

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

VIC ALHADEFF: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Vic Alhadeff

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

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Interviewer: All right. We'll start off. Can you actually tell me your name and when and where you were born?

Vic: My name is Vic Alhadeff. I was born in Shabani, Zimbabwe, or Rhodesia at the time, January 20, 1952.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what was happening in your country, and really the circumstances that led up to why you left?

Vic: Rhodesia at the time, as it was called, now Zimbabwe, was very much part of the British Colonial system, had a very close affinity with South Africa. There was a mild form of apartheid which was happening in Rhodesia. I left the country when I finished high school, and moved down to South Africa where I went to university, and then went into a journalism career.

Both countries were very much caught in the apartheid framework. South Africa infinitely and grotesquely more so than Rhodesia, but Rhodesia, too, had a system of discrimination in place. Moving to South Africa was for career aspirations, university and then journalism career. Then leaving South Africa was for same reasons again. My wife and I were very clear that we would not bring up children in a country where people were judged on the colour of their skin.

Interviewer: Why did you actually choose Australia when you decided to move on from South Africa? Why did you choose Australia, not Canada, United States or anywhere else?

Vic: There are two issues which informed the person I am, and both of them came into our decision to where we actually landed up, which was in this great country. My parents came from Rhodes Island, which is today the largest of the Greek Islands. It was Italian at the time. In 1938, the year before World War II, when my father became very aware that the situation was deteriorating for Jews in Europe, he decided to leave for Zimbabwe, or Rhodesia. Problem was, he was engaged at the time to a young lady named Becky. His intention was to bring out his fiancé Becky, his parents and his two teenage sisters.

German forces arrived on the island as World War II erupted. The 2,000 Jews remaining there were put on three ships and sent to Auschwitz, largest of the death camps. My grandparents were murdered at Auschwitz, my father's sisters survived, and his fiancé, he was told that she had perished. He had written letter after letter to her that were returned unopened to Zimbabwe. He was told she had perished, she was told he had been killed. Fast forward half a century. My father was on holiday in Cape Town, South Africa and overheard his fiancé's name, discovered she had survived, and was at this stage a grandmother in her late 70s living in Belgium. He was now a grandfather in his late 70s living in Johannesburg. My father's parents were killed as were 151 Alhadeff members of my own family.

The other strand which has very much informed me was being a senior editor on a newspaper called the Cape Times. This was a very staunchly anti-apartheid newspaper during the apartheid era. As chief sub-editor, I had direct control of bringing out the next morning's newspaper, and skating as close to the line as we could to not break the law. There was a draconian system of legislation in place which governed what you could and could not print. Seeing the grotesque, racist system which apartheid was at first hand, it was very clear to us that we would not continue to live in that country.

Being close connections with two of the worst examples of racial hatred in history, Holocaust on one hand, apartheid system on the other, those two forces have come together very much to inform the person I am, and very much dictated our decision to a., leave South Africa, and b., end up in Australia which is a democracy. All countries, at best, are imperfect democracies, but it is a democracy where overwhelmingly there is a respect for diversity and where we celebrate difference.

Interviewer: Well said. Well said. When you actually came over here, how did you get a visa? Was it difficult? Did you need support from the Australia side to actually get across here?

Vic: In between leaving South Africa and coming to Australia, we actually lived in Israel for two years. That was something which we had very much wanted to do. We lived in Israel for two years; however, I had been a senior journalist in South Africa. And while being in Israel was very exciting and very rewarding, as a journalist, professionally I found it very difficult. I needed to relocate to a country where I could function in English. We were in Israel for only two and a half years, and looking at the different options around the world where I could operate as a journalist in English, Australia very much appealed to me as a democracy and as a place where difference and diversity was and is respected.

