

At the heart of identity



the
Heartlands
project


AMES
Australia

Foreword

Cath Scarth, CEO AMES Australia

A sense of identity is critical for well-being and personal growth. It helps individuals feel connected to others and fosters a sense of belonging within groups, communities or cultures.

This year's Heartlands project 'At the Heart of Identity' focuses on that sense of identity among migrant and refugee families.

We asked the children of migrants to reflect on their relationship with their family's homeland, their parents' journeys and their own sense of belonging.

The result is a stunning series of emotional and inspirational stories about forging a new life in a new land, while also maintaining connections to cultural heritage.

'At the Heart of Identity' explores the ideas of identity, home, courage and opportunity through the personal stories of people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

The stories reflect on what coming to Australia has meant for the writers and their families and they remind us all of the contributions migrants and refugees have made to this country.

At a time when there are 123 million displaced people across the globe and rising divisiveness and xenophobia in many places, it has never been more important to share these stories.

We at AMES Australia believe projects like Heartlands are a celebration of our common humanity. They transcend cultural barriers and they connect people no matter their race, religion, culture or creed.

Much of what we see and hear about migrants and refugees comes to us through the prism of the mainstream media. Heartlands aims to give migrants and refugees a platform to tell their own authentic stories reflecting their own experiences, challenges, aspirations and achievements.

I'd like to thank all of the participants who contributed to this year's Heartlands project and generously shared their personal stories and reflections.

The collected works in this book convey a profound sense of identity and the writers' gratitude and commitment to Australia.

Carmen Calleya

As a small child, Carmen Calleya-Capp came to Australia from Malta with her parents in 1958 – surviving a shipwreck along the way

I was one of 1,290 souls aboard the Norwegian migrant ship the MS Skaubryn which caught fire and sank on its sixth voyage to Australia in April 1958. There were 1,082 passengers and 208 crew.

The tragic incident, the first major shipping disaster since the end of WWII, had an enduring impact on me and my family. It left us with an indelible sense that we were indeed migrants who had crossed the seas to make a new life.

Migrating to a new country is inherently risky but my parents never dreamed those risks included drowning at sea. My parents were never really happy that we would be coming on the Skaubryn. In 1955, my father's mother, his sister and her two young boys left Malta for Australia on the Skaubryn and during that voyage there was a fire in the engine room that was fortunately extinguished. The Skaubryn also lost its propeller.

My parents told me that the incident happened in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Aden. On this occasion the ship did not sink, and everyone arrived safely.

Tragically, three years later, in almost the same spot, we were not so lucky as the Skaubryn met its fate. In hindsight, I can understand why my parents were so concerned.

We lost everything when the ship sank. Emily, my mother lost her wedding ring and her treasured sewing machine. Tony, my dad lost his carpentry tools. We were left with only the clothes we were wearing.

In conversation with my parents, they would often tell the story, how on the morning we were traveling by taxi to board the ship, my mother noticed a suitcase had fallen off and asked the taxi driver to go back and get it.

They were both anxious that this would make us late for boarding. Sometimes they would say it was ironic that we went back for one suitcase when in the end we lost all our material possessions.



It was poignant and very sad to know that for one passenger - a German man who suffered a heart attack in a lifeboat - his dream of starting a new life ended in that lifeboat. My parents had strong faith and would always say to me 'thank God we have our life, and that life is to be cherished'.

For us, it was a traumatic voyage, but for Emily and Tony it strengthened their faith and resolve to make a really good life in Australia for their family.

So, we came to Australia in 1958; we left Malta on my birthday the 22 March. We boarded the SS Skaubryn on an assisted migrant passage.

Unlike some other migrant families at the time, we came as a complete family unit. There was me, my mother, father, elder brother as well as my maternal grandmother and two of my mother's sisters. Like many migrants at the time, we already had extended family members in Australia.

A lot of people at the time came to Australia to find work and make a better life. It was different for Tony, my father, as he had a good job with the RAF as a carpenter and boatwright and wasn't really that keen to leave Malta.

But his beloved Emily, had her bothers in Melbourne and my dad really, really loved my mother and would do anything for her; that's why we came. When I was a teenager, this was part of our story that I enjoyed hearing - the love and devotion of two people that continued to grow deeper in their long life together. Bless them.

I was just four, but I have memories of the emergency on the ship and of being in the lifeboat.

March 31st was a sunny and calm day and, in the afternoon, the captain called a lifeboat drill. Some passengers were a little grumpy because it interrupted what they were doing. My mother told me that there was a Maltese priest, Father Tabone with the Maltese migrants and he was suffering from seasickness. She was concerned about him and was pleased to see him at the lifeboat drill.

But later on, that fateful evening at around 9.30 pm the lights on the ship were coming on and off and the crew were telling all the passengers to leave their cabins and go to the top deck to begin to board the lifeboats. My mother would say you could smell the smoke in the passageways.



My family and I were all in the same lifeboat and my dad told me that as the lifeboat was being lowered, he touched the ship's plates and they were red hot.

Even though I had a life jacket, my dad always told me that he undid his belt and strapped me to him. My parents told me that they were praying and, in the still evening, they could hear other people praying while the lifeboats were being rowed away from the burning ship.

They told me that our lifeboat began to take on water and so the men used manual pumps to keep the water out. My parents and other passengers always said the crew were calm and so good.

During the drama, I lost my most cherished possession, a beautiful baby doll given to me as a birthday present by my father's brother and his wife, who remained in Malta.

The Skaubryn's Captain Alf Haakon Feste radioed an SOS and two ships responded. On the morning of April 1, the British merchant ship, City of Sydney, arrived and all the survivors were taken onboard and looked after.

My parents said that everyone was so kind and that the crew of both vessels were really good; and that everyone would always be grateful to them. It is poignant to remember that whilst we were in the lifeboats the Skaubryn was being devoured by flames.

To my parents' horror, the children were loaded by cargo net onto the deck. The adults reached the deck by climbing ropes once onboard, parents were united with their children. The horror of being in a cargo net and swung across the sea stayed in my memory and would shape my relationship with the sea and large boats.

The City of Sydney could not provide comfortable accommodation. Later that day, the Italian passenger liner SS Roma arrived and all the passengers were transferred to her.

From there, the Roma took us to Aden. We were on the Roma for three days, and the crew made every effort to make us comfortable and clothing and shoes were handed out. While on board the crew arranged for telegrams to be sent to our families, telling them we were safe.

Once again, all survivors were so grateful to the crew for assisting in our rescue. In Aden we stayed at a newly built British hospital where everyone was really helpful.



The Maltese and British Governments arranged for the survivors to continue their journeys either by plane or boat. As was customary at that time, we came via Fremantle and my father told me that we were welcomed by the Maltese Commissioner and local authorities and the Maltese Commissioner stayed with us until we came to Melbourne.

We eventually arrived at Station Pier, in April on the P&O Liner the SS Orsova. We were welcomed by our relieved relatives and the Red Cross; and the St Vincent De Paul Society were also there to help with clothing and money.

We received some financial assistance from the Maltese and Australian Governments. Of course, when you have lost everything, you are always grateful for support. Because of this, my parents and I continued to support charitable organisations.

We all lived with my uncle for a time and then very quickly my parents bought our home. I marvel at how my parents did it. They bought a house in Niddrie. We moved in with my nana, my aunts and also, for a time, my mother's two brothers.

That was how life was for a lot for migrants. I know I am in constant awe as to how hard they worked to buy and eventually own our home. I know, and have a deep appreciation of, how extremely hard they worked. They were both so proud of their beautiful home. My dad wrote a letter to his brother in Malta and enclosed a photo of our backyard complete with Hill's Hoist.

At our first Christmas in Australia, I was given a replica of my treasured doll that had gone down with the Skaubryn. The doll was, once again, sent to me by dad's brother and his wife in Malta, and the much-cherished doll is still with me.

I have to say that my parents never really got used to a hot Christmas Day. They would always tell us that they loved going to Midnight Mass, hearing the church bells ring out and then come home to a traditional warm Maltese drink and open Christmas presents.



My father, as soon as he could, was out looking for work. He got his first job at Kodak in Coburg. After a short time, as he was a very skilled carpenter and joiner, he went to work for VIA - a building company that worked on some iconic Melbourne buildings.

He trained many apprentices, which he really enjoyed and stayed with the company for close to 30 years. On the weekends, he was working on our home and helping other people.

My mother worked for many years at the Willow Kitchenware factory during the day while also pursuing her passion for dressmaking. She created beautiful clothes in the evening and on the weekends. I remember seeing her sitting at her sewing machine and then seeing the finished garment getting pressed and hanging up for a final fitting. It was so exciting - and my dolls and I were always very well dressed.

Both my parents worked tirelessly to provide a loving home for me, my older brother Joseph and younger brother David, who was born in Australia. They both worked and saved money to support their children with good educational opportunities.

I remember they were encouraging and always proud of our achievements. Like many migrant children, I started school at age six - which was the standard in school age in Europe. In Malta pre-school was part of the school curriculum however in Australia that was not the case at the time.

School was challenging for me in different ways. I went to a Catholic Primary School and a Catholic Girls College. Firstly, I looked different, my name was different, my lunch was different.

As I was used to coming home for lunch, sometimes in primary school I went home - not a good thing to do. I remember clearly one day at primary school a teacher told me "to wipe that smirk off your face". Well, I took a hankie from my pocket and the teacher reprimanded me in front of everyone. I did not cry however it was humiliating and I was scared it may happen again.

I was reading and learning about all sort of things. I did very well at secondary school. I had a scholarship and that was good for me as it helped with my school fees. My parents were very proud of me.



Sadly, in the 1960s and 1970s racist attitudes were prevalent; and also, being on a scholarship was another reason for being called a “wog” and told you should not be at the school.

I used to catch the tram to school and on a regular basis, usually going home, my bag would be thrown off the tram. On another occasion the school held a dance, and I was dancing with an Australian boy.

I remember there was a group of girls looking at him and when we walked off the floor, I heard a girl say, “look, he danced with the wog”.

Unfortunately, in our street, there was a boy who never stopped calling my family and some other migrant families various derogatory names. I just learned to ignore these hurtful words, but it was not easy.

My father always said, in Maltese, “I was a “sturdy little soul”. So, I worked hard at school and got a good education.

My parents would often say the world is full of good people and not so good. They never spoke of people’s religion or skin colour. I am so grateful for the values they exhibited in their lives, which of course became the foundation for my values.

There was an Australian family who lived across the road from us - the Faheys. They were kind and helped us so much and we helped them. We formed a friendship that lasted over fifty years.

My parents had the philosophy that racism reflected badly not on us but on the people perpetrating it and sewing hatred in the community. In my parents I saw their pride in being Maltese Australians.

It goes without saying that I remain very proud to be a second-generation child of first-generation Maltese parents.

I took a gap year after completing secondary school, which was unusual at the time. I remember talking with my parents as an eighteen-year-old and telling them it would be good to work, earn and save money - they listened carefully and fully supported me.

I then embarked on a career in education; first as a primary teacher and then as a Maltese Consultant with the then Child Migrant Education Services. I loved working with migrant and refugee children and their families and reflected on my own education experience.

It was while working at Child Migrant Education Services that I met my future husband, Andrew.

I went on to hold senior positions in the public and community sectors. This work was predominately working with diverse communities which included the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission, the forerunner of the Victorian Multicultural Commission. was my father and I was often involved - it was fun and rewarding.

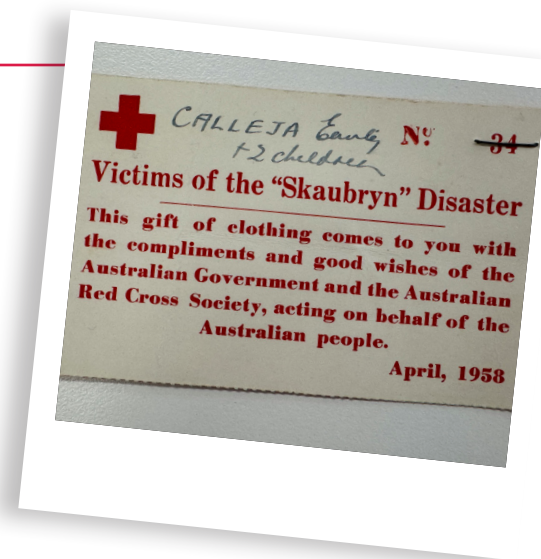
A passion for me, was my own Maltese community and I was, and still am, active in the community. I enjoy attending religious and cultural functions where speaking Maltese and mixing with the community is always enjoyable and reminds me of being with my parents.

