



CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

INTERVIEWEE: Cyril Vincenc

INTERVIEWER: Richard Raxworthy

DATE: 29 January 2001

PLACE: Cyril's Delicatessen; Haymarket

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RR:** This is Commercial Oral Histories of Central Sydney Project. I'm talking to Mr Cyril - - -

CV: Vincenc, V-I-N-C-E-N-C.

RR: And your first name, Cyril?

CV: C-Y-R-I-L.

RR: Right. And what year were you born?

CV: I was born in ***** 1931.

RR: Whereabouts?

CV: In Czechoslovakia.

RR: Whereabouts in Czechoslovakia?

CV: A very small town called Sarovitzky which is - I don't think it's on the map as yet.

RR: And you went to school there?

CV: I was – of course I went to school there, the primary and then for a high school I went to next bigger town, which is called Hustopecha.

RR: And when did you leave Czechoslovakia?

CV: I left Czechoslovakia as a young boy in 1948.

RR: And you were there all the war?

CV: I was all the war – I was only a young boy then. You know, when the war starts I was eight years of age.

RR: Yes, that's right.

CV: Or even seven, seven and a half years of age.

RR: Yes. And when did you come to Australia?

CV: I came to Australia in 1949. I was - - -

RR: With your parents?

CV: No, on my own.

RR: What did you do first?

1.17 CV: When in Australia or - what was my first job?

RR: Yes.

CV: I was hired by a lady in Bathurst, Mrs Sherman - which is a very famous or old name in Bathurst – and I was hired to buy for her husband beer. He was legally forbidden to be served alcohol because of his behaviour under influence towards the family.

RR: And you were old enough to buy him beer, were you?

CV: Not really, but I was driven from one pub after ten o'clock to another pub to buy two middies, not one. I had to drink one and he had to drink one. So, before lunch was over I had so much beer in myself I felt ill, not drunk but ill, because nothing to eat, only drinking beer and, you know, he wanted some company. And after, you know, he had enough beer he dropped me into a fruit and vegetable shop and I was sorting out rotten tomatoes; that was my first job.

RR: How long did you last?

CV: Not too long because the things were not to my liking. I was there a month and after a month I'd seen that there's not much future for me, so I decided to move on to Sydney.

2.43 **RR: What year was that?**

CV: That was in 1950.

RR: What did you do first when you got to Sydney?

CV: Nothing. I was a little bit green. I looked for job, mainly in restaurants, to wash up dishes or to have a bit of food with it as well but I was not accepted. I was a bit green and I was looking mainly in Chinese restaurants - because there were plenty of them - or in Greek restaurant and I didn't get anything, anywhere. So, I moved on to another job which was advertised to Narrabri. At Narrabri there was a farmer who was looking for young boys to clear the area of stumps - which is a hard work to pull them out by hand, so, by, you know, physically - and burn grass under control. I thought, "Oh, that'd be O.K, so we'll go and have a look at the country". I lasted only one day, it was impossible. Sleeping outside in a tent and, of course, mosquitoes and sound of birds early in the morning was not exactly what I am, what I was looking for.

4.05 So, I started walking back. We were about forty kilometres - no, about sixty miles from Narrabri and so I kept on walking. I asked - you know, I had a little bit of money which I earnt somewhere else - and I ask him if I can use the farm, if I could use the telephone for a taxi so it would take me back to town. No, he was not very helpful. He said, "No, get out". So, I kept on walking and I was lucky: I saw a car coming from way, you know, somewhere very far, so I stopped in the middle and I ask, I stopped the man and I said, "Would you be so kind and take me to Narrabri?" He said, "Oh, hop on the top of the truck", you know, "I'm taking my daughter to the station because she's going back to the school". So, that was perfect.

5.00 From then on I went to Newcastle. In Newcastle there was a - there were plenty of jobs there. BHP was number one. So, I went to BHP and I got a job, which I lasted one month. It was the hardest thing I ever worked in my life, in a coke oven, where whatever - I was near a conveyor belt and whatever coal fell off from the conveyor I was there and shovelling it back onto the conveyor. And of course at night I - in the, after the shift - we had a shower in the factory or in BHP but I was spitting and sneezing black coal dust and I thought, "This can't be good for me". So, after one month, every day working, I collected a little bit of money and moved on to Sydney.