It was on that basis that we applied to come to Australia. There was a small window of opportunity, and that was it became clear to me that editors or sub-editors were on the list of wanted professions in this country. I understood that they were only on that list for all of six months. I applied on that basis, and on the strength of being chief sub-editor of the Cape Times in South Africa, I was accepted to come here. We were accepted to come here. Five months after lodging an application, we were here in Sydney.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to settle in this local area, if this is indeed where you settled initially? What sort of changes, and what were your first impressions of the area when you first settled here?

Vic: We don't live in this area, but all my work has been focused in this area, which is why I'm very privileged to be part of this great project. Coming to this country, and specifically to answer this question about why here, it's that one of the factors that impressed us most enormously was that fact that there is respect for difference. There is acceptance of diversity. At the same time, there is a very strong not only willingness, but obligation, which I sense, to speak out against injustice, to speak out against racism, to speak out against bigotry. This is something which appealed to me from day one about this country. While superficially there were tremendous similarities to South Africa, and I say superficially, I refer to climate or I refer to love of sport. I myself am a long distance runner. All those factors appealed to me, but they were superficial.

To me, the real issue which puts the countries on different planets, is that here in this country, we do have the respect for difference. We do have a willingness to speak out against bigotry, against injustice, and that openness of the society is very much what appealed to me and what convinced us from day one that we had made the right decision.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Did you have any specific challenges when you first came here that you had to overcome? Was it all pretty easy?

Vic: I was fortunate enough to be offered four jobs on the second day I was here. That was all in the media sector, and that was on the strength of my career in South Africa. Not only had I been chief sub-editor of a mainstream daily newspaper, but I've also written four books. More accurately two books, but one of which went into three editions. Each edition was an updated version. Effectively there are four books out there, and on that career record, I was fortunate enough to be offered four jobs here, on The Sydney Morning Herald, The Australian, The Daily Telegraph and the Australia Jewish News.

Interviewer: Vic, how do you think the Jewish community has shaped the local area here?

Vic: There is no question that the Jewish community has made a great contribution to the local area and to this country. Having said that, I'm always wary about overstating our importance and overstating the contribution that we had made and continue to make. There is a wonderful and very strong and very positive contribution, but I say that with a degree of humility and a degree of hesitation. We have made a wonderful contribution, and continue to, and Jews have been here since the First Fleet. At the same time, the contribution that the Jewish community has made in this area has been part of a framework which exists. In other words, a very welcoming framework and a democratic framework and a framework where one can stand up and be proudly Greek or Filipino or Jewish. That is overwhelmingly very much accepted.

Yes, while it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that we have made a contribution here, we, I believe, should do it with an awareness that there is a very accepting framework in which to make that contribution. To me, the two go hand in hand. It's doing an injustice to this great society in which we live to only focus on our contribution without at the same time acknowledging and appreciating the fact that we are able to make that contribution in a very accepting, warm, wonderful environment.

Interviewer: That's very well said. You're certainly not the first person to actually express, I guess, gratitude to Australia. It's certainly something that is a common thread which is lovely to see. We might move on to some questions. Quick ones on food, seeing it is part of the project. I know we spoke about this before, but can you tell me anything about previous food in your native country, and any memories you had about eating your favourite foods as a child?

Vic: My background, as I indicated, I'm a Sephardic Jew, so my forbearers came from Spain, were expelled in the Spanish Inquisition, ended up in Rhodes Island, ended up in Zimbabwe, so the food which I grew up with as a young child was Sephardic food. That meant a wonderful mix of Turkish food, Greek food, Oriental food, Middle Eastern food. Sadly, I was packed off to boarding school from the age of nine, and I was in and out of boarding school until I finished my school career. My parents divorced when I was nine or 10 years old, so I did not have much of a home life growing up at all. Therefore the great tradition which is Sephardic cuisine was not lost on me, I was lost to it. The word cuisine and boarding school do not go in the same sentence.

Here in Australia and here in Sydney and here in Waverley, Sephardic cuisine is a rare delicacy. It's always a wonderful pleasure to stumble upon it when one does so, but it's not something which I have seen in great abundance here, given that most of this community does have either local Australian heritage or eastern European heritage. The food which I identify with my origins, as in Sephardic cuisine, is not something which I come across too much here, sadly.