I also had a wonderful opportunity to be involved in a community radio program called 'Speak My Language' which was providing information on Aged Care services.

I know my experience as a migrant helped me understand the needs and challenges faced by migrant and refugee families and to deliver appropriate services and programs.

I am still involved in advocacy work with a focus on quality in Aged Care for diverse communities.

The decision to leave your homeland is never easy, even when your motivation is a chance for a better life. It's an economic risk but also an emotional and physical risk - certainly for my family it could have ended by drowning in the Indian Ocean.



I cannot even imagine how my dear parents felt in that lifeboat. The decision to leave Malta was one big decision and must have weighed heavily on their minds. However, in the lifeboat they were faced with saving their family. Prayer, love, trust and hope were often four words spoken by my parents.

The experience deepened my bond with my parents - a bond which continued to deepen over the years with the pride that I took in their achievements. I still marvel at the life they made for all of us. I am so grateful to them for being my heroic and inspirational parents.

In 1983, my parents became involved with Dominican Sisters of Malta in Victoria. We shared their vision of building an Aged Care facility. From 1983 until the Home was opened in 1986, my mother undertook many fundraising events. By her side as usual was my father and I was often involved - it was fun and rewarding. In their 80's Tony and Emily retired from being much loved, dedicated and committed volunteers.

I was so proud of them and inherited from them the importance of thinking of others and helping if you can.

My parents never had an interest in material things. They were a loving couple who exhibited sound family values and kindness.

Tony, my father died, in 2010 and Emily, my mother, in 2015. What I learnt and saw from my parents is the bond of love, faith, kindness and hope.

My parents created a wonderful life for their family in Australia and contributed in so many ways that benefited the Maltese and Australian community of Melbourne.

As a second generation Maltese Australian, just like my parents, Malta is always in my heart.

Peter Malinauskas

Peter Malinauskas is the grandchild of post-war European migrants – and Premier of South Australia

My grandparents' journey to Australia

At some point in the late 1930s in regional Hungary a 20-year-old widowed mother named Eta was left little choice but to temporarily leave her daughter with extended family while she sought work at a nearby town. It was a fateful moment, as World War II mercilessly engulfed Europe.

Eta quickly found herself caught in the web of the war. Moved from camp to camp as forced labour for the Nazis, no parent could bear to imagine the pain, frustration and sense of desperation that Eta must have felt as every avenue to get back to her daughter was closed. Despite multiple efforts to return to Hungary, by the war's end Eta had been stuck in a German munitions factory.

As the Nazi regime collapsed and Eta closed that chapter of her life, her ambition for reunification with her daughter was again thwarted, this time by another peril in the form of communism. Having had her sole possession, a single bike, confiscated by the Russians at a key roadblock, Eta was again turned around and sent back to Germany.

Stuck in a foreign land, homeless, stateless, poor and with no prospect of seeing her daughter again, the Iron Curtain had fallen sharply and heavily on this young woman's hopes and aspirations. With literally nothing to lose, Eta put her hand up to participate in the Australian Displaced Persons' group resettlement scheme.

On 20 February 1949, she boarded the US Army transport USS General Omar Bundy, bound for a young and free great southern land. On the month-long journey with plenty to fuel thoughts of despair the only relief Eta could find from the heartache was in the form of work - and work she did - peeling potatoes all the way from Naples to Sydney.

Soon after arriving at an immigration camp at Bathurst, she met another displaced person fleeing the tyranny of communism, a Lithuanian named Peter. Not one for inaction, Peter rapidly



persuaded Eta that, at the first opportunity, she should get to South Australia where he was going to be working and they would marry.

Peter was despatched to Woodside, South Australia, and disjointed communication between the pair ensued for nine months before an agreed meeting time and place was arranged. Having acquired a small amount of savings from the potato peeling and the work performed on arrival, Eta was going to leave nothing to chance at her next encounter with the strapping Lithuanian and decided to dress to impress.

For the first time in years, she lashed out and bought a brand-new outfit including a hat and furs. The rest of the savings went on the airfare to Adelaide. Eta arrived in Adelaide at the agreed time in the said new outfit only to find no-one to greet her. The strapping Litho had stood her up. Now total despair sets in. She is at Parafield Airport, hours have passed, and years of tragedy, toil and torment have now collided with heartbreak.

Not able to speak English, stuck with nowhere to go, in utterly unfamiliar surroundings she sits on her suitcase and quietly weeps as hopelessness takes over. Then, just as the young woman's instinct for perseverance was about to extinguish,

Peter arrives at Parafield Airport in a taxi full of gladiolus. The actual meeting time had been temporarily lost in translation. The young couple who had fled tyranny with nothing to their name quickly got married and got to work building a new life.

This is not just a story about my paternal grandparents. It is not even just a story about the 785 other people who boarded the General Omar Bundy with grandma.

Indeed, this is a story about a young state in an even younger nation whose infectious optimism about the future gave it the courage to be open to new people looking for one thing above all else: opportunity, the same sort of opportunity our first re-settlers sought 112 years earlier and the exact same sort of opportunity new arrivals to our shores seek today.

Their story, for me, has had a profound impact on my view of



the world and my politics. But sometimes in ways you wouldn't expect.

When my grandparents got married, they bought a block of land on Trimmer Parade, Seaton, where they built their home and, for many years, operated a fish and chip shop.

I distinctly remember as a young boy standing at that fish and chip shop my grandfather built with his own bare hands as he told me about the importance of taking opportunities. He was always talking about opportunity – every opportunity you've got to grab.

An equally clear memory is of the time I inquired about him becoming an Australian citizen and grandpa quickly rushing off to retrieve his naturalisation certificate. I cannot picture the certificate, but I can still feel the depth of meaning it had to him as a symbol of the opportunity this nation and this state had afforded Eta and himself.

The desire of my grandparents, including Bob and Ursula May from my mum's side, to seek, seize and share opportunity, even in the face of real hardship, has undoubtedly influenced my politics.



Archie Thompson

Archie Thompson played soccer 54 times for Australia. He grew up in country NSW with a New Zealand-born father and mother from Papua New Guinea

I was born in New Zealand. My dad was local and my mother was from Papua New Guinea.

I grew up in country town in NSW and I was pretty much the only dark-skinned kid in town.

That made things difficult at times, but I was able to find a community through football. And, growing up my family were very supportive. Every Sunday we'd jump in the car for hours on end going to football games with my siblings. We formed really strong bonds, and we are still very close to this day.

I looked up to my parents and wanted to make them proud. After getting involved in some stuff I probably shouldn't have at a young age, it was my drive to make them happy and proud that got me back on the right track pursuing football as a career.

I've always been aware of peoples' differences but also of what brings us together.

I grew up in NSW but played most of my football in Melbourne and I also played for football clubs in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Football brings communities together. It has this power because it is a global sport.

When I've seen refugees or other people struggling with hardship, there's usually a football somewhere.

The game is a way people come together to support each other; and countries can come together over the sport. It's something familiar to a lot of people who may have been displaced from their homes.

It's a beautiful thing - the power football has to bring communities and countries together.

I recently visited Mildura, one of Australia's most multicultural



regional cities, as a guest at a multicultural football tournament aimed at building community connections and social cohesion. Events like this are important because they help to forge links between diverse communities and with the mainstream community.

Mildura is home to about eighty different nationalities, with many migrants and refugees working in the local agriculture and fruit industries.

Founded by American irrigators and populated by successive waves of Greeks, Italians, Turks and Croatians before and just after WWII, Mildura has always been a melting pot. More recently refugees from Africa, Afghanistan, Burma and the Middle East have made the city their home.

I have an affinity with multicultural communities. And I loved the vibe in Mildura where people, from all over the world have settled and seem to get on and appreciate each other's culture.

I grew up in country town like Mildura and played football. I loved the game but later on, as a professional, competing came to feel like work. So, through the pressure to win, I lost my love for the game, which is when I stopped.

That's why it is beautiful to go to something like the Mildura tournament. I met some lovely people, and everyone was really welcoming. Events like that fill the heart and the soul.

Now I play on Saturdays. I saw a group of guys playing near where I live, and I asked if I could join. There are players from different backgrounds, and we all enjoy each other's company. Football brings all different communities together. So many people have football in common, it's a universal language. In my current life I talk to a lot of young people, many of them from diverse backgrounds.

I talk to them from my own experience that setting out to achieve your dream is all about mindset. The turning point for me was seeing Harry Kewell on TV while I was working in a Chinese restaurant.

That moment gave me the drive to say 'I can do this; I'm cutting all the s&t out and I'm going to be a professional footballer. Yes, there are challenges and barriers that everyone faces no matter what they want to do, but with practice and persistence, they can make it; if they give it absolutely everything, people can realise their dreams.



Success is also about being part of a community. The effect community can give you is the feeling of being part of something bigger than yourself. My teammates became family to me and working together on everything gave me so much positivity. When you find people who you fit in with, those positive influences can be fulfilling.

My mum is from Papua and New Guinea – a place I visited for the first time recently for a TV project.
It's a beautiful place and it gave me some new perspectives on my own life and the world.

Australia has always been multicultural, we are a multicultural nation, and that means we can connect with so many people and so many parts of the world.

Archie played 54 times for Australia, scoring 28 goals, and was a member of the Melbourne Victory team that won three A League Championships.

He was in the squad for the 2006 FIFA World Cup, the 2001 and 2005 FIFA Confederations Cup, the 2007 AFC Asian Cup, the 2008 Summer Olympics and the successful 2004 OFC Nations Cup.

Cassandra Fernando

Cassandra Fernando has travelled a journey from migrant to Member of Parliament

I like to think of myself as a reflection of the community I serve. I'm hardworking, a migrant, and I'm unafraid to speak up when it matters.

These values have shaped my life, from my childhood as a migrant in suburban Melbourne to becoming the first Sri Lankan-born member of Australia's Federal Parliament.

My story begins in Sri Lanka, where my parents led a comfortable life. They had stable careers and a close-knit community, but they wanted something more for my brother and me. They wanted us to have opportunities we wouldn't have had in Sri Lanka. So, in 1999, when I was just 11, they made the life-changing decision to leave everything behind and start again in Australia.

The first months were tough. We arrived in Melbourne, then briefly moved to Sydney before finally settling in Dandenong North – and we never moved again.

Starting over in a new country was a challenge, especially for my parents, who had to navigate language barriers, cultural differences, and the reality of building a new life from scratch. But through their courage and resilience, my brother and I learned the value of hard work and sacrifice.

Growing up as a migrant child in suburban Melbourne two decades ago wasn't always easy.

I didn't speak perfect English when I first started school. As an ESL (English as a Second Language) student, I had the support of a teaching aide, but it wasn't just the language that was difficult. Racism existed, even if it wasn't always talked about.

But despite those challenges, I loved the diversity of my community. South-East Melbourne was, and still is, a melting pot of cultures - Greeks, Italians, Vietnamese, and many more who came from all corners of the world to call Australia home. It was here that I learned the true meaning of community, of people from different backgrounds coming together and looking out for each other.



My early struggles with English and my experience as a migrant inspired me to give back.

Years later, I became a volunteer language tutor with AMES Australia, helping new migrants and refugees navigate their own journeys of settling into life in Australia. This work was deeply personal to me - I knew what it was like to be in their shoes, and I wanted to help them succeed in the way my family had.

But while volunteering filled me with purpose, my professional path took me into hospitality. I started my working career stacking shelves at Woollies in Dandenong Plaza as a teenager, and I spent almost 15 years baking, stacking shelves and making lifelong friends.

I gained qualifications in hospitality management, patisserie, and commercial cookery. It was an exciting world to be part of, one that gave me opportunities to learn and grow.

One day I put my hand up to be a union delegate at the store where I was working and also became a health and safety representative.

But I felt later that I could do more and help larger groups of people. So, I applied to work as a union organiser.

The work involved helping people with roster disputes, bullying and harassment, WorkCover difficulties and basically all aspects of work-related issues.

Then as now, many of the people I represented were migrants.

But it was the Howard government's 2007 'Work Choices' policy that really catapulted me into politics.

