

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

THOMAS WOLF: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Thomas Wolf

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

Interview Date: 27 May 2015

Interview Location: Bondi

Transcribed by and date: 5 July 2015

Copyright: Waverley Council

Interviewer: First of all to start off if you could tell me your name and when and where you were born.

Thomas Wolf: My name when I was born was, in Hungarian, you put the surname first, it's Wolf, Tamás. When we arrived in Australia, I anglicised the Tamás to Thomas which is its equivalent and retained the family name so people often say to me, "Well, what was your name back in Hungary?" The answer is, "It's still Wolf."

The middle name I adopted much, much later in life at about the time of my graduation. Everybody was, because I'm a lawyer by occupation, everybody seemed to have middle names. It was very Anglo thing to do so I adopted an adaptation of father's middle name. My father's name was Jula or Julius and I adopted Jules as my middle name. I was born in 1946. A year and a day after my father came home from a concentration camp in Mauthausen. I was born 7th of August in 1946. My dad was a concentration camp survivor. My mother was a Budapest ghetto survivor. She was one of the Wallenberg people [Swedish Consul General Raoul Wallenberg saved many Hungarian Jews] along with my sister. My sister was aged five when I was born but she was three, three and a bit when they were on the way to being shot on the banks of the Danube and they had managed to escape and survive. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here today.

Interviewer: You were born in?

Thomas Wolf: I was born in Budapest in Hungary in 1946.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what was happening in Hungary sort of leading up to the time that you left Hungary and came to Australia and circumstances that led up to that?

Thomas Wolf: After the Second World War and my dad came back from the concentration camps. He was a master weaver and a loom tuner and because of his professional skills, he was elevated and elevated and elevated and because he was a socialist, ended up being fairly, the manager of a very, very big textile mill, and for that you had to be to be a senior Communist member. When the revolution broke out in 1956 and it wasn't the revolution itself, it was a fact that the Russians then came back in. It was rather obvious that there's going to be a change in Communist powers in Hungary. My father didn't feel safe because whereas pre-revolution, it was Communism A and after the revolution it was obviously going to be Communism B and there was going to be a purge of sorts, we had to get out. We're genuine political refugees in that sense.

We left Hungary in December of 1956. The revolution broke out on the 23rd of October in 1956. The building where we were living, we were living on one of the main avenues of Budapest called Rákóczi út and we lived almost directly across the road from the radio station. When the Russian tanks came back in, in early November, our home, the block of apartments we lived in was one of the first ones to be hit with incendiaries, and went up in flames. Our apartment wasn't affected at all. At that time, we were hiding in the coal cellar downstairs. We had to crawl out through the back of the building and we were lying on straw mattresses at a girl's high school behind. We then got back into the apartment and like I said, it was time to leave.

We basically walked across the border. My father, my mother, my sister and myself and another family that ended up going to Canada. We walked across the border on, I think, it's about 20th or 21st of December in 1956. By the time we crossed the border, the Russians were fully in

control of the borders. There were flares going up into the sky and we had to duck down and dive down into what was then already snow on the ground. It took us about four hours to cross 1.5 km to get into Austria. Then, once we arrived in Austria, we moved on to Vienna, got assistance there from an organisation called HIAS which is a Jewish welfare agency, international welfare agency. We were then put into a refugee camp in Austria first in a place called Korneuburg and then in Salzburg itself and from there, we went by train to Naples where we boarded a ship to come to Australia. The ship is the Flaminia which actually was a fairly well recognised migrant ship. It did a number of journeys to Australia.

Interviewer: You told me that you knew people that went to Canada. Why did your parents choose Australia in particular to come to?

Thomas Wolf: Interesting story. We have no family either in Australia or in Canada. When we left Hungary, we actually had papers permitting us to migrate to Israel. Even from Budapest, you're sort of walking across the border, we could've just got onto a bus, left Hungary. We had Israeli visas. The Hungarian revolution took place at about the same time as the Suez Crisis which was when there was a war between England, France and Israel and the Egyptians after the Suez Canal got nationalized. The English and the French were required to withdraw by the Americans. The Israelis stayed and my father said, "I'm not going to have my children assaulted." Instead of going there legally, we crossed the border illegally. My mother has family in South America that migrated prior to Second World War, the 1937, 1938 and we had entry permit to go to Uruguay, to Montevideo. Once again my father said, he said to my mother, "I'm not going to your family. I want to make a life."

