



COMMERCIAL ORAL HISTORIES OF CENTRAL SYDNEY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Peter Sakaluk

Interviewer: Richard Raxworthy

Place: Wentworth Falls

Date: 10 February 2001

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RR:** This is Commercial Oral Histories of Central Sydney. This is about Cornelius Furs and I'm talking to Mr Peter Sakaluk and I'll ask you first, Mr Sakaluk – and also the date is the 10th of February, 2001 and I'm interviewing in Wentworth Falls, Richard Raxworthy, interviewer. And I'll ask you first, could you spell your full name?

PS: Yes. Peter John Sakaluk, S-A-K-A-L-U-K.

RR: And what year were you born?

PS: 196 ...

RR: And where were your parents living at the time?

PS: They were living at ***** in New South Wales.

RR: And you grew up around there?

PS: Yes, I did. I was born in ***** and spent the first thirty four years of my life in *****.

RR: And you went to school in - - -

PS: Yes, I went to school ***** up to Year Ten.

RR: What did you do when you left school?

PS: When I left school I was offered an apprenticeship as a hairdresser and I did that for four years and did my time, got my licence, did another six months and I decided it was time to do something else 'cause it wasn't really what I wanted to do.

1.11 After that, I applied for a few jobs and I applied for a job at Cornelius Furs in the city. I started off in their dispatch department and basically it was a very hectic job; they were very, very busy. I used to put away all their lay-bys, put away all the garments that came to and from the factory and used to do all the dispatches. It was a pretty busy time when I was there because the first month that I started they actually had a record month and they took one million dollars in that June in 1982. So, it was pretty tough but because I didn't know any better, I just thought that was the job and I actually quite liked it and was used to it. And also, working in the dispatch department you actually get to learn a lot about the stock because you have to be able to identify furs, identify skins and it really does give you a good footing in the business.

RR: What about types of furs – what were the main sellers in that period and what year are we talking about?

2.14 PS: In 1982 the main sellers around those days were mink, mink and marmot. They particularly sold a lot of foxes and a few years after that they started selling a lot of rabbits but the rabbits were actually imported from Hong Kong: they stopped producing them themselves because they could get them cheaper overseas. That wasn't good for the business because they were falling apart and we were getting so many returns and doing repairs free of charge, so that didn't help the business at all, that was a really bad thing.

RR: How about the Russian furs?

PS: The Russian furs; the marmots, we sold a lot. They were great for people that couldn't afford mink, 'because they look like mink - particularly good for larger ladies because they didn't make them look fat and also very durable. They last for, you know, thirty to fifty, even more years if you look after them properly.

RR: So, what other sort of furs? Was there Persian lamb and things like that?

PS: We did have Persian lamb but we didn't sell a great deal. That was sort of sold a lot earlier, before I came there. Mainly, mink, foxes,

marmots and rabbits were the main sellers in my whole time at Cornelius.

RR: Do you remember the fur room there?

3.24 PS: Yes, I remember the fur room. We used to have two people working in there full time; one was a stock controller who used to be - all the stock control of all the furs; they were hanging up in bundles, in skins. And then we had another gentleman in there that used to match them all up; he used to match all the jobs up that went to the factory because if somebody brought a repair in - you can't put a new skin with an old fur, so you had to actually use one from a trade-in that somebody used or find one that was older, so the colours would actually match up with the skins. So, yes, they were very busy as well.

RR: What about remodeling?

PS: Remodelling; we used to do a lot of remodeling. When I started there in 1982 we used to get seven to nine racks full of garments would come back from the factory every day, which had to be put away into the lay-by and storage department, so they were extremely busy.

RR: And what about the cold store for customers' furs – where was that?

PS: The cold storage was also on the same premises. That was in the lay-by and the storage area. They were all kept together.

RR: Now, what about the factories?

4.35 PS: The factories, they've been all over the place since I started there. They were in the building next door to Cornelius, which is now I believe the Capital Centre. They used to occupy two floors there; one was the leather factory and one was the fur factory. After that, they moved to Kent Street above the Carla Zampatti building and then after that they moved to Rockdale. Then after Rockdale basically it all just folded and we had a few people working on the premises in the basement at Castlereagh Street again.

RR: What about the fur protests. Were you there when they – well, you must have been there when that happened.

PS: Yes, I was there when they happened. Basically, we learnt that the best thing to do was to close the doors, turn off the lights and not antagonise them and they would go away - and provided the media weren't there and we did have the doors and the lights off they would go. But they were amazing people as well because, you know, they didn't want furs but it was all right to wear furs in their demonstrations, splattered with blood, just to further their cause - so

they really didn't have much to talk about and they were also wearing leather and leather is no different, it's just go the fur shaved off.