'Work Choices' watered-down unfair dismissal laws and removed the so-called 'no disadvantage test' which had sought to make sure workers were not left disadvantaged by changes in legislation.

It also reduced workers' ability to legally strike and restricted trade union activity by introducing laws that allowed workers and employers to bargain for conditions individually.

It was a turning point for me. Work Choices meant insecure work for me and my parents. So that's when I started getting interested in politics.

As I got more involved in the union movement, I also got more involved in the Australian Labor Party, which I believe is the party for the people.

I loved working for the union yet, something was still calling me - something bigger than just a career. I wanted to make a difference for people like me, for the communities that had supported me growing up.

After I became involved in the Australian Labor Party, I put my hand up to run for the seat of Holt. I did that because I want people in the South-East to have better lives.

Representing the federal electorate of Holt in South-East Melbourne is more than just a job for me - it's a personal mission.

Holt is one of the most diverse electorates in Australia, and it mirrors my own journey. It's home to families who, like mine, have come here for a better life. Many of them are still finding their way, still working hard to make Australia home. I know what that feels like, and I'm here to ensure they have a voice in our parliament.

As the first Sri Lankan-born member of Federal Parliament, I carry the weight of representing not just the people of Holt, but also the many migrant communities across Australia. I want to ensure that everyone - no matter where they come from, what language they speak, or how long they've been here - has equal opportunities and is treated with respect.

But my work doesn't stop at advocating for migrants. I'm passionate about creating a fairer, more inclusive Australia for everyone.

I'm a strong believer in fair wages for all Australians - everyone deserves a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

And with Holt being one of the youngest electorates in Victoria, mental health is another issue that's high on my agenda. I've seen how deeply mental health impacts young people in our community, and I'm committed to ensuring they get the support they need.

My journey - from a young girl learning English in Dandenong North to a Federal Member of Parliament representing one of the most diverse electorates in the country - has shaped who I am and the issues I fight for. It's been a journey of resilience, of learning, and of giving back to the community that gave me so



much.

I think I represent the story of the people of the South-East; I'm a migrant and I'm hard working. And now, importantly, I'm their voice in Parliament.

I want to be an example for every Australian to believe that they and their children can be parliamentary representatives one day.

My family taught me to never take anything for granted and instilled three values that I continue to uphold to this day: hard work, commitment and gratitude.

And they taught me to be grateful – to our community and to Australia – and to never miss an opportunity to repay this country for what it has given us.

Through my story, I hope to show that with determination, courage, and support, anything is possible. Australia gave my family a chance, and now, as a member of parliament, I'm working to make sure everyone in Holt - and across the country - has that same opportunity to thrive.



Helen Truong

Helen Truong is the daughter of refugees who fled Vietnam by boat at the end of the war

I grew up hearing stories of how dangerous and fearful it was leaving Vietnam on a boat. My mum would recount how the 'captain' of the boat stole the radio out at sea and abandoned them, so they were stranded without communication. Luckily, another vessel rescued them, and somehow they ended up in a refugee camp in Indonesia. All they could think about during this journey was whether they were going to live or die.

In the camp, Red Cross would send medical doctors once a week, however there was always a long queue. Once, my second sister (who was 18 months at the time) was very ill and my mum found herself at the back of the queue. The doctors had begun packing up and told everyone to leave. Out of sheer desperation, my mum ran up to the doctor begging for medicine, fortunately they gave some to her.

Sometimes the soldiers hit the refugees with their guns. I think this was mainly when they were let out of the refugee camp to go to the beach to bathe or catch fish and everyone had to return to the camp. My mum had two toddlers and, unsure of what the soldiers were saying since they spoke Indonesian, my mum got hit with a gun. Maybe she was being told to hurry up.

Growing up hearing these stories repeatedly made me appreciate the life I have, being born in Australia, in a safe and secure environment, and never having to flee my home or fear for my life, I had it easy.

It's a good reminder to never take anything for granted. These stories, along with my parents' survival attitude taught me resilience.

I could not imagine life growing up in Vietnam. My parents tell stories of how poor they were, every day was about survival, they had to work at young ages, and there were no aspirations to go to university, to get a corporate job, play sports or buy your own car. It is such a huge contrast to the life I have, being born in Melbourne. The "struggles" I encountered as a kid growing up in Melbourne were a far cry from what my parents struggled with.



However, I did have a bit of an identity crisis growing up in Melbourne.

My family are all from Vietnam. My surname is spelt in a Vietnamese way, but we speak Cantonese at home, eat Chinese food with Vietnamese flavours, or is it Vietnamese food with Chinese flavours? Who knows.

As a kid, “who am I, and what am I supposed to be” – were the top questions in my head all the time. I’d always ask my parents: “where exactly do we come from?”.

My great grandparents were from China, but migrated to Vietnam before 1949, as did a lot of other Chinese people from Guangdong, China, before the communists took control. Our surname is spelt in a Vietnamese way because my parents were born there. Many Cantonese-speaking people also moved to Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam.

Yet my parents are very specific in terms of us being NOT Vietnamese. It took me a very long time to understand, that our ethnicity is Chinese. So, I tell people I am an Australian-born Chinese from Vietnam. Explaining this to people can be quite difficult and exhausting at times.

Upon arriving in Melbourne in 1981, my family first lived at Enterprise Migrant Hostel in Springvale, then moved to commission housing in Carlton shortly after. After I was born, we moved to Doveton in 1984, which is where I grew up and went to Doveton primary school. There were very few people of colour back then. I remember I was put in English as a Second Language (ESL) class with the other immigrant kids, but I never understood WHY, as I was always number 1 at our weekly spelling competitions, although this wasn’t seen as an achievement at home (I’m still trying to figure why that was...).

I copped a lot of racist remarks in school, although they never affected me. I treated them like standard kids hanging s%#t on each other kind of comments. So I found myself giving s%#t back to other kids. In the end, all they could say was, “go back to where you came from”. I was never offended by this because I was born in Carlton; so, are you telling me to go back to Carlton? I also got called “ching chong china”. I found this quite amusing because I wasn’t from China either.

Every now and then at school we would have some event in which everyone was asked to bring a dish and share among the class. I’d tell my mum to help prepare some food, and all she could think of was fried rice. It’s easy to make and can serve a lot of people.

Whilst I loved fried rice, I got embarrassed bringing it to school because I thought it was weird and no one would like it. But I was proven so wrong, everybody loved my mum's fried rice. It was always the first dish to get demolished. I was shocked. Mostly, I thought 'is my mums cooking that good' or are people genuinely liking fried rice. After that, my mum made fried rice every single time.

Sometimes my mum would buy Vietnamese pork roll "banh mi" and I'd take it to school the next day to have for lunch. While everyone knows what banh mi/pork rolls are now, back in 1990s I'd get questions during school lunch time. 'What's that?', my friends would ask, looking at me funny and questioning the ingredients in the roll and trying to smell my food. 'Where did you get it from? Are you Vietnamese?', they would ask. Then I'd have to explain how I was not Vietnamese, but I was also confused because I know I'm not Vietnamese so why am I eating Vietnamese food?

I went to a Chinese school on Saturdays during school terms. From age 5 to 15, every Saturday, 2pm-5pm without fail, I'd get dropped off at Springvale West P.S. to learn Mandarin taught by Taiwanese people. I was mostly interested to muck around with other "Asian" kids rather than learning Chinese. (I didn't come from China, WHY did I have to go to Chinese school?)

My parents would say, "One day when you go to China you will need to know Chinese".

Funnily enough, in 2006 I went to China as part of a Monash university study abroad program, I found myself struggling to speak to the locals, my Mandarin was so basic, however, when I went to Hong Kong I had no issues understanding Cantonese. I'm happy to say I enjoyed going to HK more, feeling like I fit in more.

Whenever we went out as a family, I'd get embarrassed. Like going to Chadstone shopping centre, or going to the beach during summer, because we looked and spoke different to other people.

My mum always relied on me to translate if we went into a shop to buy something or ordering food at a restaurant. It felt like all the Caucasian people were looking at us. In hindsight they were probably looking at us because I was looking at them to see if they were looking at me funny.

I was extremely self-conscious of how we appeared in front of other people. I think I got this from my mother. She was very



conscious of 'appearing normal' in front of others. The only times I didn't feel inferior and odd, is when we went to places like Springvale, Richmond, Chinatown, because there were a lot of Asians there. I felt like I could fit-in, and I looked like everyone else. It didn't feel weird speaking Cantonese to my parents.

Reflecting on my childhood and growing up in Melbourne, I am incredibly proud of my history and would not change anything about my past. It has shaped who I am today and I embrace my Chinese heritage with Chinese Dragon dance and watching Hong Kong films. I love the multicultural society we live in now, and seeing new migrants awkwardly trying to fit in reminds me of how far the previous generation of migrants have come.



Lee Tarlamis

Lee Tarlamis' mixed heritage has fuelled and informed his passion for multiculturalism, social and economic equity as well as his life in politics

My story, like so many others, is one of migration and adaptation, intertwined with the experiences of my grandparents and father, born on the island of Lemnos in Greece, and the pivotal decisions that shaped our family's journey across three continents.

My father's life began on Lemnos, but his path soon veered towards the unknown when my grandfather, in search of better opportunities, left Greece for South America. He first travelled to Argentina before eventually finding work in Uruguay.

When my father was barely a year old, my grandmother embarked on a perilous journey to join him, bringing my father along. Her voyage was anything but easy – she was robbed along the way and arrived in Uruguay with nothing more than her child and a suitcase.

Yet, despite the hardships, they managed to build a life in this foreign land, raising my father and his younger brother in a new country.

Years later, when my father was 16, political instability in Uruguay began to threaten their future, and the family made the difficult decision to start anew once again.

They set sail for Australia, hoping to build a better, more secure life. It was in Australia that my father met my mother, who was Australian-born with English, Welsh, and Irish roots.

Despite my father's rich Greek heritage, we didn't grow up speaking Greek at home. His early years in South America had influenced his language and culture, blending Greek traditions with Spanish.

As a result, we grew up in a mixed cultural environment - Australian at the core, with threads of Greek and even South American traditions woven through our lives.

One of my greatest regrets is not continuing Greek language



school. As a child, I chose to spend time with friends rather than attend classes to learn my heritage language, a decision that, in hindsight, I've come to deeply reflect upon.

Today, I often speak with members of the Greek community and other diverse communities about the importance of passing down their language and culture to their children. I now understand the difficulties of trying to reconnect with something you've lost touch with, and I encourage others to maintain that vital link to their heritage.

It wasn't until I travelled to Lemnos in my twenties that I began to feel a stronger pull towards my Greek roots. Visiting the village where my father was born, walking the same paths my grandparents had walked, and experiencing the landscapes that had shaped their lives stirred something profound within me.

I realised how much of my family's history I hadn't fully explored, and it ignited a strong desire to reconnect with this part of my identity – one that had always been present but hadn't fully manifested until then.

As I immersed myself in the culture of the island, I found myself captivated by its stories, especially those tied to World War I and the island's significant role during the Gallipoli campaign. Learning about the connection between Greece and Australia during the war opened up a whole new chapter of understanding for me. The fact that Lemnos had served as a crucial base for Australian soldiers during the campaign bridged two parts of my identity: my Greek heritage and my Australian life.

This fascination led me to later establish the Lemnos Gallipoli Commemorative Committee, an organisation dedicated to preserving the island's historical significance and creating a space for reflection on the shared history between our two nations.

Through the committee, we worked tirelessly to raise awareness of this important connection; we built the Lemnos Gallipoli Memorial in Albert Park and had its location renamed 'Lemnos Square' and set the foundations for the creation of a physical and digital trail on Lemnos that would allow people to walk in the footsteps of the ANZACs who had served on Lemnos.

This work became even more personal when I discovered that my great uncle, Edward Tozer, on my mother's side, had spent time on Lemnos during the Gallipoli campaign. The realisation



that my great uncle, an Australian soldier, had walked the same paths as my Greek ancestors created a profound sense of interconnectedness that I had never experienced before. It felt as though two parallel threads of my identity – Greek and Australian – had finally woven together into something whole. This discovery solidified my passion for commemorating this part of history, ensuring it is preserved for future generations to understand the deep bond that Lemnos represents between Greece and Australia.

