

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

TAMI SUSSMAN: Oral History Transcript

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Interviewer: First of all, I want to talk to you about your family's kosher butcher shop in Bondi Junction.

Tami Sussman: My family started the first kosher butcher shop in Sydney on the corner of Oxford Street and Adelaide Street. They claim that it was the first kosher butcher shop in Sydney. I've heard someone else say that theirs was the first kosher butcher, but it was Sussman's Kosher Butcher Shop. They came from Kroscienko in Poland where they also had a butcher shop, and I have been lucky enough to visit that original site which we could get into later.

Over the years, I've bumped into people who remember that butcher shop. Even when I went to high school I remember the rabbi saying, "Sussman, was it your grandparents who had the kosher butcher shop in Bondi Junction?" and I'd say, yes.

I've heard stories that it got a bit wild in there. It was run by my grandfather and his wife, and my great uncle and his wife. The wives, let's just say, weren't the best of friends, and sometimes things got heated in there. I've inherited that strong eccentric Jewish woman persona, perhaps.

Interviewer: That's good. I might get you to give us a rundown on exactly what kosher means.

Tami Sussman: I don't know if I'm the right person to explain exactly what kosher even though I did go to Jewish school for many years. I know that it refers to the way that an animal is killed - in a humane way. It refers to the way that the meat is salted in a particular way so that the blood is drawn out of it, and cleanliness. A meat can be kosher if the animal chews its cud and has a split hoof, so a kangaroo would not be kosher.

I've been told, and my dad might get upset that I'm saying this on camera, but I've been told that my grandmother had a habit of throwing meat or things across the butcher shop when she got angry. Whether or not she actually threw the meat axe, I don't know. It could be an urban myth or it could have actually happened.

Interviewer: Good story. The first question is about food because it's a very important part of Jewish culture.

Tami Sussman: Yes, it is.

Interviewer: Are you familiar with your family's previous native country's foods and do you have any memories about eating any of those foods that were prepared by your parents or grandparents?

Tami Sussman: Obviously meat was a huge part of their diet being butchers. I know that they lived quite humbly and that their meals on Shabbat were a lot more varied and, I don't know, probably they'd go all out on Shabbat on Saturdays and Friday nights as opposed to the rest of the week where they didn't have much choice as they lived in a small rural area. Unfortunately, I get quite jealous when I listen to my friends talk about their Hungarian grandparents making these sweets and these cakes, and their Russian grandparents making pierogi and all this "voorsht" [wurst]. My grandmother – I never met my grandfather – she wasn't the best cook at all. I'd go over to her house and I'd get meat and oranges and frankfurts. It was all about the meat. Unfortunately, she didn't really cook any traditional Polish food. I guess, the closest thing I could say is wurst.

We had a lot of sausage though. I think wurst is German, but there's a lot of sausage, a lot of meat - she didn't bake cakes or anything. There was no time for that, it was all about work, work, work, what's nourishing, and I guess meat was seen during the war and their time in Siberia in the labour camp, as something precious. They rarely got to have it, if at all, because it wasn't kosher meat that they were given there. Having kosher meat was everything to them.

Interviewer: What else?

Tami Sussman: I thought of something else. There was soup. There was chicken soup that my grandmother made, really oily chicken soup, really brown in color. I remember that I didn't particularly enjoy eating it. My dad said that he was served chicken soup as a kid, oily chicken soup with semolina inside of it. Sounds pretty gross.

Interviewer: Yes, it does.

Tami Sussman: It was just gross. Nothing could be wasted, so everything had to be eaten. Looking back now, I can understand. At the time I thought it was disgusting, but my grandmother used to freeze milk and then boil it up for me to drink, and there'd be that film on top of the milk, and I just couldn't drink it. There came a point where I told my mum about it and she said, "Well, maybe you just don't eat at her house." That's mean. So sorry - no grand stories of the beautiful poppy seed pastries and things.

Interviewer: Describe the typical food that you would eat at home as a child in Australia.

Tami Sussman: It was a blend of Aussie, I guess that's British influenced cuisine, and Ashkenazi Jewish food. And also Sephardi food, the Israeli influence - falafels and hummus and Israeli pickles, the Eskal Israeli pickles in a tin. My mum would mainly cook. There was always roast chicken and there was a lot of matzoh ball soup and smoked salmon. Then, of course, there were also the lamb chops and potatoes and stuff, which I guess is considered Aussie cuisine as well. I was brought up on Vegemite toast as well, especially when we were sick.

Interviewer: What was your favourite?

Tami Sussman: My favourite thing is pretty hilarious because it's my Aussie grandmother who's from Russian heritage. She would make lasagna and I thought it was the most delicious, exotic thing ever. In recent years, I've asked her how she made it and she said, "Oh, just with some ..." I said to her, "What's the cheese?" "Cottage cheese." I said, "What brand?" She says, "No Frills." I said, "Well, what do you put in the middle?" She goes, "It's just frozen spinach," and I was like, "Okay, but what about on top?" "Just grated cheese," and I realised it was just the most basic food but I just thought it was amazing.

