

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Waverley Council, NSW

PETER HALASZ: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Peter Halasz

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

Interview Date: 13 May 2015

Interview Location: Bronte

Transcribed by and date: 5 July 2015

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Interviewer: Thanks very much for joining us Peter. The first thing we are going to cover is your life before Australia and essentially a little bit about your back story and how you got here. So first of all I'd like to ask you what was happening in your country and why did you leave?

Peter Halas: I was born in 1939, which is just one month after the start of the Second World War, and Hungary was not a happy place in war. My mother was killed and so then my grandparents on my mother's side during the war. Then Hungary was liberated by the Russians, and my father came back; he was in a concentration camp, he came back, remarried and ... soon after there was a communist take over of the country which lasted through [to] the 1980s. Then [in] 1956, there was a revolution, in October 1956 and ... while the revolution wasn't successful there was a window of opportunity to leave the country which was until then prohibited. And so in October 1956 I escaped; I walked about 100 kilometers from Budapest towards Austria, actually halfway from Budapest to Austria and I was with some friends and my parents stayed behind and we were in a displaced or refugee camp for about seven months and after seven months I was granted permission to come to Australia. I was given a visa and I arrived in June 1957.

I had really nobody here except some friends of my, some distant friends, of my parents who waited for me at the ship and perhaps gave me some kind of direction of where I can go and what I can do. In those days it was very easy to get a job in Australia. I mean you fronted up to a warehouse and said I need a job and they gave me a job. I was shifting boxes from left to right and right to left and it took me about three to four months until I spoke enough English to get by and probably about 18 months to speak English well enough to be part of the community. I had variety of jobs during that time from washing dishes to stacking boxes and everything else. I worked for the British Water Corporation for a few months. So I did just about anything to make some money to live on.

After that once I got adjusted I discovered that I [was] probably good at selling and I became a salesman and selling clothes to shops and I had a number of agencies, blouses and swim wear. [One of those] those swimwear agents one day asked me if I would become a partner in their business which I did. And that's how life started.

Interviewer: That's fantastic. So why did you decide to settle in the Waverley area in particular

Peter Halas: When I first arrived it was quite funny, the ship passed under the Harbour Bridge and I looked at that and [said] this is the place I want to live. Looking right I didn't know it but it was Kirribilli, and the people who waited for me, just coincidentally rented the room for me in Kirribilli. And the first Sunday I walked from Kirribilli to King's Cross and I didn't meet one single person. There wasn't a car on the road. There was not a shop open. There was not a cinema open. That was 1957 and I mean the place was dead and a couple weeks later I don't know I took a train from Bondi, I can't remember now, but I found that Bondi was much more lively and came down to Bondi Beach and there were people on the beach. There was life happening here so I decided that Kirribilli was not necessarily, while it was beautiful looking at the harbor, Bondi is the place I wanted to live in.

Interviewer: So we covered how you found the place you started staying in Kirribilli. So what were your first impressions of Bondi and the local area?

Peter Halas: For me it was about the beach. I didn't see the ocean or I didn't see the sea until I boarded that ship in Marseilles in 1957 and once I saw it I fell in love and when I was in Bondi in around September '57 it was getting warm and water was wonderful and surf was something that I never experienced before and I just loved it, it was just fantastic.

Interviewer: Do you think that's the reason why the Eastern Suburbs were a popular place for the settlement of Jewish people or were there some other reasons?

Peter Halas: I guess you know Jewish people perhaps settle where Jewish people are and there are a lot of Jewish people in Bondi when I arrived already, synagogues here and there were community centers here. That wasn't the first thing that drew me here; once I moved here I found that and that made a lot of sense. I made a lot of friends. Friends who I have something in common with. Initially they were mostly Hungarian because language and background and understanding and our way of thinking ... after a while of course that didn't matter anymore and I had friends from everywhere.

Interviewer: Peter, how do you think that the Jewish community had contributed to the broader Waverley community?