I've got to add at this stage I was absolutely so respectful of family, my parents. My dad was 46 when all this was going on. I know that at 46, I wouldn't have had the guts to just pick-up the whole family and move. There's no way I would've done that. He had no English, no skills because as a loom tuner, as a master weaver, he actually worked with silk. Neither Australia or Canada has any silk to be woven. That was a very, very gutsy thing to do. The family that we came out with had family here in Australia so what we said, "Let's stick together." My family wanted to go to Canada. My dad really wanted to go to Canada but because of his Communist connections, we believe that there was an embargo put on him to go so close to USA in 1956 just after the McCarthy years. Sorry, got back to the story. We both applied to travel together to Canada. We both applied to travel together to Australia. We got the Australian visa. They got the Canadian visa. They ended up in Canada. We ended up without their family because we didn't know their family here in Australia.

When we arrived here, we got picked up at the dock by a complete stranger who introduced himself. He was a guy called Edie Geyer who later became a very well-known Sydney caterer, a kosher caterer and he ran a hostel up at Greenwich for the Jewish Welfare Society called Chip Chase. We we're taken to Chip Chase like many, many other migrants who had nowhere else to go and to this day, I still know quite a few of the kids that I was together at Chip Chase and not just Hungarians. It was an interesting time in my life. From the time we left Hungary for the next two years, there wasn't a time when I slept in a room other than with the entire family and or 50 other people because in the refugee camps around Austria, we were sleeping 50 to a room. Even going back to Hungary to the day I left, I left just after my 10th birthday, there wasn't a time when I was

alone in a room. We had a one-bedroom apartment and I slept in my parent's room. My sister slept in the lounge room but that was really common in Hungary at the time.

I was mostly raised by my grandmother, my mother's mother and that would become relevant when we talk later on about religion because my father's family are ultra-orthodox. My mother's family are Neologs, put it in Hungarian terms, progressive, to the extent that I think my paternal grandmother pretty well disowned us because we weren't religious enough. My father has family that lived in Mea Shearim in Jerusalem which was the ultra-orthodox section where they stone women if they wear short-sleeved shirts or things like that, so extremely, extremely orthodox people.

Interviewer: Can I take you back to that first time you arrived in Australia and really, what were your initial impressions of Australia and I suppose, specifically, this area when you first experienced it?

Thomas Wolf: Our first contact with Australia was Greenwich. It's Sydney, it was Greenwich. Before there was Fremantle where the ships first docked. My mother's absolute, absolute favourite food is just buttered bread with capsicum. When she got off the ship in Fremantle, got a capsicum, tasted it, spat it out because capsicum's got a certain flavour in Hungary. It looks the same but it's a completely different flavour here. Then we docked at Pyrmont under the old chimney stacks that you know, that many people will remember where Darling Harbour now is and mum saw the terrace houses and she wanted to get back on the ship and go back home. It wasn't something that she was fond of.

Keeping in mind we knew no language. None of us knew any language other than Hungarian. None of us had any occupation that could be usefully employed and we had about £5 in our pocket. Even Greenwich, the Jewish hostel, wasn't free. We were still required to pay. It was accrued. You have it for the first few weeks. They said, "Okay, we'll run up a tab," but at the end of the day had to be paid. Mum and dad got just about any job so they could. The first probably four or five years were extremely tough. Dad worked two jobs. Mum worked until 3:00 in the morning pedalling on her sewing machine at home. I'd be up until 3:00 in the morning snipping the corner of the sleeves and the collars to make sure that they lay nice and flat. I know quite a bit about the clothing industry which is why I became a lawyer to get out of it.

Then, my sister, who was still at school-age but because we had so little money, went to work. She got a job at Mark Foys selling. I think it was in haberdashery department and then eventually, she stopped working, went to Dover Height Girls [High School] and did her Leaving Certificate. With relatively little English, got her Leaving Certificate and matriculation enough to get into university more than a year and a half of high school. It was quite admirable. From Greenwich, we moved to Waverley then to Bondi and I went to Waverley Public School on Bronte Road where the police station is and the school is still there. From there, I ended up going to Vacluse High but my first impression was it was a challenge. I knew no English. I learned English because there was one particular kid at Waverley Public School who would give me a smack if I didn't tell him if I'd learned a new word every single day. He was a hard task master, became a bit of a thug, later on a professional rugby league player so [I don't] want to mention his name but I got belt it up almost everyday.

