



Fitzroy History Society Oral History Project 2015-2017

Transcript of interview with Menka Simmonds

(Interviewed by Meg Lee and Marion Glanville from the Fitzroy History Society on 25 September 2015)

Menka Simmonds arrived in Australia in 1948 from Macedonia and due to the need for her mother to work, left school after only two and a half years to look after her little sister. One of her early employments resulted in Menka organising acceptable working conditions for her work colleagues.

In 1964 her father was purchasing the contents of houses when residents moved out and opened a furniture restoration shop in Gertrude Street. Menka became the accountant and then managed the shop. Despite the very hard and long working days, she enjoyed the work and the personal interaction with both those customers selling and those buying in the shop, which developed into an antique boutique.

Menka's family life for many years was strongly influenced by, and had influence in, Melbourne's Macedonian community. She now puts a great deal of effort into raising money for Rotary by organising of functions, one of which is her annual cooking of a Macedonian meal. She has won an award from Rotary, their highest honour, for her long-standing efforts.



START OF TRANSCRIPT

Menka Simmonds: Well when I first came to Australia - I'm known as Mary everywhere, all my business is Mary because when I came in 1948 foreign names were not acceptable, they changed it to Mary. Everyone keeps on saying to me why do you change - not that there's anything wrong with Mary - I said well, in those days I said Menka was a foreign name. So, but now I go by both names.

Facilitator: So this is Menka Simmonds and it's Wednesday 16 September at 10:30am. Thank you Menka very much for having us. So you were telling the story about the attitude to people delivering in Fitzroy.

Menka Simmonds: Now this was in [Ball and Welch's] as I said, I wanted to buy this dinner set and I didn't have enough money. So, when I told the woman to deliver it to Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, she said oh, oh do you realise POD means pay on delivery? I said oh, would you rather deliver it to my house in Kew, that's - I lived with my parents [1:04] then - and her whole demeanour changed. I said look, on second thought, I said, cancel it, I don't really want it.

Another very funny episode, I used to stay on the corner of Gertrude and Napier Street and that was the corner where all the prostitutes did their business, and I'm waiting for the tram and all of a sudden this police car pulled up. He said ma'am, do you mind if we drive you to wherever you want, this is a very bad corner to be wait-. I said oh no, I'm used to this area, I live upstairs.

I couldn't get into a police car because opposite it was the Macedonian Gambling Club and they were all watching. If I got into a police car it would be through the whole community, she finally got caught up. Because they didn't like it that I was so successful in business and one of them said, you drive a truck - it was a van - I said yes, that's part of my business. Women shouldn't drive trucks [laughs]. I was a little bit of a rebel in the Macedonian community.

So, but I have lots of - and another really funny one was this drunk walked in - the shop was wide, really wide door - he walked in and I had one of those harps, you know the church harps where you?

He was pulling away and I said to him - maybe I shouldn't say it on the thing - I said, stop playing with my organ...

[Laughter]



...and he said lady, I never play with lady's organs.

[Laughter]

I laughed so hard, I mean I really put myself in. He sorted a, as dignified as he could and looked at me as if to say, oh. Oh, I had so many funny episodes in that shop.

Facilitator: Now the shop, Menka, was on Gertrude Street...

Menka Simmonds: On the corner of Gertrude and Napier Street and was big.

[3:15]

As I said in the book in the old days my, we knew, all the newcomers used to come to Fitzroy to buy furniture and stuff. We used to sell them for £200 to furnish their whole house and we'd deliver it. Then the extra service we used to give them we'd ring the gas and fuel, we'd ring the telephone, we'd arrange all that for them because they couldn't speak. So, that was an extra little incentive we used to do for them, and we did...

Facilitator: Yes. So, what made you come to Gertrude Street?

Menka Simmonds: Oh well dad originally when wanted to do something used to buy all this stuff and mum said, you either get a shop or just get rid of the stuff, because he was a buyer. So he opened up in Gertrude Street in a little shop and then this shop, the big one, became available and all his cronies were all retiring. He said no, he said I'm going to open that and he borrowed money and opened Fitzroy Auctions in 1964.

Facilitator: What number Gertrude Street?

Menka Simmonds: I think it was 314.

Facilitator: Where Dante's was?

Menka Simmonds: Yes, and he said well - I was working for Myers at that time - he said, you'll have to come and do all my paperwork and all my selling, and with my poppa if he said you did that - and I really resented it, but I did. I learnt everything there is to learn about...

Facilitator: What year was this?

Menka Simmonds: This was in 1964.

[Very] early, and we stayed there for quite a long time until poppa retired and I and my husband at that time took over the business. We more or less started improving it, putting antiques in it, and then I started doing antique fairs. No it was a really good business and in those days' people loved coming in. They could buy anything. Fridges, bedding, antiques, jewellery, we had the lot.

[5:23]



Figure 1: Menka's mother and father.

Facilitator: Yes, and they were Macedonian...