But my journey of self-discovery wasn't solely about culture – it was also shaped by personal loss. My older brother passed away from cancer when he was just 17. During those two years he spent a lot of time undergoing painful treatments and experiences some highs but far more lows, and my sister and I had to grow up fast.

With my parents spending most of their time at the hospital, we took on more responsibilities at home. Despite his suffering, my brother was always more concerned about how we were coping than about himself.

His strength and selflessness in the face of such immense pain taught me the true meaning of compassion and the importance of supporting others. He taught me that as bad as you think your day may be, there is always someone out there doing even tougher than you and that you should always strive to help those who need it whenever and wherever you can.

These are values that I carry with me to this day in everything I do.

This experience of loss also highlighted the cultural differences in how we deal with grief. In the Greek community, mourning is often more solemn and prolonged. At my brother's funeral, I found solace in sharing laughter and memories with his friends, reminiscing about the good times we had shared.

However, some people found this approach disrespectful, believing that grief should be expressed in a more sombre way. This experience taught me that there's no one "right" way to grieve. Every culture approaches loss differently, and there is value in learning from those differences.

As I became more involved in community work, I realised that my initial distance from Greek culture made me more determined to reconnect with it. My involvement in the Greek community, along with my experience of embracing my wife's Vietnamese culture, helped me appreciate the immense value of diversity and the need to preserve it.



I've come to see how important it is for migrants and their descendants to retain their heritage while also integrating into a new society. For me, this balance – holding onto my Greek roots while embracing my broader Australian identity – has become a lifelong journey of understanding and growth.

As a member of Parliament today, my work is deeply rooted in the values I was raised with – values of fairness, compassion, and a deep commitment to serving others. From an early age, I was taught that leadership isn't about elevating just those who share your background or experiences, but about bringing everyone along, no matter where they come from. This principle has guided how I approach my role, particularly in my efforts to work with diverse communities across our region.

I am passionate about ensuring that every voice is heard, regardless of how long someone's family has been in Australia or where they have come from.

Whether they are part of well-established communities or have recently arrived, I am committed to making sure they feel represented and empowered. My goal is to build bridges and create opportunities that benefit everyone in my community, not just my own diaspora.

I firmly believe that our society is at its strongest when we move forward together, and I will continue to dedicate myself to fostering progress, equity, and inclusion for all. This sense of shared responsibility drives me each and every day in my work as a parliamentarian, and as an active member of my community, and I am deeply committed to ensuring that no one is left behind as we build a brighter future for everyone.

Brenda Picard

Brenda Picard came to Australia with her parents from Burma as a two-year-old. Recently, she has set about connecting with her parents' culture and heritage

Mum, dad and I migrated to this beautiful country in November 1969 when I was two years and four months old.

I was born in 1967 after my parents moved to Thailand in 1966 after they married. Dad was already in the process of getting his family out of communist Burma, now known as Myanmar.

It was Brazil, America or Australia that finally gave him the "green light" and it was now a big decision as to which part of the world he wanted to migrate to. Australia won.

Dad was a member of the YCW (Young Christian Workers) and in 1965 went to Kuala Lumpur as a representative of Burma where he met with a catholic priest, the late Monsignor Toomey, who was the chaplain of the Australian delegation.

A friendship was formed and with his help and guidance he became our sponsor to come to Australia. The journey took us from Thailand to Hong Kong and then finally Australia.

Our first home was in the south-east of Melbourne in a suburb called Clayton. We shared a house with a recent widower. I recall mum always having kind things to say about Mr Heinze.

A verbal agreement was made between Mr Heinze and us via Mon Toomey where mum was his housekeeper. Her duties involved meal preparation and housekeeping.

Dad recalls Mr Heinze's favourite meal was lamb chops and three veg. Back in the 1970s, lamb chops sold for 10c a chop. Mum would cook two meals every mealtime, meat and three veg for Mr Heinze and rice and curry for us.

Dad's first job was at William Adams tractors in Clayton. Back in the 1970s there was no Seek or LinkedIn so Dad would walk from one company to another asking for work. He was lucky to score this job within 48 hours of moving to Clayton.

Back in the day, William Adams would provide their employees with a meal, and this is where dad's love of European food



especially desserts began. His favourite dish became meat (lamb chops in particular) and three veg.

The fat around the chop was dad's favourite bit and his work colleagues could not understand how this could be. While they were cutting the fat off theirs, dad was tucking into his.

I recall from the very early days, dad would always work two jobs, and this was generally in the hospitality sector. He learned how to make many different dishes that he had not heard of before and especially not tasted. On the weekends, dad would cook these for us. Over time these dishes appeared on our dinner table more and more.

In February of 1970 dad had enough money to buy a car or put a deposit on a house. My parents bought their first house in Clayton North and dad changed jobs to Cerebos which was still in riding distance of our new home.

Mum did not take up fulltime employment until my brother Ian and I were well into our primary years at school. Mum did, however, sell Avon which she took me to as I was under five and Ian had not been born yet. This is where she got her first taste of vegemite, which she did not enjoy.

I started school in 1973, the year my brother was born. School was, at times, a challenge. I experienced racism at a young age. I was called many unkind names. I was a very shy, timid youngster and cannot recall if I did go home and tell my parents about my experiences at school. Most of my friends at primary and secondary school were migrants.

Growing up, I remember rules for Ian were very different to rules for me. I recall that when I was in grade six, I was unable to attend our school camp but when Ian got to year six, six years later, there was no question that he wasn't allowed to go to school camp.

Dad was very protective of us, but especially me, as I was a 'girl' with Ian being able to do whatever he wanted. I always said to myself that when I have children, I would have one rule for both and when I did have my children I stuck to my word.

Our parents didn't really teach us Burmese as their goal was to "blend into the Australian way of life". They talked to us about customs and festivals. I can't recall celebrating any of these festivals or adhering to any of the customs. I guess my parents just wanted us to know about them. These days, I have brought aspects of the culture to my own children through stories and



food.

Dad's dream was to take us to Burma and in 1999 we went there. Mum, Ian, and I went while dad stayed back to take care of our pets. We got to see the homes my parents lived in and meet relatives as well. We got to visit the church my parents were married in and the school my dad attended.

In 2004, I married my partner of two years. We met at work, fell in love and had two beautiful children, Brigitte who was born in 2005 and Jean-Luc born in 2007.

In 2017, for my 50th birthday, I decided I wanted to take my family to visit the country I was from. So, we set off, with dad, to visit Burma and Thailand. We had taken the children to France already to visit their French heritage and it was my turn to show Sylvestre my husband, Brigitte my daughter and Jean-Luc my son, the other half of their heritage.

I lost my mum to renal failure in April of 2015. Dad became her sole carer at the time. I remember dad's day starting at 7am at the hospital and his day ending at 11pm. He would feed mum and just sit with her while she slept. He cooked food for mum everyday. But towards the end when dad knew mum was going, he would buy her favourite food and bring it to the hospital. She never ate a lot, but she was just happy to have him bring her her favourites.

Then, in July 2015, we all flew to Korea for the wedding of Ian and Ha-Kyungm (Alice). We spent two weeks there exploring Korea and learning about the culture of my sister-in-law.

Her family were very welcoming and by the end of the trip, it was like we had known each other for a lifetime.

Ian and Alice have two girls. Olivia was born in 2019 and Sophia in 2022.

At the start of 2024, dad's health took a turn for the worst. He was diagnosed with Giant Cell Arthritis which resulted in the loss of his vision in his left eye. Then in July of the same year, a bacterial infection developed in his right knee, where he had had a knee replacement 25 years before.

After many meetings with dad's surgical team, a decision was made to amputate the right leg just above the knee.

Now it is my turn to repay the favour of all the love and care I was given by my dad. He is my rock, and I cannot imagine not



having him around. He has helped so many people over the years from teaching new migrants English to volunteering his time and energy in helping others and the environment. His zest for life and helping others was always present. Dad doesn't have much in the way of wealth but no matter what, he still makes regular donations to a range of organisations - in particular an orphanage in Burma.

Alongside that, dad absolutely loves meeting new people, striking up conversations and learning about their life and their culture.

Dad looks at life with a positive attitude and does not hold back from anything even when things seem impossible. I think I have inherited some of these traits from dad.



Ian de Santos

Ian de Santos is the son of migrants who fled Burma's military government in the 1960s

This is not a chronological account of growing up as a child of migrant parents; it is a collection of my memories and observations of the changing face of Melbourne over my lifetime.

I was born in Melbourne in 1973, the first of my family to be born in our new homeland.

My parents emigrated to Australia in 1969 with my older sister, Brenda, to escape the incumbent military junta and provide a better life for their children.

Our family lived in Clayton North near Monash University, and we lived in the same home until 1997. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s was an interesting time in Australia. It was a period that would be the precursor to the multicultural society that Australia is now.

In those days, Clayton was predominantly an Australian and Italian neighbourhood. The main street was a mix of pizza shops, cafes – and not the funky new high-priced cafes of modern times - butcher shops and a bakery.

This was a far cry from Clayton in 2024 with its saturation of Asian restaurants and grocery stores. Nostalgically, two shops remain from my childhood, Clayton Firearms and Springers Sports Store, where I would buy my Aussie rules and soccer uniforms.

I went to primary school in Clayton and was one of only a handful of South Asian students.

I don't recall facing racism at school, most likely due to the large number of 1st generation southern European students. I was a tall kid and extraverted, which I think kind of helped to reduce the racism I experienced at school.

My love of sport was the other factor that helped me assimilate into Australian culture. From a young age, my dad encouraged me to be physically active and get involved in sports, leading me to play Aussie rules.



I did experience some racism playing footy, but I don't recall it being intimidating racism and it didn't affect me long-term. Growing up in Clayton and playing soccer at lunchtime with my European schoolmates soon saw me switch sports to soccer in Grade 5. The switch to soccer was met with mixed reactions.

As Johnny Warren highlighted in his book 'Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers', soccer was not the sport of choice back then, and I copped a lot of backlash from 2nd and 3rd-generation Anglo-Saxon Australians for switching codes.

I witnessed a lot of racism and ethnic tension playing soccer; most of it had nothing to do with my ethnicity but the legacy of tension brought over by European migrants from various countries.

This tension plagued soccer in Australia for a long time, up until the advent of the A-league.

I also joined the local Little Athletics Club and had a relatively successful junior athletic career. This is where I recalled receiving my first racist comment.

It was from a kid in my age group, and I believe he was not trying to be disrespectful; however, he remarked, "I know why black people run so fast, it's because they have always been chased by white people" (or words to that effect).

The statement didn't offend me, but it did resonate the ignorance and stereotypical nature of racism. In the late 80s and 90s, I found my place in the world. Hip-hop hit the airwaves, and Michael Jordan was the most famous athlete in the world. The NBA became a mainstay sport in Australia, and dark skin was cool.

Being 182 cm tall, 6 feet on the old scale, I started playing basketball and riding the wave of this new ethnic acceptance. This in itself was a form of ignorant racism; I was not African American, but I was perceived as that stereotype.

Political correctness was not a concept in the 1970s and 1980s. Kingswood Country was on primetime TV, and the lead character would refer to his Italian son-in-law as "bloody wog."

Towards the end of the 1980s, it was refreshing to see the rise in national pride from first-generation Australians. Acropolis Now aired on TV, which spawned a plethora and lucrative series of stage plays based on the experiences of first-generation Greek migrant children.

Back then, most TV shows had a predominantly Anglo-Saxon cast, and TV ads targeted white Australia. These days, it is normal to see actors of different races and religions in TV shows, and TV commercials target specific ethnicities. Comedians have become successful in critiquing their ethnicities and highlighting the nuanced differences growing up in that particular culture.

The significant change in the 80s was the influx of Vietnamese migration post-Vietnam War. Living in Clayton North and bordering of Springvale, my family experienced this ground swell first-hand and benefited from it greatly.

Firstly, the cooking ingredients from my parents' homeland became available. Back then, hardly anyone knew what coriander was; now, everyone in Australia has an opinion on coriander.

It also broadened Melbourne's cuisine options. No longer just counter meals at the pub, going to the fish and chip shop or the local Chinese restaurant. Now, the sanger was superseded by banh mi and chicken noodle soup was replaced with Pho.

Growing up near Monash University, I witnessed the early beginnings of international students attending Australian universities, which has grown to be a multi-billion-dollar industry, and the industry in which I work.