Interviewer: That's not good. How did your family find themselves in Waverley and then Bondi? Was it just chance or ...?

Thomas Wolf: Not really. Not really. Many of their friends moved into this area. We were in a hostel. We weren't in a permanent accommodation over at Greenwich. We knew it was only temporary accommodation so we moved from there to a boarding house in York Road, Centennial Park, [at the] fringe of Waverley. We were there for about six months and this is the time of key money. Many people today won't understand what that means but basically, you couldn't get accommodation unless you paid the existing tenant an amount of money so that he would give you the keys to the apartment. That's why it's called key money. Key money could be as much as, or what we paid, £300. At a day and age when the average weekly wage was £8 a week, we managed to save to £300 within about a year of arriving in Australia. A year and a half of arriving in Australia which was quite a thing to do. We scrimped. We saved.

I always talk about feast and famine which will also be relevant to you later on. There were times where there wasn't much on the table and one of my issues with, you can say I do eat, I eat a lot, is I got to learn that when there's food on the table is when you eat because there's times when there's not going to be food on the table. That was like that. Even here in Australia, it was like that. It was certainly like that in the refugee camps and on our journey to Australia.

Interviewer: Now, we'll skip through to food and can you tell me a little bit about Hungary's native foods and maybe a memory about eating your favourite food as a child?

Thomas Wolf: Hungary has many foods, mostly stolen from other nations in turn because everything in Europe is so closely knit. The Austro-Hungarian empire was so closely knit. You can't say this food is Czech, this food is Slovak, this food is Hungarian because we're all eating each other's foods. It might be called the Vienna schnitzel but we still ate it in Hungary. The one thing that I have of other Hungarian food is that it is peasant food, it is not sophisticated like the French will have haute cuisine. There is no haute cuisine in Hungary. [There were] potatoes, meats, vegetables, lots of soups. What is in Hungary, a goulash, is a soup, it's not stew. All of it is the sort of food that anybody can cook. You don't need to go to a cooking school to learn how to cook Hungarian food.

My part of the family never kept kosher. To us, it made no difference what it was. As long as it could be cooked and put on the table, it would be eaten. My father took exception to eating escargot because in Mauthausen, he had to eat snails to survive. Apart from that, we'd eat anything. My mother was a, to me, in my mind, a brilliant cook. It was very plain folksy stuff. We'd always have a soup because my dad loved soup – chicken soup, potato, green peas, anything like that. Main course would be crumbed meats. It can be Vienna schnitzel or chops or anything. It can be just barbecue. Not barbecue because barbecue is totally non-Hungarian but the pan-grilled meats always accompanied by either rice or potato, not the three vegetables that Australians or Anglo-Saxons are used to. What would be considered to be most strange to anybody other than Hungarian is there's always a sweet dish served up with the main course. Like there'd be cling peaches or stewed apples. It was part of the main course. It wasn't a dessert.

You had your meat, you had a spoon of this, you had a spoon of that, layered potatoes ... these are all dishes that I still cook to this day and we ate the whole animal so chicken livers and innards are all part and parcel to the Hungarian diet, Hungarian menu.

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

Thomas Wolf: I didn't get to eat any until fairly well down the way. One, we couldn't afford to go out and eat and it wasn't something therefore that my mother knew how to cook and secondly, I didn't get invited into an Australian household so to speak to eat dinner or to have anything other than maybe a glass of water if I played with one of my schoolmates until well, well, well down the way. I remember the first roast dinner in the way that we know of roast dinner; I would've been in my mid-20s when I took out a girl whose mother said, "Come for dinner." That was the first time I ever had a roast dinner because once again it's not the Hungarian kind of cooking.

Interviewer: Did you like it?

Thomas Wolf: I do. I do. I've got to say. Unfortunately, I can no longer have much of it because I've had some medical issues which mean I can't eat red meat but I certainly like the crispy bits of a roast.

Interviewer: Do you think your migration wave has influenced food in the local area?

