

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

VELVEL LEDERMAN: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Velvel Lederman

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: We'll start off, if you can tell me your name and where and when you were born.

Velvel Lederman: I'm Velvel Lederman. I was born in Sydney, Australia in February 1954. I'm the second child to my parents Moishe and Malka Lederman who came here after the war from Poland.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about your family's back story and when they came to Australia?

Velvel Lederman: My parents survived the Shoah, the Holocaust, both being from Poland. It's actually a very strange kind of story. In fact, my father and his wife, they were directly related to his only surviving son who had married the sister of my mother. It was a situation of a father and a son marrying two sisters. After the war they went to a displaced person's camp south of Germany. They stayed there for two years. The younger couple went to Israel because they were very pioneering. The older couple, my parents, had sponsors, and they came to Australia. The boat sailed from Marseilles. It was a six week trip. As you can imagine, very difficult trip because there was hardly any food. They arrived in Circular Quay, starting a brand new life in a very strange land. However, they did know quite a few people here who they met by chance, out in the street in Bondi after the war.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you know why they chose to settle in the local area?

Velvel Lederman: First of all, coming to Australia was because they'd heard other Jewish people had come to Australia. Having a relative who was a sponsor, they were able to come here. However, when they did arrive there was a Jewish boarding house I'm told in Coogee which had been sponsored by the late Mr Rabinovitz who was actually one of the pioneers of the Jewish day school movement. A lot of the couples went to Coogee because a lot of the Jewish people were already moving into the Bondi area. My parents, being religious, the most important thing for them was to be close to a synagogue. That's why I think a lot of the religious crowd moved into the Bondi area. Because the religious element for them was, I think, the most important thing. That's why they moved into this Bondi area which is virtually up the road in [Stewart] Street not far from here.

Interviewer: Okay. Did they relate any kind of challenges that they faced when they first came here?

Velvel Lederman: They would have had an incredible language problem. My mother picked up on it quicker than my father, but she did go to a school. Even after being in this land for more than 30, 40 years, she would still call herself, "I'm a new Australian." It was always in the back of her mind. I think there were employment challenges. My mother, she was lucky. She was a seamstress. In those days you could pick up a lot of sewing work at home. My father had never learned any skills except being a locksmith. Because he didn't have the language advantage he didn't go into that. He was actually a 'chazan', which is a cantor. It took him a while, but then he found a good position in one of the local synagogues, which is the Mizrahi next to Barracluff Park.

I do think the language and the employment were the two big challenges. Probably knowing a lot of friends and other people that lived in the area, they were able to speak with them and speak out all their problems. No matter what problems they had, they found other people with the same problems so it made it easier for them.

Interviewer: Obviously the Waverley region has got quite a large Jewish community. How do you think that that's actually shaped the area overall?

Velvel Lederman: I do believe because of the intensity of the Jewish people here has brought a lot of Jewish culture to the place. I would like to add though to the last point which has got to do with this. The third challenge would have been a religious challenge. A lot of people that survived the Holocaust started disbelieving in God and all that sort of thing. My parents came from a class of people that their belief system even improved, but finding the amount of people that wanted to join a synagogue after the war must have been quite difficult. I think, having grown up here with all the Jewish clubs around especially in the good old days of Hakoah Club, Bondi was a very, very Jewish area with the Jewish shops and the restaurants and the clubs. I think the Jews have formed a lot of the rich history of this suburb in particular.

Interviewer: What we want to do is move on to food because food is a very important part of Jewish culture. Can you tell me about any food that you enjoyed at home as a child?

Velvel Lederman: I suppose you would class it into two sections. We would have the foods that were specifically eaten on all the Jewish festivals. Of course, you have the famous saying, when you have a celebration, you've got to have food. This is definitely true in the Jewish religion. Then you've got the other cultural foods that people used to cook because they were the foods that they had at home. I suppose from the religious and the calendar point of view, the Sabbath foods or Shabbat foods were really made very regularly. One in particular was the famous stew which cooked for 24 hours called cholent. In the original Polish it would be called cholent. It would be very difficult to describe on the nouveau cuisine on what cholent is because you've got to taste it. It's basically potatoes, grains and some meat thrown in.

Then you would have the matza for Passover. We'd have the honey cakes for Rosh Hashanah. I suppose one of my favourite foods that my mother would have brought from Poland with her, the original term of what they were called was 'kreplach'. I think the English equivalent would be gnocchi. To say that it was like the gnocchi that you'd get in the restaurants here would be very different. Because it was this cooked dough and the way it was cooked, it really was a taste sensation to be able to eat it. They are the first foods that come to mind.