Interviewer: Is Sephardic food something you prepare at home at all?

Vic: I have to give credit to my wife in that regard. I am an ignoramus when it comes to matters cuisine, so I cannot lay any claims in that regard at all.

Interviewer: You do eat it at home, though?

Vic: We eat it at home when my wife makes it, and it's more typically on an occasion like breaking the fast after Yom Kippur, after the Day of Atonement. My wife makes a wonderful Sephardic cuisine in that regard. On Passover, there's a distinction between the Sephardi and the Ashkenazi communities, in that on Passover, Sephardic people are permitted to eat rice, where Ashkenazi people are not. That is something in which we participate as a Sephardic tradition in that regard.

Interviewer: Really, we'll go on straight to the praying, which is really about rituals and observances and traditions based around Judaism. We'd love to hear about mitzvahs, traditions, how it shapes your identity and the passing down of any particular traditions from generation to generation. I guess my first question would be how do your religious practices now compare to before you migrated?

Vic: I cannot lay any great claim to being a strictly observant person. That said, our family just recently experienced the most wonderful religious tradition, and that was both my daughters got married within 12 months of each other. Our older daughter's wedding was in Jerusalem. Where the religious traditional aspect came into the fore was, in the Jewish tradition there's a pre-wedding ceremony which one has in a synagogue. Given that the wedding was taking place in Jerusalem, one hour direct flight from Jerusalem is the island of Rhodes, where my family originated. Forty of us from Australia, South Africa, Israel and the United States flew to Rhodes Island where we had this pre-wedding ceremony called the 'Oufrouf' in the synagogue on Rhodes Island. The synagogue is all of 500 years old. It's the only remaining synagogue on the island. It's magnificent. It's been refurbished. They are black and white pebble flooring. Once can see that it's hundreds of years old, but it's been refurbished.

The Jewish community of Rhodes Island, as I indicated earlier, was decimated by the Holocaust. There are all of five Jewish family only left living on Rhodes Island out of a community of 5,000 people before the Holocaust. The synagogue is there but it's empty, and it awaits the arrival of tourists. For 40 of us to descend upon the synagogue and to have a pre-wedding ceremony there with a rabbi who came from Sydney, symbolically brought, not only the the synagogue back to life, but the community back to life. That was very powerful indeed. We had a Friday night Shabbat service in the synagogue. We had a Saturday morning service in the synagogue. So even though I cannot claim to be an observant person, reviving the community of Rhodes Island in this religious way and with a pre-wedding ceremony was exceptionally powerful, exceptionally moving. Something which resonated for all of us who were there, most certainly including our own families.

Interviewer: Fantastic. That's great. Do you attend a synagogue here at all?

Vic: I do attend synagogue. I do attend synagogue. Again, I cannot lay claim to being overly observant, so I do not attend as often as one might.

Interviewer: Moving on then to the traditions, I guess. No matter how religious you are, there are certain traditions around Judaism that a lot of people adhere to and embrace. Which traditions do you feel are most important or that you're most passionate about?

Vic: Every family, every individual make their own choices in terms of which traditions are more important or less important. In terms of our own family, Friday night Shabbat dinner is a very important ritual for us. In terms of an opportunity, there are a number of disparate sections of our family here in Sydney. We are fortunate in that a number of different sections of our family have migrated to this country. The Shabbat dinner is a wonderful opportunity for our family to get together to reconnect and that, for us, is the most important tradition in which we adhere to.

Interviewer: That's something that has really been passed down through your family, through your parents?