After I moved out of home I loved coming for Friday night dinners and having the challah, the warm challah that's just come out of the oven, and the roast chicken and the baked potatoes, because it's warm and homely and comfort food. As a child, I remember looking at my grandmother and everyone eating chopped liver and thinking that is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen and even sniffing and just thinking, "Oh, how can they eat that?" Then as I've grown older, I started having little bits of it and I said "Okay, I can kind of see how people can enjoy this a little bit." So my taste has changed over the years.

I still haven't answered your question about my favourite thing to eat as a kid from a European perspective. I did like going to the Hungarian Steak House in Double Bay or the Gelato Bar in Bondi, Campbell Parade, which is an establishment. I loved the Hungarian food served there, which is Eastern European, not necessarily Polish. Are you looking for something that my parents would make that I particularly enjoyed?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Tami Sussman: My mum didn't really cook much. Nothing stands out. I could go with the people-pleaser answer and just say mum's roast chicken. I always admired the way that she could handle the chicken and she could put her hand up its arse and pull all the stuff out of it. I just didn't know how she could do it, but she did.

Interviewer: Very good. Would there be something that you would eat now that triggers memories of your childhood?

Tami Sussman: Yes. Now, I've brought back some memories. Cold cuts. When my dad and aunt got together and the kids were around, my aunt would always bring over sliced cold cuts, and she'd bring over a wurst. I don't know how it's supposed to be pronounced but they called it kosher "voorsht", and my mum would always say "It's so unhealthy, and so fattening". But my dad and his sister would love it and we just put it in between bread. If there's white bread rolls with cold cuts and mayonnaise, that reminds me of my childhood.

Interviewer: That's lovely, very well said. How would you compare Australian food to your traditional family food?

Tami Sussman: I think Australian food is quite simple, maybe more bland. The European food is always heavily salted. Even my grandmother's chicken soup would always be so salty and oily and so rich and fattening, and my dad and my aunt would go and put more salt on it. Now, I'm putting more salt on my food and my mum's looking at me going, "What are you doing? It's so salty."

I guess you could say that their food is a metaphor for how rich their culture is - that richness has been put into their food. It's complex. The recipes aren't easy or straight forward. A lot of it has been told through an oral culture, so not a lot of it is written down. There's not always a specific amount of salt or sugar, it's not really a recipe that you can follow sometimes.

A lot of the food would also be considered a bit off putting to other people unless you've been brought up on it. In a similar way that Vegemite is off putting to people who've come to Australia and never tasted Vegemite before, and then they don't know how much to put on the piece of toast. I know that my friends who've tasted gefilte fish for the first time have just been like, "Oh, my God, what is that? It's like a wet slimy bowl of fish," but I guess if you've been brought up on it, it's just normal. Off putting is one way of putting it but interesting, interesting smells, pungent.

Interviewer: Have you learned to cook from anyone in particular?

Tami Sussman: I know it would be really great for the documentary if I could say I'd learned to cook through my parents and grandparents. I've learned how not to cook, how not to over salt things or put too much oil in my food. I've learned, I guess, little tricks in the kitchen. I guess my palate has

evolved because of the food that I've been given. I've definitely learned how to eat through my parents and grandparents, how to overeat, how to feel guilty after eating, how to save food and not waste anything at times in an obsessive way, and how to always offer food to other people and be offended if they don't take it.

Interviewer: Do you see it as important that you still cook certain things and keep them in the family as you become custodians for your family, the new generation?

Tami Sussman: Yes, I have and there's a certain sense of anxiety surrounding that, too, because I know that I'll want to cook my family a traditional Shabbat dinner and I know that in my family, the roast chicken was like the centrepiece and I'm really queasy about handling raw meat. I just feel like, "How am I going to do it? How am I going to have that amount of food on the table? How can I cook for 14 people?"

But, yes, it is important and now that I'm married to a man who's a Sephardi Jew and his family comes originally from Spain, then Turkey and more of the Middle East and they have their food as well. How am I going to combine the two and pass that on? I can definitely see smoked salmon and roast chicken and potatoes and chicken soup in my family in the future.

On the other hand, and this is also something that makes me feel guilty, I'd also love to be vegetarian. Sometimes I say I'm a non-practicing vegetarian. There was a time when I did tell my father that I wanted to be a vegetarian and it was like telling him that I was about to shave my head and become a monk. He just could not understand it and he said, "Well, you can't. You're from a long line of kosher butchers. You can't be a vegetarian. It's impossible." I feel like there's a part of me that wants to break away and do my own thing, but then I'm always drawn back to this food as being a link to my past and my culture which I can't escape as much as I try to.