Most of the flats and houses around me were now rented by international students, mainly from Asia. One of my earliest memories and encounters with an international student was around the age of 9 when I wanted money to buy lollies at the local milk bar.

Being a little entrepreneur, I remember watching something on TV about pet rocks and decided to make and sell pet rocks. I found some stick-on googly eyes, grabbed some textas and took a few decorative pebbles from my neighbour's garden.

Off to work, I went, individualising each pet rock and setting up a stand to sell my wears. I remember stopping an international student and giving them a spiel on why they should buy a pet rock.

My unique sales proposition was that they must be lonely in a foreign country, the pet rock could keep them company and a pet rock is also easier to maintain than a real pet.

To my surprise, the student gave me 20c for the pet rock. I think it was more out of sympathy than my sales ability.

One change I have observed is the increase in mixed-race marriages.

Growing up, it was relatively rare to see a mixed-race couple. I am a testament to this, having married my lovely wife Ha-Kyung (Alice), who was born and raised in South Korea and had lived in Australia for about ten years prior.

We met at work and married about a year and a half later in South Korea.

We now have two beautiful mixed-race daughters, Olivia and Sophia. Unlike when I attended school, Olivia's primary school is a proper melting pot of nationals from almost every continent. Even though it's a Catholic school, multiple faiths coexist harmoniously.

Fast forward to current times, and Australia has genuinely become a multicultural country. Australian Bureau of Statistics data reflects this, with 29.5 per cent of Australia's population born overseas and 48 per cent whose parents were born overseas.

Suburbs like Dandenong have transformed to have Little India and Afghan Bazaar precincts. When I was a child, my aunty would visit from overseas, and we would have to travel to the western suburbs to buy Halal meat.

Now, most butcher shops and takeaways sell halal meat. Australia is still a young country with mass migration, a relatively new phenomenon. Most of the community has embraced multiculturalism, but like with any change, there are always pockets of resistance.

Nino Cipriani

Nino Cipriani has traced his father's journey from Italy, through the Queensland cane fields to Melbourne.

PART 1: Dad's Story

Introduction

The Collarmele Cane Cutter: The Story of Angelosante Cipriani, from Collarmele to Queensland.

This is the story of one Italian immigrant who grew up at Via Garibaldi, in the little town of Collarmele, located 120KM east of Rome in the Province of AQUILIA in the region of Abruzzo, Italy. This is the migration story of my dad, Angelosante Cipriani (12/01/1935 – 15/07/2021) the Collarmele Cane Cutter. Dad came with nothing, asked for nothing except for the opportunity to work. Dad was one of the men brave enough to come to Australia and tough enough to stay.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Italian immigrants faced harsh realities upon migrating to Queensland, Australia. Many, like my dad were recruited to work in North Queensland's sugar industry, living in basic, isolated accommodations with few amenities. Despite financial assistance under the 1951 Italy-Australia migration agreement, most arrived with little more than determination, working tirelessly to build better futures.

The Australian government covered travel and housing costs in exchange for two years of labour. Between 1951 and 1968, around 42,000 Italians arrived under this scheme. For these immigrants, life involved gruelling work, saving to improve their circumstances, and adapting to cultural and social challenges, including prejudice linked to WWII, media stereotypes, and the White Australia Policy. Yet, many succeeded in learning a new language, buying homes, and establishing stable lives for their families.

Dad's journey began in Collarmele, a small town in Abruzzo, Italy, where he was born in 1935 to Antonio and Carmella Cipriani, peasant farmers raising six children. Growing up in wartime Europe, dad's family like many others faced poverty and hardship. At a young age, he took on adult responsibilities,



Dad's family outside of their home. (1958) Dad's mother Carmella in front centre, his five siblings a breast and his father Antonio wearing a hat in the background. My Dad is missing from the photo as he is already in Australia. Note the footwear in the photo, footwear made of cow hide.



Italian canecutters arrive at Cairns aboard the AURELIA. The Italian migrants line the decks 17th May 1956

working the fields and herding livestock to support his family. After WWII, Italy's poverty persisted, and opportunities were scarce. At 21, dad seized the chance to migrate to Australia through the assisted passage program, aiming to send money home to his family. In April 1956, he departed aboard the Aurelia, arriving in Cairns on May 17 with 1,200 fellow Italians—552 of whom were destined for the cane fields.

Unknown to him at the time, dad would become celebrated as one of the “gentlemen with the flashing blade”, a term honouring the strength and endurance of cane cutters. His story is a testament to resilience, hard work, and the enduring spirit of Italian immigrants who overcame adversity to create better lives for future generations.

What Was Happening in 1956?

The year 1956 marked a pivotal time in Australia's history. The nation hosted the Olympic Games in Melbourne, bringing global attention. Public television broadcasting began on October 17 in Sydney and November 4 in Melbourne. By November 22, five television stations were operational, ready to televise the opening ceremony of the Melbourne Olympics. This period also saw everyday innovations, such as the introduction of Birds Eye Fish Fingers, which were promoted as a way to encourage Australian children to eat more fish. Additionally, Beppi's Italian Restaurant opened in Sydney on June 10, 1956, and remains at the same location as of 2024.

With the introduction of television and the hosting of the Olympics, Australia entered the modern era. Simultaneously, the nation was undergoing a cultural transformation, fuelled by mass migration from Europe. Migrants brought with them new foods, languages, and customs, contributing to Australia's growing multicultural identity.

Italian migration surged in the years following the Second World War. Between 1945 and 1951, more than 35,000 Italians settled in Australia. The influx continued between 1951 and 1972, with an estimated 338,624 Italian migrants arriving. The 1950s marked the peak decade of this migration, with as many as 193,791 Italians making Australia their new home.

By the time my dad arrived in Far North Queensland, many battles to improve living and working conditions for cane cutters had already been fought and were protected by legislation. The sentiment towards Italian cane cutters had also begun to shift, becoming more positive. The Italian cane



Italian canecutters
arrive at Cairns
aboard the
AURELIA. The
Italian migrants line
the decks 17th May
1956



Gang of cane cutters
out front of their
accommodation

cutter, once viewed with suspicion, was now revered as a figure of strength and resilience. Artifacts displayed in the Cairns Museum in 2022 capture this shift, reflecting the regard in which cane cutters were held. One artifact featured the following description:

“The demanding physical labour of manual cane cutting created a mystique around canecutters as men of heroic strength and endurance. For decades, their seasonal presence gave sugar towns a distinct character.”

The cane cutters were affectionately known as “the gentlemen of the flashing blade.”

When my dad arrived in 1956 at the age of 21, he was oblivious to Australia’s broader sentiments towards migrants, the White Australia Policy, or even the excitement of the Melbourne Olympic Games. Leaving the monoculture of Italy, he was stepping into the unknown—a developing, multicultural Australia. For him, the priority was simple: “I have come to work, show me where I need to go.”

Despite the challenges, my dad embraced his new life with pride. His stories of adventure and hard work during those early days were shared often and with great joy. Arriving in Cairns, he began his first job cutting sugar cane in the Ingham region as part of the Assisted Migration Program. Under this program, migrants were guaranteed work for two years, after which they could either return to their home country or remain in Australia. Thankfully, my dad chose to stay.

The Hardships and Rewards of Cane Cutting

For the first five years, Dad worked in the cane fields alongside Italians, other European migrants, and Pacific Islanders. Cane cutting was gruelling work, as vividly described by Robert Donaldson and Michael Joseph in their 1967 publication, ‘Cane!’:

“Like crops of mushrooms, the first blister-buds appeared on the hands, grew tight, and burst. Sword-edged cane leaves cut into the skin, drawing blood in fine beaded lines. A host of muscles began first to throb, then stiffen, and finally settle to a raw, burning torture.”

Guido Pontello, another Italian immigrant aged 21 arrived in the cane fields in 1957, shared similar recollections in his book, “A Great Start in a New Country”. He described the physical toll and relentless schedule:



“Once the milling season began in June, we worked like dogs. Everyone did. You’d be up at 5:30 in the morning, have breakfast, and head straight for the fields. Cutting cane by hand with a machete was extremely hard work, especially as the temperature climbed. Loading the freshly cut cane into bins was backbreaking.”

“For the first two months in Tully, I was so sore at the end of the day I couldn’t walk properly. The cuts, bruises, and muscle aches kept me awake for much of the night. The heat didn’t help, and neither did the mosquitoes.”

Despite the challenges, cane cutting offered significant financial rewards. While the average weekly wage in Australia in 1951 was £9 15s, cane cutters earned £23 5s—more than double. By 1960, wages had risen by 17%, and skilled cutters could make up to £40 per week during peak seasons. In many ways the cane cutter was similar to the modern FIFO workers.

Cane cutting was also a communal experience. Workers lived and worked in gangs, sharing both income and camaraderie. Days began early with cutting in the cool morning hours, followed by a midday break and a return to the fields in the evening to load cane onto trailers for transport to the mills.

Beyond the Fields

When not cutting cane, Dad took on other jobs, working in cafés, restaurants, and even hunting crocodiles—a stark contrast to his upbringing in Italy. He rented accommodation, adopted a dog, and built an independent life. Despite the hardships, these years in Queensland taught him resilience, resourcefulness, and a sense of adventure.

Language barriers posed another challenge. While the Assisted Migration Program encouraged migrants to learn English, formal classes were often inaccessible in the remote cane fields. Dad learned the basics from the children of cane farmers, who would teach him the names of everyday objects. He also picked up phrases from cinemas and pubs, mastering just enough English to get by.



Building a New Life

In 1961, Dad moved south to Melbourne with his sister, seeking to be closer to relatives and the growing Italian community. It was there that he met my mum, Maria, through a clever ruse involving my uncle pretending to sell door-to-door products. They married in 1962 and began building a family.

Dad's work ethic was unparalleled. He juggled multiple jobs, working as a storeman by day and a cleaner by night. Despite limited English skills, he adapted quickly, using his resourcefulness and determination to secure steady work. His philosophy was simple: say yes to opportunities, avoid conflict, and always be on time.

In 1970, Dad and Mum purchased a home in Box Hill North—a place that would become our family's sanctuary. For Dad, owning a home was more than an investment; it was a symbol of security and independence. Having experienced the instability of post-war Italy, he was determined to provide a stable foundation for his family.

A Legacy of Hard Work and Generosity

Dad's generosity extended beyond our family. He once took in a young Italian man living in a shelter, providing him with a home until he could get back on his feet. Our home became a gathering place for family celebrations, from making passata and salami to hosting legendary BBQs. Saying no to Dad's food and hospitality was simply not an option.

Even in retirement, Dad stayed active, tending to his garden, helping with household chores, and continuing to share his stories. His inventive streak shone through, whether it was rigging a makeshift cooler for picnics or salvaging treasures from hard rubbish collections.

Through his hard work and sacrifices, Dad taught us the value of resilience, adaptability, and community. His journey—from the cane fields of Queensland to the suburbs of Melbourne—was not just a story of survival but one of triumph. His legacy lives on in the family he built and the values he instilled in us.

Dad arrived in Cairns aboard the AURELIA on May 17th, 1956, at the age of 21, he came with nothing, asked for nothing except for the opportunity to work so he could live a better life. The cane cutter from Collarmele, achieved what he set out to do. He didn't know it in 1956, but with the first swing of his



flashing blade into the sugar cane, he laid the foundation for a family that was to come so they could have opportunity and prosper. He was one of those men with heroic strength and endurance, a gentleman of the flashing blade. Brave enough to come and tough enough to stay.

PART 2: First Generation Perspective: My Reflections

Growing up in the leafy eastern suburbs of Melbourne during the 1970s and 1980s had its challenges. I vividly remember my early days of primary school. In prep, I had a temporary teacher who, frustrated with my pronunciation, slapped me across the face several times. It was a shocking introduction to the education system. Italian was my first language, and at the time, I spoke more Italian than English—what else would you expect?

By grade two, I encountered another hurdle. The teacher assigned homework I didn't understand and casually remarked, "Your mum or dad can help you." I thought to myself, what was she thinking? My brother, younger sister, and I essentially served as interpreters for our parents at home. Reflecting on it now, the education system back then was woefully unequipped to support students from diverse backgrounds. And that prep teacher? She failed in her most basic duty of care.