Vic: That has not been passed down through my parents, because I had a very ... My background was very disrupted. As I mentioned earlier, I was sent off to boarding school at the age of nine, so I did not have a home life to speak of growing up at all. I have no recollection of any home life or Friday night Shabbat dinners, because there was no united family there at all. When our parents divorced, as I said, when I was nine or ten years old, my father went off to live in Zaire. We were living in Zimbabwe, so that is not something which was passed down. It's something which I married into, I guess, which is a wonderfully rich tradition.

Interviewer: I'm assuming that that tradition is now being passed on to your own children.

Vic: Very much so. Both our daughters have married wonderful young men, and that tradition does endure. Most definitely.

Interviewer: Okay. We'll move on to naches. Every Jewish person wants some naches in their life. It can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community. I'd just like to know what the word naches means to you, and does it have any special significance?

Vic: I guess one would define naches as deriving satisfaction, gratification from those in whom one has imparted some learning, some lessons, some education, some experiences. Clearly, the people for whom that would apply to first and foremost would be one's loved ones. My wife and I are extremely blessed to have two wonderful daughters, two now sons-in-law and a granddaughter. That is naches personified in the first and foremost. Beyond that, I have been fortunate enough to have mentored a number of people along the way, whether those are aspiring journalists, people who wanted to get involved in advocacy work, which is very much what my work on the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies enables me to do and puts me in a position to do, and from my previous career as a journalist. There have been a number of journalists along the way whom I have mentored, coached, assisted. Seeing people in all those sectors not only flourish, but really spread their wings and achieve and conquer, that too is naches. Obviously in a slightly wider circle than one's own loved ones, but in different measures and with different degrees, all of that would apply.

Interviewer: What do you hope for your own children and grandchild?

Vic: What I hope for my own children and grandchild is the same factor which prompts me to get up in the morning. That is to work for a society where there is no bigotry and there is no racism. To

me, that issue right there is the biggest scourge that we deal with. Whether that bigotry be against people of color or gays or whatever it is, or different faiths and religions. I abhor bigotry with a passion. It is what drives me first and foremost.

I was giving a speech recently at a Rotary club when during the Q and A there were a number of rather searching questions. One of the questions was why do you do what you do. I began giving all sorts of intellectual answers, and then I stopped and started again. I said, "Actually, the real reason I do the work that I do is that I don't want my children to walk down the street and be abused for the crime of being Jewish." Right now, that is a very real risk. It's more than a risk. It actually happens to members of the community. It's not just about Jewish identity, it's all identities. We all have a right to be on the planet, with the proviso that we don't impact negatively on our neighbour.

That's what I want. I want a society where we respect each other. Not being an observant person, there's a line in the Jewish teachings from [Rabbi] Hillel which says, "That which is hurtful to you, do not do unto others." If we can get to a place where every person abides by that, then I believe we will have achieved a great thing in our society. That is the sort of society that I want for my children and for my grandchild.

Interviewer: Very, very nicely answered. What do you think your biggest achievement in life is, Vic, and why?

Vic: I hesitate to use the word achievement in terms of biggest achievement when I refer to our daughters. Both of them are not only the most exceptionally high achieving, but the most wonderful human beings. They are people in their own right, so I cannot say that they are my achievement. Certainly they are our daughters. In terms of professionally, you want terms of achievement, I hope that I impact on people, when I go into the marketplace of ideas and talk about the fact that every one of the people to whom I'm speaking has the ability to make a difference. Not only to make a difference for themselves, but to make a difference in society and to make a difference in the world. Every one of them has the ability to not be a bystander, not be an onlooker, to make a positive difference in changing society for the better.

I do a lot of public speaking. That is the topic which I speak about the most, of which I am the most passionate. I invariably do elicit a lot of positive response, that it's clear that some people, obviously not all, have somehow been touched or impacted in some way. If just one of those people in any given audience does something positive with that, I regard that as my day's work has been done. That is the achievement which I continually strive for, to impact people and move people with the awareness and understanding and obligation that they have the ability to make a difference positively. Every time I feel that I've touched someone in that way, that is an achievement which I feel that I have done for the day.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Just looking at the activities that you're involved in for the wider community that also bring you naches.