My dad isn't kosher anymore with meat. It's pretty expensive, kosher meat, and I guess when he met my mum, she corrupted him and told him that he couldn't taste the difference. It's an interesting story. They met a butcher who wasn't kosher and he admitted that when there was a kosher function going on and they ran out of kosher meat. They called him to supply whatever they were lacking and after hearing that, my mum said to my dad, "See? You can't even tell the difference. You don't even know if what you're getting is kosher anymore," because at that point, the butcher shop had been closed and they were getting their meat from elsewhere. Bit of a scandal!

Interviewer: Is the reason for kosher purely in the taste?

No. It's different for everyone. I have friends who only eat kosher meat but everything else they'll eat isn't kosher – they'll even eat lollies without checking if there's pig gelatin in it. I guess for some people it's a way to honour their past and their grandparents. They might say, "Well, my grandparents are kosher. It's the one thing I want to do." For my dad, I think keeping kosher and having that kosher meat was a way of staying connected to his father and his mother. Then I think that evolved into "Well, eating meat is just my way of staying connected to them."

I know that one of the reasons why my great grandfather became very sick and ended up dying in Siberia was that he refused to eat the meat that they gave them because it wasn't kosher. I know that a lot of other Jewish people did end up eating the meat just to survive but he refused. I

don't know if that ever played a part in it, but I don't see kosher food as a concept to me. I think eating well matters to me and that element of eating for survival and eating really healthy, nourishing food is important for me. That's the way that I feel I'm honouring my grandparents and what they went through.

Interviewer: Does your family observe the traditional Jewish festivals and holydays?

Tami Sussman: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about special foods that are prepared?

Tami Sussman: I learned a term recently. It's a translation from a German word and it means "culinary Jew" which refers to Jews who feel Jewish in terms of the food that they prepare and eat. Growing up, I went to a Jewish primary school and it was important for my parents that I learned about Jewish customs and we did go to synagogue. We didn't keep Shabbat but we learned about it. As I grew older and as the family grew older, keeping the traditions religiously became less important and it was more of a cultural observance. But the culinary side is of most importance. So on our festivals, we won't necessarily go to synagogue anymore but we'll always have the associated traditional meals.

Friday night dinners we'll have the challah. There's meant to be two, but in our family we have one, because if there's two, we'll end up eating it and then we'll overeat and we'll all feel bloated and guilty. We'll always have chicken. On Passover, we'll have the seder, the Passover seder with matzoh and my mum will make the seder plate and we'll have charoset. On Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New Year, we'll have honey cake and apple dipped in honey. My parents still fast on Yom Kippur, which is I guess the antithesis of eating.

Every year, I question, "Why do you still do it?" and, again, I think it's something that just links them to their parents. During Purim, we'd make hamantashen, the triangular shaped biscuits, but I think that was more of a childhood thing. We stopped doing that because that was a less important festival to us. Chanukah, as a joke, sometimes my grandmother or mum will give me some chocolate money but we steer away from the deep-fried jam doughnuts now because we're a bit health conscious and gluten-free and all that other stuff.

Interviewer: We're actually going to go right back at the beginning now. I'd like to ask you your name, when, and where you were born.

Tami Sussman: My name is Tami Sussman. I was born in 1987 in Paddington at the Royal Hospital for Women.

Interviewer: Before you move on, I noticed that you have kept your maiden name. Can you explain the reasons why you feel it's important to keep your maiden name?

Tami Sussman: I felt that it was important to keep my maiden name because I have a very strong connection to the Sussman family. I could elaborate more. I have written a poem about why I've kept my name and it was performed at an event for third generation Holocaust survivors. If you wanted to use some of that, you'd be more than welcome. I just have a lot of respect for my family

and what they went through, and I feel that Sussman just encapsulates strength and chutzpah and ballsiness and craziness, and that's just me in a nutshell.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what Sussman means?

Tami Sussman: I'm told that in German it means 'sweet man' and that, perhaps way back when, the original Sussmans could have been in the industry of making or selling sweets, and that's how they got their name. That's nice to think about it that way. Then it evolved into slaughtering animals and plucking chickens. I think 'sweet man' is nice. I also like the way it evolved.

Interviewer: I have some details about your Jewish heritage which describes the Sussmans as snow white skinned, hooked nose, furry palms. I notice that your one-woman show "My Furry Heart" contains this. Can you start from the top about it?

I guess people often ask me where I'm from and I say I'm Australian, and they say, "Are your parents Australian and your grandparents?" And then they say, "What about your pale skin?" Then I say, "Yes, I'm Polish-Jewish background." That's where my darker hair but pale skin, where my hairiness comes from, my hairy arms which I wear quite proudly. And the hooked nose. As a teenager, I hated my nose, and I just dreamt that, "Wouldn't be great if someone could just throw a ball in my face and then it's broken and I have to get a nose job?" You know, that would just be amazing. My health insurance could pay for my nose job!