Menka Simmonds: Oh no, all different nationalities. We went through all the different, like the Macedonians, there were Spanish and then there were Italians and then there were Turks. That area, that was their starting point for all the new Australians because it was close to the city and they could get cheap rental, very cheap rental in those days. A lot of them would live in the flats until they gathered a bit of money and then moved on to Doncaster. ...Or Kew, or Bulleen.



[Laughter]

It was a fantastic...

Facilitator: Yes, because [Johnson's] was also a furniture shop.

Menka Simmonds: Well that was the building, that was the original building. Johnson's, yes.

Facilitator: Oh, yes, because I understand that Johnson was further down by the Aboriginal Health Service.

Menka Simmonds: No, no I don't know. I, we understood it our building was - because we used to get a lot of furniture with a stamp and one of the elders in the area said he remembers coming there and working. So I don't know and I can only go by what he said.

Facilitator: Yes, so where did you get your stock from?

Menka Simmonds: Well in those days we didn't have to go hunting, all the agents used to ring us up because we'd just clear the whole house before they'd sell it. Used to be able to get a whole house lot for about £100 [laughs]. It was anything just to clear it. It was a real big business, loved it, that was my start there and then I moved on to Clifton Hill, oh, in 1987 in Clifton Hill and I've been in Clifton Hill since then.

[7:18]

I bought the building on the corner on Michael and Queens Parade and in those days' buildings in Clifton Hill, or as they call it North Fitzroy, were cheap. I had to borrow all the money to buy that building and I remember the bank manager saying, you paid that much money for that, in Clifton Hill? I said, you wait, one day I said - anyway, 10 years later he came and saw my name and he said oh, you were clever buying this building. I said, not according to you. At that time, I borrowed the money I was paying 17.5 per cent.... Nearly went broke a couple of times.

Facilitator: ...interest rates were high then, weren't they?

Menka Simmonds: Oh people complain about six per cent, in business.

Facilitator: Yes, it was tough, it was tough.

Menka Simmonds: 17.5 per cent, so...



- Facilitator: Yes. So Menka, you mentioned the Macedonian Club across the road in...
- Menka Simmonds: That's where all the Macedonians congregated to play cards. Gertrude Street and Napier Street was the mecca for the Macedonians. We had our church around the corner, that was the first Macedonian church and an Anglican priest, Father [Elliot] from, he used to have the Saint Luke's in Brunswick Street, St Georges Road. He was a great friend of dads and went to Canberra because the Greeks didn't want us to open a Macedonian church, so through him we got the permission to open the, to build the church in Young Street. I don't know if it's still there, I don't think so. ...But they said...
- Facilitator: ...Young Street was demolished, wasn't it?
- Menka Simmonds: It was a big church and that was the first Macedonian church in Australia. Now there's over 30 or so, all over. [9:09]
- Approximately, yeah. We used to walk around the, from Young Street right around Napier Street and all the other streets at Easter time carrying the candles. We'd be walking around our area and the Greeks would be walking around East Melbourne and it was a really interesting era.
- Facilitator: Yes, very much and, of course, the twain never met.
- Menka Simmonds: Well we did, but look there was a bit of argy bargy but I've got lots of Greek friends and I say to them, I respect you and I like you but I'm Macedonian and you're Greek, let's leave it at that. The ones that know me...
- Facilitator: Yes, do you think there's many Macedonian's left here?
- Menka Simmonds: Oh, there's still a few, but not as many. A lot of them moved out to bigger houses in Doncaster. They could buy a big house compared to - but there's still quite a few in McKean Street. ... Macedonians, yeah. Not as many as there used to be.
- Facilitator: What do you think they were employed...
- Menka Simmonds: They were always in factories, they always worked in factories. My father was about the only one who was in business, the rest of them, well most of them worked for either factories or in butcher shops. Mainly sort of labour work. He was ahead of his time, poppa, working in antiques. They all thought he was crazy lugging all this furniture, but I got that from him, I love it. I still love it. ... Yeah, I think it's one...



