

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

ELEANOR SAUL: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Eleanor Saul

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: First things Eleanor, can you tell me your name and when and where you were born?

Eleanor: My name is Eleanor Saul. I was born Eleanor Cecile Solomon in Singapore in 1940 and I was a premature baby. All my siblings were home births apart from an elder sister who my mother had difficulty in her pregnancy. She was born in Singapore General Hospital and so was I. I was two months premature.

Interviewer: Was this something your mother wanted, to give birth to her children at home?

Eleanor: It was the norm for the Singapore Jewish community, the mothers to have their babies at home with the aid of a midwife who was also from the Singapore Jewish community.

Interviewer: Okay, it's interesting. Can you tell me a little bit about what was happening in Singapore around before you decided to come to Australia or before the family decided to come to Australia?

Eleanor: I'd like to tell you a little bit of the history of Singapore. We were Baghdadi Jews. My paternal great grandparents immigrated to Singapore to get away from persecution from Iraq, Baghdad. They arrived in Singapore in the late 1890s and my mother's parents left Baghdad to go to Singapore in 1926.

Before 1926, Singapore never had a rabbi or a religious leader. My great grandfather, my father's grandfather, took over all those religious rites. He did all the rites. My mother's father, my grandfather, when he arrived in Singapore, he took over the duties of being the rabbi in the synagogue. We had a beautiful synagogue. We still have it. It's still in Singapore, the Maghain Aboth Synagogue in Waterloo Street and my mother's father led the community in prayer for 16 years.

Interviewer: That's lovely. Can you tell me a little bit about the circumstances of your family coming to Australia, what was happening in the country at the time?

Eleanor: I'll have to tell you about the Japanese occupation. I was only four years old and my younger sister, Florence, was born whilst the Japanese were throwing the bombs in Singapore on the 16th of February. Singapore fell to the Japanese on the 15th of February. I remember quite well, I was only three, four years old and Florence was born, my little sister was born in the shelter whilst the bombs were being thrown in Singapore.

We all lived under the one roof. My father, my mother, his brothers, his mother, his father, my grandparents, all under the one roof in Singapore. During the Japanese invasion of Singapore, it was a tough time for us. I never really remembered my father until after the war. He was taken to jail in Changi Prison in 1943 and in 1945, [they] released him with all the other Jewish people that were taken to Changi and sent us to the Sime Road internment camp. I was only four.

I still have memories of the Japanese occupation in Singapore. One of [the soldiers] was called Puss in Boots. He used to arrive at the camp dead drunk and my duty was to rush to my mother and everybody at the camp to tell them that the Japanese soldiers were coming. The Japanese soldiers were coming. They had prepared to stop what they were doing and line up and kowtow to them, bow to them as they came.

This one Japanese soldier, Puss in Boots, was so cruel. The women shivered when he arrived at the camp and he kicked and rolled and kicked and rolled a 17 year old girl who became my sister-in-law in later years, because she didn't see him and she didn't bow to him. There was also a very kind Japanese soldier. We called him Grandpa. Whenever he came to the camp, all the children, all of us would run to him and he'd put his hands in pocket and give us each a sweet.

When the war was over, I still have memories of them rushing to pick up the leaflets that the British planes threw to the camps and ...

Interviewer: Between the end of the war, when did your parents decide to leave Singapore?

Eleanor: When Singapore had political turmoil then and the first chief minister of Singapore was a very good friend of my father, David Marshall. They worked together in the Jewish welfare board in Singapore. My father was going through a very tough time. He had the position of secretary of the Singapore City Council and we were living in a lovely, huge bungalow. They were happy years, happy years in Singapore, but the Jewish community were tight and they were close. My father didn't see any future for us there. Although my elder sister married ... when we were there, she was married at the age of 17. It was an arranged marriage. Most of the marriages before the war were arranged.

Actually, my mother and father's wedding was arranged too, although she told us that the first time she met him she fell off her bike when she was riding in Short Street where he lived. He ran to her aid and she saw his beautiful green eyes and fell in love with him. She was only 16 and she married at the age of 16. It was a union made in heaven.

Interviewer: That's lovely to hear.