Now, as I've grown older, I've just thought, "Look, it's me. It's funny. It's a quirky part of me." Some people would say it's not a distinctly Jewish nose but it is hooked, and I guess I've come to embrace that now.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your one-woman show.

Tami Sussman: A few years ago I started performing spoken word poetry which is a fairly small scene in Sydney. I started off writing "angry ex-girlfriend" poems. Over some months I developed the confidence to perform stuff about my background and my cultural heritage. But this scene is mainly in the inner West. It's not necessarily cool to be associated with Jewishness because that's automatically linked with Israel and they're not very pro-Israel in those areas. So it took a lot of guts to be able to talk openly about that. Some of my poems were serious and some of them were funny, and then I had friends tell me that rather than competing in competitions where I'm on stage for two or three minutes, I should compile all my work into a one-hour show, which I did.

My first performance was at the Cock 'N' Bull Hotel, nice Irish pub in Bondi. Then I toured the show around different venues in Sydney. It went to Kings Cross and Auckland, and then to the United States in 2013, in New York and San Francisco. I've been told that there is a lot of Jewish humour in there. I guess I grew up watching *The Nanny*, and then later *Seinfeld* and Woody Allen films, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, of course. I guess it's just seeped in through my pores without even knowing.

Interviewer: Are you aware of what was happening in the country where ... Was it your grandparents that were overseas or did your parents come out of here?

Tami Sussman: No. My parents were born here.

Interviewer: Were you familiar with circumstances of why your grandparents left and what was happening in the country when they left?

Tami Sussman: Yes, I'm definitely aware of why my grandparents had to come here after the Second World War. Growing up I always knew that my grandparents had an accent. I didn't meet my grandfather but I was always aware growing up that my grandmother had a strong accent and I don't exactly remember at which point I was told the full story. I imagine that I would have learned about it at school, that there was a Holocaust, and I imagine that I would have gone home and said to my parents, "Did that happen to our grandparents?" I guess, that's when they would have told me a bit about what happened and why they ended up here.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit of what you do know?

Tami Sussman: I do know that my grandmother Adela and my grandfather Chaskel Sussman went together from Poland to a Siberian labour camp, and I do know that my grandmother in the labour camp had something to do with the bakery or bread production - something to do with the accounts section. I don't know much about what my grandfather had to do but I do know that it was hard physical labour, and I know that they lived in freezing cold, bare conditions, and that they were starved and hungry and desperate for a lot of the time.

I do also know, though, that they did consider themselves lucky that they got to go a labour camp and not a death camp. I know that also comes with a lot of guilt with my grandmother now that she does feel very guilty that she survived and she lost all of her brothers and sisters. My grandfather, Chaskel, did end up coming to Sydney and meeting up with his family here - not all of them but the ones that survived. I don't know much else about what happened in the labour camps, not in great detail. My grandmother was very hesitant to talk about stuff like that.

Interviewer: You don't know what happened between Siberia and Australia?

Tami Sussman: I actually don't. I know what happened with some of their relatives. I know that Chaskel's oldest brother Gershon, was in the Polish army and then came to Australia and was part of the Australian infantry. He even went to Papua New Guinea and I know that that was what enabled my grandparents to come here as refugees more easily because they were given priority because of his relationship with the Australian Army.

I know that they arrived here around 1949, and they already had family here that had arrived earlier. When they first arrived they went to Coogee and then ended up settling in Bondi to be closer to the synagogue, Central Synagogue, which I'm told was on Grosvenor Street at that time.

Interviewer: We're talking before about you being barely able to imagine what your grandmother did. Why don't you start from the top then?

Tami Sussman: I know that both my grandmother and grandfather prior to going to Siberia lived in rural Polish towns with a little town centre. I've been to Kroszno where my grandfather's from and I know that there's a river there, but I don't think that quite compares to the ocean in Sydney. I can imagine that when they arrived, they would have seen the ocean and I'm sure they were overwhelmed by it. I know that they never swam in the ocean.

They didn't learn how to swim, and my dad doesn't like swimming, and every time we say, "Why don't you swim?" he says, "Because I'm Polish," which I know is a generalisation, and a lot of Polish people would say that they do swim. I'm sure that that wouldn't have been a source of pleasure for them, and I know that they worked and their life was all about work. I've asked my dad if he has memories of them ever going for walks at Bondi along the promenade and he said, "Nope." I think that being in Bondi was purely to be close to family, close to the synagogue and not for leisure activities. I don't think there was much leisure in their life.

Interviewer: How did they stay connected with their community?

Tami Sussman: Through the synagogue, the Central Synagogue. They were quite observant and I know that the families did get together, and I know that later down the line, when kids had their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs they'd all gather there. Of course, when they opened up the kosher butcher shop around 1953, that was a bit of a hub for them and that's how they stayed connected and knew the people who came into their butcher shop.