Peter Halas: Well, I guess there's a cultural influence. There are lots of restaurants. Lots of synagogues. I think that the Jewish people have populated this area so whatever happens to that part of the community, in fact they are a very large part of that community. I guess that, I know for instance that North Bondi Surf Club has a lot of Jewish members. Probably this club has a lot of Jewish members. They're part of this community, they are intrinsic to the whole area.

Interviewer: Have there been any challenges for you and your family in Australia?

Peter Halas: Lots of challenges. In the beginning when we started we were very, very short of money. Then we started the business on a shoe string. If you ask someone out of university today, if they would start with the capital I started with they would say you'd be crazy you would be out on your back side within a month and yet commitment ... we persevered and managed to succeed. Occasionally there were times we were so short of money we would look, every time a car started in the middle of the night we thought is our car being repossessed. But you know the hard work and the perseverance brought us success.

Interviewer: How is your sense of culture and lifestyle changed through living in Australia?

Peter Halas: Hugely. Um, much more casual. I haven't worn a tie for example for probably about 20 years. I find that even though if you go to Europe, especially the Eastern part of Europe, like Hungary, people are a lot more formal in their speech, in their demeanor, in their dressing. Australia is a very casual in that we're not casual about our passion, but we are casual about the way we act. Internally we are not that casual but outward we are. Now I do feel like an Australian. Especially if I go overseas, I feel like an Australian. I think ... I think generally I think, ... Australia is certainly a way to look at life in a completely different way than I looked before. First of all, having gone through the war and the Revolution. During war and the Revolution we were always tense and perhaps afraid. [In] Australia we're relaxed. Despite all the problems that we're having and what happened with Lindt Café [a recent siege of a Sydney city cafe] and stuff like that. I don't think that changed an

awful lot in our attitude. I think we still feel that that's just an incident that hopefully won't happen again. And if it does, it's isolated. And that way life is just fantastic.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Well, what we might do at that point, we might start exploring our next category which is of course about what to eat, about food. Um, so, can you tell me about your native country's foods and your memories about eating them.

Peter Halas: Well, first of all you need to remember that I grew up in a time when food was at great shortage. After the war there was hardly any food. We ate really staple. Potatoes and beans were what we ate. Then the Communists came and food was rationed. I had a family of five. My parents, my step-mother, my father, my step-brother and my grandmother and me. We were under a hundred grams of butter a month on the ration. We got two eggs a month which was rationed. It was a holiday once a year when ... if we had chicken. Meat was [in] very short supply and if it was available it was very bad quality. So, ... you know food was, my grandmother was a fantastic cook and she made the best of what she had with spices. But basically, the quality of the food was pretty poor. One of the greatest foods in Hungary is goose liver and everyone talks about goose liver in Hungary. In fact, some of the foie gras in France is actually imported from Hungary because they are not allowed to – it's another story – but anyway it is. But, when I lived in Hungary I don't think I had it too often because it just wasn't available.

When I came to Australia, the food that we wanted [in order to] to cook was difficult to find. Things like sour cream. We went to grocery shop and we asked for sour cream and they said why would you sour the cream? We asked for olive oil and they sent us to the pharmacy. Because olive oil is not something they used. Um, you notice today we have, I don't know if you go to a grocery shop you have 30 different kinds of tomatoes. In those days you had one tomato. In 1957 food was good quality but it was very, very limited. And the expansion of the cuisine – it's obvious – but I guess Australia has probably the best food in the world. Mainly because we have so many cuisines available. In Bondi they have about four Hungarian restaurants that I know of and they are all very successful and they're all doing well. So people obviously like Hungarian food its a mixture of--it's just Middle Eastern food, middle European food. Talk about Wiener schnitzel is Hungarian, obviously it's not, it's Austrian but goulash and various other things, cabbage rolls and yeah.

Interviewer: So is there any ... any food or any dish in particular that even conjures up any memories and images of home?

Peter Halas: I, yeah, I think probably a chicken paprika. With gnocchi. I think that's probably the one that really takes the cake and, um, yeah I think we eat, now we eat such a broad variety of food. We love food from Asia, food from Italy and we do have Hungarian food as well.