Thomas Wolf: Oh definitely. Most definitely. When we first arrived, I think in the first Continental restaurant that opened up in the Bondi area was a place called Gelato Bar across the road in Campbell Parade, run by the Berger, family, Hungarians, and you'd actually get Hungarian food there but once again, we only went there when there was absolute celebrations to be had because it was money. We didn't have any. Eventually, when we were okay, my mum and sister opened up a market stall at Paddy's Markets and very successfully. Mum was an absolute genius. She could look at somebody wearing a garment and reproduce it within five minutes. We were always first with the latest fashion at Paddy's Markets. By the time the others woke up to this being the fashion, we had already sold out and we were on the next line. It managed to get my niece and my nephew through very nice private school education et cetera, et cetera.

We became fairly comfortable by about 1968, 1969, 1970s. It took awhile. Sorry 1958. By the time I was in high school, we were relatively comfortably off.

Interviewer: Given your sort of limited finances, were there any special foods that were prepared or eaten during Shabbat or get-togethers, Jewish holydays, that kind of thing?

Thomas Wolf: I'm sure other people have told you this joke before. What's a definition for Jewish holyday? The answer is they tried to kill us. They didn't make it. Let's eat. That's how you define a Jewish holyday. Every Jewish holyday is a feast and that element of the hunger- feast situation that I also described a little bit earlier, when times are good, there's food on the table. When times are not, there's no food. When there's food on the table, you're inclined to eat more than you need. It's like a buffet dinner. You always overeat at a buffet. Even now. When I cook for a dinner party for eight people, I always cook for 12. Left-overs you can always have later but terribly embarrassing if you run out of food. That's the way it always is. It always has been in my family. We're a very close-knit family. I'm still very, very close with my sister. We have never had an argument over anything substantial.

We disagree about silly things but nothing substantial. I get on with everybody in the family and we quite often have family functions, family feasts. Fortunately, I believe I'm about to have

another family feast coming up in a few months. We're about to become grandparents again so that will be a feast.

Interviewer: Congratulations! Congratulations! What we might do is move forward to the pray section now and of course the essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances and in this section, we'd love to hear about mitzvahs and traditions and how it changed your identity and how things have been passed down from generation to generation. You might start off if you can just discuss your religious practices now and how they compared to before you migrated from Hungary.

Thomas Wolf: I think it's better if I did it the other way around which is tell you about what it was in Hungary because I've already explained to you my dad was in the Communist Party. I didn't know there was such a thing as religion. I didn't know what religion I was until we crossed the border into Austria. I knew there were rumblings of Jewish, not Jewish, that kind of thing. I lived with the nightmare of staying in the same bedroom as my father and mother for the first 10 years of my life and afterwards. There wasn't one single night when my dad wouldn't wake up in the middle of the night with a nightmare about the concentration camp and what happened. I knew about that. I knew about the horrors of it. I came to realise that we're a minority or selected or whatever you want to call it, when during the Hungarian revolution, we found chalk marks on our doors in the block of flats where there were about 30 flats in the building and all the Jews had their doors marked with chalk.

Now I don't know what whoever did it had in mind for us but certainly, I knew we were different. Then in Austria, when first we've crossed into Austria, we arrived there about 2:00 in the morning. Old school house, everybody is lying on the ground. We walked in and somebody called out from the back of the room, "Here come the Jews." Another reason why we then packed up before the buses came off to Vienna and joined up with HIAS, the Jewish agency. That to me was totally strange. I didn't know what I was. I knew my grandmother, my father's mother, we'd go over there on a Friday night and she had these candles burning. I didn't know what they were. I noticed that my parents a few times during the year, didn't eat. Meant nothing until I came to realise after we'd left, I learned about the different religions because dad said to me early on, "You pick what you want to be."

A very progressive man and I compared various religions, I read about a lot of religions before I decided out of respect for my parents that I wanted to be Jewish. I studied my Bar Mitzvah at Temple Emanuel Synagogue at Woollahra with Cantor Deutsch another beloved Hungarian but then I couldn't have my Bar Mitzvah because on my 13th birthday, I was actually in a hospital about this close to death with peritonitis. I had a burst appendix. I used to play a lot of sport, a lot of soccer. I was kicked in the stomach and obviously I was in pain but didn't realise that it was a burst appendix, not just a muscle spasm, until it was almost too late. My Bar Mitzvah actually consisted of being called up to the Torah about six months after my birthday because the Parasha [the portion of the Torah read by a Bar Mitzvah boy] was completely different to what I had learned, all I could do was do the blessing and Mike Deutsch did the reading.