Interviewer: What about the impersonations of Nana?

Tami Sussman: There were a few impersonations of Nana that I could do. She'll say to me, "You've lost weight. You are too thin. You need to eat more." Then if I see her a few weeks later or a few months down the track, she'll say, "You've put on too much weight."

Or "Don't talk to me. I'm too old. Don't ask me these questions. I'm too old." She wasn't really ever into getting deep into her previous life. I mean, I can get sad. I can get into dark stuff. She often asks, "Why am I alive?" She believes in God and she often says, "Why is Hashem keeping me alive?" She's the last remaining relative of that generation of the Sussmans. She married a Sussman, and she's outlived everyone, which I know most people would think as, "What an achievement." But she just sees it as a failure like she wanted to die long time ago which is a bit sad.

Tami Sussman: I could also tell you a funny story if you want.

Interviewer: Always welcome.

Tami Sussman: A few years ago, I was admitted into the emergency room because I'm allergic to peanuts and I'd accidentally eaten something with peanuts in it. The nurse was admitting me and asking me all these questions, and she asked me what my religion was, and I thought that was a weird question. I said, "Why do you need to know that?" and she said, "Because sometimes there is genetic stuff that we need to know." I said, "Okay, well, I'm culturally Jewish," and she said, "Yeah, that's an important thing to know."

Then she looks at my name and she looks at me and she says, "This is going to be a really strange question, but did your grandmother happen to own a block of flats in Bondi Junction back in the 70s?" and I said, "Possibly. Why?" She said, "Is she Eastern European?" I said, "Polish. Little angry woman with combs in her hair," and the woman said, "Yes. I lived in those block of flats and she was my landlord and she used to come on a Sunday morning after we'd been out and had a big night, and she'd be knocking on the door to come and collect the rent." And I said, "That sounds like my Nana."

Interviewer: Very nice. Are you aware of some of the challenges that your grandparents had when they first arrived in Australia?

Tami Sussman: I can imagine that arriving without any money, any English. I know that my grandmother spoke Polish and Russian and German and Yiddish. She had to learn English here and that would have been so challenging. I'm aware that just through what I've learned at school in history classes about the general feelings of the Aussies already here how they felt about immigrants coming into their territory and their space, and being outsiders can never be easy. Sometimes even I feel like an outsider, and then I think they would have felt like that multiplied by a thousand. They didn't have the language or much money. I could imagine that would have been extremely challenging and obviously still grieving the loss of their families and the people that they'd left behind. I know that they arrived here with a child already so that would have been quite difficult as well.

Interviewer: And obviously they would have arrived with very little money, right?

Tami Sussman: Yes. If anything, that would have been very challenging to arrive here without any money or much support. They had a bit of support from the family already here but for my grandmother, it would have been really difficult. She had her husband's family, but none of her own family. Yeah, that would have been pretty rough.

Interviewer: How do you think the Jewish community has shaped you as an individual?

Tami Sussman: I guess there are two sides to that and it's been a journey. I think it's made me have a very strong sense of family and an understanding of the importance of a close-knit family. I think it's given me such a sense of admiration and respect for my elders. My friends who aren't Jewish or old boyfriends who weren't Jewish were always quite impressed but also confused as to why I was so close to my grandparents. They said they'd speak to their grandparents twice a year or every so often, but I guess that's just part of our community - having that closeness to grandparents, and the appreciation because our parents didn't have grandparents.

I think as I grew older everyone goes through a rebellious stage and I felt that the Jewish community, especially in the Bondi area, was just totally overwhelming and consuming, and everyone knew everyone's business and that made me angry. And now I've evolved into just appreciating it again. There've been times where I've struggled, and especially when I moved out of home for the first time.

I went to school in the Eastern Suburbs but lived closer to the airport. The Eastern Suburbs and Bondi and Vaucluse and Dover Heights where my friends lived was like the promised land. Funnily enough, my dad did grow up in Bondi and Dover Heights but then he decided to get out of the ghetto. Then my sister and I, all we wanted was to live there. When I was 19 and I moved out of home, I moved straight to Bondi. So did my sister, which was quite ironic. When I moved out, all my friends' parents who lived in the area were always inviting me over for dinners and packing a doggy bag for me when I left. They knew that I was trying to be independent. I was young and I was studying, and I was struggling to be an artist at the time.

My friends would come over and they'd say, "Well, my mum's throwing out this jacket and she thought maybe you'd like to try it on before she threw it out." I knew that they were just

wanting to help me out. That made me appreciate the community. If I had pulled a muscle, I knew that up the road, my friend's mum who's a physio could look at it, and if I were sick, then my friend's dad who is a doctor up the road would come to my rescue. That made me really appreciate the Jewish community and how, I guess, everyone was looking after me, looking out for me.

Interviewer: This section is about the praying aspect or traditions - the essence of Judaism, its rituals and observances and the passing down from generation to generation. Can you tell me about your religious practices, if any?

