



## COMMERCE AND WORK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

---

**Interviewee:** Paul Mendels

**Date:** 30 April 2009

**Place:** Waterloo

**Interviewer:** Roslyn Burge

**Recorder:** Edirol

---

## TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RB:** This is an interview with Paul Mendels at the Nut Shop factory at 20-26 Allen Street in Waterloo on Friday, the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2010. The interview is being recorded as part of the City of Sydney's Oral History Project, Commerce and Work in the City of Sydney, and the interviewer is Roslyn Burge.

Paul, thank you for your time this afternoon for this project and if we could just start with some personal details, when you were born and where.

**PM:** I was born in Germany in \*\*\*\*\* 1927 and in a little place, a village actually, called \*\*\*\*\* which is in northwest Germany not far from the Dutch border.

**RB:** And you left there when you were about eleven, I understand.

PM: Yes, we left early in 1939 after the so-called *Kristallnacht* which sort of trashed the houses of Jews in Germany and burned synagogues and so on. And we went via Holland; we had relatives in Holland where we stayed a few weeks, and then came by boat to Australia.

**RB: Did your family elect to come to Australia or was that just a happenchance?**

PM: No, we originally wanted to go to America where my mother had a lot of relations but my father also had a brother in Australia. But after the so-called *Kristallnacht* it was just whoever would have us first and the landing permit for Australia came, I think, a week before the one for America and we decided to go with it.

**RB: Did you have other brothers and sisters?**

PM: I have a sister who also came and we came out as the family: my father, my mother, my sister and myself. My sister's five years younger than I am.

**RB: Did you come straight to Sydney?**

PM: Yes, we came straight to Sydney.

**RB: Do you remember that arrival?**

PM: Very much so, particularly even – we came not through Perth in those days but we came down from Darwin and our first port of call was Thursday Island and I thought, "My God, what are we in for?" There was absolutely nothing, not even, you know, native shacks and then Darwin was not much of a city in those days either. But then the next port of call was Brisbane and I was very impressed coming from a village that Brisbane actually had, for those days, skyscrapers and trams.

2.21 **RB: And then on to Sydney?**

PM: And then on to Sydney.

**RB: You mentioned you had other family here. Were they here before you came?**

PM: Yes, I had an uncle who was here before; he came out in 1936.

**RB: Was he involved in the confectionary business?**

PM: No, not at all.

**RB: And your father wasn't either?**

PM: No, my father wasn't either.

**RB: What was his profession?**

PM: He was a cattle dealer, buying and selling cattle from the – like, buying cattle from the farmers and selling it the markets.

**RB: That's a very different aspect of business.**

PM: Very different.

**RB: How did he come to be working in the confectionary business?**

PM: When he first came we arrived here actually in April of 1939. He worked for a while as a removalist with a big truck and furniture removalist and really that didn't suit and he was looking for a business to buy and this business in the Strand Arcade run by the de Kleins was for sale and that appealed to him and he bought it.

**RB: Had he started working there or any experience of working in that sort of industry?**

PM: Not at all, not at all.

**RB: Did you know the family?**

PM: No, no. But you had a common bond because they were also refugees from Germany at the time.

**RB: So they hadn't had the shop for very long either?**

PM: I think about two years but he was not a well man and he just couldn't handle the physical work and that didn't worry my father at all; he was a fairly big, strong man and he could do that. And part of the conditions – and I have the original sort of agreement that was drawn up between just an accountant and who was sort of a relation and the de Kleins – and it provided that they teach my father the trade.

4.13 **RB: Did your father enjoy that business?**

PM: Yes, he did, he did. He liked to work with the public and he was fairly outgoing and that was the sort of business where you could.

**RB: And did you work in the business at all?**

PM: Almost from the beginning. I was eleven years old and in the very early days there was late night shopping on a Friday and there would be no one – would be someone at home but we usually came into the city to meet – well, I came into the city. I had a cousin who also came

with me at the time and we went into the city and helped in the business, actually cooking nuts by hand - that was the way it started.

**RB: Can you tell me about that process? It must be so different today. What was the process like then?**

PM: It's not very different, it's probably much the same except nowadays nobody lifts anything, it's all done mechanically, nobody stirs anything, it's all done mechanically, and that was all done by hand and fairly small things. People said, "Oh, what a large copper pot" but it was around about – I suppose the weight was about five pound which is about just over two kilos and that was sort of stirred and cooked and then we used to put the product on trays right in the front of the window and separate them much the way we do now and then sold them. And people used to wait for a particular batch because they didn't want the one cooked ten minutes earlier that was stale.

**RB: Are people just as fussy today?**

PM: I suppose they are, yes.

**RB: So, what sort of things did you sell then in the 1930s and '40s?**

PM: Well, we bought the business actually in January of 1940 because the de Kleins wanted to have the Christmas business but my father was there already from November but the actual transfer wasn't till the first week of January, I think, of 1940. And the main product was what we now call "Vienna almonds" – they were in those days Vienna almonds but during the war Vienna wasn't that popular; people didn't differentiate between Austria and Germany so we couldn't call them Vienna almonds and we called them "vanilla almonds".

6.20` **RB: Are they still called vanilla almonds today?**

PM: Well, some people come in and still say vanilla almonds, some of the oldies, but no, and then we changed back to Vienna almonds some time later and now we call them "candied almonds" because many of the tours think they're imported from Vienna.

**RB: Did you experience any difficulties yourself, any racism or abuse at that time?**

PM: Not very much but of course we were called "reffos", that was the thing at the time and obviously you dressed and acted a little differently and it took some time till we got used to the Australian way and as kids at school, making new friends, it didn't take long and I had no personal difficulty, no.