Eleanor: We lost them. They were both young. My mother was 51 when she lost her life here and my father was only 53, but they brought us ...

Interviewer: Again, coming back to why they decided to come to Australia, because I think we got to the reasons there. Why did they choose Australia in particular?

Eleanor: My father, he was chosen to participate in the first intake of the Colombo Plan. I don't know if you've heard about the Colombo Plan. It's a study for Asians to come to Australia and do field study and study office administration and to go to homes and go to parliament ... Entertained by parliamentarians and universities and study family life. They even went out to homes to study family life.

When he came in ... I think it was in 1953 ... he came to Sydney and he absolutely loved it around Sydney Harbour. He loved beautiful Sydney. I'm sure he had it in his mind then that if ever he had to bring his family for a better future, it will be Sydney and that's how he came to Sydney.

Interviewer: Okay. What year did you go to Sydney?

Eleanor: I came to Sydney in ... We left the shores of Singapore in late September 1959 and it took 14 nights to arrive in Sydney with a stopover at Melbourne on the day before. It was on the Dutch Liner, Oranje. It was a great experience, a great experience. Charmaine Solomon, the cook that ... I'm sure you heard of her. She was on the same ship with her husband and their two children.

Interviewer: How did you end up in this local area?

Eleanor: My aunt lived in Sydney, I think a year before we left Singapore, and she brought the telephone directory of Sydney to us. My sisters and I were going through the pages and looking at all the names of the Jewish people living in Bondi and we were so excited because we thought, "At last, we'll come to Sydney. We'll have a great social life. Look at all the Jewish names there."

We were somewhat protected in Singapore. We didn't have that freedom of mixing with the local Jewish boys, although we went to Habonim and Oneg Shabbat. It's a Jewish community on Saturdays. We were excited. We just wanted a new social life, a new life in Sydney.

Interviewer: What were your first impressions of the local area when you moved here?

Eleanor: I loved it. I love the double-decker bus, the trams. The first day or the second day we came, a friend of us brought the Sydney Morning Herald with cuttings of vacancies or jobs that we could go and apply. We went about the city. It was so exciting to see everyone around us white, because at that time, Australia had the White Australia Policy.

Eleanor: But, I have to say that we were somewhat disappointed and more shocked when we came here to realise that we were really not accepted by the Jewish community here because we were Sephardi. Having been brought up in Singapore, I suppose we were naïve. I never thought the different customs and whatever in Jewish people. I thought Jews were Jews everywhere they were. They were one, but it was somewhat of a shock that over the years has all smoothen out.

We didn't even have a synagogue when we arrived here and my mother was so upset. She cried, she told my father, "You made me leave our beautiful synagogue to come here and pray in a school hall." That's where they had the prayers, in a school hall in Flood Street for the High Holy Days.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about some of the challenges that you and your family faced when you first arrived in Australia?

Eleanor: No challenges really. We didn't have any ... I suppose going out to find ourselves work, a job which I had no problem in getting one. I was offered a secretarial position with the Philips Electrical Industries in Clarence Street. I was so excited when I first arrived here, because I met my partner who is the younger brother of my sister's husband, 10 years younger.

When I was in Singapore, he used to come visit us and I used to ... I even dreamt he put me on a pedestal. He came to Sydney in 1952 before my father came on the Colombo Plan. He was part of the contingent in the Jamboree to Sydney. When he arrived, Rabbi [Dr Israel] Porush went to the camp to meet him personally because he was the only Jewish boy in the contingent. From that time, Sonny had a close association with Rabbi Porush.

Interviewer: That's lovely. How do you think the Jewish community has shaped the local area?

Eleanor: Now, it's improved a lot. Sephardis are marrying Ashkenazi and we're being accepted. We have our own synagogue which is wonderful. I go to synagogue every Saturday and I love it.

Interviewer: We might get you to expand on the way that Sephardi Jews are now being a little bit more openly embraced.

Eleanor: Yes they are. The Sephardi Jews are being more embraced now than when we first arrived here. Although in the early years, when my nephews were getting married, you could still see that segregation. There was no wanting to get together, but gradually as the years went by, we've been accepted and it's much nicer now. Much, much nicer now. I suppose the Ashkenazim realise today that we had different prayer chantings, different customs.