Tami Sussman: In my group of friends, I'm the most unreligious person. What's funny is that my closest group of friends are Jewish but they make fun of me for being quite unreligious. I don't pray anymore. I did pray in high school. We were forced to pray in our little prayer section in the morning. I used to pray for stupid things like hoping that a boy would like me. Then I used to pray every time I thought I was going to throw up. I'd say, "If I don't throw up, please God, I will start praying to you again." Then if I did throw up, I'd just forget about that the next day and then not pray. Isn't that terrible?

I did go to synagogue as a child. I think my parents wanted me or my sister and I to have that experience, and I did watch my dad put on his tefillin and he'd wear his tallit, but I didn't really pray. My mum didn't pray. She'd hold the siddur open to look like she was praying, but she was really talking like a lot of the Jewish women do in synagogue. I would very rarely pray. I'd mainly be checking out the cute boys on the other side of the mechitza, which is the separation [between men and women].

Then growing up in high school, we did continue to go to synagogue. I learned how to pray. In high school, we had prayers in the morning for half an hour, where we were forced to pray, which I don't think was the best method looking back. Perhaps I even taught myself how to pray. I knew that it was nice to have quiet meditation time in a hectic day - I could appreciate that. I've never understood what I was saying, and the translations were old English translations, and I didn't really get that. I did sometimes pray for the health of family members or friends.

I guess I was praying to a higher being. I knew that they referred to him as Hashem. Now looking back that makes me angry. Why wasn't it her? Now, I consider myself more agnostic. If someone asked me "What religion are you?" I'd say, "Well, I'm a cultural culinary Jew, religiously undecided." I just don't know. I'm not an unbeliever. I think there's something up there or some people, maybe Hashem and Allah and Ganesh and Buddha, are all sitting there at a conference table looking down and laughing. I don't know, but I don't go to synagogue anymore, on festivals. I don't pray to a God. I did get married at the beginning of last year and it was important to my husband's family that we were married by a rabbi underneath a chuppah, a canopy. Out of respect to them and understanding that perhaps maybe in years' time I might look back and regret not doing it that way, so I decided to go through with that.

Again, it was more about the rituals. I loved the ritual involved in a Jewish wedding. The stuff that was said in Hebrew, I don't understand what it meant, and I'm cool with that. I know it made a lot of people happy and I know that it made my grandmother happy. I think that, yes, our wedding is about me and it's about my husband, but it's also about honouring our family as well. Despite what people have said about it, "It should only be about the bride and groom." I disagree with that. I think

that we're welcoming each other into each other's families and we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them. So they should play a major role in that day.

Interviewer: What traditions do you feel are important or you're most passionate about?

Tami Sussman: I'm really passionate about any traditions or learnings that surround family and place family as a priority and focus. Friday night dinners are really important to me. There was a time where we weren't having Friday night dinners and then my sister and I came together. We thought this was really important, especially after we moved out of home. The festivals, coming together at those meals, sharing that meal over Passover - I find that a really important festival. Retelling the story of the Jewish exodus out of Egypt, I find symbolic for the way that the Jews have had to flee many times and celebrate the way that the Jewish people have overcome adversity and persecution.

Interviewer: Are there any teachings that you follow?

I remember as a primary school student at a Jewish day school listening to the rabbi talk about the concept of lashon hara which means 'evil tongue'. He was telling us the story about someone who'd said something nasty about someone else and he went to the rabbi and said "I said something nasty about someone. What should I do?" And the rabbi said "Take a feather pillow, go to the window and let all the feathers loose." So the man did that and the rabbi said "Now go and pick up all of those feathers that are now in the wind". And the man said "I can't do that - it's impossible." And the rabbi said "Well that's the lesson we've learnt. When you say something bad about someone you can't take it back. You never know where it's going to go and how far it can go."

Another lesson is about how you can ruin someone's whole life by a comment and that's as bad as murdering someone because you could destroy everything in their life. Pretty hectic to tell someone in primary school! But I've always thought about that lesson. I've spoken about it with friends, especially girls who like to gossip. I've always tried, as best as I can, not to get involved in that and sometimes I'm much more able to stop myself than at other times. I've been told that a lot of religions have a similar parable so it's not specifically a Jewish tale but it was told to me at primary school and it has stayed with me.

But to be honest a lot of the things I was told at school by my religion teachers and rabbis I didn't really connect with and I spent a lot of time doing other homework in those classes. And Hebrew teachers, as a general rule, and there are exceptions to that rule, are pretty scary people - or they used to be back in the 90s.

Interviewer: Even though you are an Australian you have been surrounded by Jewish culture, how does it feel to belong to a community that has common traditions and history?