**RB: Where did you grow up?**

PM: In Randwick. We lived in Arthur Street, Randwick, and we went to Randwick Public School and later on to Sydney High and always stayed in that area or till about 1943, I think, and then we moved to Eastlakes.

**RB: Are you still on this side of the harbour?**

PM: No. When I married we moved to Middle Cove at first.

**RB: So, when you finished school was it obvious that you would go into the business or were there other choices available?**

PM: No, I had no intention of going into the business originally but that was a time when it was very difficult to get staff and labour was hard to get and the business was thriving. It was only the one shop and you just couldn't get staff. During the war also I worked during school, after school and Saturday mornings to help my father.

8.02 And my father said, "Well, for a year you can defer going to university and help in the shop". And I wanted to study science actually but after working for six months, see what you could earn and realising that sciences were then, as now, very poorly paid unless you were really someone special. I thought, "No, it's not for me".

**RB: Were there any family pressures brought to bear?**

PM: My mother insisted that I do something also; I did a couple of years of accountancy at night. She felt I should have some other profession.

**RB: And, of course, your own family are now in the business as well.**

PM: Yes, I have my son and daughter. My son is an architect by profession; he also worked for a few years and then came in. I had a bypass about twenty five years ago now and then decided that "Either they come in or we sell the business" and he took a while to make his mind up but he did come in. And my daughter had come back from a trip after being married, they had an eighteen months' honeymoon, and when they came back I said "Look, it's" – I think it was September or some time – "you won't get a job this side of Christmas. Come in, give me a hand till after Christmas" which they did, my daughter and my son in law, and we worked together. My son in law later decided to opt out. He had a minor difference with my son on how to run the business but he kept his shares in the business and he's still a director of the business but he's doing other things.

**RB: Very much a family concern still.**

PM: Very much, yes, very much so, and I have also, I had my granddaughter – she is now twenty four – from the time she was about seventeen till in her early twenties gave me a hand on

Thursday nights and that was very good and now I have Dan's older son, grandson, who is sixteen or nearly seventeen and he's helping me Thursday nights.

**RB: Thursday nights in the shop in town?**

10.01 PM: Yes.

**RB: So, how long do you spend working in the shop yourself?**

PM: Now? I go in mostly on Thursdays and on Fridays from about ten to four, half past four, occasionally a little bit more and on Mondays I come here if there's anything here, mostly do the banking or some of the banking and whatever else is necessary. We usually have a sort of directors' meeting or whatever it is, and that's till lunchtime.

**RB: How long are you in the shop on Thursdays?**

PM: Till about half past six.

**RB: In the afternoon and evening?**

PM: Yes, yes. So, I come later sometimes but at the moment it's half past six because we have a different crew coming to work the night and they have to have lunch – they have to have dinner, rather.

**RB: Yes.**

PM: So, while they go eat I'm there.

**RB: What do you do when you're in the shop?**

PM: Oh, I look after the customers.

**RB: So you're standing on your feet for that time?**

PM: Oh, yes.

**RB: You're not twenty one – that's quite a long time to be standing on your feet.**

PM: No, but it doesn't seem to worry me, no.

**RB: That's terrific. So, during the '40s you mentioned that labour was hard to get.**

PM: Very difficult to get, yes.

**RB: So, was there anyone else outside the family helping you at that time?**

PM: We had one girl who stayed with us for quite a while. She's since passed away and then married to Melbourne who helped us and then occasionally we'd be able to get somebody else but the Manpower people directed people to you, and that's all we could get.

**RB: Yes. So how many people would you need in the shop then, say?**

PM: Well, usually we needed four. So, before I was there there was this lady and another girl and my mother used to come in.

**RB: That's quite a small space – where did you all fit?**

PM: Very small.

**RB: And your stock, how did you work around all of that?**

11.58 PM: Well, we didn't have so many lines. We had only the Vienna almonds and one that we now call "sugared", like sugared peanuts like that one and we had some chocolate lines. I think there were about three chocolate marzipan, chocolate prunes, chocolate brandied prunes and covered the Vienna almonds in chocolate and we called the "chocolate almonds" and we did that first thing in the morning before it got really warm and then I put the chocolates in the fridge to cool then and then from about half past nine, ten o'clock onwards only the Vienna almonds.

**RB: I'm really surprised; thinking to keep four people with an income you must have sold a tremendous number of nuts.**

PM: We did in those years.

**RB: More for the number of lines that you had than today?**

PM: It was very busy. We were only open two or three hours a day; the rest of the time we were manufacturing and people queued up because everything was in short supply: you couldn't get sugar, you couldn't get almonds, you couldn't get anything. So, it was all – we even rationed things. In other words, during the war years customers were rationed to a quarter pound of Vienna almonds and if they were in uniform they could get half a pound, so.

**RB: And where did you source your chocolate and your almonds from?**

PM: Well, the chocolate came from Smalls Chocolates in Bridge Road - - -

**RB: Yes.**

PM: - - - and I often remember that when their deliveries were only once a week or something and if we ran out I'd have to go down on a bike and get a box or the twenty pound slab of the chocolates on the bike from Bridge Street, Stanmore and bring it back to Strand Arcade. And the almonds were quite difficult because they were also were short supply and my father went to Griffith and he had, I think, a local stock and station agent there who helped him go around the farms and they were often Italian farms who grew them as a sideline and they'd buy the almonds, throw them on the back of the truck and then they'd come to a cracking plant in Sydney, who was a relation to the stock and station agent, where there was a cracking plant and we had them cracked there and I often helped with the cracking as well because you couldn't get labour on the Saturday morning.