Thankfully, some kind neighbours on our street stepped in. They would sit with me on the back steps of our home, helping me with reading and correcting my spoken English. Their kindness left a lasting impact. It wasn't until adulthood, when I returned to study, that I fully overcame the language barrier and unlocked my potential for academic success.

At my primary school, I was one of perhaps ten non-Anglo kids. Racial vilification was relentless. "You wog, go back to where you came from. Greasy wog. Dirty wog. You come here to take our jobs. Your dad has a knife in his shoe. Your dad must be a concreter. What's that weird food you're eating?" These slurs echoed throughout my school years, both in primary and high school. It was the 1970s and 1980s—a time marked by ignorance and a lack of cultural awareness.

When the next wave of migrants arrived during my high school years, the focus shifted. Vietnamese students began enrolling in the early 1980s, and suddenly, they became the new targets of racism. It was as if the bullies had found their next victims. For me, the overt racism didn't truly lessen until my early twenties.

The constant vilification forced those of us from migrant

backgrounds to stick together. We found safety and solidarity in our shared experiences. During high school lunchtimes, we'd often play short games of cricket or football—Aussies versus “wogs.” As I recall, the “wogs” usually came out on top!

Once you've experienced racism, you become keenly aware of its presence—in both overt and subtle forms. Sadly, it still persists today, targeting new waves of migrants: the Vietnamese, Indians wearing turbans, Muslims in veils, Somalians, African Australians, the Jewish community, Indigenous Australians, and other marginalised groups. The old thinking and attitudes that drove narratives like the “Yellow Peril” and “Olive Peril” from the mid-1800s continue to rear their ugly heads, now joined by myths like migrants causing housing shortages. Really? You can't help but wonder where this narrative comes from and when will Australia truly embrace its identity as a multicultural nation.

Despite these challenges, my experiences taught me patience, resilience, tolerance, and persistence. More importantly, they reminded me that there are many good people in the world.

A Career Shaped by Determination

At 17, I started a four-year apprenticeship, which was a baptism of fire. The workplace had its share of difficult personalities, but my foreman gave me advice that stayed with me: “Let the quality of your work do the talking.” I took those words to heart, ensuring my work was better than anyone else's. By the final year of my apprenticeship, I had been promoted to foreman, managing a team of twenty people—most of them twice my age with five times my experience. Amazingly, they listened and respected me.

Being fluent in another language gave me an edge in understanding and navigating different cultures, which fuelled my passion for lifelong learning. In some ways, I've been teaching English as a second language since I was five, helping my parents and younger siblings adapt. This background inspired my career as a learning and development professional, where I continue to bridge gaps and foster understanding.

Speaking Italian also allowed me to build relationships with my grandparents and extended family in Italy, maintaining a deep connection to my cultural roots. It has also sharpened my creative and problem-solving skills, both of which have been key to my career success.



Looking to the Future

Watching my nieces and nephews—second-generation Australians—navigate the education system and land their dream jobs has been incredibly rewarding. Their experiences have been so much more inclusive than mine, enriched by the growing acceptance of cultural diversity. English was never a barrier for them, and their environments celebrated difference rather than fearing it.

Throughout my life, I've come to see that it's often a loud minority driving racist narratives. Most people don't care about cultural heritage and are open to learning from others. And as for the question, "What's that weird food you're eating?"—it's ironic that Italian cuisine, once mocked, is now beloved and celebrated worldwide, alongside countless other cuisines. Food has the power to bring communities together, and perhaps it can help change the narrative.

Tara Fatehi

*Tara Fatehi's family are from Kurdistan.
She now lives in South Australia.*

I stand on this soil, but I'm not rooted here. Australia welcomes me, but still I'm a stranger. See, I carry Kurdistan in my blood, in my bones, but my homeland is a place I've never truly known.

Born in the land where the mountains breathe,
where the winds carry whispers of resistance and grief.
Kurdish cries caught in a storm of broken dreams,
trapped in borders drawn by hands unseen.
Iran held us in its iron grip, and my family knew war like it was
the only language we could speak. So we fled, left everything
we knew to seek shelter, to find peace in a place we'd only
heard about.

My tongue twists between two languages,
neither one my own. I speak English and it fits like borrowed
clothes—a little too tight, a little too loose, never quite
comfortable in this skin. Kurdish is my heart, but it's fading, like
the echoes of songs my mother used to sing, back when life felt
like home.

I'm here, but I'm not here. I am Kurdish, but never enough.
Australian, but never truly enough. In my homeland, I am
foreign. In this land, I am foreign. Tell me, where do I belong?
My family sacrificed everything, crossed oceans of fear,
endured sleepless nights where hope was the only thing we had
left. They gave up their past so we could have a future.

I am the child of survivors, but survival comes at a cost.
It's the constant question of identity— what does it mean to be
from nowhere and everywhere?
What does it mean when your roots are tangled in the soil of two
lands, but neither one feels like home?
I am the bridge between two worlds, but the weight of it is heavy.

In every step, I carry my family's strength. In every breath, I
honour their fight. And maybe one day, I'll find a place where my
heart feels at peace, where I can speak in my mother's tongue
and the land will understand me. Where I can stand tall in my
Kurdish skin, in a place I can call home.



Saidin Salkic

Saidin Salkic came to Australia as a child refugee from Bosnia. He is one of Australia's leading avant-garde filmmakers and artists.

The history and culture of my homeland Bosnia has shaped every aspect of my life since I was forced to leave it as a child.

I was 12 years old when Bosnian Serb troops overran the United Nations declared "safe area" where my mother, my sister and I, along with thousands of other Bosnian Muslims, had sought refuge in July 1995.

Tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims had fled the Bosnian Serb army and were being protected by 600 lightly armed Dutch peacekeepers in the enclave in eastern Bosnia. But on July 6, the Bosnian Serb army advanced.

They took some of the Dutch soldiers hostage and demanded that the Bosnian Muslim fighters hand over all of their weapons in return for safety.

The Serbs then took away men aged 12 to 77 for what they said would be interrogation. The first killings began just two days later and, over five days, more than 8000 Bosnian Muslims were killed. My father was among them.

The United Nations has defined what happened in Srebrenica as a genocide. For me Srebrenica is the present. I live with it every day.

It upended my life, but it also fuelled a cathartic and intense passion to create art. I became a filmmaker, poet, writer and visual artist.

After years in refugee camps my family settled in Australia in 2001 making Melbourne our home. Coming to Australia has made my work in the arts possible.

My work has been exhibited widely, including in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Graz, Los Angeles, New York and Cork.

My first film 'Karasevdah; Srebrenica Blues' was a meditation



on the nature of suffering and the possibility of reconciliation.

But my most important recent work, a 40-minute film entitled 'The Arrival of the Phoenix' is inspired by our journey to Australia and it was featured at the Adelaide Film Festival and the Wyndham Learning Festival.

I think I grew up quickly. Instead of laughter I started hearing the sounds of shells flying through the air. I had a recurring dream of running through some fields in fear, hoping that we'd get somewhere safe, before the inevitable explosion.

Srebrenica completely changed my life. I became the man I am, in a moment of time.

I started jumping on planes, made my first film, Srebrenica Blues, about the Srebrenica genocide.

My father was one of the most beautiful humans that ever laughed under the clouds, truly.

And some of us have more right upon that word "truly" than others. Some of us have fought and suffered for it more than others.

There is a shrine in Bosnia for my father, where many people gather every year. I have said this in many national and international interviews, for many years I made the art for the glory of my father.

Then, when my daughter Sevdah was born, I realised I was making it also for her. In the midst of it all, I must have been making it for myself too...

Art invaded me gently, but with immense intensity. I became prolific, with a wide and intense output.

Suddenly I felt awake. I have made 36 avant-garde films. I have painted and drawn thousands of pieces of art; I published two books in Bosnian.

I have recorded hundreds of songs in different genres with some great pop, jazz, blues and avant-garde musicians.

And I feel humbled to have been called the "national treasure in Australia's avant-garde film industry".



They say that when a man wakes up once... he never stops being awake...

It is impossible for me as an artist to practice the sacred medium and not to feel the responsibility of evolving it and making it more relevant than it was before it became mine.

Art by its nature must be intimate. It must attempt to be true to our own intimacies. This is why it is important for the art to be based on a foundation of morality.

Even imagination must have moral a foundation to not be a dangerous tool.

Nietzsche said: 'for the science to be trusted, it must be in the hands of the philosophy that can be trusted'.

I think in the way that matters, the same applies to the art. I am reflected directly and intensely in my art.

I have always said: 'family is family and art are friends'. To me, it has proven itself as such. It has given me solace. I think that is what peace is in a way, it is silence.

And I have learned to treasure it profoundly. Art has shown me the way in this, our Australian society.

The dreams of those who have had to leave their homes are full of melancholy. For me as an artist, the gift of true melancholy is inevitable.

I have never forgotten those barefoot runs down the hills of Bosnia. They are in me, but they are crucial for the further understanding of the priceless value of the home I am creating here, in this land, Australia.

We are here, in this moment of time, in this beautiful land we have the privilege to call our own. I am in a way in the epicentre of it; at the heart of the artistic and with it social and moral evolution forward.

I am working hard to have the art I make further influence the social streams of our society. We bare the great responsibility to advance our Australian society in every moral specificity that we can.

I would like all in this society, including the 'immigrants' and those who consider themselves 'Australian' to know that we are all the same, we have the same foundations, rights and with it, responsibility.



All the great historically documented achievements happened after the great migrations.

We are that society now. Many things are being achieved. I am the part of it. Culture and art are things that constantly evolve, change and grow, and all of our migrant communities are an equal part of this.

I feel responsible to present my experiences to future generations. With every step we take, we must try to make our great society more just, more relevant and more beautiful for all of us to enjoy.

A hope descended upon us

By Saidin Salkic

A hope descended upon us as we descended onto the thousands of little lamps that spread beneath us as dissected sea.

Uncertain of what it was, I imagined it to be. Beneath the wings of the descending plane, I perhaps heard the waves murmuring the ancient song of the strange land.

One inside of me, torn away, quieted in the whispering of the ancient waves as they stubbornly continued to sculpt the stones of the ancient bay.

Sisyphus is the sea. That is certainly absolute. Sisyphus are the waves, the children of the sea, the ancient ocean that whispered beneath me as we landed, promising a strange hope that ascended from beneath.

As the aeroplane wheels touched the ancient land, I heard the laughter and the screams, but the waves became louder, and their healing song, which has sung for long, continued to heal.

James Brincat

James Brincat is the child of migrants from Malta. He works for Parks Victoria as Area Chief Ranger for Werribee Plains.

Growing up in a migrant family had a profound impact on my life. In many ways it did make parts of my early years challenging. At times I was the victim of racism and discrimination especially in my early years at school. I was forever unsure of my identity and that was mainly due to the mixed messaging I was receiving via the media which consisted of the two main brands of newspapers and 5 channels on the TV all sending messages that conflicted with what I was experiencing. So, like many other kids there were times when I struggled to fit in.

But ultimately, being the child of migrants gave me prescient early insights into what has become our amazing multicultural society, and it has strengthened me and continues to give me meaning to my life and an understanding of others with similar backgrounds.

And, in what seems like coming a full circle, it informs and underpins my work helping refugee communities find meaningful and valued places in society.

My parents migrated to Australia from Malta after WWII. My dad Joseph was with some of the first to arrive from Malta on the SS Asturias in 1949. He came as part of the 'assisted passage' program which saw skilled trades people and labourers brought to Australia after World War II. Skilled trades people were in such short supply that there were many Maltese who were greeted upon arrival at the port with offers of cheap board and accommodation if you signed up.

Dad was a boilermaker by trade and was particularly gifted in his skill as a free-standing welder. Although a significant number of post war immigrants ended up on the Snowy Mountains Scheme, my dad was not one of them. Although he did do some work connected to the Snowy Mountain Scheme as a contractor, he instead worked on construction of the new gas and water pipelines across Australia, but his first years were in the rocket range around Woomera. He also worked on projects around Broken Hill, Port Augusta, Darwin and Canberra.

