

Middle Park History Group

Interview with Sofija Muceniekas born 1 July 1933

by Annette Robinson from Middle Park History Group

3.00pm on Saturday 4th February at 169 Richardson Street Middle Park

(Sofija's two daughters Gaila and Laima were also present)

Early Life and Family before coming to Australia

My family came to Australia in the late 1940s from Lithuania. We lived on a farm in a village, a couple of kilometres from the township of Zemaiciu Naumiestis.

My father was born in 1883. There were eight children in my father's family, six boys and two girls. My father was forced to serve in the Czarist army during WW1 after which he returned to farm life in the village with his parents. He worked 31.2 hectares of farmland that was mixed farming.

My mother was born in 1897 in a small village the other side of Zemaiciu Naumiestis. They married in 1922 when my father was 39, and she was 25. My mother came from a family of 11 children, six boys and five girls.

Unfortunately my father died of a heart attack when he was only 52 years old, leaving my mother with eight children, including two sets of twins. I am from the youngest set of twins. My twin brother was only four years old when he was kicked and killed by a horse. I can remember it as clearly as if it was yesterday. We were playing outside in the care of my older sister, when my brother picked up a little stick and startled a horse that was drinking from a pond.

When my father died, my oldest brothers, twins Peter and Paul were just 13 years old. My mother's brothers helped her on the farm tremendously at this difficult time. Eventually, life settled down into a routine and she even extended the house and renovated some of the buildings. This included the fitting of lightning conductors, as in summer Lithuania has the most violent and frightening thunderstorms. My brother Viktor tells the story of how during one such storm, my mother gathered us children and made us kneel and pray until the worst had passed.

World War 2 impacted on the lives of the Baltic people in a way none of us would ever have imagined. I had almost finished Primary School in 1944, when we learnt that the Russian army front was advancing and would pass through our village. My eldest brother Paul decided together with my mother that we should on the morning of October 9th 1944 flee the rapidly advancing Russian army. We only had that one night to pack our bags, tend to the animals and prepare to leave. We believed we would only be gone temporarily, and never dreamt that we would never return to our home.

We left in two horse drawn carts, and I can still remember how my mother called out to the neighbours to please look after the animals as best they could.

Germany

We headed to Germany, and later learnt that only two hours after we fled, the Russian army was already in our village. My cousins left at the same time, but took a different fork in the road. Eventually they were forced to go back, and lived under the Soviet occupation until Lithuania's independence in 1991.

My mother's unmarried sister also fled Lithuania with us, as did our young housemaid who was aged about 16 or 17. We travelled avoiding the major roads and towns. We slept where we could find shelter and were given food by the Germans. Winter was coming and I remember that we stopped in East Germany just before Christmas. My older brothers were always listening to the radio to find out where the Russian front was. As was proved later, the Baltic people had more to fear from the Russians than from the Germans. Over three hundred thousand people were deported from Lithuania to Siberia, an enormous number when you consider that the whole population of Lithuania was only about three million.

In May 1945, when WW2 ended, Germany was divided into four different zones. Our family was in the English zone in a 'displaced persons camp', run by the English army. We were able to resume some sort of normal life, as schools including high schools were set up. I was able to attend high school. My older sister Genovaite finished high school there, as did my brother Viktor. Previously we had had to queue up for food, whereas now we were able to cook for ourselves.

Our young housemaid who had fled with us was able to emigrate to England and work. At that stage, younger single people were given the first opportunities. Canada also started to accept migrants from the displaced persons camps as did Australia. Arthur Caldwell, the Immigration Minister at the time, visited the German camps, and under the Australian government's policy of the time, opted to accept many of the Baltic people into Australia. They showed films about life in Australia - the beaches, kangaroos, opportunities and the good life that was possible. But many rumours abounded that the streets were full of spiders and snakes! Australia's first invited migrants in 1947 were Baltic people.

Migration to Australia

At this time, only my older brothers the twins Peter and Paul were allowed to migrate to Australia. They registered and signed employment contracts to work in Australia for two years. They were 25 years old, fit and strong, just the type of people Australia needed. They were on the first shipment, which sailed into Melbourne with 400 Lithuanian men, and 16 Lithuanian women, as well as many Latvians, Estonians, amongst others.