14.14 **RB: Where was the cracking plant, Paul?**

PM: Where the North Shore Hospital is now. What's it called? The street in - - -

**RB: Herbert Street.**

PM: Herbert Street, St Leonards - exactly right, in Herbert Street, St Leonards.

**RB: Is that all they did, just crack nuts?**

PM: No, they also were agents for ..... Prunes, they're still going, so that's how the chocolate prunes came into it because they were the agents for prunes and we could get the prunes and make the chocolate coated prunes.

**RB: And did you brandy them yourselves?**

PM: Yes. Well, all we do with them is just sort of soak them overnight in brandy, drain the brandy off and chocolate coat them. They're not a liqueur one.

**RB: Would you drink the brandy after that?**

PM: No, it just was absorbed, with nearly all absorbed. If there was any left you could leave it till next time, till the next lot came in.

**RB: And I'm very interested not only just in the shop but how the things came to you. Would you also import nuts?**

PM: No, not at that time but what happened fairly soon after that – and this was even during the war years – it was very – people moved out of Sydney. You might have heard the Japanese were going to come and a lot of the shops in Strand Arcade were empty and actually Strand Arcade got quite neglected. And so first of all they gave us a



shop next door, the so-called “storeroom”, and then later on when business began to pick up again that wasn’t good enough and we took several rooms on the first floor, then we no longer manufactured in the shop. And I’m talking now about, oh, 1944, ’45 onwards and we had one room where we made our chocolate which had fridges in it – we didn’t have air conditioning, it wasn’t as popular at that time – and the other room was the room where we did our cooking of Vienna almonds and similar things, nuts as well.

16.07 **RB: It must have been very hot.**

PM: Well, it was, yes, yes.

**RB: What were some of the other shops in the Strand Arcade at that time?**

PM: Ooh, there were a lot of – what is, people who made hats, what is the name for it?

**RB: Milliners.**

PM: Milliners. That was - Strand Arcade was known for that.

**RB: Yes.**

PM: There would have been four or five different milliners, there were tailors, watchmakers and, oh, I think also two very big delicatessen shops, Sylvester’s - and I’ve forgotten the other one, they were changed, it’s all changed. Nowadays we’ve got all these bulk enormous Coles and Woollies supermarkets that didn’t exist in those days, so you had the specialty shops.

**RB: So, the delicatessens, would they have sold conventional Australian things, so-called like - I’m trying to think of that loaf, that Devon loaf.**

PM: Devon, yes. That was about all you could get. You could get Devon or Berliner but it was both the same, it tasted exactly the same. Yes, of course, smallgoods and some sort of sausages, sausages to barbeque and to sell, cheeses, but they also cooked chickens at that time and hams, of course, for Christmas - that was the big thing. I remember the days before Christmas they were working twenty four hours a day because they were cooking them and nobody went home.

**RB: The smells in the Strand Arcade must have been quite different to today - - -**

PM: Oh, yes.

**RB: - - - the smells of food and chocolate and hams.**

PM: Very much so, yes.

**RB: I can remember even in my time in the city where there were European delicatessens and I was thinking about Circular Quay the other day where you could get wonderful rissoles and that sort of thing.**

PM: Yes.

**RB: Did those delicatessens sell those sort of items?**

PM: Yes, yes. Not only that. I mean, they sold Sargents Pies. In those days everybody loved Sargents Pies but they also made a lot of their own things like rissoles and cooked chickens and so on, specialist things, and Sylvester's I know had their own factory.

18.01 **RB: Is that where you would have your lunch?**

PM: No, at that time we brought lunch, at that time.

**RB: You brought it in with you?**

PM: Yes. I think most people did. To go out for lunch - I mean, if you went to Cahill's or Repin's or one of these places that was something special, there were no lunch places like food courts now. The one thing I remember very vividly: on a Friday whoever was working there got tea money and we all went to Fernandez which was a fish shop in Pitt Street just near King Street and that was a special event for me, I always looked forward to that. And that's before they had the brownout - it would have been 1941 or '42; '42 I suppose it happened - but then after that there was no more late shopping on Friday nights.

**RB: Was the business ever in a state of decline in the '40s, when you thought you might have to do something else or your father thought that?**

PM: No, no, we were lucky that it never really happened and, I must say, we had a lot of other shops, retail shops. Later on, we built a factory and I had up to nine retail shops at one stage, yes.

**RB: Goodness. Where were they?**

PM: Oh, there were two in Bankstown, Bankstown Square and Compass Centre, there was one at Roselands, we had one in Australia Square, we had one on Wynyard Station. Well, the first one actually was in George Street opposite the cinemas where the Trocadero used to be.

**RB: Yes.**

PM: The cinemas are still there but you can't compare now to what it was and I worked in that shop for a long time on Saturdays and when the theatres emptied - and there were about six or eight theatres on either side of the street – George Street you couldn't walk just on the footpath; the theatres all emptied at the same time and half the street was taken over with pedestrians – it's quite different and there were a lot of people went in there.

**RB: Yes.**

PM: And the concerts were at the Town Hall, so that part of town was really a big entertainment area and that shop was very good for a while. That's between Bathurst and Liverpool Street, facing the railway on the left hand side, opposite the Trocadero.

20.05 **RB: Right, right. Because I suppose your nuts, chocolates are very easy things to eat in a film or a concert.**

PM: Yes, I suppose so.

**RB: Would people buy them for that?**

PM: People used to come before and buy it, yes, exactly, yes, but when theatres also all had candy bars as they do now and people with trays but, yes, people did come out at interval and particularly came before they went in and bought things – it was a very good shop for a while.

**RB: So why did you close it?**

PM: Well, first of all once television came you could say that part of the business dropped by a third and then once you got videos another third went and the whole theatre business went; there were no people, it wasn't as busy any more. The Century is now still an empty hole, you know, it's pulled down and some of those theatres held two thousand people and certainly the Century did. Not the Century, sorry, the Regent, the Regent was the biggest one there.