5.55 And in Sydney, it's a big town, and I already have got a little bit of, you know, bad, you know, experience - or good experience - and I started to look where I - where can I get a job? So, something told

me that a hospital would be the number one thing where to go; in the kitchen, clean, food, no dust. I got a job in the kitchen in King George V Hospital in Camperdown and I stayed there for four years. And after one year of washing up they were looking for a chef or cook – cooks were very hard to get them. The cooks which they were there, they were all ex-army cooks and it was pretty rough. And after – they were looking for – and I was observing what they're cooking – they looked for a breakfast cook. So, I went to the manager or to the – of the, you know, the department there and I said, "Mr Brown" – a very nice gentleman – "I think I can do this cooking for you here. Give me a chance". He said, "O.K."

7.08 Next day, prepared meals, uniform, and I was a cook over there and I was cooking wonderfully. And we cooked with another gentleman, who was an experienced cook from a ship but – his name was John Farrugia and he couldn't read and he couldn't write. Of course, I could read and I could write because on the wall there is every day a menu, what goes where, who is getting what; he couldn't read it. So, I was reading and cooking and he showed me a few things and I became a very – I would say a reasonable cook for that particular era. And I stayed four years. And after four years I thought, its enough, enough, and I start – I wanted to be independent because I learnt this trade in Czechoslovakia. For two years I was an apprentice; you have to be apprentice to be able to work in a store like this, and so I had some knowledge about it.

8.15 In the meantime I was working part time not very far from here and working for next to nothing, just to gain experience in Australia, what to buy, who is buying and so. And I had one good or one – I was fortunate enough to be able to communicate with all the newcomers which came here which couldn't speak English, including me. So, I was speaking to them in Czech or in Polish or in Yugoslav and some German and I was immediately a popular person; I served well, reasonable people liked me. And I was in this area already - - -

RR: That's Haymarket?

CV: Haymarket. To get a premises you had to have big money or you had to be lucky, which was impossible to achieve, an empty store or empty premises. So, after four years being in the hospital and working part time in this shop I knew where to buy, how to buy, what is selling, where to get the merchandise and I was looking around this area for a premises.

9.36 And one day I read in a paper that one particular lady in Hay Street won first prize in the lottery. So, I found out who it was, so I went there. It was – they were selling batteries and part interior decorator was next door. And I came and I congratulated the lady and I said, "Gee, you're lucky. I wish I could buy your store". She said, "Maybe you will be able to buy it. Come back tomorrow. I'll speak to my

husband". Fair enough. They sold me their space, with the key money, for two thousand pounds, which I never had - I never had this money but I knew that is a way to get into it. So, I had a few friends and I somehow collected this two thousand pounds and gave it to her and I had an empty store; beautiful empty store and that was the beginning of Cyril's Delicatessen and we slowly, slowly, you know, set it up.

10.37 And there was a store end of Hay Street, Pitt Street: it's a very small Czech man from Yugoslavia and he was so popular with the newcomers in food that he had to lock - he let ten people in, served them, while there was a big gathering outside, about fifty people waiting to get their turn. And I said to myself, "If he can make such a good business I think I can help him". And, of course, from the moment I opened the store - which I had no money for the goods - and anything I collected in the meantime, empty cans and the empty cans, I just decorated the shop - different merchandise which I already prepared in the hospital because a lot of cans being opened there and I was opening them in the right way so when I set it up so it looks full. You know, it was an illusion.

11.36 Then, when I opened up I already - I got myself into debt again. The refrigeration was, you know, on time payment and whatever, everything was time payment, and I slowly, slowly started to be successful. From the first day we had business because I was already, a little bit known in Rawson Place. So, around Hay Street people wanted to see something new and I gave them a better service. This guy was not cutting anything; it was "Just take it or leave it", you know, a bit arrogant because it was he couldn't handle it like that, and I gave them a civilised service and people liked that and I was a success from the first day and I'm here in this building forty eight years.

RR: So, the year you started was -?

CV: In 1956. And so, you know, to me it seems like yesterday, even if I got to count but I know one thing, it was very different time to start - not easy, 'specially when you are young and green, but with the determination and fairness to the customers I achieved a good name and I think people still patronise me for that because, being a fair trader.

RR: You've always got some good specials too.