RR: Now, the salon, was there a ladies salon and the men's salon when you were there?

5.57 PS: Yes. When I started we mainly had furs, which took up most of the shop. The leather shop, when I commenced, was on the right hand side of the store. It was only in a little alcove - which is now the Walford Boutique [interior decorators] - but we mainly had, in the men's department, men's leathers, some sheepskins. We hardly carried any ladies leather and the bulk of the business in those days was done with the furs.

RR: Did you notice any famous customers?

PS: There was a few earlier on in the piece: we had Margaret Whitlam [wife of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam] was in, Paul Hogan [comedian, film star] was in, Elvis Presley's manager was in. We did have quite a few customers but because I was working downstairs in admin I didn't actually get to see them; I only got to hear about them - but I do remember Margaret Whitlam because I saw her coat and it was ermine and it was just enormous; there were so many skins in it and I've seen her wear that on television many, many years later - don't know if she's still got it.

RR: And you moved from the lay-by and dispatch section after a period, didn't you?

7.09 PS: I did, yes. I went to work in their office and sat on their switchboard for four years. I used to do their banking and other general admin duties, such as the sales tax - also working in lay-by still because they were starting to reduce staff and we all had to multi-skill, so if you weren't multi-skilled you actually didn't have a position for too long. So, yes, I did work - but mainly I was there doing admin from the whole time I was at Cornelius.

RR: But you trained on the job in the way of furs?

PS: All on the job training, yes, yes.

RR: You mentioned that you were called into the salon and that you did in fact sell furs.

PS: Yes, when Thursday night and Saturday afternoon shopping started up, I used to work in the salon after hours. That was actually quite interesting; very scary, because you had to try and sell things to people that you - they didn't really know what they wanted and you had to try and work it out. And also playing with women's vanity can be a little bit dangerous, so it was quite an interesting experience.

Now that I'm working in jewellery it's so much easier because people come in, they see what they like and they just buy it; you don't have to try to talk somebody into trying to buy something, which is great.

RR: The next door building where they had the factory for a while, was that there until recently or was it pulled down?

8.37 PS: It was a very old building - it was about three or four storeys high. We had two floors of it - and there was a jeweller down the bottom when it closed, I can't remember who it was. Yes, and it was pulled down. I remember at the time, I thought to myself, "What a shame", because it really was such a beautiful building and the jeweller that - whoever had it - really did an excellent job on street level and I'm just surprised in Sydney we pull down so many of our lovely old buildings because they're just irreplaceable.

RR: Did you see anything of the factories and of the methods and did they change?

PS: No, the methods are pretty archaic, really. After being there for eighteen years nothing had really changed. It was still the way that - still the same way that they used to cut the skins. They used to strand them, put them all back together, the cleaning, every method still remained the same; nothing changed, technology just did not come into it.

RR: That's interesting. And what about the leather section?

PS: The leather section; nothing really changed there. It probably folded a lot quicker because we could buy imports from overseas and get external suppliers to actually make them up much cheaper than what our factory could. So, that was one of the first areas of the business that actually did close down well before the fur factory believe it or not.

10.07 **RR: And did you ever work in the other shop that Cornelius Furs owned at Centrepont?**

PS: I did work over there because I did the admin for Levy Furs, it was - I used to do all their bookwork, so I had to go over there. Sometimes I would sell, not terribly often, but I did go over there to sell. That was quite a successful business as well but unfortunately Centrepont just wanted to terminate the lease because they wanted to expand a number of shops and we had to leave but that was quite a shame because they did do very well at Levy Furs.

RR: Were you there when the protest was on?

PS: At Levy's they didn't actually have any protests because it was inside a shopping centre, so the security guards would come and escort them out straight away.

RR: Now, what about the different stages of the business while you were there?

PS: Sorry. Different stages in what respects?

RR: Well, when you went there in the first place it was thriving on furs, was it, and then it was - - -

PS: O.K, yes, yes, yes.

RR: - - - it was taken over and what about the closure?

PS: Yes. Well, when I first started there, as I said before, the shop was devoted mainly to furs and then later on we used to sell more leather. We actually had to expand our men's leather department and our ladies leather department, which meant that the fur section actually shrunk but that was due to the downturn. We used to start selling more sheepskins because we were finding that the Russians and the Japanese were finding the sheepskins cheaper here than at home.

11.46 So, yes, that all dwindled and then after that we got into accessories. We used to sell a lot of handbags, wallets, keyrings, things like that to the tourists, sheepskin rugs - and then they stopped buying that because the yen, actually the value of that was no good; they could buy them cheaper at home and then we had to go into other things, like wool and cashmere, polyester, just plain cashmere and that actually kept the business going.