Interviewer: Why don't we move on to start talking about food? Food is a very important part of ...

Eleanor: I'm in the choir and we sing food. Yes, the Sephardi food is just unbelievable. You're whetting my appetite now when I think of it. My favourite dish is the fishcakes. Properly made fishcakes, not the easy stuff that they do here, but it's a lot of work. The outside is made of rice, minced fish, coriander, celery all bound together. The stuffing is fish slightly spiced. Very hard, very fiddly to make, but delicious.

Interviewer: Sounds beautiful.

Eleanor: It is.

Interviewer: Sounds beautiful. This is something that you would have eaten back in Singapore.

Eleanor: Absolutely. I've done it here about four, five times, but I have to think about because it takes two days to get the ingredients and to prepare and to stand in the kitchen for long time. Our main dishes till today, Friday night would be banya which is ladies' finger or okra and it's cooked with tomatoes and mint and lemon and served with rice and chicken. Till today, my grandchildren even enjoy that dish.

Then there are mahashas which is stuffed cabbage rolls and spinach. We had special mahasha leaves, edible leaves. I've never ever seen it here, but the closest, it's like spinach leaves, that's the closest, and stuffed tomatoes. That's the Friday night Shabbat dinner. Plau [rice] with chicken through it and roast potatoes, deep fried potatoes.

The Saturday dish was hamim. It's an authentic dish, rice, chicken, spicy and cooked for 24 hours or more than 24 hours actually. In Singapore, it was cooked over a coal fire, because on Sabbath, you couldn't even turn on the lights. Our servants did it for us, but no cooking, nothing. That dish is hamim and that's usually on a Saturday on the Sabbath.

Interviewer: Do you have a lot of good memories spending time in the kitchen with your mum?

Eleanor: Yes.

Interviewer: Tell me about it.

Eleanor: Yes, I used to watch mum cook. I don't follow recipes. When I'm doing my cooking, I just do what she did. A bit of this and a bit of that. It always turns out lovely, always.

Interviewer: What do you think your favourite food is or favourite was as a child?

Eleanor: As a child, banya – a beautiful meal. It's so edible. It's tasty. Like I said, these fishcakes too, but they're so fiddly and hard to make.

Interviewer: Was being kosher part of your ...

Eleanor: We were always kosher. In Singapore, yes. Yes, yes, but when we came out here, we started being kosher and then gradually found it too difficult, but mum used to kosher it herself. She use to get ... Put the salt and whatever to kosher the meat, but we were kosher for a long time until gradually the years went by. That was sort of given up.

Interviewer: Okay. When you first arrived in Australia, what did you think of Australian food and how do you think that's changed?

Eleanor: When we first arrived, there was no McDonald's. Even the Italian shops, fish and chips, none of them existed. My husband, Sonny, was studying accountancy here. He was two years in Sydney before we arrived. His meals in the weekend consisted of lamingtons, because the landlady wouldn't cook in the weekend, only provided meals in the weeknights.

Yeah, there were no fish and chips shops, no hamburgers until ... I think it was about three, four years after we arrived that the Italians and Greeks and whatever came to Sydney and brought their expertise.

Interviewer: Eleanor, how has your migration wave influenced food in the local area?

Eleanor: Yeah, we had a weekly, women's weekly with our group and all that and friends. When I went to work and we had to, each one, bring in a dish for a certain function. I'd make my delicious Chinese [roja]. It's a delicious fruit salad with tofu and peanut sauce, and chili sauce for the gravy and they always enjoyed it and I still do that dish. The food in Singapore, the hawkers food that we brought here with us, the recipes.

Interviewer: Is that being embraced by the community over here?

Eleanor: Yes. Yes, it has.

Interviewer: Okay. We might go on, and if you can tell me about any special foods that you prepare during family get-togethers or Jewish holidays.

Eleanor: Yeah, that's a roja. When I have my family over, I do a curry, a chicken curry and a beef curry, and the banya dish, and the dish of fried noodles. Always roast potatoes or deep fried potatoes. That's a must. I didn't mention pickles.