12.56 CV: We are at - you have to today, the marketing is a little bit different. If you don't compete with the big supermarkets you are definitely not going to survive. You really have to see what attracts the buyers today. The buyers in fifties are not here any more or very few of them and the new generation are different. They have money to go to the restaurant, spending big money, to be served on, but when it comes

to shopping they are very careful, 'specially on food – maybe not so much on clothing. But that's the story of today but in the meantime we still have a good business and I still enjoy my work after so many years.

RR: You're on the main road, so to speak, or main foot road from Central Station to Chinatown. Do you get many Asian customers come in?

13.56 CV: We do, we do but I wish we could get more, but merchandise which we sell, half of it they don't eat. But they still come in, that they are inquisitive. They buy little souvenirs from – pardon, from my place because again the prices are right. They're very price conscious; everything is how much - before they will say whatever they want they want to know how much, not, "I like this". It has to be – price has to be right. So, I do get a little bit. And I know the Chinese people, the old Chinese people, are also not here - only very few, which I knew very well from the market times and so on. But the new Chinese which are mainly from Vietnam and some are from Indonesia – Chinese and Indonesian – and I am slowly, slowly getting some confidence with them and they patronise me as well. But if I could speak Chinese or if I would have maybe different merchandise I could be – I could succeed better. But definitely this area is Chinatown in, I would say, eighty per cent of Chinese or Chinese customers in this area. So, this is maybe my disadvantage at the moment.

RR: And what about the changes over the years in the customers here? How have you coped with that?

15.28 CV: I must say one thing: this whole area changed so dramatically since the market, produce market moved to Flemington and the meat market moved that way as well, to Homebush, and the flower market and the fish market. So, it became a completely different area and it's a little bit of a – not a battle but you've got to adjust yourself to whatever is happening and also you have to follow the trend, what is in or what's out. Food or merchandise is very fashionable; it goes one day and after you think you are on something very good, in a matter of very short time it changes and you have to change with it. So, to survive in this area, which is not an easy area any more, regarding parking, regarding everything else in the city, we still maintain a reasonable business and I still enjoy it after so many years and I think this is part of the success; people can see if you are here just to serve them and take their money or if you enjoy it as well. And they feel good when they come to my place, because they're not only spending money, they get a little bit more for it than whatever we're asking, money times.

RR: What about the changes in the building? I notice you've done a complete reorganisation now.

16.58 CV: I must say one thing: this building is a beautiful old building but it was neglected by previous management and I think the people who found the money and who decided to keep the building and put money into it, I think they done a wonderful job and it was – it should have been done twenty five years ago; would have been cheaper and maybe better. But in the meantime the building looks fantastic and I would say it's a contribution to this area to have a nice old building refurbished and restored to the original glory and I'm very proud of the Council that has seen it and they done something about it – because there were some tenants here which were really making the building much worse than it original was - and I think it's a plus to the city that something like that has been done.

RR: Now, the building was built in, I think you've said 18 -?

18.08 CV: 1893 and for some reason – somebody told me at one stage that it was a barristers chambers but then I just can't quite believe it because barrister chambers - there was no courthouse around here, so maybe it was something else. But in the meantime there was tenants like Undertakers Union, small printing shop, galvanising place, which I think really shouldn't have never been on the first floor, with all the acid tanks and all the, you know, fumes, which not only ate nearly everything, including the bricks inside – they really, I mean, it was there for a number of years; they were galvanising day and I still can't believe it that the Council let it and it's such a tenant for long, long time. So, I think whatever – then there was a restaurant, then there was a bit of a illegal gaming joint and, I mean, this is only recently, but now it's a Chinese gallery and I think it's clean, it's healthy and it's, I would say, an asset for the owner as well.

RR: And what hours do you work now and what hours did you work before?

19.34 CV: Richard, I always worked very early in the morning because first of all there used to be much more activities early in the morning when the market times were and somehow I'm still in that same routine, even today. I come here usually around six o'clock in the morning: nice and quiet, cool, and do our chores, do our receiving the goods and also making orders for the next day or for the same day. But I'm an early starter and we finish about five, five thirty, which there is not much serious shopping at that time any more. And, you know, I quite enjoy it still.

RR: What about the changes over the road there, the Capitol, from being a cinema to now being a theatre?