I would have to say another one of my favourite foods because this was baked weekly, and women still do it today, the Shabbat challah, which is the bread that we eat for the Sabbath. That was obviously handmade in the kitchen. The women today braid it with the three braids. My mother actually made it like a cake. She was very adamant that no other challah tasted as good as her challah. I suppose I can attest to that fact because it did actually come out like a cake. They were, I suppose, the three favourite foods we had.

Then you get the secondary type foods for Chanukah and Purim where you would have the latkes, the potato pancakes with the oil oozing out the sides. Then you'd have the hamantash, the three cornered cakes, that we ate on Purim. Each food was not bought in the shop. They would make them at home and have a lot of pride in making them. The only food, I would point out, that they would have to buy was the unleavened bread, the matza, because that had to have strict cooking requirements. That was bought from the shop, and probably in those days brought over from Israel, [as well as] the famous Solomon's bakery that is over 100 years old here now.

Interviewer: Is there anything in particular that when you eat today it just brings you back to your childhood?

Velvel Lederman: I would say probably the two foods that would bring me back to my childhood would be the cholent, which I'm not really a big fan of, but when I do eat it I can remember Mama's cholent. The other food that has got no religious value, but my mother used to make it a lot were the scrambled eggs, just the way she used to make it. If my wife makes it the same way I am brought back to that era.

My children however do make fun of me that when I was a university student I was quite spoiled. When I came home late from university, my mother would have my dinner ready. I would do a terrible thing and eat the dinner in front of the television. Incidentally, we don't have a television. One of the other favourite foods she would make for me were the chicken schnitzels. There were sliced pickled cucumbers on top. That was actually quite a taste sensation as well. That would bring back a lot of memories from childhood.

Interviewer: That does sound pretty good.

Velvel Lederman: Yeah.

Interviewer: How do you think that the migration wave of your parents has affected food in the local area?

Velvel Lederman: Nowadays not so much. I do believe that when the Jews came over at the end of the '40s and the beginning of the '50s, they brought with them all this culture and all that food. From my memory, and I only started going to the kosher restaurants in the late '60s and '70s, there were a few kosher restaurants that did specifically make the European type food. There was a heavy influence of that sort of food. Those migrants, I can only speak from my parents' point of view, they would not have enjoyed eating the modern food because they weren't used to it. If they went to a Bar Mitzvah or wedding where they got the then kind of nouveau cuisine, my parents would probably think it was quite raw. They didn't like it.

Even for instance, in the late '70s when they started introducing the kosher dry wines because traditionally Jews would never have had the chance to drink dry wines. They were all the sweet sacramental wines. My father at that time was a kosher supervisor at many of the wedding functions. He came home once with a box of the new dry wine. There was a very funny story. He opened one on one lunchtime, and he started drinking it. He said to my mother, her name was Malka, he said, "Malka, we've got to put sugar in the wine. The wine's got no taste." He didn't realise that even the wine had a specific taste.

The restaurants then served incredible European kosher foods. I do remember the one Penkivil Street called Schwartz's. It was that famous that it even got a write up in the Sunday Herald in the restaurant section. I suppose another influence of those sort of foods wasn't necessarily the type of food on the plate, even though it was all European, the amount of food on the plate. Australians today would not be able to eat the amount of food that they gave you. The proprietor, this guy called Mr Schwartz, he would come out with a big dinner plate, and it had a mountain of food on it, and that was your portion. I think there were heavy influences. I think even today a lot of

the restaurants are going back to look for these traditional dishes that were once upon a time famous, with putting a modern touch to it.

Interviewer: Like modern day comfort food.

Velvel Lederman: Yeah.

Interviewer: I think you've already done a good job at telling us about the special foods that were prepared during family get-togethers or Jewish holidays.

I think what we'll do is we'll move on to the pray section, which of course is about Judaism, the rituals, the observances. In this section we'd love to hear about the mitzvahs and traditions and how it shapes your identity. Also how things are being passed down from generation to generation. The first thing is can you actually tell us basically your religious practices and how they compared to your parents?