**RB: Yes, yes.**

PM: But all of those, there were so many theatres along there.

**RB: So when did you close that shop – in the '70s?**

PM: I'm not sure when I closed it. No, I think it would be even earlier, that particular one was even earlier. In the '60s or late '60s my wife was always a relief girl for these shops, somebody turned in sick and she went there and she finally said "I'm not going to do this any more" and I thought "Well, there's no way I can do it any other way" and I sold, I

think, four shops within about six months and sold them to my staff – or at least three of them I sold to staff. More or less told them “If you don’t want it I buy it back for the same price” and they bought the things that we manufactured in the factory from me and anything else that we didn’t make they could buy wherever they wanted to and that went on for a number of years.

22.02 And the one in George Street in particular did very well and the girl that took it over actually went to Tasmania, she opened another shop there and we supplied her there for a few years but that site was redeveloped and they made her an offer just too good to refuse.

**RB: Is she still selling your product in Tasmania?**

PM: No, no, no, it was about three or four years and then I think her children needed her more and she just didn’t, yes.

**RB: Yes. Well, perhaps growing backwards - you grew and grew and you had your factory in Surry Hills, when did that begin?**

PM: Factory in Surry Hills would have been about – I’m just thinking – it would have been the late ‘50s.

**RB: Whereabouts in Surry Hills?**

PM: In Buckingham Street, 28 Buckingham Street – there’s a block of flats there now.

**RB: That must have been such a different atmosphere in that part of the town now to now.**

PM: Well, it was actually, yes. At the time we built the factory we wanted something close to the city because I could go from the factory to the city shops because we had a shop in Australia Square, shop at Wynyard Station, shop in George Street and the city; there was four shops I could be there any time in quarter of an hour if needed and easy to supply. Yes, it was a different time.

**RB: Is the shop in Wynyard – it’s a long time since I’ve caught a train – is there?**

PM: No. All I have left now is the shop at Strand Arcade and we have a shop in the factory here. I think retailing has changed. When I sold my shop to my staff I made more money, they made more money because with the regulations the way it is, you couldn’t have one by themselves in the shop, you needed two girls. You needed someone to change for lunch, someone for Thursday night.

23.56 And just as an example, the shop in Bankstown that I sold, the girl particularly, well she ran the shop completely by herself. She had a

friend that came in at lunchtime, gave her a break at lunchtime and I think she employed a couple of casual schoolgirls for Saturday mornings and that suited everybody and it was half the expenses; when you consider the wages you saved it was enormous.

**RB: How did you deliver the product from shop to shop – did you have a truck?**

PM: No, we have a van, yes, a van. We still have now two vans.

**RB: Are they anonymous or are they - - -**

PM: No, we don't have a name on them. My son always wants it and I always feel "Ah, doesn't make any difference".

**RB: You don't think that's an advertising tool?**

PM: Probably should have been but I'm very conservative and I felt, no.

**RB: What other ways are you conservative in terms of the shop?**

PM: Well, we don't have a lot of changes. For instance, the shop looks – I'd like to keep it looking very much the way it did ten or fifteen years ago. Not always necessarily correct but I feel people are used to it and they like to see something in Sydney that hasn't changed that much.

**RB: Do you have people, say from the country or visitors who come back regularly from time to time and buy things?**

PM: Every week – I could almost say every day – we have people coming that live overseas now, "I'm glad you're still here. I used to live in Sydney thirty years or forty years ago" and so on. Actually, as a matter of fact, the person who worked with the de Kleins came in must be now about five, six years ago and he's an old man now, even older than I am – he would have been in his late eighties then – he came in "I just wondered whether you were still here" and walked in and he's living in London, been living in London for fifty-odd years and come in since then.

**RB: Goodness.**

PM: Yes.

**RB: Goodness.**

PM: It's quite a change.

**RB: Yes.**

PM: But every week, I would say, we have people coming and we have particularly Asian people who come to Sydney once every six months on business that come regularly but also people coming from Bankstown or Hornsby or people coming from the country who come in fairly regularly and that's probably the basis of our business.

26.09 **RB: Is that right, people from out of town?**

PM: Yes, yes, they come regularly.

**RB: So, is it because they come regularly or because they buy a tonne of stuff?**

PM: Oh, well, see the people, we've got one lot of customers and the others are the people living in town. The people who are living in the suburbs, really the closer suburbs, they all have shopping centres, they can all buy nuts at all of the supermarkets and so on and you don't get them as often but the people coming from out of town can't buy quality nuts as much as they can if they were living in the city.

**RB: So, Paul, what makes your nuts quality nuts?**

PM: Oh, I suppose it's the nuts we buy from and the farms we buy from. I mean, just at the moment – and I'd like to give you a sample when we've finished – we have some almonds. My father dealt with the father of the guy, the grandfather of the guy that Dan deals with now and that's in, I think, Willunga in South Australia and that particular variety of almonds isn't being planted any more and they don't keep the varieties the way they used to any more because there are so many new varieties. And sometimes you can't even tell them apart. They look similar but when you eat them or particularly when you cook them you can see the difference in them. You know, we're all used to red and green and yellow apples but there's very many more varieties of almonds than apples, so it'll give you some idea and they're all very different.

**RB: So what are the kinds of almonds that you use when you say these are different – do they have a name?**

PM: Yes. The ones we like best for some of our products are called Johnson, another one is called Booths and these are the dark almond - you wouldn't usually buy them in shops - the skin is brown. You might remember the brown skins you used to get.