My mum Carmen arrived in 1954 on the P&O liner Strathnaver. She came with her older sister Ernestina, who was already





living in Australia and had returned to Malta for a visit. At the time, if you arrived under the assisted migration scheme, you had to remain in Australia for the first two years. My aunt was missing her younger sister and brother. She was the first to emigrate from her family so had no family in Australia. She did however have a very good network of close friends. In those days there was no community guides to meet you when you arrived in Australia, and you were very reliant on others from your community to assist you in settling in. In many instances, garages were converted to makeshift tiny homes and bungalows to accommodate entire families who had just arrived. As with most Maltese of their age they did have good English but their grasp on the Australian language and slang would have been minimal so my aunt would have still struggled in her first two years in a new country with very different customs and rapid speech.

Mum and her sister were very close in terms of their age and their outlook on life. Although many people who came to Australia after the war were looking for economic opportunities, but mum was wanting freedom. She came from a large family with a giant age gap between the oldest and youngest and very strict parents. In fact, her father who was born in Libya and lived in an Italian community was incredibly strict. In those days in Malta, many people had large families with one of the kids, usually the youngest who would never be encouraged to marry. It was especially hard for the women and if it was not for mandatory schooling, many of these women would not have been allowed to go to school. So, like many others who were the youngest, my mum was encouraged to stay single to look after the parents in old age. There were many families, where the youngest of the siblings joined one of the Catholic orders either as a nun or a priest or an order known as the Museo where they continue to live at home but have taken up a vocation. For a woman, your only escape from a rigid family life was either marriage or becoming a nun. Mum didn't particularly want to get married, nor did she want to be nun. She just didn't want to live that traditional life. At the time, life in Malta was very controlled. There were conservative Victorian morals mixed in with the rules set out by the Vatican which meant strict Catholic observance.

My mum wanted to be a school teacher. As a teenager she was teaching her younger friends English and maths. But the war hit when she was 13 and put an end to her education and her life as she knew it. Many hours spent in bomb shelters and living in a constant state of anxiety would take its toll on her mental health throughout her life. So, when her sister returned

to Malta, she convinced mum to come to Australia with her. Of course mum didn't tell her parents she was emigrating until just before she left. The parents only agreed because my aunt was just as headstrong and would be her chaperone. For many unmarried women from Italy or Malta immigrating on your own was not an option. So many single women travelled with another family member who agreed to chaperone, or were married by proxy prior to departure. So, my mother packed her belongings into one suitcase and left for Australia on the Strathnaver.

Dad, on the other hand, left Malta because there was nothing for him there. Malta, during World War II, was the most bombed place on earth. After the war almost nothing was left. My dad once told me that unless you have seen it for yourself, you could not picture what a bombed-out city looks like. Rubble and fractured pipelines and lifted and buckled roads. There were no jobs or social welfare and hardly any food and a housing shortage after the war. Dad's father was not well, and he knew emigration would give him a chance to assist the family by "sending money home" as many other new arrivals did. He didn't tell his mother he was emigrating either until the day before he left. She found out because his brother had seen him walk out of the immigration office wearing a suit. The news reached home before he did.

My dad did tell me he had made the decision to leave Malta during one of many bombing raids. He was sitting in a shelter, and with his hands over his ears he said to himself 'if I ever get out of this alive, I'm leaving'.

He was an essential worker at the Docklands repairing ships in the harbour which had been bombed delivering food and supplies to Malta. He was an apprentice boiler maker at the dockyards where the bombings were most concentrated. Essential workers do not go into the bomb shelters when the sirens start screaming, they instead have to wait until a red flag goes up. That means you have minutes to get into a safer space. He and his work mates would be welding the sides of bombed ships as they were being unloaded in the middle of more bombings. Malta was caught in a siege and the island was in a state of constant starvation and the fear of an invasion. So even if a ship sank, they would send divers down to salvage canned food and any fuel barrels that were still intact.

Mum and dad first met in Australia. Although their families may have been known to each other in Malta; they grew up on opposite sides of a saltwater inlet called Msida Creek. Mum was





on the Floriana side and dad's house was on the Sliema side so as they would later claim, never crossed paths. In Australia they were introduced through Mum's sister, who had married dad's cousin. Mum was living in Footscray with her sister at the time and dad was in Sydney but came to Melbourne to meet up with his cousin and I'm sure there would have been some encouragement from mum's sister to consider my dad as a prospective spouse.

They married in 1956 in the Yarraville church and were never separated except in the early days when he had to go away to work on pipeline projects in Darwin and South Australia.

Once married mum and dad lived across the road from mum's sister and Dad's cousin in a new suburb called Pascoe Vale. It was common then for migrant communities to live in close proximity to other family members for support, especially in the first years of child rearing.



Growing up in a Maltese household in Pascoe Vale, a suburb that had so many people who had immigrated, meant that my siblings and I grew up hearing different languages and accents from around the world. In fact, I had an aunt who grew up in Tunisia and spoke Italian, French, Maltese and English. In our neighbourhood, doors were always open to kids from other families. There was a great sense of community among the newly arrived Greek, Italian and Maltese as well as the mainstream Anglo-Celts. I also remember having friends and neighbours from other parts of the world like Poland, Hungary and Germany. All their kids were also living in two worlds.

Traditionally, in Malta, only family members were allowed to enter the family home. In fact, in traditional Maltese homes, the front room is the only room that can be viewed by non-family. During one week of the year, the feast of the patron saint of the village, that front room has the curtain open and you get a quick peak as you walk past. Otherwise, its family and relatives only. But my parents embraced the openness and celebrated the multiculturalism they found in Australia. They made friends with people from a broad range of cultural backgrounds, including Anglo-Celtic Australians. It was very common to find your mum having a morning coffee at our kitchen table with other women in the street. All of them in their dressing gowns, everyone speaking their own form of English with different accents. If there was a serious illness, word soon got around and those same women would be cooking extra meals and the men who had cars would help.

It was also quite common for us, as kids, to be at our friends' houses after school and we learnt the golden rule in summer – when the streetlights go on – time to go inside. Our Sundays would be for visiting with relatives and during the warmer months, picnicking with our cousins from Altona. Many of us lived close to industry and we were no stranger to the smells and sounds of factories, refineries and tanneries along our creeks and rivers, especially the Maribyrnong. This was our world. When I was 14, I joined a conservation group and helped plant hundreds of trees along the Merri and Moonee Ponds creek. Mum and dad thought that was good to do. Remember, most of our creeks were filled with car bodies and the water would run with different colours from the factories. They were not good places.

For me, I felt like I grew up in two worlds because we were a migrant family, but we spoke English at home. Our customs and food were similar to the Italians but different to the mainstream Aussies. Like the other kids we took sandwiches to school. But it was what was in those sandwiches that made the difference. Anglo kids had jam or vegemite and the kids of immigrants had everything but the kitchen sink – packed in a sandwich.

At times school was not a nice place for those of us who didn't fit in. At the time there were no race discrimination laws so people could say whatever they wanted no matter how hurtful.

I had experiences where teachers said or did awful things. The Italian kids could especially be the targets. We were all kids caught between two worlds and this explains why some kids hid their cultures away until they got home and tried to be like everyone else. Now cultural identity is way more fluid and your world is a fusion of foods and customs. But growing up in the 1960s and 70s, you had to make a choice about which world you inhabited. There were barriers around culture and denomination. A protestant marrying a catholic was defined by some as a "mixed marriage" but by the late 80's it all of that quickly became less important.

Today we are fortunate to have migrant and refugee settlement services that support people who are settling into their new country. I may speak four languages, but I could not imagine opening a bank account or getting the electricity connected if I had to do it in a language other than English.

People like my parents were encouraged to put their own culture aside. And because the Maltese spoke English, they probably integrated more quickly but at a cost.

Many Maltese parents decided not to teach their mother tongue to their kids. They really believed that it would be best for the kids. I never got with that theory. Maltese kids were exposed to Maltese and English. Of course as we got older and visited the countries of our parents birth the language barrier would be a challenge. For me I made a decision to learn Italian when I was in my teens. Most of my friends were Italian and some of my friends were Maltese from Egypt and they spoke Italian in the home. In fact, my Italian friends spoke Italian and their dialect as well as English. I wanted to be with the Italian kids. They were cool, confident and their food was better. What was there not to love about people who embraced family, fun and drank real coffee.

So, I learned Italian from a young age; and I was fluent by the time I was in my 20s. I learned Maltese much later. Malta has always been at the crossroads of different cultures and languages and has a long history of belonging to empires and because of this the Maltese language is made up of elements from many cultures. We are known as the 'chameleons of the Mediterranean' and justifiably so. Our language is a true language, a combination of Arabic, Italian, French and Sicilian. It's a semitic language written in Latin script.

Maybe that's why I have an interest in different cultures and languages. I consider myself Australian, but I am heavily influenced by the Maltese language, history, and culture.

In my late 20s, I began to develop my own sense of self, and much of this was by embracing my cultural background and I continue to do this to this day mainly through language and cooking.

I see so much of the challenges in the early part of my life when I am working with some of the refugee groups at Werribee Park, in particular the Karen from Burma.

The Karen, who have fled persecution in Burma, have found community, solace and pathways to employment in our refugee engagement program at the park. I feel lucky to make some contribution to their future, in the same way that there were people who helped my parents in their first few years in Australia.

The Karen are proud of their culture and are keen to preserve their language and traditions. It is so important to them that their kids remain in touch with their culture and language, so they are able to communicate with their elders.

What I have learned over the years is that it is important to be who you are. There are real bonuses in coming from parents who had immigrated. From language acquisition to having a deep and empathetic understanding of other cultures and the challenges that come with settling in a new country. I am Australian. I am Maltese. I don't struggle with this concept - I embrace it. My mum used to say you can't find two people who make lasagne the same way but it's still lasagne!

Maru Jarockyj

Maru Jarockyj's parents fled Ukraine after WWII. She grew up in the UK and came to Australia as a young woman where she has worked as an architect and an artist.

Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent devastating war has sparked some deep latent emotions in me and reignited a sense of patriotism.

At the end of World War II my parents fled Ukraine as refugees, leaving behind a devastated nation and their experiences of brutal forced labour under the Nazis.

More than seventy years later, Ukraine is again under siege and we Australian-Ukrainians are doing all we can to support the people of Ukraine.

Dad and mum were taken by the Germans as forced labourers. Mum was forced to work on farms in Germany and never had enough to eat. When the war finished, she ended up in England working in a cotton mill in Lancashire.

Dad, who was in the resistance, was also a forced labourer and ended up in Hastings after the war. He moved north to Lancashire and married mum in 1950.

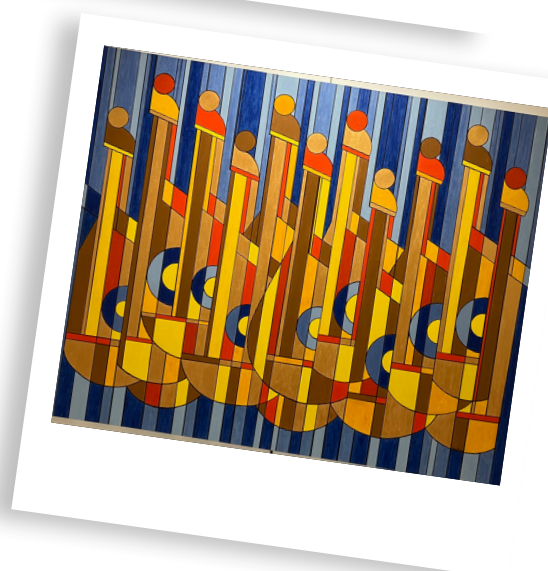
Dad worked for a builder and went on to set up his own plastering company. He went from nothing, from wearing rags, to running his own business. He worked his way up without being able to speak English at first.

I was born in Manchester in 1951. Ukrainian was my first language, and I could not speak English when I first attended school. But after a year I was filling out my dad's tax returns.

As the daughter of refugees, I was the first in my community to go to university. That led to a career as an architect.

Ukrainian culture has always been important to me. In my youth, I was part of a Ukrainian folk music group and now I'm very much into art.

During my student days, I became part of a folk singing group called Trio Konvalia, which won Britain's 'Opportunity Knocks'



TV talent quest, the then equivalent of Britain's Got Talent.

We released two albums and performed across Europe, including at the Vatican for the Patriarch of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

We were very much a curiosity item at first; three girls in embroidered blouses, playing guitar and singing in Ukrainian.

But it was fun, and we played concerts every weekend which helped to finance our university studies.

And we felt we were doing our bit for Ukrainians because the language was banned in Ukraine during the soviet era and people had to speak Russian.