Velvel Lederman: Well, I really am fortunate being that I was born into a religious family. My father had been a fourth generation cantor. I think the upbringing that they gave us gave us a love of Judaism. Having grown up and wanting to get into education, I wanted to give this over to the next generation. I'm one of the lucky ones that have been born into the religious background. For me it's second nature to wake up in the morning, go to the synagogue, do the prayers. I actually go three times a day. I've always tried to help other people do religious customs, doing a lot of outreach. Actually, this very day in honour of my father, I do the Friday visits at the two nursing homes that I'm appointed to and run the Shabbat parties.

Before I forget, because I have brought this along and I would like to mention it, when it comes to religious practices, I brought along a little box of 50 cent silver coins. I think they were minted in the late '60s. They're 50 cent coins that actually have the silver in it. My mother kept them specifically for the fact that she told me one day they'll be very, very useful because we have a custom for a first born male child that has been born completely naturally, and he's the first born, we have what's called the redemption of the first born called the Pidyon Ha'ben. It's a ceremony where a father redeems the boy off the priest, called the Cohen. How does he redeem them? With these silver coins.

My mother gave them to me, and it's been actually quite a great treasure because any time I'm invited to one of those ceremonies I use these coins. This shows you their love of the religious life, that she even found something religious in something so trivial. Do you want me to go through some of the other religious things that I go through?

Interviewer: Yeah, please do.

Velvel Lederman: For instance, at all the different festivals, we do all the rituals at home, Chanukah and Purim. I suppose for me being a teacher and being involved in outreach work, whenever it would come to a festival, we would have the ritual that we would do at home, but we would also always try to include other people that didn't have the opportunity to perform these sorts of commandments. For instance, on Purim time, we'd always have two readings of the Scroll of Esther, called the Megillah at our place for people who didn't have a chance to go to the synagogue. Similarly, in the High Holydays, in Rosh Hashanah, I would take time out to go visit different hospitals

and blow the shofar, the ram's horn, for people who wouldn't be able to get to the synagogue. Chanukah time I'd go to the different nursing homes and light the menorah for the patients there. All those sort of activities I'm part of.

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

Velvel Lederman: The traditions. I suppose for me personally, it's not necessarily a religious tradition. For me, and my children know this, it's the family traditions that they would have grown up with and that I would like to give over to my children. The little folk sayings that they had. The little traditions like blessing the children at the wedding. I suppose if I would have to think of one of the most treasured tradition that I have from the year would probably be the Jewish Passover, Pesach. I actually brought the little matza cover along. I suppose because it's such a rich festival. The way my father sang the ritual, and me trying to copy all those songs, and me passing them on to the next generation and the next generation.

For me, I suppose the tradition of the music and the culture in the festivals is a very, very important one. For that reason I have over the years recorded quite a few musical albums. One in particular was called My Father's Favourite Songs, which I took all of the beautiful songs he would sing at the festivals. I did a more modern approach with the different musical arrangements. I also had the opportunity of putting one of the original soundtracks of my father's cantorial pieces on that album which hopefully maybe we can put into the exhibition.

Interviewer: Okay. Velvel, what traditions are you passing on to your own children?

Velvel Lederman: I would hope that I'm passing on the traditions, first of all, of keeping the rituals of all the festivals. That my children and grandchildren will know what were given over to me. One in particular would be the tradition of the attendance in the synagogue every day for the prayers. I find that really quite important. Some of my children have made fun of it. You don't have to go all the time. Maybe when you can. I think the attendance daily, at least for the men, gives you something. For the girls, I think it's the lovely tradition of the Sabbath candle lighting and the little prayers that go with it.

Once again, I'd have to come back to, because my children know the music that was given over to me, nearly every festival has got all its own songs. The tradition of handing over the songs that I sing at all the festivals, and even on the daily Shabbat experience, I have been able to hand those over to the kids. I would hope they would in turn hand those over to their children. Another tradition would be the tradition of coming of age of the different parts of the life cycle. For instance, even though it's not done in most middle-of-the-road Jewish families, here the traditional hair cutting at three years of age called upsharin, would be an important one of the traditions that we've always thought greatly of. In actual fact, my wife is very lucky. She's going next week to one of our grandsons in Miami to participate in that little ceremony.

Interviewer: That's lovely. Now we're going to be talking about naches.

Obviously, every Jewish person wants some naches in their life. Naches can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community. I'd like to hear what does the word naches mean to you, and does it have any special significance?