- Facilitator: So if you could imagine Gertrude Street on either side of that Macedonian Club, from Napier Street on which are the existing buildings now, because they demolished... [11:09]
- Menka Simmonds: Mm, I remember when they demolished there was a big, big kerfuffle about demolishing all those shops to build all the flats. But they needed to house people. They demolished a lot of shops. They could've left shop frontages and build the - but in those days, they didn't care, they just demolished things. It was the same with the Exhibition Building, where the museum is. That was a beautiful building and overnight they pulled it down. That's alright now, but they pulled it, overnight, to build that, they pulled down a very beautiful old building to do that. But that stopped, thank goodness, that stopped pulling old buildings down in Fitzroy, I hope they have.
- Facilitator: Mm, yeah. Do you remember an antique shop on the corner of Fitzroy Street and Palmer Street? Maybe you didn't come west of Brunswick Street.
- Menka Simmonds: What was the name?
- Facilitator: I don't know the name but - I'll talk to you afterwards about that.
- Menka Simmonds: I probably do but I don't, I don't recall.
- Facilitator: Mm. But if we could imagine those shops along Gertrude Street can you remember the sequence of what was - was there a Macedonian restaurant next to the men's club?
- Menka Simmonds: Yes, there was. There was a beautiful Macedonian - it was practically opposite, not my shop, there was an auction room on the corner where the Aboriginal - actually, that building was owned by my sister and brother-in-law. They opened an antique shop when I took over Fitzroy Auctions, they opened an antique shop there and there was a Macedonian restaurant practically opposite them, next to that hotel, I can't remember the name of the hotel.
- Facilitator: The Builders Arms.
- Menka Simmonds: Yes, oh gee you've got a better memory than I have.
- Facilitator: No, well I live down there.
- Menka Simmonds: It was beautiful, beautiful food. [13:21]



Mm. But they closed down. There's not many, I don't know if there are many Macedonian restaurants left. I think, I was always told, you should open a Macedonian - because I cook quite a few Macedonian dishes. I hold a dinner for the last 10 years for Rotary to make money for the Rotary. I cook for about 20-25 people of Macedonian dishes.

I actually fitted 25 people here last - was it last year or this year? No, last year, it was in March and it was 36 degrees so I had to fit them in here. It was too hot outside, some of our Rotarians are in their 90s. I had six of them sitting here and the rest were on two long trestle tables. I cooked a sit-down meal.

Facilitator: Mm, you did a lot at once.

Menka Simmonds: Yeah I love it, I love cooking, and I earn them \$500 for the day because I charge people \$25 for the meal. They were happy to pay.

Facilitator: Oh, I'm sure, they were getting a bargain for a lovely home cooked meal like that.

Menka Simmonds: Do you know any Macedonians?

Facilitator: No, the secretary of work, where I used to work, [Sefta].

Menka Simmonds: Sefta, I probably know her by face but I...

Facilitator: Yeah, she's - and I think and her husband works at Ford, I think he's in administration at Ford. Yeah, I can't remember her last name.

Menka Simmonds: No, I probably know her by face. But there were a few, like there was a Macedonian record shop I think opposite, in that part, near the Macedonian restaurant, but he went. There were only about, actually only about, well counting ours and my brother-in-law's, only about four Macedonian restaurant in the street and the Macedonian Gambling Club, that was big.

Facilitator: Legal? [15:34]

Menka Simmonds: Oh legal, yeah, they played cards for fun and for coffees, yeah. But they had, there'd be lots of them there congregating, much to the delight of the wives, it got them out of the house.

Facilitator: Yes, and the bootmaker?

Menka Simmonds: Oh, he's still there, Tony. ...His father owned three of those buildings and he was in - oh I'm sorry, yes, that's another one. That was, he's definitely Mac-, well, they call themselves Macedonian Bulgarian and he...

[Aside discussion]

His father originally started that business, but the son did the shoe and he's around the corner in, he still repairs boots and shoes. He used to make special boots for all the rockers, all the rockers from America used to come and have boots made by him specially.

Facilitator: Like Elvis Presley.

Menka Simmonds: I don't know about Elvis; he never came to - he never came to Australia. No, a lot of the rockers used to turn up there and he was the speciality making these beautiful boots. Now he just does shoe repairs, he's very good at it. He and his wife, they sit in this little garage in the back, she said Menka, what can I do? He doesn't know what to do with himself. So, this is a way of keeping him busy, yeah. They own those three buildings, three storey building. Their son now runs a, I think, a computer repair in one of them.

Facilitator: Menka, in the 1960s Gertrude Street was really a shopping hub of Melbourne, wasn't it?

Menka Simmonds: It was, but it also had quite a dodgy, a bit of a dodgy name. There were a few dodgy people living around there.

Facilitator: Now you told me the story about the police offering to pick you up before, you might like to say that again. [17:46]

Menka Simmonds: Well I always dressed well, I always through if I'm going - well, I love dressing up. I was standing on the corner of Gertrude and Napier Street waiting for the tram and all of a sudden this police car pulls up. He said lady, madam, can we give you a lift? It's not safe to be standing on a corner here. I said I'm sorry, but I happen to own this business here and I live upstairs so I'm quite happy, thank you. They wouldn't move until the tram came and I got onto the tram.

There's another really funny story. This elderly woman, she was a pro, she was lovely, I used to always talk to her. She'd be standing on a corner and she told me she did this business to earn money to send money to her daughter in Queensland for their - and the daughter had no idea what she was doing. One day, she used

to come and wander in the shop, this little Greek man came and I was about to sell him a bedroom suite, I went to get the docket book, next thing I know he's walking out. I said, excuse me, what about the bedroom suite? He said, forget the bedroom suite, he was going off with her.