Pickles plays a big part in our diet. We love it. My grandmother used to make vegetable pickle called [chakla bakla]. I believe that's a term that the Kurds used for their hot cannons and I don't know how maybe the Baghdadi Jews sort of gave the name of their hot pickle [chakla bakla]. Lemon pickle, mango pickle, it has to be. There's always pickle there.

Interviewer: Have you developed a taste for any of the traditional European Jewish food?

Eleanor: Not really. I tried having herring, a gefilte fish and I just can't have it, but I love smoked salmon with capers and bagels. I love that. That is one that I've learned to eat here in Sydney.

Interviewer: We're going to move on now to the next section which is pray. Of course, the essence of Judaism is really based in sort of rituals and observances. We love to hear about Bar Mitzvahs and traditions and whatever shapes your identity and what's being passed down from generation to generation. The first question I'll ask you is how are your religious practices now compared to before you migrated?

Eleanor: I still light my Shabbat candles and I always have Friday night dinner, Shabbat dinner with my 12 year grandson. He's my naches, my daughter's son. He's going to be Bar Mitzvah'ed in October and I go there and he conducts the Shabbat prayers.

Before that, I used to have my family over for Shabbat when my husband was alive. We kept that for many years. My sister and her family coming for Shabbat dinner. After the dinner, we'd play mahjong. This is one of the things we continued doing here for many years when we arrived in Sydney, playing mahjong.

Interviewer: That's with the ...

Eleanor: The tiles, the Chinese tiles. Yeah, love it. I brought up with it and backgammon.

Interviewer: Do you attend synagogue?

Eleanor: Yes, every Saturday and I love it. I love it. I go for Saturday morning prayers. I love listening to Rabbi Chriqui's sermons and I think it's extraordinary really that I sit on the right of [Rachel Shababo] whose father was the rabbi after my grandfather passed away. He came to be the rabbi in Singapore. She's the youngest daughter of Rabbi Shababo. On her left, Rabbi Chriqui's wife, [Dalia], sits.

I don't have that seat. I don't have that seat. My name is not on that chair with the Sephardi synagogue. By your chair, they have your name on the chair, but I've been doing that for the past four years, almost five years now, sitting on the right of Rachel, because the lady who owns that chair doesn't come. Doesn't attend synagogue.

I attend the Sephardi Synagogue in Fletcher Street and Rabbi Chriqui is the rabbi of that synagogue. Now and again, I attend his shiur or whatever he calls it, on a Wednesday night. He has a talk every Wednesday night. That is open to the members. I've been to a few, but now and again, these cold nights, I don't want to go out.

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

Eleanor: Traditions? Lighting my Sabbath candles. I have to do that and saying my Shema Yisrael every morning, every night.

Yeah, it's a prayer. It's asking God, HaShem, to help us and I do that every night and every morning. You have to have faith and ... I believe in divine intervention. This whole thing happening here, to me, is divine intervention, because I let ...

I didn't tell you that I wrote a book. It was launched last September. I started on it in 2009, thought I'd finish it in 2010 and my husband loved it. My late husband said, "go on, get it published. It's great", but I felt it was unfinished and at that time, he took terminally ill. I lost all incentive and I let it ...

It laid dormant for six years until my grandson, bless him, Isaac, nominated me to be a living historian for his year in school, in the Emanuel School and I committed to a month of Wednesdays. I felt, "All right, I'll do that," because I did all my homework. I did all the research and my whole history, my heritage. I did it and that connected me to the book again.

Before I knew it, Professor Clive Kessler from UNSW who I'd meet ... I worked for UNSW for 15 years and I'd meet him on the 400 bus and we got to talking and I told him I was working on a book and he gave me all the encouragement. Before I knew it, the book was printed by UNSW.

Interviewer: Yeah, when we're finished, we'll actually get you to give us a little bit of a summary of your book.

Eleanor: I'll give you the book.

Interviewer: No. We need you to talk about it. After we'll finish the questions.

Eleanor: Of what it has, what it contains?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Eleanor: Yeah, it's my whole life's story and my great grandparents. Yes. From leaving Baghdad to Singapore.