Velvel Lederman: When you called me, I thought I'd do the right thing because naches can mean different things to different people. Being that Yiddish, it's a Yiddish word, was actually my first language, my native language, I went to the Yiddish dictionary, and I'm going to read you out exactly what the Yiddish dictionary says. Really, 50% of Yiddish are Hebrew words. In Hebrew we have the word nachat, which is the same as naches. The dictionary over there says it's either a pleasure, it's gaining satisfaction, the proud enjoyment of something or to derive pleasure from something.

Now, this actually leads to the term, because it's not just naches. The naches is what you feel. To get the naches, in Yiddish we say, schleppe naches. We derive the pleasure from something, from a child, from a situation. I suppose if you were to ask me personally, naches really would, for me, be something that's family orientated. When you see an offspring or a spouse or even maybe the parents, but naches is mainly where a parent sees a child doing something that gives such great pleasure. It gives a parent an inner joy to know that this pleasure has given the parent something that you can't buy. To me naches is something that has got to do with children and grandchildren and the pleasure that they give you in the way that they behave or the way they do things and the way they behave to you.

Interviewer: What do you hope for your own children?

Velvel Lederman: Obviously, we have a nice little saying in the blessing for wine. We have a blessing that says bor-ay peri ha-gafen, to bless the fruit of the vine. Gafen are the initials in Yiddish and Hebrew. The Hebrew letter gimel stands for gezunt. I would pray for good health for them. The pey in the gafen stands for parnassah, a good livelihood. Once again, the nun is naches. We want them to give us pleasure, and for us to give them pleasure. I suppose as a parent what I would want for my children, that they would be successful at whatever they have. We want the girls that are left, that the Almighty should bless them with what we call a good shidduch, a good mate, somebody nice to marry, because I've still got a couple of daughters to marry off. Success in their education, and the same enjoyment that I got and the naches that I got from my children, I would bless them, and I would hope that they are able to derive the same naches from their children which are our grandchildren.

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

Velvel Lederman: Well, if I know my family were watching this, I would say that I've become a Jewish pop star because I'm an entertainer for children. I would have to once again divide it. I suppose the greatest achievement for me, having seen what my family went through, and it actually is miraculous that I was born in the first place. After having come from such a faraway place to a new country, and my mother having been told she would never ever have children, but she never gave up the search for doctors to help her have children. First of all, my actual birth was miraculous. Having been brought into a religious family, I suppose the greatest achievement that I have is that I've been able to bring up a lovely family with the same ideals.

I'd have to divide it though and say that because I always had the interest and the passion to go into Jewish education, and I have been at Moriah for 37 years having taught Bar Mitzvah students and little kids, the knowledge that you are able to daily give over the Jewish traditions to a completely new generation is a great thing for me. I always wake up in the morning thinking, "Let

me think of a new inspiration for these children that I'm going to teach today so that I can pass over something new and Jewish to them as well." It would be the family one side and my passion for education on the other side.

Interviewer: I'll ask you this separately, but you might have separately answered it here. That is, what activities are you involved in for the wider Waverley community that also give you naches?

Velvel Lederman: Apart from the teaching, the other main activity that I'm involved in, not necessarily from a [Council] point of view but because it's in Waverley, I'm a volunteer for the COA, the Council on Ageing. However, even if I wasn't a volunteer, I've taken this upon myself in honour of my father who was a resident of one of the nursing homes in Newcastle Street, Wentworth Manor. I visit two different nursing homes in the Waverley area. Not necessarily to bring joy of the Jewish Shabbat to the Jewish residents. When we do these weekly activities we bring everybody together.

It's our philosophy, no matter whether you're Jewish or non-Jewish, we bring all the residents together. Let them have a good time, sing the songs. It's actually quite humorous. My neighbour's husband, he now lives in Wentworth Manor. This lady's not Jewish. She's Dutch. After doing this part for about two months, she knows all the Jewish songs already. It's lovely to see all the people joining in. I think apart from that volunteer activity, the other activities I do would be of a religious nature. Obviously the synagogue I go to is in the Waverley area. All the schools that I visit are in the Waverley area. They're pretty much the things I do. I'll probably think of another one on my way home and say, "I should have put that one in."

Interviewer: Is there anything you want to add before we actually get you to start describing the things that you brought along with you?