[Laughter]

Next day she's on the corner again and I said to her excuse me, but you can do your business out on the street but don't steal my customers from my business. Never came into my shop again [laughs]. She laughed, she said ooh, I got good money out of him. I said yeah, yeah I said and I lost the sale of a bedroom suite [laughs].

Facilitator: He found a bed?

Menka Simmonds: No, it was - there were a lot, there were a lot of them and, you know, that's business. Oh, look...

Facilitator: They lived in the neighbourhood?

Menka Simmonds: They lived in the neighbourhood. There was another episode, I'm standing in the back and I could see this chair moving from where I'm sitting in the back and I ran out and there's this man walking off with one of my beautiful chairs. So I went and I picked it up and I [20:03] put it back into the shop. He said, you caught me this time, and just kept on walking. He lived in one of those three storey, yeah.

Facilitator: So the three storey houses were used as apartments?

Menka Simmonds: Boarding houses, and she was very - she still looks after them, she was very good to them. They did all their paying their bills or taking them to doctors. They have longstanding, they still run it as a boarding houses, they have longstanding...

Facilitator: What's her name?

Menka Simmonds: Oh, I can't remember, I'm sorry. The memory's going. ...Tony's her husband's name. It'll come to me, but they are a lovely couple. They've been in the area a long, long time.

Facilitator: I know somebody who's renting one of the apartment, whatever, in there now.

Menka Simmonds: Now there's a lot of single men.



- Facilitator: Yeah. I think it's - I haven't been there - but I think it's like a, you have your own place and share the kitchen.
- Menka Simmonds: Yes, yeah. No, it's interesting. One of the tenants that used to be there, she was, a lot of them were alcoholics and she always looked a bit - one day she walks into my shop, she's beautifully dressed, and she said, I've come to tell you goodbye, she said, because I've been offered this flat somewhere in Thornbury by the council. She said, I've decided to become a good citizen. She was beautifully dressed.
- I said, I'm so happy for you. Three months later she's back in the area, I said to her, what happened? Oh, it was too hard being prim and proper, she said. I like Gertrude Street, Fitzroy much better, it's much more interesting and people talk to you [laughs]. It was a lovely, lovely area, yeah. I was there quite a long time.
- Facilitator: So you didn't only auction furniture or sell furniture to new arrivals but you ...gave them additional service.
- [22:08]
- Menka Simmonds: Oh no. ...Oh no, we did.
- Facilitator: Can you talk a bit more about that?
- Menka Simmonds: Well they used to come in because they couldn't speak English and they didn't know what to do about putting the, applying for electricity, applying for their telephone. So we would fill it out for them and register it for them for no fee. Because it was very hard, there was nobody there to help them in those days.
- Facilitator: I would imagine they'd be very grateful.
- Menka Simmonds: Oh they were, they were, and of course it helped the business, they used to send all their friends to come and buy because we had really cheap furniture.
- Facilitator: Yes, and the flats were in the process of being built at that time, because the demolition had just occurred, really.
- Menka Simmonds: Yep. Oh I was there when they were all up and running, yeah. The first lot that were there, they were very happy to be there because they were in new buildings.
- Facilitator: Yeah, looked nice. What made you decide to come to North Fitzroy?



Menka Simmonds: Well when I broke up with my husband I decided I needed to find another place and I heard that that building was up for sale. I've always loved the Fitzroy and North Fitzroy area and I, when I looked at that building I thought, that's it. I was successful and I rebuilt part of it and I built a, it was a beautiful apartment upstairs. I lived there for 15 years and my mother came to live with me upstairs. It was a big area with a beautiful garden, I built an extra part for a garden. A beautiful fam-, a huge family room, twice the size of this.

There was a local - can't remember his name - leadlight worker and I had 14 foot doors and he said I can build you a beautiful leadlight there. I said, but he said - he only charged me for the whole [24:26] thing [\$1400], it's worth a lot of money - but he said, I'll only do it for that price if you allow me to bring clients up to see my work, which he did and he got a lot of business out of it. It's still there, the leadlight, it's beautiful.

Facilitator: So who were your, who did your - who were your customers in North Fitzroy?

Menka Simmonds: Oh, all nationalities.

Facilitator: Because by this time you transferred your business across to antiques, hadn't you?

Menka Simmonds: I still, it was all antiques but I never got over buying, if I could. I'm a wheeler dealer, I like [change], I would buy any [thing] ... But most of my furniture was antiques. Beautiful stuff. It was a beautiful shop and I had a showcase built along one whole wall, a three-door showcase - I can't remember who it was who came and built it - into the building and it housed all my best china and sterling silver into it. I had clients from all over, I used to get a lot of interstate people because it was such a vast shop.

Facilitator: Mm, so you were actually running the antique shop where Blondies was.

Menka Simmonds: Yes, mm.

Facilitator: Yes, and do you still have connections to the Macedonian community?