Interviewer: Is there a particular dish that, um, you know, you're saying your grandmother was a good cook ...

Peter Halas: Yeah ...

Interviewer: Was there a particular dish that she made? Or was that really made goulash ...

Peter Halas: Mainly, yeah. Goulash and chicken paprika if we could get hold of a chicken. Um, she did wonderful things with potatoes for example. Um, she could cook them in 50 different ways. Um,

there's a dish called layered potatoes which is potatoes layered with eggs and sausages and then baked in the oven and lots of sour cream. And that's something we still, we still make.

Interviewer: Tell me about ... some of the special foods that you prepare or eat during festive occasions or holidays.

Peter Halas: Um, I guess ... the two main holidays are Passover and the New Year. For Passover we use matza and my wife makes a wonderful chicken soup and she makes matza balls that we, we use and ... there's a dish called gefilte fish which is ground fish made into balls and ... so it's something we have at that time ... brisket ... chicken is something so staple it's almost compulsory. We love some of the condiments like cucumbers and ... mainly cucumbers yeah.

Interviewer: Describe the satisfaction that you feel when you're eating your favorite Jewish food.

Peter Halas: Normally, as I said it's during the holidays and holidays always bring back memories. Although, during the period of time I lived in Hungary ... the holidays were not kept by my family as much as they are kept here because during communist Europe it was frowned upon and my family wasn't religious anyway in the first place. So I found out about the religion when I got to Australia. I went to my first Passover meal in Australia and I was 17 or 18 or 19. So I don't have that many memories from there, but now that we do celebrate these holidays it gives me a satisfaction they try to wipe us out and we're here eating.

Interviewer: Fantastic and we might just finally explore were there any recipes that have passed through generations which sort of have come back to, you know your history.

Peter Halas: Yeah, not really because my ancestors have all passed on and, uh, like I said I left at 17. I wasn't into cooking then. I am into cooking now but I do explore it and sometimes I do look at, you know, cook books at what's happening but, you know, we eat such a variety of food I'm sorry to say I'm not, we are not really focusing on anything in particular.

Interviewer: That is fine. We might move on to um, our next section which is praying and of course I understand the fact that you are now atheist but I guess the pray section also kind of will relate to traditions. Um, so, um the first question is how does your religious practice compare to when you were back home and I guess ...

Peter Halas: I can tell you one thing, but ... I remember that in during the first couple, few years of war Budapest was really not under the German occupation because Hungary was an ally to the Germans, we were not occupied and we were allowed to live our lives in a normal way. There was some restrictions like we have to wear a yellow star for example. But I remember going with my grandfather to synagogue on some Saturday mornings I must have been only four or five but that's a memory that's still with me. And in fact we are going back to Hungary on this trip that I'm starting tomorrow and my whole family is coming and we're making a dedication to my grandfather in that synagogue where he took me at that time.

But after the war we didn't keep anything. My family was totally, totally, I wouldn't even say atheist but they were just not aligned. When I came here, once I met some Jewish people, they were kind. They invited me to their Passover meals and they invited me to their New Year

celebrations. And then I met my wife and her father was, and her parents were extremely religious. They are orthodox. In fact he was a kosher butcher in Bondi Junction and, um, they frowned upon the fact that I wasn't religious so, I tried to keep with the family. I went sometimes to synagogue with them and certainly during the holydays. We were respectful of what they stood for without actually believing in it. Then our children were born. We wanted them to understand what our background is what our family is. So we are members of the Central Synagogue within Bondi Junction and we go to synagogue a few times a year. Mainly because it feels good and it's not necessarily for religious reasons. It's for cultural reasons. I support Jewish causes, again not for religious reasons but cultural reasons.

Interviewer: Again, getting back to our topic of traditions. What learnings, beliefs, traditions, do you feel most important, are most important or are most passionate about?