That was it. That was my Bar Mitzvah. It was totally different from my children. They actually had to go through the ritual of it all but that was also at the Emanuel. We stayed progressive as opposed to my father's family who are, to this day, very orthodox. Those that still practice.

Interviewer: Do you attend synagogue?

Thomas Wolf: Not as often as my rabbi would like. I get on very well with [Rabbi] Jeffrey Kamins. He's a dear friend. He's always saying he doesn't see enough of me. We go on the yahrzeits [anniversary of death]— on memorials to parents – and sometimes during the High Holydays. I really hate crowds. I have this dislike of crowds so I don't like milling around. I do, for example, I go for special occasions. I'm involved with the Scouts so we go for Anzac day services and that to synagogue. It's always to the Emanuel. I don't particularly like the orthodox service.

Interviewer: I know that there's no particular Jewish traditions that are being passed down through your family because you made your own mind up about all of that, right? Is there any particular traditions that you feel most important that you're passionate about?

Thomas Wolf: I think Judaism is a religion of morality and that is what I'm most passionate about. In other words, it's the morals of lifestyle that I hope I've passed onto my children rather than just knocking their head against the brick wall and Bible bashing. Through that also, this idea that if you get something out of something, you've got to give it back. You've got a duty to return what you get. Once again, I hope I've passed that onto my children.

Interviewer: Every Jewish person wants some naches in their life and it 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?

Thomas Wolf: Naches is a Yiddish word. And I don't speak Yiddish, most Hungarians don't. understand but to me it means joy. I hope that in their lifetime, I gave joy to my parents. I know that I get a lot of joy out of my children and now one grandson. Hopefully, more in the future. That is what to me is naches. It is not in any shape or form a religious concept. It can be, it doesn't matter what religion you are. You can get joy out of the very same things and you can give joy the same way. I do a lot of volunteer work. It gives me extreme satisfaction. For example, over the years I was the first duty solicitor as a lawyer in Sydney. I set up the very first duty solicitor scheme. It was a free scheme. It then became a paid scheme. I stopped doing it when we got paid. I've been with the Scouts as a Scout leader now for 30 odd years. It gives me incredible satisfaction to see these kids grow up and I'm now into almost my third generation of kids. All three of my boys, I've got three sons, all three of them are Queen Scouts. They all went through the scouting system.

I hope I have some input into that although I must say I was never their leader. Whenever they moved from section to section I would move from that section so let I them be with somebody else. I would still see them. I'd grow up with them through Scouts. I'm now retired. As of another month from now I will not even have a practicing certificate as a lawyer. I now spend most of my time down at the men's shed repairing toys for the Bondi Toy Library making sensory panels for the Wairoa School which is a school for special needs children. I'm very much involved. My personal hobby at the moment is to build square rigger ships plank by plank. I'm not a carpenter. I've got arthritis in every joint and I find if I do this fine work, it stops being so painful. That all gives me great joy but I mean the greatest joy of all is of course, being with the family. At the end of the day, especially seeing that I have a family that gets on so well together.

Well, the scouts that I'm involved with are the Judean Scouts. They are down here in Bondi. They're the only Jewish scout group left in Sydney. At the one stage there were six or seven. They've all closed down over the years so there's only this one now left. In Melbourne, there's still quite a few. I'm taking them for example to the Jamboree in next January. I'm involved in, of all people, me, who doesn't keep kosher at all, I'm actually in charge of kosher catering for the Jamboree. It's a bit of a challenge but it's fun. I've been involved around the periphery, not so much periphery. I've actually been actively involved in some Jewish activities. I was on the board of an organisation called JASAA which then became Maccabi New South Wales which still functions today. I have had 10 carnivals, senior carnivals with Maccabi playing volleyball. I met my wife in Perth. She's a Melbourne Maccabi player. Met her at a Maccabi carnival in Perth. Got engaged in the Melbourne carnival, Maccabi carnival. Very nice Maccabi family.

I think at least one of my sons is interested in sports. The other ones aren't. He also did his internship with a fairly well-known Maccabi type person who was called Mike Wrublewski. That's my son David. He's very involved in basketball.