Menka Simmonds: Not so much, no. My sister does, she still does, but not so much, no. I did, well while my mother was alive I used to take her to the church in Gertrude Street, then of course the big one opened in Epping and we used to go there. I still go for Easter at the one in Epping, just midnight. My niece picks me up and Tina, but



Tina still mixes a lot with - now, they come into my shop, a lot of the
[26:38]

Macedonians, but I don't really go to many - I sort of, my family's my first, my daughter and my grandchildren and also Rotary.

I do a lot of charity work through Rotary. I've been a Rotarian now for about 10 years and I'm organising functions and meals at different peoples' houses and at different, different places.

Facilitator: Mm, and you've won an award?

Menka Simmonds: Yeah, for all the charity.

Facilitator: Tell us about the award, yes.

Menka Simmonds: Well it's a Paul Harris Award, that's the highest honour you can - Paul Harris started Rotary I think in 1800s, that's the highest honour you could - I shared it with the real estate agent in Queens Parade, Steve Earl, because he's also part of the Rotary group. It's one of the highest honours you can have. We have the changeover every six months and I had no idea that I was getting this award.

My daughter came with the two boys because my son-in-law was working and I said, what are you doing here? Oh, she said, we were invited to come just to see what goes on. I said to the boys, I said, aren't you supposed to be somewhere? Because they never - no we, we're being picked up by here. I had no idea. It was a wonderful, very, very proud of that.

Facilitator: Congratulations.

Menka Simmonds: Thank you, very proud of it.

Facilitator: Shall we have a break?

Menka Simmonds: Yes.

...

Facilitator: Sefta Valeska was the Macedonian...

Menka Simmonds: I probably know her by face.

Facilitator: Yeah, I just thought you might know the last name if not the... She's about 53...



Menka Simmonds: No. [28:24]

Well she's my daughter's - so, I don't know whether she'd know my, but no, she's more my daughter's [age]- most of my age group, they all live in Epping, Bulleen, Doncaster. I really don't hear that much. They go to their churches in those areas. I don't really have much to do with them. As I said most of my time's spent with my daughter and grandchildren and my Rotary. I feed two seniors from the Rushall Park home down here every Wednesday. I set up the table here and because they don't cook they love it, and I do Tai Chi down there. ...I do. ...At the Rushall Park, there's a special hall down there.

Facilitator: Oh, because I've been looking for Tai Chi.

Menka Simmonds: Oh, please come, be our guest. But she's away at the moment. It's every Monday at three o'clock. If you give me your phone number when we go back, it's wonderful and she really is a specialist for older - because most of our group is older. So we do movements to...

[Aside conversation 29:48 to 30:40]

Menka Simmonds: There were a lot of factories opposite our shop. Oh, now what were the factories? Well, like there were a lot of clothing factories and a lot of Jewish people. I used to know them by, and actually dad knew them more than I did, because poppa looked Jewish. He used to always wear a hat and they loved him because he was a merchant and they were merchants. He used to take mum on the Gold Coast every year and he'd meet up with all these Jewish owners of their factories and they - so they all used to congregate but not really mix together, but a lot of the Macedonians worked for them.

Facilitator: So they lived in Fitzroy and...

Menka Simmonds: They lived in... [31:30]

Facilitator: ...worked, they weren't travelling further for the factories or...

Menka Simmonds: Oh, a few of them used to - I actually worked in a factory and there were a lot of Macedonians in Brunswick. It was a bedspread factory and at first the owner wouldn't employ me because I spoke English. In those days, you preferred people that didn't speak English, they could get more work out of them.



I needed a job very, very - so he said alright, I'll give you a trial. Because I could speak and write English, there were a lot of Macedonians working in this factory, in the bedspread factory, and the main two were two Russian Jewish women in the main part. He put me there and I also did his office work. But when I arrived there and I thought oh dear...

[Background noise]

...dreadful here, because you know the candlewick bedspreads?

Facilitator: Mm, oh yes.

Menka Simmonds: There were no sucking machines to suck the fluff and you could hardly see people because of the - and there were no heating and there was one toilet for about 20 people. I said to the women, I said I'm definitely not staying here, I said to them how can you work under these conditions? Well, we just need a job. So I thought no, I'm going to fix this. I said to them, you should get a union. They said oh no, he told us if we joined a union we'll lose our jobs. I said, tell me who are the main people here, and I found out five of them were the main.

I talked them in, I said if you join there's no way he could fire you because you're the lynchpins of the place. So I got them secretly to sign and I went to the union, but I gave him notice. I said, the union is coming in a week's time to inspect the premises. He said, what? I said, I've got five signatures and I'm not saying who it is but your place will close down if you fire these five people.

[33:41]

So in a week he put in machines to suck all the fluff, he put in heaters... ..he put in a new kitchen and he put two toilets. I said, you've got happy workers and then I said well, and I'm also giving you my resignation. Because I couldn't work there, I got a job in Myers. He said you did all this and you're leaving? I said no, they were working under appalling - and of course the women loved me for doing that for them, but they were too scared to do it one by one.