**RB: Yes.**

27.58 PM: Nowadays the skins are all very light coloured and they have much better flavour and they're usually larger and for certain things they are better whereas these light coloured almonds vary very much, there's very many varieties of those as well, but people often ask us "Why

your nuts taste different to others?" Well, it's why do red apples taste different to green apples or this but you have to know where to source them. And the same goes, we have a firm that I buy walnuts from and I've dealt with for many years.

**RB: Is that right?**

PM: Oh, a region actually, there are two farms there – I've changed farms recently – but they're a variety of walnuts called a franket [?], it's hardly being grown now. Because I grow macadamias and have been for thirty five years; everything is how many trees per hectare, how many kilos per tree because you get paid so much you don't really worry but for us it's essential to get that special taste.

**RB: Would you care to tell me for the record who that person is that supplies you the almonds or is that something you'd rather not put on the record?**

PM: Well, the person we dealt with originally was Nelson - and I've forgotten even the name - but we've dealt with almonds in Adelaide since, oh, I would say the late 1940s. When the almond co-op first started we couldn't get almonds and we used a lot of almonds, particularly these brownie almonds that were being grown at the time and my father went over and had a contract with them to take so much and so it suited the co-op, it suited us and so we've got – look, after being so long in business you know, you've got your connections, you know exactly what you want and these almonds are really hard to get because they're not being planted any more, these varieties; as I say, everything is how many kilos you get out of a hectare.

**RB: So, how are they shipped across to you – by road freight?**

PM: Oh, by truck.

**RB: By truck.**

PM: Originally, it used to be by boat from Adelaide and they'd end up at Darling Harbour or Walsh Bay, along there and I remember very vividly once going there when there was a strike on, to see. We had absolutely no nuts and in those times always the strikes came before Christmas and we were desperate to get the nuts, trying to persuade the wharfies could I get the almonds off the boat but I had no luck.

30.18 **RB: So, how many would you be importing at that time? Importing is a loose word for interstate.**

PM: Oh, at that time, oh, about ten to fifteen tonnes per year. It's not a lot compared to usage today but - - -

**RB: It still sounds a fair number.**

PM: - - - but when you had to cook them all by hand that was quite a bit.

**RB: Did you also have to remove the hull or would the factory in Herbert Street do that for you?**

PM: No, no, when you say that – the skin or the - - -

**RB: The skin.**

PM: The skin. No, we don't remove that very much at all. We only use that for one line but particularly for making marzipan; they have to be blanched, have to have it taken off.

**RB: Do you make your own marzipan?**

PM: Yes. When we originally started that my father brought the nuts home and we cooked them on the stove at home and did it by hand but that was ..... and then about late 19 – what would it be? – no, it would it have been early 1950s we bought a blanching machine; still in use now, we use it now for skinning the peanuts because the almonds are all done in Adelaide because they have got very big equipment. But, yes, we can use it now but we do about – what? – a hundred kilos in about an hour and a half and that's just not efficient; the big machines they fly through that, then you've got to dry them afterwards as well, so.

**RB: Is all that work, all that factory work done here in the premises in Waterloo?**

PM: Yes, yes, and before that it was done in Buckingham Street but we outgrew that, it was too small.

**RB: Is your business continuing to grow?**

PM: The wholesale side of it, yes. We've got - I'm happy to show you through later on if you'd like to have a look.

32.01 **RB: I'd be very interested to see it, yes.**

PM: They've all gone home, there's no one working but, yes.

**RB: So, what sort of businesses would you supply wholesale?**

PM: We supply some people who pack under their own name and we supply a wholesaler who takes our chocolates and supplies it as Nut Shop Chocolates but also a lot of shops in centres. For argument's sake, in the Hunter Valley and so on they have little shops there and



often local things, people think they're made locally but in fact we supply a lot of those. But we also supply a lot of pastry cooks with the nuts as kernel or as manufactured, we grind a lot of nuts for pastry cooks and restaurants too; they take a lot of pine nuts, pistachio nuts and so on, so that's sort of a separate facet of our business.

**RB: Where do you source the pine nuts from?**

PM: China at the moment. We used to get them from Portugal but pine nuts have gone through the roof so it's not a good time to talk about pine nuts.

**RB: They're always expensive, I think.**

PM: No, they weren't always but lately.

**RB: Is that right?**

PM: Yes, yes, at the moment, yes, they certainly have at the moment. People use them for making pesto and the restaurants have got their menus printed so you can't say "Try and we'll suggest you use this or that" and they all say "Yes, that's very good but what about our menus?" and "We've got it advertised".

**RB: These things flow on.**

PM: Yes.

**RB: Looking at your website, I notice you have a variety of items and you have a particular packaging. Do you do all that packaging yourselves and printing?**

PM: Yes, we did for quite a while, particularly when we were in Buckingham Street. Half of our business would have been supplying duty free stores at the airport because this is why I went into macadamias - macadamias particularly for the Japanese were the big thing – and we supplied them also to the chains and exported them a little bit.

**RB: Where would you export them to, Paul?**

33.56 PM: Well - what was it? – the chocolate macadamias, I think, went to Japan a little bit. We tried very hard to break into that market in a big way but that didn't succeed but we certainly supplied the chains here and at the airport that was quite big business for us. There's been a lot of changes at the airport now; there are, think, three separate overseas terminal but at that time it was all the one thing and it was very big business for us. And was also supplied one packer who has since opened up his own factory but he used to get a pallet of

macadamias packed into trays which he'd slip into his own boxes per day and that was quite good business for us; an order just came on the fax, "This one, that one, that one" at night and then it went out the next day. But that completely changed; we no longer have a sort of worthwhile presence at the airport international terminal, which is a pity because that was very good and quite a large volume and business.