Peter Halas: I'm pretty passionate about the fact that we live in a free society and having lived through Nazis and then communism I really appreciate the freedom we're allowed here. And even today if you travel, even in so called free countries in Europe, the bureaucracy, we complain about bureaucracy, Australia has no idea what bureaucracy is like until you get to a place like France or even Germany. So freedom is a very important part of why I love to live here. I believe in respect for everyone. Having been a refugee I very much empathise with the refugees of today. Doesn't matter where they come from. I feel that they are in a terrible position, and we are, as a free nation, we are necessary here to make the transition from where they were to a free society. Obviously we know that some of those refugees find it difficult to adapt and adopt, and I think we need to persevere and educate them in our ways of life and if they don't want to live our way then we need to ask the question of why did they come here in the first place. But anyone who wants to live the Australian way, which is this free society, respectful of other people and while no one hurts me, I don't care what they do. If they aren't harmful to anyone else, as far as I am concerned they're free to do what they want.

Interviewer: What about Jewish tradition?

Peter Halas: Jewish tradition is respectful. You know, our religion is not a converting religion, it's not a proselytizing religion. We, more or less keep to ourselves and we live and let live. And that's really one of the mottoes. If, I think that Jewish people generally are grateful to Australia because this is one country they can practice their religion. They can practice their way of life without hindrance and without persecution.

Interviewer: How does it feel to belong to a group of people with common history and traditions?

Peter Halas: I'm very proud of who I am. I am very proud of the people I belong to. I'm very proud of the achievements the Jewish people have made to society. And if you have a look at the number of [Jewish] Nobel Prize winners, they are totally out of proportion with the rest of the population. Um, I think that what Jewish people achieve in every walk of life whether it's art or science or medicine or whatever ... literature. I think we've made a huge contribution totally out of kilter to our numbers. And I'm really proud of that. I'm proud of the fact that most Jewish people are generally good people. There are some obviously not, but generally I think we add value to society.

Interviewer: And are there any particular traditions that you're passing on to your own children and grandchildren?

Peter Halas: I think the value system is very important. I think ... the Jewish religion is based on the Ten Commandments. And I don't disagree with any of that. Um, even though I'm not religious I do believe those are the tenets of society that's ... that society is built on. And I think that if you use that as your basic, basic, you know, I can't find the word now. If you use it as your cornerstone then you can build on that and I've always taught my kids to respect and to be respectful of other people and demand respect.

Interviewer: And how is your interaction with other multicultural groups been in the local area?

Peter Halas: Um, I haven't had a lot to do with, I mean I'm not conscious of, of going, having friends who are not Jewish. I have lots of friend who are not Jewish and it's not a ... it's never an issue. It's a, you live in a society, you live in a community and you find all sorts of people amongst it. I participate in an organisation group called Courage to Care. Courage to Care basically is an anti-bullying organisation but uses the Holocaust as the ultimate bullying. And ... we go from school to school or we bring schools into our exhibitions and teach, and tell children about what happened. And we focus on the, on the rescues, the people who are not bystanders but actually played an active part in rescuing people. And we are telling kids that you never should, you should never be a bystander if you see something that's wrong you have to step in and try to make it right.

Interviewer: That's fantastic. Um, we might just move on now to our ... final category. So, first of all I'd like to ask you what does the word nachas mean to you?

Peter Halas: Nachas means happiness. It means content. It means taking, looking around me and saying well the world is a good place. Um, you know I came here on my own at 17 and I have a family, close family of 12, because I have two children who are married and each of them has three, three children so what six grandchildren. And ... looking at my grandchildren I, you know I think if I wouldn't have survived 1944, these people would not be alive today.

Interviewer: How do you describe nachas to someone who doesn't know what it means?

Peter Halas: I would describe nachas as something that, it is a concept that, um, makes your heart warm. Puts a smile on your face. If you have, if I have all my family around me that's nachas to me. Um, seeing the kids, I have grandchildren from the age ... youngest is nine and the oldest is 23. When are all together, and I see the interaction between all the kids, and my son and daughter and their partners, and my wife and I. That's what nachas is.