I went to work for Myers and he came and asked for me and he said I'll give you double the wages if you come back because he didn't have to employ someone to work in his office. I taught the two Russian women - we couldn't understand each other so I said to them, you teach me two Russian words a day and I'll teach you two English words. Within about three months they could speak the basics in English and I learnt a bit of Russian.

Facilitator: Where did you learn your English? Was it before you came to Australia?

Menka Simmonds: Oh no, oh not a word. I was, I came at the age of 11 here and because there was no school in the village, the Germans had occupied our village. I hadn't met my father until I came to Australia, he left for a better world in 1938 and of course war broke out and then we couldn't, we didn't even know he was alive. After the war, he - he served in the Army here - I think it's in the book - he brought us over and I was 11 and I went to school for only, I only went for two and a half years.

Because dad had a fish and chip shop in Albert Park and when my older sister got married - that's Stella, that's in that photo there - he needed someone to work in the shop (See Figure 2). No, he actually needed someone to look after the baby, they had another daughter born here and mum had to work in the shop. So I was made to leave school at the age of 13 to work in the shop and look after my young [36:01] sister. I loved school. So I only had two and a half years of schooling, but within six months - being in the shop helped because I used to work after school in the shop peeling potatoes and doing all the - I learnt English in six months.



Figure 2. Menka aged 11 (seated in front), in 1948 when she first met her father.



- Facilitator: Mm, and it would've helped, I mean a lot of people migrating would have had both parents speaking Macedonian...
- Menka Simmonds: Oh dad...
- Facilitator: ...whereas you had your father already...
- Menka Simmonds: Oh no my father, my father spoke beautiful Eng[lish], and he loved Australia. The neighbours next door were Australian and they loved poppa, so they used to teach me about an hour a day schooling after I left school. So I had good help from the neighbours, but that's all the schooling I've ever had, two and a half years. So I've worked...
- Facilitator: You've done well.
- Menka Simmonds: Well I've worked really hard.
- Facilitator: Well Menka that's fairly typical, I mean my father only went to Year 8.
- Menka Simmonds: Well that's how it was, it didn't stop. In those days, you could but I know now - I've got an 88-year-old friend that I feed every Wednesday, she said oh, it's a waste of money sending, spending all that money on private tuition. My four did only - I said listen Pauline, I said in those days, I said I've done well and I've only had two and a half years, I said it's different today.
- Today kids need, I said it's money well spent, I said I don't, I'm not sorry I'm spending it on my two grandsons. I said it's different. Because she's of the old school, she's 88 and her kids have done very well, but things are different.
- I said, your grandson gets extra. Oh well, and she sort of changed [laughs]. No, I think, I believe nowadays you really, to survive you need a good education.
- [38:01]
- Facilitator: Yeah I agree, too. ...Well Menka, what good works have you done to win the award from Rotary?
- Menka Simmonds: Oh mainly my, I attend practically every meeting, but mainly it's doing dinners and arranging for at peoples' places and earning this, and either people are charging, earning all this money for Foundation. I am also a Foundation member where I pay a Foundation fee that of all the Rotary groups, all the ones that pay, Foundation, that money gets spent all over the world. It's a very big - mainly it's more my work to do with doing dinners and arranging for different nights where people are going to spend and earning money that way.



It's a lot of hard work because I've got to do a lot of re-, like two weeks ago we wanted to try a new venue so I went to the Clifton Hill Hotel and they charge something like \$35 for most of the meals and our lot can't pay that. So I went and talked to her, I said you'll get at least 20 people but it has to be a special. So she did a \$20 a head and for beer and wine's \$5 a glass and it was wonderful. We didn't earn the money from that, that went to the hotel, but it was very nice, it was lovely and she was very happy and my crowd loved it. I went for Fathers' Day with my daughter and grandchildren and then I realised what the real price was, \$35 or \$30...

So that's what my job is, to arrange different functions and they're all over, they're all over, oh well some are, there's one we do at Eltham and there's one we do at Little River. He's an old Rotarian, he's 90-something, he's not part of the group yet but he likes to have us there and we get a bus and I arrange for everyone to bring the salad or a sweet. We go by bus there, a small bus, and they give us - oh, they've got a beautiful place in Little River - and they provide the barbecue and we provide all the rest. We bring our own wine and our own sweets. That's the kind of thing. We still charge \$25 and that goes to the Club so it's a good money earner. [40:50]

Facilitator: [Now/No] it's being [unclear] by Annie I think was very social for her when she started.

Menka Simmonds: Oh Annie, Annie's fantastic. She started at MS, multiple sclerosis thing in the Swimathon.

Facilitator: Yeah, oh she told me about the Swimathon.