**RB: Why have you elected not to be at the airport as well?**

PM: No, the airport has changed since Macquarie's [Bank] taken it over; those firms that we supplied don't have an outlet there any more - - -

**RB: I see.**

PM: - - - and so we haven't been able to crack the new ones – or we haven't really tried. We have no sales person, never have had.

**RB: Is that right?**

PM: Yes, so it's only people who come to us and so they haven't really tried that.

**RB: Do you have customers of longstanding?**

PM: Oh, very much so, very much so. People have been coming fifty years, people come in, they remember when we used to cook them in the Strand Arcade in the shop as retail customers and also wholesale customers.

**RB: Wholesale customers.**

PM: The wholesale customers, there's a fellow that's our agent now of the company, would be, what, thirty five years, forty years at least, yes, at least.

**RB: Is that unusual, to have such longstanding - - -**

PM: I don't think it is in the confectionery industry, no. And the same with our suppliers; we've dealt with those for a long, long time, individual farms and the like.

36.04 **RB: You mentioned you went into the macadamia business yourself. What prompted you to buy a farm?**

PM: Well, macadamia as you know are a native Australian nut and this would have been, what, in the late '60s we started our first herd of macadamia. I came, actually, back from a chocolate convention in Chicago and I met the fellow who owned Hawaiian Host, Mr Takitani I think his name was at the time, a very unassuming Japanese man

whom I thought he couldn't afford to pay for his stay here and later found out he was a multi, multi millionaire. And he had Hawaiian Host in Hawaii and he allowed me to go through that factory when we went back and I saw the Japanese walking out with their ten packs of macadamia clusters and I thought, "Gee, I can do that" and he was actually very helpful to me. And when I tried to buy local macadamia nuts it was only, see, as I had first started to grow macadamias here commercially and I got absolutely nowhere. And I'd had macadamias before from the people who supplied us with peanuts and they were banana growers – Peanut Company of Australia now – but they also sold peanuts at the time and banana growers at the time had macadamias as windbreaks around their farm and they came to Sydney in the shell still, not cracked, and there was a little cracking plant just down here – I've forgotten the name of the street – where we could crack them on a Saturday morning again, sometimes they cracked them for us and I could never get enough macadamia.

37.52

And then I had a friend of mine who is still in business, George Kemsala, who brought me in the first macadamia kernels from Hawaii and that was, if I remember rightly, about either a half a tonne or a tonne of macadamia kernels and they were very expensive at the time and we just salted those, nothing else - we hadn't enough to be chocolate coated or anything like that - and people loved them. And so this is how I got into the macadamia farm business, when I saw the only way to do this is to buy a farm, and together with some people in the family we bought what's now, what, a twenty five hectare property and we've had that for thirty five years.

**RB: It's very much sold overseas as an American nut, Hawaiian nut, still rather than a traditional Australian product.**

PM: Well, there's no question they developed it, absolutely no question they developed it. We did absolutely nothing with it till they started it and people asked us "Have you got these nuts?" and then when I found out they were really a native Australian nut taken to Hawaii in the, what, 1890s, that I realised, "Well, they must be able to grow here". But don't forget at that time people said "Oh, it's all right for Hawaii, they haven't got the pests there". We have flower eating caterpillar, nut bore and hundreds of others but then we had a time where we had the organic chloride sprays, you know, the DDTs and this various things - - -

**RB: Yes.**

PM: - - - and you could buy a drum for about twenty dollars would do the whole orchard and that was very easy and very good but then later on we found, of course, that they had residual problems, so. But in the meantime we have other sprays that we can use but that's been a real problem.

**RB: Still a problem in that industry?**

PM: Well, yes, still with the fact that you have these pests and you have to control them but every industry has that.

**RB: Yes.**

PM: But it isn't as cheap to get rid of it.

**RB: What was that?**

PM: It's not as cheap to spray.

**RB: No.**

PM: And we try not to spray; the whole emphasis has changed there.

**RB: Yes, yes.**

PM: Yes, but we are talking about the farm now.

39.59 **RB: That's right, yes, which is a tangent to your business. So, again reading through that terrific article of Helen Greenwood's and your literature, you say that things began to change and people wanted different items in the shop - - -**

PM: Yes.

**RB: - - - so you moved on from Vienna almonds and macadamias.**

PM: Oh yes. Well, the first thing we did – and they were early days - then too were salted cashews. See, before the war – I'm talking about WWII – cashews weren't that well known; they were grown in India but they were quite an expensive nut and very few shops sold them. We were one of the first then to have salted cashews and they were very popular.

**RB: What prompted you to sell them?**

PM: Well, they were available.

**RB: Did you go to India to source them?**

PM: No, no, no, we went to an import agent here but you had to have an import licence to get them, you see, and it was very hard and for a while there we had a lot of problems and we actually bought the licence and took someone else's licence to buy the nuts. But they were different years; they were just immediately post-war years and business was done differently to what it is now.

**RB:** I'll come back to the produce you sold but the city itself was a very small area, with a very great number of small businesses in that area.

**PM:** Mm.

**RB:** Were you aware of the other businesses in the city and the other restaurants?

**PM:** Oh yes, sure. Sure, very much so. But if you have a look at – see Pitt Street's now Pitt Street Mall – you had a lot of what you might call small businesses; there were little department stores along there; you know, there was quite a number there. There was McCarthy's, there was Hordern – not Hordern Brothers, not the big one that's down here, that was Anthony Horderns but Hordern Brothers was there and there were several other ones along there. There were really ways and there were really small department stores and then Farmers, of course, and then David Jones, so there's quite a lot.