Velvel Lederman: Well, the thing that caught my eye, the funny thing was I was actually walking to the Glenayre Preschool. It was actually the first time I saw the poster. The poster was Eat, Pray and Naches in that order. Eat, Pray and Naches. I thought that was a very interesting way of putting it, because in the Hasidic (fervently orthodox) custom, they say a person should eat first so that they'll have the strength to pray afterwards. It shouldn't be the other way around because if you pray and you haven't eaten, you might not have any strength to pray. It's in an old Hasidic story. You eat, and then you have the strength to pray. By praying, you get the naches.

When I saw that, I said, "I would like to be part of that." Then I got onto one of the ladies who actually convinced me, "Look, I want you to do this project." I thought the way you worded the project was actually very nice.

Interviewer: From here why don't you tell us the items that you actually brought with you?

Velvel Lederman: From the document point of view I brought along the picture of the boat that my parents came on, the Louisiana Monaro. It made two voyages. Would you believe it was a cargo boat and because the Italians realised they could make a lot of money bringing the refugees over, they made it into a boat for the people. You can imagine the sailing in that just must have been horrific. I've actually brought along the passenger list that I managed to get from the boat. I know a

lot of these passengers myself, the ones that are still alive. I brought along the document which is really quite frightful to look at.

All the documents that I brought along were released by the United States Holocaust Museum when all those documents went public. I brought along a document from one of the previous concentration camps, the prisoner list that my father was in before he was shipped off with the only surviving son to Auschwitz. That was David and Moishe Lederman. Of course, the German documents being the way they were, they were precisely in the right alphabetical order with the numbers.

I brought along a document showing my father's skill after the war. He was a locksmith, and he obviously was tested at the displaced person's camp. Unfortunately I couldn't find this document, but I will tell you about it. When the people left the displaced person's camp, because they knew they were going to a new country, they obviously wanted some piece of paper to tell the people where they arrived in the new country what kind of employment they could get. Because my father was a cantor, the lady actually took a picture of the little school that they opened up for orphans in this displaced persons camp. He was given a certificate saying ... they didn't call it cantor. First class singer. If ever he would get a job in singing and entertainment.

I've also brought along a document of my mother's naturalisation which took place nine years after they arrived here. They arrived here 1st of May, 1949. Nine years later they naturalised. I don't know if they would have had to take English tests in those days, but I remember one humorous story that my father would have told me. Because he couldn't speak English that well, he got on the bus, and he wanted the sixpence ticket. He couldn't say, "Give me a ticket for sixpence." He said, "Give me six, please." The driver gave him the six tickets, and he didn't want the six tickets. It was a terrible story. The driver wouldn't give him the money back even though there were only the two of them.

I brought along varied pictures of their life in different stages. The four main artefacts that I brought along here that I thought could be used in the exhibition, and I use them from time to time. I think I've already spoken about them. The first and most precious to me is an original Passover matza cover where we put the three matzas, unleavened breads, in. It's so important to me that even though we have our own at home, I'll always put my parents' on top. We have the symbol of my home still in our home.

I brought along a handkerchief that my father had. It was a random thing that I found in the house. Funnily enough, I've actually used this handkerchief in religious rituals. We have a ritual that when a couple get engaged, when they're going to get married, the bride and groom are given by the rabbi to hold a garment. By lifting it up, they acquire the contract to get married on that day. When I found that out, I said I'd like to use something of my father's, so we used this handkerchief. I've actually used it at all the weddings that my children have participated in.

I've also brought along, it's in a little red case, it must be an original, little, old jewellery case. I never ever would have thought I would use it, but my mother gave them to me. They're about eight, 50 cent coins, round coins. The mint did the coin that had all the different shapes, but this one was a round coin. It actually had the silver in it. It became a collectors item. My mother kept them because of the silver in the coins, and they would then be used for the redemption of the first born.

In actual fact, when our first born boy was born to my son who now lives in Canada, we used those coins at that ceremony. Because it's such a rare ceremony and you only get to use the coins once every few years, I would say that's probably one of the most valuable things I have at home. So valuable that when my son-in-law, who's a Cohen, the priest who actually does the ritual, he went to great lengths measuring, weighing the silver in the coins because there has to be a certain amount of silver, to make sure they were the right amount of silver in the coins. I brought those along for you to look at, and all the varied pictures.

I also brought a book that I wrote about my mother's life. It hasn't been published yet. The thing which I think interested your lovely photographer, the cover of the book says, "Moshe Malka Lederman, from Pulawy" which is where they came from in Poland, "to Sydney, Australia." It shows what they looked like after the war and how they looked like after they had settled in Australia. You have the difference of them participating in life here.