20.21 CV: That has very little influence on me, actually. That extension in Capitol Theatre, which was apparently necessary, took half of the street away. So, we are back of the Capitol Theatre. Anybody who

goes to the theatre doesn't go and buy groceries. So, it's clean. The cinema was not a very successful cinema because there was so many good, better cinemas which had bad time because of the television, because of the communication. Big cinemas closed and out of one they used to – they made four small one so they could attract still the cinema-goers but I think with the refurbishing there, I was there not so long ago for a performance and I seen it well before, I think the job is done, maybe not first class, but it is definitely a colossal improvement to the building. The only thing that is wrong with it, I think, there are a lot of performance being taken away by a smaller and newer theatres, like Star City [casino] where there is free parking, where there is cheap eating and a bit of gambling, and they really just took, the thing which should be, say, in Capitol Theatre performed, they have been taken away by the competition to Star City. But I think the place is so expensive to run for a, say, a company which is not quite sure if they can fill the place - and that's a bit of a problem there - but also parking is a problem but on the other hand it's close to the station, so you really can use public transport to get there.

RR: Now, what about the advent of the trams [light rail] here again? Has that made a difference to you?

22.22 CV: That, oh, that made the things even worse because the trams are going, no access by car, they're practically on top of footpath, which I'm still surprised how on earth ever anybody allowed to go tram. One half – no quarter metre from pedestrian, which I honestly think it's a dangerous thing. I'm really surprised that there was no calamity by now. But that's not – I'm not the planner, I'm not the man who decides but that's my opinion.

RR: You don't advertise, I understand.

CV: I do a very little advertisements, only certain times of the year, like around Easter-time or Christmas-time for people which looking for something very specific and otherwise I have – I'm very fortunate that the press looks always for something a little bit different and they occasionally mention my store or my activities in the daily newspaper or in the column of food and so on - so, that really helps. But main thing, you have to be competitive, you have to have something cheaper than somebody else and you have to have the quality and if you have quality, price and service which is very hard to get in town today – you are in a big store in supermarket you're nothing or you're number one, number two, number three - here, customer is a king and they can feel that, that they're getting something a little bit more than in normal supermarket or normal store. We make sure we welcome them and we'll give them a very fair go and they come back.

24.16 **RR: And have you thought how long you're going to be here? Are you going to be here forever?**

CV: I think so, because I have no other plans in – for future because I'll be seventy this year but I still enjoy whatever I do and that is my life.

RR: You have no family to hand it on to?

CV: No, I have two daughters but they are successful in their own field and at one stage they were trying to convert it in one of those modern deli cafés and all that but I think they're making more money for themselves somewhere else than they would make in my store (tram bell rings) or in their store if that would be the case.

RR: Yes.

CV: But unfortunately that's how it is.

RR: What about staff over the years?

CV: Staff over the years, we had bigger staff. Now, at the moment, we have a smaller staff, we are better organised. Economy is a very important part in – to survive in any business. So, we're doing it – the way we are doing it at the moment – my wife is helping me which – and I do work for two and wife for one and another helper for one. So, it is part of economy; today's staff is a very expensive exercise.

RR: Do you open on Saturday?

25.36 CV: We open half a day on Saturday and close on Sunday, which is still – we should be open on Sunday because Sunday is still a big shopping day in Australia. Shopping times and shopping days change; that's why Thursday night shopping is quite an important matter to the supermarkets. But in this area there is no shopping - unless you have a Chinese supermarket there is not really much shopping activities. Maybe it's my imagination but I don't think I could – it would be worthwhile opening so late.

RR: Have you been involved in the politics of the city at all or anything like that?

CV: No. I'm not really a public person when it comes to this because, first of all, you have to really – to do it well you need a lot of time for it and you have to attend meetings and you have to do certain things which I think family for me is more important.

RR: All right. Is there anything else I should ask you that I haven't?

CV: I think you've covered it pretty well. I know one thing; I am very grateful to live in Sydney and I'm very grateful that Sydney was so generous and good to me and to my family and whatever I've done, I would do it again - if I have to repeat it, exactly the same way. But I

still – I'm very fortunate and I'm very lucky to be in Australia and that's all I can say.

RR: And we're very lucky to have you.

CV: I hope so, but I'm saying only one thing; that anybody who knows otherwise they should do their homework first before they say anything about anything.

RR: Thank you very much.

27.17 CV: My pleasure.

Interview ends