**RB:** Did you supply any of those restaurants?

**PM:** No, at that stage we only supplied our own shops.

42.00 **RB:** But now you supply restaurants with things like the nuts?

**PM:** Yes, we do. Yes, that's changed completely.

**RB:** So, how did people respond to this new food item of cashews?

**PM:** Oh, I mean people love cashews and people love salted almonds and all the various things that we cooked there and we also imported brazils – but not directly but through an agent and we still do. For a little while I imported things myself. My son feels it's – I had at that time several suppliers, particularly one Indian one – and I could guarantee, he guaranteed that he'd give me good quality and we did that, but my son now gets a couple of quotes from different importers and they're all graded and we do it that way.

**RB:** I get the sense with you, Paul, that there's a large number of business relationships that you have and have had for a long time.

**PM:** Yes.

**RB:** And business is done differently now with the next generation in terms of getting quotes or not continuing those personal relationships.

**PM:** Times have changed. I used to go over to Adelaide, buy maybe twenty, twenty five tonnes of nuts on a handshake. We had no sale

notes, we had nothing, whereas nowadays everything's done order and number and sale notes and so on but that's the way things have changed. It wasn't only the Nut Shop, it was everybody else is the same way.

**RB: Yes. Would you go overseas on buying trips yourself?**

PM: No, not on buying trips, no. We went overseas for many years; I regularly went to a convention called 'International Confection' - we're still members of that organisation - 'Retail Confectioners International'. And they're a group, anything from Darrell Lea - so Darrell Lea were also members at the time and we are - but anything from American companies with say seven hundred shops to the individual shop where mamma sold at the front and poppa made the goods at that back and that's always been very much - also personal contact things, we always found people that we could relate to and that's been very good.

44.20 My son finds he hasn't got the time to go to these things as much. He's been to a couple but for argument's sake there's a company in Canada called 'Purdy's', they now have about seventy or eighty shops, I think, maybe more, and through the contact there they bought excess macadamia from my farm that I didn't need and they still take them, so, but it's all on a personal thing and we made very many good friends through that.

**RB: Yes, yes. Is there such an organisation nationally or is that the Australian group that you're speaking about?**

PM: No, no, no. The one I'm speaking about is an American group. They call them RCI - 'Retail Confectioners International'.

**RB: And is there an Australian similar body?**

PM: No. One here, there's a Confectionary Association but that's changed over many years and it now includes people like Cadbury's and Nestlé and so on as well in a bigger way but this is a local association; my son goes to those meetings - but we are very small compared to most.

**RB: So where do you get things like your chocolate?**

PM: We blend our own chocolate, we have our own recipe; very strict, my son is very precise with that and he has luckily a very good palate that he can tell the difference and he says "One bag of this, one bag of that, one bag of that". We use some of the Callebaut chocolate; we used to get it from Belgium but now we get it from Singapore which we think is equally as good; people think Swiss or Belgian chocolate is better but it's the same firm making it, and we get some local chocolates. We can go upstairs, you can have a look later but

there's Cadbury, there's Nestlé and there's Callebaut and we just blend it.

46.02 **RB:** **And do you buy it in the block, you don't buy the cocoa beans?**

PM: No, it comes in bags. No, look there's really Cadbury's and Nestlé no longer make chocolate from cocoa beans. I believe Haig's is the only company that still makes it – I don't know what they make – but it's not very difficult to do but I think it's very uneconomic to do it. The cocoa bean is now pressed, as they call it, in the country of origin and they send it out as cocoa butter and cocoa liquor and then the bigger firms reconstitute it from that.

**RB:** **You don't participate in that sort of production?**

PM: No, no, we just buy our chocolate as chocolate. We use some chocolate liquor because we like to have our dark chocolate a little bit more bitter than the one that's available but this is a matter of blending, not a matter of making, of conching the chocolate.

**RB:** **So in a sense one could suggest you're doing science in any case.**

PM: Well, hardly but - - -

**RB:** **You wanted to do science.**

PM: Hardly.

**RB:** **I think I interrupted you earlier, Paul, when you were going to tell me about the kinds of items that had sold and that sold differently at different times and how that taste had changed.**

PM: Well, I think tastes change, yes. We now sell a lot more nuts, natural nuts particularly because of this 'Nuts for Life' or 'Nuts for Health' campaign. Nuts, people are much more conscious of the health benefits of nuts, so we sell a lot of either roasted nuts without salt or ordinary kernels but we also sell a lot of manufactured things like – when I show you later, our scorching room is very efficient and good and we - - -

**RB:** **Your scorching room, did you say?**

PM: Yes. Or the panning room, whatever you'd like to call it, where we make chocolate almonds, chocolate peanuts, sultanas and things, macadamias, and it goes quite large volumes. But we do that but we also like the raw, natural nuts and we roast them.

48.00 **RB:** **What about marzipan – is that still a big seller?**

PM: To certain – how can I put it? – to a certain clientele, yes. We don't package ours very well, we only sell it in our own shops, and people know when and they're really regular customers that buy that.

**RB: Do they buy it to eat as something out of a paper bag or do they buy it - - -**

PM: Yes.

**RB: - - - for cake?**

PM: No, no, I don't sell the bulk marzipan, only chocolate coated.

**RB: Did you ever sell bulk marzipan?**

PM: No, not really, no.

**RB: Did you ever import marzipan?**

PM: Well, we do import sometimes a marzipan base that we use and sometimes we make it from the nuts onward, it just depends. Sometimes it's much cheaper to buy the base and make it from there onwards than otherwise and if you can get the good quality then it's no problem.

**RB: Is there a season in the production of - - -**

PM: No, marzipan is – almonds keep very well so there's not.