Arthur Caldwell was on the wharf in Port Melbourne to meet the new arrivals. My brothers were pleased to have reached Port Melbourne and went first to Bonegilla. From there, they were brought to Melbourne and given jobs in a brick works in Oakleigh. They rented rooms close to their work. In 1948 my youngest brother Viktor arrived on his own in Australia. In March 1949 my mother, auntie, two sisters and I and Aleksas left Trieste and arrived in Australia. We left Germany by train to get to Trieste where we boarded an English ship 'Dundalk Bay' and departed 16 March 1949. My mother was extremely sea sick and thought that she would never make it. We sailed to Sydney via Fremantle and from there were taken by train to an immigration camp in Bathurst NSW. My brother and sister then travelled to Melbourne via train, but as I was still not 16 years old, I had to stay in the camp with my mother.

We were later moved to Greta, near Maitland for a few months where there were mainly women with children whose husbands were away working. We used to walk the 3km into Greta to do shopping etc. We finally received news

that I could come to Melbourne with my mother. There happened to be a train strike, so arrangements were made for us to fly. I had to go to the Greta Post Office to send a telegram to the boys expecting us in Melbourne saying that we would now arrive *with aeroplane* not *by* aeroplane. That is still a source of much amusement in the family!

We landed at Essendon airport and it was wonderful to see our family reunited. Our first lodgings were at 142 Williams Road Prahran, only a single rented room.

Melbourne

I was 16 by now and wanted a job. As I was very shy and with only minimal English, my brother Viktor went with me when I got my first job, at the Alfred Hospital. I was allocated to the laundry, doing sorting and folding. One day the boss came and told me I was to be moved into the dining room, my first promotion. Perhaps the fact that I was blonde, blue eyed and nearly 17 helped with that. I enjoyed serving food to the doctors, nurses, students and others. I remember being asked where I was from, and how and why I came to Australia. "Communism is no good" I replied in my new language.

After the work was finished in the dining room, I had to then go to the kitchen to help with preparation duties. The kitchen supervisor asked me to do too much overtime, so one day I quit without giving any notice. "I'm not coming back tomorrow!" I can remember crying all the way home on the tram. As I had not given a week's notice, my sister Vale came with me to the employment office to smooth things over. I remember how angrily the employment officer said to me "You should be sent back to where you came from". I have never forgotten that stinging remark.

Soon after, I found work in the Rinaldi spaghetti factory just around the corner from our room in Williams Road. Later my mother joined me working at the factory, as she did not want to be at home all day, and although her English was poor, she was very capable of carrying out the work.

Middle Park

In 1950 my brothers began to look for a house to buy. They had looked in Richmond, but there were some aspects of that location they did not like. My

brother Aleksas was working for the PMG and living in South Melbourne so he knew this area.

The boys wanted something so that my mother could be near a Catholic Church in an inner city suburb. Luckily they came across 181 Page Street Middle Park. They bought it in July 1950. It was named 'Samogitia' and still bears that name plate today. It cost three thousand guineas. We had a deposit of 700 pound and borrowed the rest from the ES&A Bank. We also received a small bequest from my uncle who had gone to the USA and become a priest. Every bit helped.

The house was ideal as it had seven rooms, was very close to the church, with shops nearby and the tram and train to the city within an easy walk. It was not uncommon in those days for tenants to have the right to stay on in a boarding house despite the house being sold. However, the lady tenant moved out within a few weeks of living with us. She could not have liked us much.

My mother, whose English was poor, used to shop in Armstrong Street, and the shopkeepers commented that she bought a huge amount of potatoes. In our tradition, potatoes are used to make so many things. Potato dumplings are really a national food.

On Sundays we would go to church, especially for the Lithuanian services at St John's Catholic Church on the corner of Punt Road and Victoria Parade in East Melbourne. The seven of us, dressed up in our winter coats, gloves and scarves, would walk to nearby Mills Street to wait for the tram. Today I still think to myself that almost 70 years ago I used to wait for the tram at this same stop.

Once again with my brother Viktor's help, I obtained a job – this time at Hoadley's chocolate factory. I made a good friend there, another girl from Lithuania. She introduced me to other Lithuanians socially and that is how I met my husband Arnis! Arnis was also Lithuanian, and had arrived in Australia in 1949.

We made many other friends at church and at work, and would often have celebrations at our home in Page Street, which often finished up with singing. One day when we were enjoying ourselves, there was a knock at the door. It

was Father DeLochry from the nearby church. He had heard the noises coming from the house and wanted to join in the fun.

It was our intention that Father DeLochry would marry us at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Middle Park, but at the time we were to marry, he had moved away, so we had Father Curtin instead. As Arnis was not a Catholic, he was required to attend Catholic preparation classes before the wedding, but as both he and Father Curtin enjoyed a good time, the sessions tended to be more like social events. We also had to be married in the Sacristy instead of at the altar because Arnis was not a Catholic. We were married on 19th September 1953.