RR: What about the other skins, Australian type of skins like crocodile and snake?

PS: We didn't sell any crocodile or any snake, no. We did have some snakeskins there but they generally were used as trims in leather jackets - and that was actually in the late seventies, early eighties - it wasn't fashionable in the year 2000, although it was just coming back - because we didn't have a workroom it wasn't actually done, so no.

RR: What about ostrich and emu?

PS: Ostrich; we had a very good time with the ostrich. We used to sell a lot to the Japanese, again because it was very cheap here. The bags sort of retailed anywhere between about seventeen hundred, two thousand, two hundred dollars and with the value of their yen it was a bargain for them. But in the last three or four years we would be lucky if we would sell two or three bags a year; it was we just couldn't sell them, they were just so expensive.

13.12 **RR: Did they ever get into fish skin?**

PS: We did have some barramundi, yes. We had some barramundi slippers, they had some barramundi skirts and some barramundi trims on some leather jackets but again nothing in a big way. That sort of fashion really just changes so quickly; by the time it comes in and you latch onto it, it's out before you can produce the items.

RR: When did you hear about the decision to close up in Sydney?

PS: The decision to close in Sydney was made probably a couple of years before we actually closed - they had a rather long lease on the premises and I think they realised that they couldn't keep it going forever. The business was still doing O.K. at the end but they still had a few years to run and they just realised that the expenses - because it was a large premises, we had to have a lot of staff on and the electricity and all the other expenses - they couldn't keep it going. So, Leon actually - one of the directors - decided he wanted to pursue something else in his life, because he was in his mid forties. His mother took it on but unfortunately his mother was in her, probably, late sixties - she never actually divulged her age - but the time was coming where really they had to think about just getting out of Sydney because they were just going to lose money if they kept it going until the lease finished.

RR: And how did they deal with the process of closure?

14.44 PS: The process of closure - - -

RR: Did they have a big sale or what?

PS: We had a big sale, yes. It ran for seven weeks. They had a very, very busy time, believe it or not. We never thought that in our wildest dreams that they would sell everything they did but they did nearly a year's takings in seven weeks. We actually employed three or four extra staff members and all of us that were there were exhausted. We couldn't go to lunch; the boss had to bring lunch in for us, we were absolutely exhausted. We were supposed to be out on the 31st of July - we thought that we would close a few days before so we could pack up and have an orderly exit from the building but it wasn't to be: our bosses decided to trade up until six o'clock on the very last day and basically they just took out a few possessions that they wanted to take. The rest was left there and unfortunately thrown out. But there was no stock left - the stock that was left fitted into a few small boxes and I'm sure they were very, very happy.

RR: What about machinery, did they take all that?

15.54 PS: A lot of the machinery was actually sold off in the weeks prior. They did know that they were going to close down but it was kept quiet and after it was announced, about seven weeks before the closure, they did actually sell it off to a lot of the subcontractors that used to work for us, because we only had a small – we only had two people working in our factory. We had a finisher and somebody else and we used to put a lot of the work out to subcontractors because they could do it a lot cheaply.

RR: Now, was the stock control computerised, was everything computerised?

PS: Yes, when I started there – I've always, once I've moved out of the switchboard area I've always been involved in the stock control. It was manual when I started; every garment had a stock number and all its movements and sales were recorded. We eventually went onto computer with Melbourne and that was when the Koskys owned the business – the Koskys were the owners when I started there - and towards the end when the Kemplers took over they got rid of the big computer system that we had between the two stores and we just had a PC with new programs in Sydney and basically from an office of twelve it was down to just myself in the end.

RR: But under the Koskys, no?

17.17 PS: Sorry?

RR: You weren't there when the Cornelius were there?

PS: I wasn't there for the Corneliuses, no, but I was there with the Koskys. I would imagine that with the Corneliuses it was manual because it was still manual when I started with the Koskys.

RR: Were there any other changes that you can think of that happened over the years?

PS: Not really, apart from the downturn in the furs, which I do have to add didn't come when it happened overseas. Unfortunately, Australia, as we all know is behind overseas and it actually happened about two years after overseas, so we actually did very, very well when they were quite out of favour overseas. But one of the biggest changes I have noticed is that it is so much cheaper to have these garments produced in Hong Kong, Japan, China and their techniques have changed considerably - but we don't see them over here because we don't actually do it - but they're now shearing minks, they're dyeing them so they actually look like fake furs and there is now a very good business in that sort of area. We were doing quite well – our directors would travel to Hong Kong and buy lots of garments and these garments did sell extremely well.