Interviewer: That's very nice. Very good. What do you hope for your children and grandchildren?

Peter Halas: Well, my children are now middle-aged adults. So I think that they're well on their way of achieving whatever they wanted to achieve. Um, my son is running Sea Folly he's the CEO and my daughter is a psychotherapist and um, her husband is also in business and very successful. My daughter in law is running an organisation called Threads, which is very similar to Oz Harvest but they do it with clothing and they're collecting clothing from factories with leftover stuff and give it

away to people who need it. Um, so you know they are involved both in business and in charity and my daughter the psychotherapist is helping community to level, to find a level ground.

So I think that you know, we've come a long way. My grandkids, I really hope that they all find something that'll give meaning to their lives. Doesn't matter what walk of life they find that in. I have a grandson who is only 11 but he desperately wants to be a filmmaker. He's probably, he probably knows more of what he wants to do than any of the others. But they all, I just want them to find meaning in life. And to me it means that they find satisfaction in whatever they do.

Interviewer: You mentioned before your grandmother, I mean ... and your grandparents in general, do you think that you might have given them nachas?

Peter Halas: Well I left home when I was 17. So, my grandmother, that was the last time I saw my grandmother. My grandparents on my mother's side were killed in the Holocaust. Probably as a little kid I would have given them nachas, yes. My grandmother was ... my grandmother who survived, she was fantastic. I was hidden in the during the war by a Christian family and after the war she found me. And the family that saved me during the war wanted to adopt me because they didn't think that my parents, either of my parents survived and my grandmother, I remember I was only six years old, but my grandmother had an enormous fight getting me back; and I was really the apple of her eye and she watched over me until I, until I actually left Hungary and she was like a ... although I had a step-mother, she was my real mother during that time.

Interviewer: How do you feel about belonging not just to the Jewish community, but to the community overall?

Peter Halas: Yeah, I'm a member of society. I'm a Jewish member of society and the larger society. I am just as interested in ... politics although I don't actively participate in the political party but I'm interested in politics. I'm interested in philosophy. I'm interested in arts. I'm interested in whatever is going on. I love sport. Um, I'm on the beach every single morning at six o'clock. Yeah I'm part of the society and being Jewish is incidental. It's important but it's incidental.

Interviewer: What would be your biggest achievement in life?

Peter Halas: I think my family. I think that my family are all good people. I think I managed to give them values and I'm actually, I'm trying to give those values to my grandchildren now. Um, I think that with, I made the transition from a poor homeless immigrant to someone of some substance, not just financially but also culturally and I guess emotionally. And I think I've had a good life so far and I look forward to the next 55 years.

Interviewer: Fantastic. That's great.

Simone: I would just like to know about your love story – you don't mind sharing that?

Peter Halas: Sure, no, well you know how it is, it was one of those things where there were lots of people on the beach and she happened to think that I'm, she liked my looks. And I think she approached me rather than me approaching her. And we were young. I mean she was 17 and I was 20. Um, and I asked her out on a date. Our first date was in 1960, March 27. It's a date I'll never forget. And ... within a week I asked her to marry me and that was because, I mean I was by myself. I

had no family. I had no-one, and I desperately wanted a family. And my wife was living in a very restricted orthodox family and she would have been happy to sort of lash out and ... and so we were engaged by June and married in December. And they said it wouldn't last.

Interviewer: So what was the significance of the “Jerusalem” steps?

Peter Halas: It was just, it just happened that this is where we were every Saturday and Sunday during the summer months. That's when we made our plans for Saturday night, the big night. On a Sunday night [crosstalk] ...

Interviewer: Do you actually mention them? Mention them by name?

Peter Halas: I don't know where the “Jerusalem” steps comes from. We didn't call it that.

Simone: What did you call it?

Peter Halas: We just called it the Bondi steps.

I think that name must have come later because when I came here we just called it the Bondi steps.

Yeah. And I, nearly all of my friends congregated and ... we just enjoyed the surf and the sand and the sun. And then we struck up friendships with people who happened to be there.