I feel very blessed to belong to a Jewish community with a rich culture, rich history. I feel that in a way, I was born with some instincts and brought up with an instinct that I wouldn't have received had I just been born to Aussies. I feel a bit guilty saying that, too, I feel a bit judgmental, like Aussies don't have any culture. I think they do but I think there's something about coming from a group of people who are survivors and who have a survival instinct, who are strong - that is inspiring. Double edged sword though, because on the flip side, I sometimes feel like it's a burden, like I have to succeed, otherwise, what they did and what they fought for will mean nothing.

I know a lot of people feel an instinct or feel an inclination to be religious, and to follow the religious practices of Judaism, because so many people died fighting for what they believed in. I see that I need to be a successful person. I need to be thriving in order to honour what my grandparents went through. That can come at a cost, because I'm quite often down on myself for what I've achieved. I feel like I have to achieve more in order to live up to that expectation, in order for them to feel a sense of pride.

And also, because they started with nothing and ended up, not exactly ruling an empire, but they built themselves up from nothing and had a small business. I've just started a small business and I didn't start with nothing and I have the language and network that they didn't have, so I constantly put pressure on myself to have to succeed.

Interviewer: Do you think that when you have children of your own that you will be passing along some Jewish traditions to them? If so, which do you think?

Tami Sussman: My husband and I are at the stage where we've talked about when we will have children and what we'd tell them, because we both decided that we don't believe in Hashem. But he wants to tell our children that there is a God and that Hashem does exist, and I say, "Well, I want to tell them that they need to find it out for themselves." We're still kind of tossing it up. We're going to find that happy median, that happy place in between.

I definitely want to teach my children about Jewish history and what the Jews have been through over the centuries. I want to teach my children about Jewish practices and Jewish beliefs. I'd love to teach them the prayers for Shabbat, bringing in the Shabbat with the candles, blessings over the wine, over the bread. And I'd love to teach them, obviously, about the festivals.

But I also want to teach them about other religions and their beliefs and festivals and their practices and history as well. Yes, there'll be more of a focus on Jewish history because that's personal to us, but I'm at that planning phase, where I've actually have to think about what will I teach them? I want to do Christmas with my kids, too. I'd love to have a Christmas tree and celebrate the cultural aspect of Christmas. My cousins and my husband are like, "You can't do that. You can't have a Christmas tree in your house." I'm thinking, "Why not?"

I'd love to do Chinese New Year with my kids as well. I'd love for them to be open minded and less ignorant. My parents obviously did the best that they could but I definitely felt sheltered. Coming out of high school I felt that my Jewish education was great in many ways, but that just left me in the dark about a lot of other religions and other cultures.

Interviewer: What do you think is the best thing about being Jewish in Australia?

Tami Sussman: The things that spring into mind are sometimes the best thing and the worst thing, which is so typically Jewish. You just can't have pleasure without pain and guilt. We need to remember the horrible things that happened within the pleasure through what we eat to celebrate that.

The best thing about being Jewish, specifically in Australia is when I'm meeting Aussies who aren't really familiar with Jewish cultural practices, more often than not have positive things to say. Or, they'll have positive connotations. I'll say, "I'm Jewish." Then, they'll talk about, "Oh, how funny is

Seinfeld or how funny is Larry David." "I love bagels "and "Oh, I went to New York and I stayed with a Jewish family and they were awesome."

Of course, there's a flipside to that and sometimes I hate just being put in a box and labeled the Jew, the token Jew. Sometimes I just want to say, "Yes, well, Seinfeld and Larry David are American and that's so different to ... You don't know me, you can't just put me in a box straight away." I guess there's a level of, I don't know, exoticism.

I've never asked my mum and dad if they even believed in God. But recently I said, "Do you actually believe in God? Do you believe in Hashem?" My mum was like, "I don't know." My dad said, "I've never really thought about it." I'm like, "What do you mean you never thought about it?" He's like, "It was just I never questioned it." I guess my generation is very much into questioning and therapy and all of that. They came from a generation not really talking about things, not really over analysing things. I can't remember what they said. I think my dad ended up saying, "I suppose so." I just think he didn't even want to go there, and I don't remember what my mom said. I have a cousin who would say, "Of course, it's Hashem. Of course, I believe in Hashem."

Even though I don't believe in Hashem, there's a little part of me that's like, " Oh, no, but what if he does exist and just by saying I don't believe in him he's going to strike me down?"

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

Tami Sussman: The word naches to me means the pride that my parents or grandparents have. To me naches means the pride and joy that people's family or kids give them. I remember visiting my nana and her asking, "How did you do in your test?" and telling her that I did well, and she would always say, "I am proud of you." Yes, she'd always just be proud: "You are the best in your class." And I'd say, "No, I'm not." She'd say, "I know you are the best in your class."

I remember my parents coming to watch me in school concerts, or I'd bring home a piece of artwork, which was probably really bad, but my mum just thinking it was the best thing ever, and her framing it and putting it up on the wall. It was like, "Look what my daughter can do." That's naches, probably way out of proportion and really unhealthy, come to think about it. It gave me a false sense of security growing up, that I was just the best. Then, I went out into the real world and realised that I wasn't the best at everything.

