mosaic. I had a burning passion to write the story of my family and that ended up being called Mosaic. That was later published in America and Canada as well as here in Australia. I set out to tell the story of my remarkable relatives about who my father had told me for many years. It ended up being my story as well because while I was researching it, I completely unexpectedly came across the priest who helped to save our lives in the Polish village during the holocaust and that completely transformed what Mosaic was and what it became. It became my story as well as the family story. When I started it I didn't even think that I was going to be part of it. I'd been a journalist and as a journalist I'd always spent my time getting other people's stories and always staying in the background. To my great surprise, I ended up being part of the story of Mosaic.

My second book was called The Voyage of Their Life. That's the story of the post-War migrant hell ship on which I arrived in Australia with over 500 other migrants from all over Europe. Researching that was a huge task because it took me all over Australia and New Zealand as I tried to trace what had become of those migrants and what had happened to their hopes and dreams, but I also traced what had brought them to Australia and of course they told me about the night their voyage on which so many dreadful catastrophes took place. The people use to say to me, "why didn't you turn this into a novel?" I used to say, "If I had, nobody would have ever have believed that so much could happen on one voyage."

Then I turned to novels. My first novel was called Winter Journey. That was based on an atrocity that happened in a Polish village, not the one where I lived, but a very small village in the eastern part of Poland. In that atrocity, it turned out that the Polish villagers had placed all the Jewish inhabitants of the village in the barn and set them on fire. Up till recent times, it had been noted that the Germans had done it, but when I read that it actually had been the Polish neighbours who had done it, I had burning feeling that I had to write a novel based on that story. My novel became Winter Journey. That won a prize, an international prize and it was translated into Polish and Hebrew.

The next novel was called Nocturne. That was based on experiences in World War II, during the Holocaust, in Poland and England. It was largely based on a story that I'd been told. I used to do interviews for Steven Spielberg, for his Shoah Foundation and I met a remarkable woman and part of her story became the story of Nocturne. That won a fiction award in Australia.

My last novel, Empire Day was the one that was set in Bondi Junction in a little street which I called Wattle Street but which was really Walter Street in Bondi Junction. It started with the scene where a little migrant girl was watching a blazing bonfire in the middle of the street on a cracker night.

Interviewer: That's lovely. That was you.

Diane Armstrong: That was me.