Menka Simmonds: Oh, she, when it first started well I think they earned about something, oh, about \$500, now it's \$280,000 for two days. The swimmers get sponsored by body corporates and things and Annie, when she started it, arranged for Rotarians for two days, 24-hour day, to provide coffee and food for them. We provide the food for the swimmers and they paid a small fee but the swimmers got it for free. So we provided all the food.

Facilitator: Yeah, and it was for 24 hours, that's a lot of work.

Menka Simmonds: Two days. ...We had, different Rotarians would take different shifts.

Facilitator: Got rostered on sort of thing.



Menka Simmonds: She started it all with a woman called Cooke, she - oh, what was her first name? She also won the...[award for... She was, multiple sclerosis, that's how Annie started it and she was in a bad way, but she fought it and she was in the last Olympic Games in the Paralympians, she won a medal.

She was in her 50s and won a medal for rowing. So it's, Rotary is a fantastic foundation, they really do so much good work.

Facilitator: How many, do you know how many years it's been going in Fitzroy?

Menka Simmonds: In Fitzroy, we just had our 45 or 48th anniversary, there's a lot of clubs who are a lot older. [42:50]

[Over speaking]

But no, it's been going a long time.

We only have about 30 members in Fitzroy but for the small club they're all there when the big chiefs come visiting, the governors, they said you're a small club but you do - at the moment we're sponsoring a young boy from Germany, we sponsor him with another Rotary group and different Rotarians have him at their - the boy at the moment is with our president, she's a single woman, she lives in North Fitzroy. She has a little house in Woodside Street and she's got him part time.

He's 15 years old and I had him here for dinner one night because she's got no children and I thought it would be good for my grandsons to meet - he speaks beautiful English and he's going to be there tonight to meet all these other people. So they do quite a...

Facilitator: It's impressive, it really is.

Menka Simmonds: Mm.

[Background noise]

Facilitator: There's more the work and... [background noise] ...community. It's a lovely story about how supportive it seemed to be with everybody here.

Menka Simmonds: It is, Rotary is fantastic. I'm so happy because I've always been really working hard in business, making money, and I thought it was about time I gave some back and I love it.



Facilitator: Mm, and I was reminded when you were talking about the awful working conditions then, I had a job interviewing women, how [44:43] their lives were affected during the Second World War. I was reminded with your story of one woman telling me that she had a job in a factory and the boss thought he was so good because he allowed them a few minutes to stamp their feet to warm up before they worked.

Menka Simmonds: Oh, I know, and you know our boss used to time the women, how many times they'd go to the toilets and I thought, I'll fix you mate. What I found out he had a problem with his...

...works [prostate] and he used to actually tell them you can't go to the toilet more than so many times. I thought, you know when you've got a period, I thought how could you? So I thought, I'll fix you. One day in front of everyone, Mr [Izzy], that's the fourth time you've gone to the toilet, that's not acceptable.

[Laughter]

I didn't care, see, I wasn't going to stay. He went bright red, he stopped telling women that he could - they all thought that was wonderful because none of them had the courage to...

Facilitator: Oh, they must've really loved you.

Menka Simmonds: Oh they did, they did. They - because as I said, I could afford to be cheeky like that because I knew I wasn't going to stay there, but they couldn't afford to. Because that job was very important to them, they were actually supporting families so they had to abide by the rules.

Facilitator: Yeah, they had no choice.

Menka Simmonds: No choice, none at all.

Facilitator: Mm. Did you get an insight into the manufacturing, clothing manufacturing, the Jewish industry in...

Menka Simmonds: Not very much, no. Dad was more into it [unclear], not very much, no. I had worked for one factory - I've done a few jobs but I only [46:39]

lasted a day because you know those gored skirts, I was supposed to sew those gores and they all came out wrong. So that's it.



Facilitator: Oh, so it wasn't your choice. I thought oh, maybe you didn't like it and you only lasted one day.

Menka Simmonds: No, no, it wasn't my choice. They said, they were trying me out and they said no.

[Laughter]

Facilitator: Also, we hear a lot about people making their own sausages and things. The ingredients for Macedonian food, did you have to grow them in your garden or were they readily available?

Menka Simmonds: I didn't do it but my dad, my dad used to make his own wine. Oh God, he was a cheeky one, he used to make his own wine and his own grappa. He used to live in Doncaster at that time and it was illegal but he was only doing it for himself in the garage. He made up a still and then he said to me don't tell anyone, because he said, this is illegal. I said poppa, I don't have to tell anyone I could smell it two blocks away.

[Laughter]

He quickly dismantled it because one of the Italians was caught and he was fined because he was making it to sell. Poppa was only making it for himself but it was still illegal. No, he had his own vegetable garden, he used to make his own sausages and he used to grow everything. No I'm not, I wasn't into that. I was just business. My thing was really buying and selling, loved it.

Facilitator: Did you go out into country Victoria to buy?