After we married, we moved to a weatherboard house in Gaffney Street Coburg, and our first child Raymond was born in 1954. It was far from the city. Batman Station was our nearest public transport, and at times, I felt very lonely there. I was only in my early twenties with a young baby at home to care for. Arnis was working hard to pay for the house, arriving home at 9pm some nights. However, the neighbours were very nice and friendly. My sister used to telephone me to keep in touch, and when I heard of all the doings of the extended family in Middle Park, I really wanted to come back to the area.

Arnis had at first worked for the St Kilda and Brighton City Council but later moved to Mytton's, a kitchen sink supplier, a company based in South Melbourne. His work involved pressing stainless steel sinks. I asked him if we could move back, and said that I would get work while my mother cared for Raymond. So in due course we bought a single fronted house at 285 Richardson Street Middle Park. We took in a Lithuanian man as a boarder to help us pay off the house. He stayed with the family for 20 years and in fact died at home with us.

Arnis's brother encouraged him to go back to school, as he had studied economics in Lithuania and Germany, and he finally did move to an office job. Arnis left Myttons for the Commonwealth Aircraft Factory in Fishermans Bend. A co-worker would pick him up from Beaconsfield Parade and drop him off at the same point on his way home. He later worked for the Department of Defence firstly at the St Kilda barracks, then later in St Kilda Road.

Dalia was born in 1957 while we are at number 285, as was Gaila in 1961. The house was heavily wall papered and dark and by then too small for our growing family. So when the opportunity to buy number 349 Richardson Street came up, we took it. We stayed in that house for forty years. Laima was born there in 1963.

Middle Park was home to many Europeans in those days, mainly Greek, Italian, Hungarian and amongst others the 'Anglo's'. Many workers had jobs on the wharves or at the many factories in South and Port Melbourne. The vegetable laden front gardens still seen today, attest to the southern European owners, as do the colourful painted walls inside and out.

Families tended to stay in the area, and if they moved it was usually within the same area. We remember lots of families in the area - the Davolis, the Mitchells, the Murphys, Miss Munday, the Cannings, the Collins'.

Bert Jones' supermarket on the corner of Richardson and Langridge Streets was well known to all.

When my youngest daughter started primary school at Mount Carmel School (all my children attended that school), Luigi Moreschini the greengrocer in Armstrong Street asked me if I would like to work for him one and a half days a week. It was a lovely clean shop with the fruit and vegies laid out in a beautiful display. Luigi and Italia were Italian and lived above the shop. He greeted the customers, mainly women, with a wide smile, and "How are you today young lady?" He also provided a lovely seat for customers to rest on while they shopped or found the correct money to pay for their purchases.

He was one of three greengrocers in the sixties and early seventies. George and Helen on the St Kilda side of Armstrong St, and the two tallish sisters, one who was married and the husband ran a smaller shop where 'Scope' beautician is now.

There were three butchers at that time, two chemists and a couple of banks. Health care was also different then. In a doctor's practice, there used to be just the one doctor, not like now with six, seven or more doctors in a practice.

There was Dr Foster on the corner of Amstrong and Danks Streets, and Dr Clark later who was our family doctor.

The house at 349 Richardson Street was too big for Arnis and I after the children moved away, so we bought this house at 169 Richardson Street in 2003. The original house at 181 Page Street where we had started out stayed in the family until about 2005. Many of my family and extended family lived in the area for a long time. Today my son Raymond and his family still lives in 121 Page Street and my two daughters live here at 169 Richardson Street with me. My nephew Saul lives with his family in Canterbury Place.

The church is still very important to us, and the plaques in the reflection garden area of the Mount Carmel churchyard commemorating family who have died mean a lot to us. My husband Arnis died suddenly in 2009. My mother died of cancer when she was 68. Most of my family that has passed on now and those that have a long history with Middle Park are remembered in this way.

In those days and in some ways, it was a happier time. There was no television or computers and children played cricket and other games outside, the older ones looking after the younger. There was more a sense of community that is different to now.

I feel very blessed to have come to Australia and to have raised my family in such a lovely beachside suburb, and to also now live opposite Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church where I was married. Lithuania regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and many people thought about going 'home' to Lithuania. Although Lithuania is my birthplace and part of my heritage and tradition, a country I will never forget, I am glad I only went back for a visit. Australia and in particular Middle Park is home and always will be. I have had opportunities that I would not otherwise have had and my life would have been so different if the War had not happened. I am lucky to have travelled around Australia and the world and to also have been on the Queen Mary 2 and retraced the shipping routes of post WW2.

Sofija Muceniekas with brother Viktor when she was aged about 20 at front gate of 181 Page St