Vic: My work is focused on being CEO of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies. That work takes me into the wider community by definition. It is focused very much on two tracks. One is bridge building, relationship building with the wider community. The wider community being the

Indian community, the Greek community, different faith groups, different ethnic groups. It is about bridge building. It's about forming relationships with the common denominator that we are all Australians in Australia in this part of the world and here in Waverley, all ideally working towards the same goal. That is very much part of the work that I do on a daily basis.

The second track, and parallel to that, is putting out fires. Either responding to attacks on the community, responding to incidents of bigotry and racism. Again, that is dealing with the wider community, and is dealing with it from a negative perspective, but trying to turn people around, addressing issues of racism, of bigotry, trying to get through to people to understand why those incidents took place. Very often there's a very clear understanding from our side, that there is no logic in that. Therefore one has to deal with the situation and with the factors on the table in different ways.

Both of those tracks, engaging and responding to attacks on the community are dealing with the wider community. That is where the work is and that is where the challenge is. That is what takes the vast majority of the time which I dedicate to this role.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I think maybe that's the end of the formal part of the questions. I was thinking maybe you can expand on maybe the books that you brought along. Did you bring any photos or they'll come later?

Vic: I brought the three books, and I brought some photographs from... I was sent to Moscow three times as a journalist for the Australian Jewish News.

Interviewer: Well, maybe you can talk about that.

Vic: Okay.

Interviewer: Just really give us some information about the different photos that you brought.

Vic: I was fortunate enough to be sent to Moscow three times when I was on the Australia Jewish News. The impetus for that was this was during the dark days of the Soviet Empire, when the two million Jews in the then Soviet Union were effectively prisoners in that vast empire. Prisoners meant that they were punished, often harassed, often imprisoned for the crime of being Jewish, for identifying as Jewish, for studying Judaism, and for the crime of applying to emigrate from that country and emigrate to Israel as well. People were called refuseniks. A refusenik was somebody who had applied to leave the country and had been denied a visa and now had been thrown out of his job, et cetera.

Isi Leibler at the time was president of the Australian Jewish community, [of the] Executive Council of Australian Jewry, and he played an extraordinary role of helping to prise the doors open of the Soviet Union to allow Soviet Jews to leave. Part of the armoury of his campaign was the oxygen of publicity. He took me along to the Soviet Union as part of his team to write about what he was doing. This involved meetings in the Kremlin, for example. One shakes one's head in amazement to think that one has actually been into the Kremlin. In those days, all you knew about the Kremlin was what you read in James Bond books.

I went along with Isi Leibler to meetings in the Kremlin with Soviet government ministers, in which he typically would hand a piece of paper to the minister at the meeting with 45 names on it and say, "Why have these 45 people been denied visas?" The response was extraordinary. I remember it as clearly as anything, where the minister said to him, "Mr. Leibler, there are two million Jews living in this country. Why do you care about 45?" His response was quite simply, "Everyone is a human being, and everyone has a right." Watching him in action in those meetings was a rare privilege. Being a journalist there at those times where he organized the first legitimate concert of Jewish music in the Soviet Union in 70 years.

Everyone can picture the scene. It was the Tchaikovsky Auditorium in Moscow, snow outside up to your knees. Jews had come from Siberia by train for four days, for which they had paid half of their monthly salary, to get to Moscow to get a ticket to the concert. Then the concert is packed with 3,000 people, Soviet Jews, many of whom had been denied visas out of the country, and in the front you can see members of the KGB with their hats. Then the concert begins. Again, it's the first legitimate concert of Jewish music in seven decades. Dudu Fisher, an Israeli who played Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, goes on stage, and after a couple of Hebrew songs, he sings *Bring Him Home* from *Les Miserables*. The shivers are just going down people's spines, tears going down people cheeks, and I'm there as a journalist, which was one of those extraordinary moments which one never forgets.