**RB: I wanted to ask you about training your staff, Paul.**

PM: Well, as far as the men are concerned, the confectioners, yes we do train them, sort of separately, with separate things. We've had a guy on now, he would have been here about close on a year, and now he knows how to cook all the salted nuts and it's quite – we batch cook, so it's not a continuous process so it's quite different, that each nut has to be a different time and even varieties of nuts are different times; he does all the roasting, oil roasting and other roasting. And then the chap that does most of the confectionery has been here about over thirty years and that's sort of, we teach it as we go along, caramel brittle and all the various products. But we are very fortunate that when Cahill's closed in the city, we had the main confectioner from there and I'm still in touch with him - he's still alive - and all the recipes from there and everything; he was very generous with us; he taught us and so we teach it on to them.

**RB: Could I ask what his name is?**



PM: Yes, Marshall Stoescu but he was Australian born, a returned soldier. He's got a Baltic sort of name but Stoescu is his name, Marshall Stoescu, and he's retired onto Central Coast – he's still alive.

50.16 **RB: So how did you have that relationship with him?**

PM: Well, when they closed down he was looking for a job; we were very happy to take him and he was happy to work for us. Matter of fact, at Christmas-time he still gets his nuts sent to him and chocolates and he always come back and he said "They're as good as ever" and makes comments about the creams and occasionally when we drive up north to the farm we stop and talk to him.

**RB: Just coming back to the Strand Arcade too, you mentioned Chequers and your knowledge of Chequers. Would you like to tell me about that?**

PM: Well, as a young man you're very much interested in this and we got good pocket money if I can – how can I put it? – in those days when you got beer you didn't get it them in cartons, you had a sugar bag, right; you went to the pub with a sugar bag and they gave you six or eight bottles of beer, right. Now, we went through every day two bags of almonds which at the time fetched about two shillings and sugar bags which when the fellow came for collecting the bag cost you one shilling, so that was – if you can work it out - - -

**RB: Good economics.**

PM: - - - there was eight shillings and that was quite a lot of pocket money to get - - -

**RB: Yes.**

PM: - - - and that was my thing. And so we had a little bit of money and Chequers was quite expensive but you got a meal and you got a floor show and everything else and I must say I enjoyed my times we went to Chequers. There were other clubs, there was a lot of other ones as well but Chequers and particularly at Strand Arcade had a certain – for me it was the tops. And there was a comedian called Joe Martin and a lot of the girls that were in the chorus used to go and buy two ounces of Vienna almonds and you got to know them and to see them, and also when you went down with the lift you could see them, they were practising or whatever else.

52.11 We had – don't forget we had the rooms upstairs which was really our factory. We were on two separate floors; we had three big rooms up there where we made our chocolates. And that was a time I really love to remember, that was a great time, and they were very popular, particularly with the racing fraternity and they had really a great

kitchen, a great meal and a very good floor show and when you worked it out it wasn't all that expensive.

**RB: So there was quite a sophisticated aspect of Sydney life at that time?**

PM: Very much so.

**RB: And you're living back in Randwick. Were you aware of that - - -**

PM: No, we were living at that time in Eastlakes.

**RB: Eastlakes. So, you were in the suburbs and you were working in this very sophisticated atmosphere with Chequers nearby. Were you aware of the - - -**

PM: As a young man you're not aware, you're just looking for the day.

**RB: But all those glamorous girls and that glamorous - - -**

PM: Yes, they were, they certainly were.

**RB: - - - aspect of life.**

PM: But it was certainly a part of the city and part of Strand Arcade and particularly Chequers.

**RB: Yes, yes. Would you take time off from the shop to slip down and watch them practice?**

PM: Not really, no, but always as a special thing. I didn't go all that often but once every two months you'd have a meal there and take in a new floor show or whatever that was, very much so - particularly had different girlfriends at that time and it made quite an impression, it was really very good and good value I always thought.

**RB: Well, Paul, you've been very generous this afternoon and I'm conscious that the day is moving on. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about particularly that you'd like to record about the Nut Shop?**

53.57 PM: No, but as I say, we had shops sort of both ends of the city: George Street was one part, near Liverpool Street, then I thought I'd like to be – Circular Quay was expanding, they were building the AMP Centre at the time, so we took the shop at Wynyard Station and then later on we were in with the original development of Australia Square - Harry Seidler even helped us to design the inside of the shop – so we were very conscious of the city as such for us, for our productions for goods and we had a lot of customers from those various branches.

**RB: Just as we wind up, would you say your customers were mostly city based? You said that you had a number of - - -**

PM: No. See, it was quite different. In the original days people put on their hats and gloves and once a week came to town because there was no shopping in any of the suburbs, really not. It was quite different and people used to come in, especially Thursdays and Fridays, and come in and shop in town. Now, bit by bit as suburbs expanded, as supermarkets expanded that stopped but people still - - -

**RB: And even somewhere like Rosedale – what was it, Rose - - -**

PM: Roseville, Bankstown.

**RB: - - - that place near Bankstown, Rose -?**

PM: Roselands.

**RB: Roselands.**

PM: We had a shop in Roselands, we had a shop in Roselands but that was the first of the big centres, with the rainbow fountain – if you remember that and - - -

**RB: Very special.**

PM: - - - it was very special, it was something completely new and that killed the city for a while. It was a long while till the city population and even people now come to the city again but for a long while they didn't. So we had our regulars that come once every few months perhaps from overseas or from Hornsby or Bankstown and then we had the city workers who are still sort of for lunchtime the major part of our business and always have been.

**RB: How many people do you have in the shop now?**

PM: Always four but sometimes five because we have an upstairs way up - we pack.

**RB: You've been very generous this afternoon, Paul. Thank you very much for your time.**

PM: O.K, thank you.

**Interview ends**