Interviewer: Okay. We'll get there. We've talked about the traditions that you feel are most important, that you actually practice and you feel passionate about it. What traditions have been passed down to you from your parents or grandparents?

Eleanor: My grandparents, they were really observant, all those High Holy Days. In Singapore, before the Simchat Torah ... I don't know whether you know Simchat Torah. It's a festival, rejoicing festival. We'd have this dumb tailor come to our home and sew for us, make three new outfits for my sisters and me. He'd stay in the home.

My mom used to take us to the shops, get the fashion books, look at the fashion books and pick our styles and dresses that we want, get the material and he'd stitch the dresses. We'd go off and show off in the synagogue in these festival days. They were great. We burst with excitement at getting new outfits.

Eleanor: He was deaf and dumb, but he knew what we wanted.

Interviewer: When you're talking about a dumb tailor, you actually meant ...

Eleanor: He was deaf and dumb because he had no tongue. I don't know what happened to his tongue. He'd grunt and we'd get the message across, but he knew what we wanted. It was exciting, very exciting.

Interviewer: What traditions have you and are you passing down to your own children and grandchildren?

Eleanor: In a way, my grandchildren know their roots. I was hoping that my grandson would have been Bar Mitzvah'ed, he's 24 now. He did when he was reaching the age, he asked his mum, "Mummy, can I have a bar mitzvah?" Cathy says, "No, you can't, because you're not Jewish." Sonny and I didn't want to press that, because as long as they're happy, we were happy, but we had them over for Shabbat dinner and they'd stand and have the kippahs on the heads.

Being Jewish was not a ... They didn't want it. My son never went to synagogue after he was Bar Mitzvah'ed. What can I say? Only at weddings and all that. He just didn't embrace the religion. Maybe one day he'll return to his maker, I don't know. I don't know, but the beautiful thing is Isaac, my daughter's son. He is learning all the Habonim songs, the Jewish songs that I learned in Singapore. He's singing it better than me.

Interviewer: That's a nice feeling.

Eleanor: He's in Emanuel. It's beautiful, that's my naches. I love it.

Interviewer: It's a fantastic thing to see those traditions actually being carried on for the next generation now.

Eleanor: I didn't tell you when we arrived here, when I came here after the birth of my first child, Caroline, in 1964. I suffered chronic asthma. Chronic asthma for 10 years. It was so debilitating. Honestly, there were times I just wanted someone to just slit my throat so I could breathe.

I was working at the time for the Prudential, Prudential Assurance. They're finished. Working for an insurance company, I felt that they could give me a life policy. They gave me a life policy, but my doctor did not give me a good medical report. His reports stated that I would have been dead by the age of 50, 55, because I was so chronically ill with asthma. I just can't believe that I'm cured from it. I didn't believe I'd see my children grow up, let alone be a grandmother. That's my naches.

Interviewer: Very nice. Speaking of naches, we'll move on to that now. It is sort of a concept that doesn't have a direct translation. One thing that I'd really like to hear is what the word naches means to you.

Eleanor: The word naches means to me ... I hope I'm not wrong, it's luck. I'm lucky. Luck. Mazzāl in Arabic, Baghdadi Arabic. Mazzāl, luck. You've got naches, good health, you see your children grow up. You see your grandchildren. You witness happy occasions, that's naches. Isn't that naches?

I don't know. I suppose that's what I think naches is. I've got naches. To think that I was dying and not ... I would be dead in my late 50s and here I am, I'll be 75 this year and I've got three beautiful grandchildren. Three beautiful grandchildren and I'm so proud of them.

Interviewer: I can tell. What do you hope for your children and now, your grandchildren?

Eleanor: I just want them to be good citizens. Do the right thing in life, because that's all that matters and they must not be afraid. Not be afraid to grab whatever opportunity comes their way, because that's what life is about. Life is a gamble. I love gambling. I didn't tell you that I punt on the horses every day of my life for the past 53 years. Every day. It's my hobby.

I have my system, so I can't lose all the time and I can't win all the time. It's my hobby. I have my system that I follow and I only do granny bets. From the time that I first arrived here in Sydney, I used to go with my mother to the TAB. We used to bet 25 cents and I'd have the place bet. Today, I can do 50 cent bets and I bet on my computer two minutes before the ... I can do it, but I ... I'm going off the track. Anyway, that's my hobby.