Eventually I married and had two sons of my own. We came to Australia in 1981, when my husband Baz, an IT expert, was recruited by Ford Australia.

He worked at the Ford plant in Broadmeadows and, after getting my qualifications recognised in Australia, I became the City Architect for the Broadmeadows council, a job I had for ten years.

After Jeff Kennett reconfigured the councils, I moved to the City of Melbourne, where I worked as the Capital Works and Asset Management Coordinator in the city's Parks and Recreation division.

After that, I set up my own architecture consultancy, Axis Architects, in Melbourne and I'm still practising as a chartered architect.

One of the ways I can now support Ukraine is through my art. I have held several exhibitions that celebrate Ukraine's history and traditions.

My art exhibition, titled 'UKR-DNA – Ukrainian DNA', which was on display in Melbourne's Docklands earlier this year celebrates Ukrainian history and traditions. And was hung in defiance of Russia's attempt to invade Ukraine and wipe its identity and unique culture off the map.

My art also draws on my architectural background with shapes and colour informed by modernism and neo-cubist influences. It reflects my strong connection with my family and with Ukraine and its history, culture, traditions and iconic symbols.



It was the Chernobyl disaster that really propelled me into producing art. Ukraine has always been close to my heart; it defines me every day.

One of my pieces is a work called 'Chernobyl Madonna' which has become a global symbol of the city and its eponymous nuclear tragedy. It's also a graphic symbol of Ukraine's suffering over decades and centuries.

The work has spawned three more Madonnas, including the 'Madonna of the Heavenly Hundred' which symbolises the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, when clashes between protesters and police Kyiv led to the ousting of pro-Putin President Viktor Yanukovich and the overthrow of his government. It also sparked the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Another is 'The Orange Madonna', which symbolises the massive protests triggered by claims of electoral fraud, corruption and voter suppression in the 2004 Ukrainian election.

The 'Madonna Holodomor 33' is the final in my series and it represents Ukraine's Holodomor, or great 'Terror-Famine' that was part of the wider Soviet famine of 1932-33 which affected the major grain-producing areas of the Soviet Union.

During the Holodomor, millions of Ukrainians died or were forced to flee a famine in Ukraine that was induced by Josef Stalin.

Some historians have said that the famine was planned by Stalin as a way of eliminating Ukraine's nascent independence movement and imposing collectivisation on the nation's productive grain farmers.

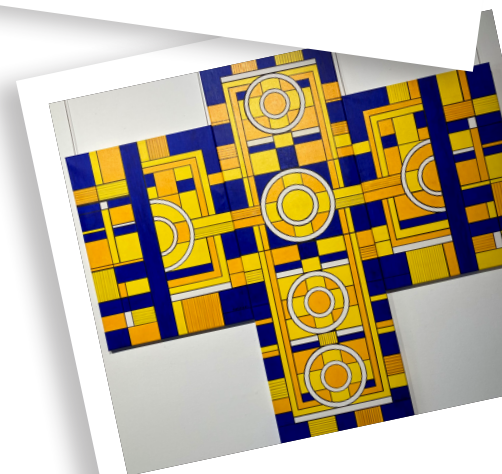
It seems history is repeating.

Every day I'm connected to what is happening in Ukraine. I feel like I'm sitting behind the window of history.

I still have family in Ukraine on my dad's side. My cousin's daughter gave birth to her third child while in a bunker under Russian attack.

Through art I feel I have an outlet and voice to bring out what I'm feeling. It's almost like a prayer of relief. How else do you mitigate the anger you feel?

What are important to me in my art are the historical and



cultural aspects of Ukrainian life. I'm trying to synthesise what is good and unique about Ukraine.

Ukraine has seen great suffering in what seems like every few decades. But now I sense a line in the sand has been drawn and people are saying 'we will survive this as we always have' and I think people are confident that they will triumph, they will win and drive out the Russian aggressor from Ukrainian soil and with victory Ukraine will have a golden future.

Life in Australia for me has been a catalyst for my art and for my professional life.

I'm grateful for the fact that I can do this freely in Australia – paint and have a voice and a career as a woman.



Maruska Batakovic

Maruska Batakovic was born in a beautiful town on the Adriatic Sea in the former Yugoslavia. She now works to support other migrants and refugees settling in Australia.



Life is full of experiences that shape and form us. Some are full of challenges others filled with joy. Arriving in Australia at the age of two, I don't have many memories of life in the village, or the trip across the ocean to arrive in Melbourne. I don't recall the tears of family meeting mum and I as we disembarked the ship.

Growing up I do remember being different to our neighbours, in the language we spoke, what we ate and how we interacted. Going to school in Ballarat was horrifying, when dad was enrolling me into school, the principal wanted to change my name, as Maruska would be too hard for everyone to pronounce. Common girls' names in Ballarat at the time were Sally, Karen and Julie; it was very Anglo Saxon. Dad refused.

"Her name is Maruska and you will just have to try," he said. He also told me in no uncertain terms that I was not to change my name to anything else but what it is. Dad was determined that we were not to lose our identity, religion, and language. Every time a new teacher would mark the role she would stop at my name, and I would give her a helping hand. It was so embarrassing.

The kids at school were not very pleasant at first. Not only did I have a different name, my lunch (sandwiches were mortadella and parmesan cheese) was strange, my Christmas and Easter were on different days. Life was too hard to understand, and I wanted to go home to my grandmother where everything was normal. I asked mum why our Christmas was different, mum said Santa does not have time to visit all the children with presents on one night, so he does the Catholics on the 24th of December and Orthodox children on the 6th of January.

I was very lucky to have cousins who were also experiencing the same issues as me. Some chose to fully emerge themselves into the Australian way of life. They did not share their differences but kept them hidden.

Others, like me, found a way to accept the differences and take on some Australian customs to fit in. The first lesson was learning to eat vegemite. I too began to bring vegemite sandwiches for school lunches, to the horror of my mother. The mortadella and parmesan cheese, liver pate and Vienna bread were all enjoyed after school and on the weekends.

Dad was a great soccer player and was picked up by a local Scottish team, the language of soccer is international, so no interpreting was needed. This made me think of how I could fit in more at school. I made friends through my sporting prowess. I was tall and strong, I could kick and mark a football (not a soccer ball) better than the boys at school, which gave me status.

I was respected. It also built resilience, when tackled I never cried, I picked myself up and moved on. Our whole family became Carlton fans since Alex Jesaulenko played for Carlton, another “Wog” who was respected for his sporting ability. Many years later I worked with Alex at Visy and told him how he inspired my whole family and helped us adjust to our new home. It brought him to tears.

We moved from Ballarat to Geelong when I was in grade 3, at 9 years old. I felt I was reborn. Geelong was full of “Wogs” it was “spot the Aussie” in class. Life was AMAZING!! The one thing that remained constant was family and my parents making a conscious effort to keep the language and traditions alive. We continued to celebrate Christmas on the 7th of January, with a badnjak (Serbian Christmas tree oak not pine), Orthodox Easter with colouring of eggs and Slava (patron saint day for the family) as well as doing folkloric dancing.

Summer in Geelong was the best, even well after I moved out of home and started my own family. The apple tree in the back yard of our family home was the gathering place. This is where we would congregate and we, more often than not, would be joined by uncles, aunts, cousins neighbours and friends who lived locally.

There was always food, BBQ, fish and lamb on the spit, (thankfully our spit was cooked in the backyard not the front) and homemade wine and vegetables from mum’s garden.

After the meal, the music would begin, my Uncle Nik playing the tamburica and leading the songs. The repertoire was the village songs that were sung back home. We still sing these songs today accompanied with tears as there are not many left to sing them with; only my dad remains from my parents’ generation.



From an early age I learned to have courage, resilience, and a strong sense of identity. Being adventurous, I was always trying new things and finding the silver lining in all situations. I learned to be adaptable to speak up for injustice and to be proud of my heritage. I also became curious and interested in other cultures, including the Aussie way.

Because of this, it's not surprising that I began working in not-for-profits that had a focus on CALD communities. There is so much to learn and embrace from our differences.

Australia was, and remains, the land of plenty. My parents, like so many before and after them, left their homes for a better life with more opportunity. They always had a love for their homeland, but Australia became their home as it is mine.



Halima Hassan

Halima Hassan is a refugee from Somalia who arrived in Australia as a young girl.



Finding my family

As a young child I was taken from my family by an 'aunt' who promised my mother that she would take me to safety and away from the dangers of the Somalian civil war that we were living through.

The 'aunt' was a distant relative of my father. She and her family helped me escape the conflict, but along the way my name was changed and all trace of my real family was wiped away.

My aunt asked my family if she could take me to a better place so she adopted me and we moved to a camp in Egypt.

But instead of peace and safety my life became a nightmare of fear and heartache.

My aunt changed my last name, she counted me as one of her kids and she told everyone I was her daughter.

After years as refugees in camps in Egypt we were eventually granted resettlement places in Australia in 2000.

When I turned 15 in 2006, I found out I had been adopted and told my aunt that I wanted to find my biological family.

I was immediately thrown out of the home I had been living in.

I found out my 'aunt' wasn't my real mum when I heard the other kids talking. I told her 'I need to look for my family and my mum and dad'.

My aunt said if I did, she would throw me out, but I decided I had to know what had happened to my family.

I was taken in by a cousin and I began improving my English by attending a language school in Melbourne's west.

One day I got lost after getting on the wrong bus. I could not speak much English and I did not know where I was. I couldn't ask anyone for help. I was very scared, I didn't know what to do. Thankfully, I was approached by a Somali taxi driver who took me to some members of the Somali community in Footscray

and eventually my cousin was tracked down and I was taken home.

Amazingly, this accidental connection with my community eventually led to me being reunited with my biological family four years later.

Through the community, I met a Somali man who frequently travelled to East Africa for business.

I asked him if he could ask about my family and eventually he got word that my family was living in a small town in western Somalia called Abudwak.

In 2011, when I was just 20-years-of-age, I travelled alone to my homeland to find my family.

I took a flight to Abu Dhabi, two internal flights in Somalia and a 16-hour mini-bus ride and, eventually, I found my family.

It was very emotional and wonderful to meet my family after so long. They were very surprised, they didn't know I was coming.

My family knew I was overseas somewhere but not where. And because my name had been changed, they had no way of finding me.

At first I was taken to my uncle's house and then he took me to see my mum and brothers. She was crying and I was crying.

I spent three happy months living with my family in Abudwak before returning to Australia.

But things took a bad turn after I left. A bad drought struck the area where my family was living and they were forced to move to the capital Mogadishu.

At the time the Islamic militant group Al Shabaab controlled most of the city and they came to my mother's house and kidnapped two of my brothers.

Some men came to my house and kidnapped them. Al Shabaab is a group that is very bad. They take teenagers and brainwash them and make them fight for them. At the time my mother was at home with my brothers and she refused to let them go but the men hit my mother with the butt of their guns and they took my brothers with them.



We don't know what happened to them and we have never heard from them again.

My mother feared for her other three sons and fled to Kenya where they spent six months in the Dadaab refugee camp.

But violence and threats there forced her to flee again in 2012 – this time to the only slightly smaller Kakuma camp.

I am now 33 and married, and I work in childcare in Melbourne's west. I have also married and started my own family.

I would love to bring my family to Melbourne but there have been many barriers.

I almost didn't make it to Australia myself. When I was a young girl living as a refugee in Egypt, I had an inkling that I had family still in Somalia and when my 'aunt' received the visas to Australia I didn't want to go.

The Australian embassy interviewed me and asked why I didn't want to go. My aunt had told them I had a boyfriend and that was why.

She thought the embassy might reject her if they found out I wasn't her daughter, so she told me that I had to tell them I had a boyfriend and that was the reason I didn't want to go.

She told me she would do something bad to me unless I told them that. I told the embassy people what she wanted because I was very scared of her.

Sometimes I regret that because if I had told the truth, I might have had my own family here with me now.

But in Egypt I was only 11 and I had no one to help me. And if I had stayed there myself I would not have survived. I had no money and no family.

I told the embassy I broke up with my boyfriend, I got a visa and I came to Australia.

As an adult, I spent time in women's refuges and in emergency housing, but I was finally able to get on my feet and find work.

I thank God that in Australia there are good people and a government that helps people. This is the reason I am here today.





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