18.39 **RR: Did they sell fake fur at all?**

PS: We did sell fake fur, not a great deal and it was only for a short period. I was actually assisting in the buying when Leon was running the business and Leon was more than willing to listen to the staff and have anything in that would help the business to stay afloat. When his mother took over, she was a true fur woman. She's been in the game since she was a young girl and she would not have a bar of it: whether they were selling or not to her was immaterial, they were fake, she just wanted to get rid of them and we did and you would never, ever suggest to her trying to bring some fake furs in. Even though we saw many nice ones we could not convince her whatsoever.

RR: Did the Cornelius Company ever make – well, I don't know if you can call it accessories – matching gloves and hats and things like that?

PS: We used to make fur mittens – not a great deal of those - but we used to sell a lot of leather gloves, which we bought in, but we used to sell hats out of all sorts of furs. Towards the end we used to sell a lot of collars because they were very much back in vogue. People were having cuffs made to go on their woolen cashmere coats, so the trim was quite successful but again everything's cyclical and it's the same with the furs. You know, they just come in and they go out and these items do last you a long time, so it's not a sort of thing that you go out and buy all the time. And I did find toward the end people were using them as necessities rather than - when they were really popular they were buying them as it was like a status symbol - and, you know, a lot of our clients towards the end were overseas travellers or people that lived in Canberra, Bowral, the Blue Mountains – it wasn't your average lady that would buy a rabbit in the eighties to go shopping at the supermarket. So, yes, they were bought because they were necessary towards the end.

20.35 **RR: What about men who bought fur coats? Were they many of them?**

PS: We didn't sell a great deal of men's coats, basically because we didn't have many to show people. But we did, at one stage men's mink lined leather jackets were very, very popular – that would have been in the late eighties but they were quite expensive; they were about four thousand dollars – but had we had them, we would have sold them but, you know, if you don't have them to show people you just can't sell them.

RR: I saw a picture in the paper – it's an old paper – of Sir Robert Helpmann in a mink coat.

PS: Yes, Robert Helpmann – we had quite a few stars in; Shirley Bassey [British singer], Kamahl [Australian singer]. There was numerous; Ernest Borgnine [American film star] - numerous people that came through and I believe there are still photos circulating around with our current owners. I'm not sure if they've lent them to the Powerhouse Museum or not but those photos still all exist and they're quite interesting.

RR: **I hadn't thought of that. I'm going to ask Sonia Kempler about photographs this week, so she might have lent them to the Powerhouse, you think?**

PS: I think she has, yes, and, like, some of them are even autographed so.

21.44 RR: **And I noticed I haven't seen any signs of or heard of anything about any of the South American furs like, well, chinchilla, yes, but of course they were bred but llama skin, I didn't see any of that. Did you see any of that at Cornelius?**

PS: No, we didn't really sell llama. I mean, somebody might bring one in once or twice a year to have something repaired or cleaned but other than that, no, llama skins were not popular at all.

RR: **Is there anything else I should ask you?**

PS: No, the only thing I should say is that it's a shame Sydney is missing a great place now. Yes, it may not be politically correct but, you know, the cavemen have been wearing furs since the time dot and if the animals are bred for it, well, why not? I mean, leather is no different, as I said earlier, but it's just that the hair is shaved off. And we've got, you know, huge problems in the mountains and in country areas where red foxes are eating lambs while they're being born and things like that and these animals just aren't being killed because their skins aren't worth anything but it's just such a shame they're shot and just left to rot in a paddock and people really should utilise them.

23.03 RR: **Did the business make any arrangements for you when it closed down?**

PS: I was very fortunate that Leon, one of the directors, actually did speak to the new owners or the people that were taking over the lease at Cornelius. They offered me a position and I've been with them - so I'm actually now in the jewellery game and I will be going back to the Cornelius premises: Makers' Mart at Chifley Plaza has taken on the store and when it's refurbished, hopefully on the 1st of July I'll be working back on the same premises – but there's been a lot of money spent on it and I won't recognise it when I'm back there.

RR: What has been changed? I mean, the basement will still be used, will it? The sub-basement, I mean.

PS: The sub-basement, yes. Actually, I was there yesterday, believe it or not, and it'll – all the admin will be downstairs. There's going to be a new staircase put in, they've discovered a little grotto in one of the corners under the window on the corner of King and Castlereagh Street, which I believe they're going to use as a feature, and they've changed a lot of it. The toilets have been moved now. They were upstairs in the salon, now they're downstairs. There's a new shower being put in. So, the internal aspects of the building will be completely changed.

RR: Well, is there anything more we can talk about? You can't think of anything?

PS: No, I can't, no. I'm sorry.

RR: All right. Well, I'll say thank you very much, Mr Peter Sakaluk.

24.34 **PS:** Thank you, Richard.

Interview ends