Interviewer: Very nice.

Eleanor: And singing. I love singing. I'm in two choirs. You'll have it on my thing. I attend two choirs, the Gaden Choir in Woollahra and the Green Square Singers in the City of Sydney.

Interviewer: I know you're about to go a rendition of Food, Glorious Food. Okay. Can you tell me what your biggest achievement is in life and why?

Eleanor: My biggest achievement, writing my story for my children and my grandchildren to know their roots. I think that's very important. To know your roots, where you came from and where you are heading.

Interviewer: Well said.

Eleanor: Is that an achievement?

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Eleanor: We were lucky when we were not killed by the Japanese. When America bombed ... When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, America came into the war and we were saved. My father was actually digging the trenches for us when the time came for the Japanese to shoot us all and bury us. That's it. That's luck. Is that naches? We're out of it. We're alive.

Interviewer: Now, I do realise it was that close.

Eleanor: It was that close. It was that close. My husband spent the last years of his life battling with the UK Ministry of Defence at the veterans because they didn't want to give us compensation. When they put a notice that all British subjects who were interned by the Japanese during the war were entitled to compensation.

We didn't get that, because we were interned, not because of our Jewishness, but because we were British subjects. Anyway, the upshot is the UK ombudsman upheld the decision and before he passed away, he knew that he'd won the case and his family were all compensated, his siblings.

Interviewer: That's good. We'll finish on just a community related question. What activities are you involved in a widely community that also bring you naches?

Eleanor: My singing. I love singing. I attend on Tuesday mornings from 10:00 to 1:00 and Fridays from 2:00 to 3:30, and we perform in community events. Mainly in nursing homes and I've even performed in the nursing home where I lost my husband, a couple of times. I enjoy singing very much.

Count your blessings one by one. I don't know in my words. Some songs I just can't sing because I choke. I love Autumn Leaves. "Autumn leaves fall and are swept out of sight. Words that you said have come true. Autumn leaves fall and are swept out of sight. So have the memories of love we once knew. The wind of forgetfulness blows them into a night of regret. The song you would so often sing is echoing, echoing yet.

The falling leaves drift by my window. The autumn leaves of red and gold. I see your lips, the summer kisses, the sunburned hand I used to hold. Since you went away, the days grow long. And soon, I'll hear old winter's song. But I'll miss you most of all, my darling. When autumn leaves start to fall."

Interviewer: That was marvellous. What a treat. Thank you so much for that. I can see you why it chokes you up.

Eleanor: It chokes. I feel he's shining down on me and making all this happen. I said I suffered from chronic asthma and I didn't tell you that I have diabetes as well. I had diabetes for 18 years and I've been under the care of St. Vincent's, Lesley Campbell, professor.

The day when my book was ready, I took it into St. Vincent's because she knew all about me having this urge to write the book and told me to get it done. "Get it done. The story has to be told." It was a few years after ... A couple of years after my husband passed away and I went in there and I was ... I just was asking where Professor Campbell was and the doctor that cared for my husband. He had cancer.

Before I could say anything, both Lesley Campbell came out and John Greenfield. I was stunned. I could not believe it. I handed each of them a copy of my book.

Interviewer: That's lovely.

Eleanor: Isn't that divine intervention?

Interviewer: Why don't you tell us a little bit about the contents of the book?

Eleanor: The book, I started ... I love my father very much. I lost him when he was ... He's a great inspiration for us. Always smoked a pipe. Joan Bieder, the author, wrote a book on the Jews of Singapore. Big, thick volume. I purchased a copy when I went on a sentimental cruise, a voyage, the last voyage of the QE 2. I took my husband with the money that he had from the compensation from the British and went to Singapore and I purchased the book there and we had a symposium on David Marshall. He was the first chief minister.

When I read the book, I was disappointed that my father's name was not mentioned and I felt he had a strong part to play in the early history in Singapore with the Jewish community and not a mention of him. Then gradually, I felt that my father's spirit was urging me on to get it all documented, because I had photographs. When you look at the book, you will know what I mean.