Menka Simmonds: I used to go everywhere. I used to go to overseas too. I used to go to England to all the markets, I was - my daughter was living in London for 13 years so I used to take the opportunity to go to all the [48:30] markets and bring all the stuff back with me. Here in Victoria I used to go to Ballarat with my ex-husband and we'd go there early in the morning, load up the van and then come back and have to unload. We'd be working from six o'clock in the morning until two o'clock the next morning. Because we couldn't afford to leave it in the van. So that was hard work.

We used to attend all the country auctions picking up stuff, really hard work. It wasn't - we had a lot of people coming to us selling their stuff, but it wasn't a big way and there wasn't enough so we'd go out to all the country auctions.



Facilitator: There was always plenty of stuff to buy?

Menka Simmonds: Oh there was lots of stuff, lots of stuff, there was never a short supply of stuff. There was an auction room on the next corner before my brother-in-law opened his antique shop and that was an auction room. I can't remember the name, that's in the '60s. That was another funny episode. Apparently, someone stole this vase from that auction room and supposedly sold it to me and this woman came with the police. She said that vase in the window belonged to her. So, the detectives went in to pick up the vase, I mean I bought it and I had it in my book.

She said, green was my mother's favourite and next thing I know the detectives are going and putting the vase back. She said, what are you doing? Well, this is not green, this is blue. Exactly the same style of vase but she was colour blind.

Facilitator: Mm, interesting.

Menka Simmonds: Yeah. So, I was clear.

[Laughter]

Yeah. Oh, I had lots of stolen goods offered to me while I was in the shop. This man came one day with a trolley and it was full of [50:46] China and I thought no, not buying anything from you. The police were actually outside watching and waiting to see if I'd buy it. I took one look at him and thought no. They came and said, this man said he bought all this China from you. I said no, he didn't, I said he offered to sell it to me. I said come on, you know very well you saw him walk in. I said, I wouldn't put China in a trolley like that, I said, I'd wrap it piece by piece. They were trying to get him, see, so they were trying to implicate me to get, to catch him. Didn't work.

Facilitator: Was there a big presence of the police?

Menka Simmonds: Oh yeah, oh no there was. I had, I bought a truckload of stuff, it was all done, I always did it legitimate...

[Aside discussion]

I always put it in the book and I always got them to sign and put their licence, and I bought this house lot of stuff and I thought gee, that's good stuff and it's cheap. I thought no, I'm a bit worried about it, so I rang the Fitzroy Police. I said I bought all this furniture from a house in, I think it was Young Street or somewhere, Napier



Street. I said, it's good furniture and I'd like you to come to tell me if it's okay. Nobody turned up, nobody. Then two weeks later the police turned up, they said I believe such and such furniture - and I had asked that policeman for his name, the one I reported to, luckily I did.

He said there was a house in Fitzroy, they had tenants and while the people were away and all their furniture was sold, apparently to you. I said yes, and it's in the book, I said but I rang. I said, I was a bit dubious about it, I rang the police. Oh he said, if you were a bit worried why did you buy it? I said listen, I'm here to buy and sell. I said, I did the right thing, rang the police, and I said there's the name of the police officer - just as well I did - I said that I reported it to. I don't know, I said, whether he wrote it down. Anyway, I heard nothing more about it.

[53:05]

They would've been insured but if I hadn't got his name I would've been - it was hard work, it was. There were a lot of dodgy people trying to sell you stolen goods.

Facilitator: Had to be on your toes.

Menka Simmonds: You had to, mm. But you had...

Facilitator: The police always had their offices there beside the Town Hall, didn't they?

Menka Simmonds: They did, and they patrolled Gertrude Street quite a bit because there was a lot of...Toing and froing [laughs], it was a very interesting street, very, very interesting. I think it was one of the most interesting streets of the lot.

Facilitator: Because the Builders Arms back then was, when I did the walk along Gertrude Street with the Koori and it was the, a popular spot for the Aborigines, yeah.

Menka Simmonds: The most - yeah, and the most one with the really dodgy name was the Renown, of course now it's - in the past the Renown had a bad name. But of course, then later on it was taken by someone and they've cleaned up their act, it was much better. There were a lot of hotels, a lot of...

Facilitator: Plus, the alcohol laws changed too, didn't they?

Menka Simmonds: Yes.

Facilitator: Was Rose Chong operating?



Menka Simmonds: Yes, yep. I used to sell, I used to get people that - I had a trunk with - what's her name, that famous actress? Oh, I bought this trunk of materials from an auction room and I noticed the name, Lillie Langtry.

Facilitator: Oh, really. [54:57]

Menka Simmonds: I thought I'll sell the materials. I mean I bought it for the trunk and I sold quite a...

[Aside discussion]

I sold quite a lot of the materials to... To Rose, yeah. She had a good business going there. Is she still there?

Facilitator: Oh yeah.

Menka Simmonds: Yeah, over the years I've sold a lot of material, mm.

[Background noise 55:23 to end]

END OF TRANSCRIPT