Naches, I guess, also, to me, means feeling lucky and getting joy from my family. My sister's just had a baby and I now have a niece. I always looked at other people talking about their kids, about how wonderful their child was and I'm thinking, "Oh, that's so annoying." And now I've got this niece and I think she's the best thing ever. I'm like, "Okay, I get it now." Naches is thinking what you have is just the best thing ever.

I have a memory of high school. My sister and I told my mum that we didn't want to go to the synagogue we went to anymore. We wanted to go to a different one because we'd been there for a Bar Mitzvah and all the boys there were really good looking and we didn't have any talent in our synagogue, and that's why we wouldn't go. She said, "No, we're sticking to the one that we belong to." So my sister and I said, "We'll go to other one", because my sister could drive by then.

"We'll go to that one, and you can go with dad to your synagogue" and she started crying. We're like, "What? What is going? You don't even pray."

She said, "Synagogue for me isn't about praying. It's about standing there and having you two next to me so I can show off my girls." That was quite an eye-opening thing for me. I thought, "Wow, we are her joy, just being next to us and having us next to her. We bring her naches."

Interviewer: This is almost a related question - what do you think you will hope for your own children?

Tami Sussman: I hope that my children are respectful of myself and my husband, and respectful of their grandparents. I hope that they're kind in terms of their Jewishness. I hope that they are proud of where they come from and don't take for granted the facts that it was a struggle for their ancestors a lot of the time. I also hope that they are really open-minded and embracing of other cultures as well. I just had a few experiences where I've met Jewish people who are, I call them, redneck Jews, who just don't want to have anything to do with anyone else and can be judgmental of other cultures.

I just hope that they can find the balance between being proud of who they are whilst also being respectful of other people in their beliefs and their cultures. I'd really love for them to learn how to cook so that they can cook for me when I'm old, and hopefully, I want them to be a Jewish doctor. No, I don't really! I'd love them to just find happiness and be successful in a way that doesn't have the pressure to be successful but to be happy and be independent.

Interviewer: I know it's still early days, you're a 28 year old. But what do you think is your biggest achievement in life and why?

Tami Sussman: Look, I know that my grandmother's biggest achievement was that I ended up marrying a Jewish man - that's pretty big for her. I wouldn't say that's my biggest achievement, though he is an achievement, finding a lovely life partner. That question, what's my biggest achievement, do I have to answer it?

Interviewer: Yeah, I hope.

Tami Sussman: There's not one thing that stands out - yet.

Interviewer: Are there any activities that you are involved in with the wider community that bring you naches?

Tami Sussman: People ask me what my favourite job was after I graduated or through uni and I always say that the job I had at the Burger Centre in Randwick, which is the day centre that's part of Montefiore nursing home, was my favourite job. I was employed as an activities officer and that gave me the opportunity to meet a lot of older Jewish people, and hear their stories. I was desperate for work, I'd just graduated from drama school so of course, I had no real prospects before me and I needed a job. My sister said "There's a job going at the Burger Centre - they need an activities officer. You'd be great." I thought, "I don't know if I really can handle old people." I didn't know if it would be quite for me, but it definitely made me a much kinder, more patient, person. It opened me up to a whole part of me that I didn't really know existed – a kind part of me, which never really

embraced my maternal side. It gave me a new level of understanding about the Jewish experience and about getting old.

In terms of community work, I struggle with feeling guilty, like I don't do enough for the community. In high school, we had to do community work, and I did mine at the Montefiore Home. After school I was a struggling artist, so I wasn't in the position to ... I just had to work to survive. I don't like to think of visiting my grandparents as charity work either. I know that there are a lot of people in my generation who do all this community work but don't really do enough for their own grandparents. Whereas, I've always felt that charity starts at home, and that, "Yes, I could be out fund raising for this organisation, but you know what? Actually, my grandmother needs help, so I'm going to put my energy towards that." Which could just be a cover for me feeling guilty for not being a charitable enough person.

Interviewer: I did read somewhere that you were involved in running anti-bullying workshops?

Tami Sussman: Yes, but that was employment, I was paid for that. I haven't been able to work for free.

Interviewer: Is there footage for that poem you mentioned?

Tami Sussman: Yes – it's on YouTube.

Tami Sussman: When the organisers of this project asked me if I had any memorabilia, my first response was, "No, I don't think I do and I'm really sorry." Then, I thought, "I'll just check." I called my mum and I asked her, "Do you know if dad has kept anything?" She said, "It's funny you mentioned that because we recently found the journal log or register that my grandparents had from their kosher butcher shop. It was for people who had an account and would get their meat and pay once a month or whatever." They have it, and my dad kindly lent it to me to look through, and today is the first time that I've actually seen it.