

# TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH ARIS YIANNAKIS

*This is the transcript of an interview of Aris Yiannakis made on 27 August 2015 at the home of Anne Miller who is conducting the interview on behalf of the Middle Park History Group. Aris, whose proper name is Aristides - one of the early Greek philosophers - lives with his family in Brighton. He conducts a shoe repairing business at 3B Armstrong Street, Middle Park.*

## **Aris's parents early life in Greece**

Aris's forebears lived on the island of Lemnos in the Aegean Sea. In 1960 the Australian government encouraged immigrants to come to Australia to work, so many of the young Greek men particularly, boarded the ocean liners, such as the *Patris*, by the thousands to come to Station Pier in Melbourne. From here some people went to Bonegilla, others to South Australia and others to family members already in Melbourne.

Back in Limnos, Aris's grandfather (who had not been born on Limnos) had a farm and also ran a delicatessen/milkbar business, in which his sons, including Aris' father (subsequently known as Father), walked around the island with a donkey, selling produce to the other islanders.

Aris's mother (subsequently known as Mother) had also grown up on a farm in another village on the island of Limnos. Mother came with a group of women to Melbourne. Many of these people from the one community or island also gathered together in Melbourne, which was how Aris's parents met each other, they did not know each other on Limnos. Their incentive for coming to Australia was the opportunity for work and money, made by the government here, as there was a depression in Greece at this time with no work available. Further back in the history of Limnos the island had been alternately occupied by Turkey and Greece, the people living on the island were really refugees. Father had not been born on Limnos, rather in Mosconisi in Turkey.

Aris thinks that neither of his parents went to school at all on the island. Today Mother cannot read or write in English. Father is not alive today.

## **Father's arrival in Australia**

Father first worked in South Australia at one of the vineyards/wineries but decided that he did not like this type of work.

On arrival in Melbourne, Father was taken in by one of his relatives who had previously arrived here, purchased a house and taken in fellow nationals in shared rooms until such time as they could buy their own houses. From here these new arrivals spread out, met other women or were 'matchmade' into a relationship. Sometimes they would go to dances in Lonsdale Street, or certainly meet up with other immigrants from Limnos. Father's first job in Melbourne was as a labourer in 1966 when the St. Kilda Junction was being reprofiled from 8 intersecting streets into its present format. Later he worked for *Australian Gypsum* (now *Boral*) in Oakleigh making plasterboard, together with a group of Greek people. This was at a time when the sheets were made and installed manually. In his later fifties Father went to work at the large complex of the *Montessori Jewish Homes* in Punt Road as a gardener and cleaner. After this position he retired. Aris described his father as a hard worker who had established himself well, but never in the bootmaking business.

Later, Father, together with 3 uncles, set up a various businesses in properties and apartments.

### **Mother's arrival in Australia**

On her arrival here Aris thinks his mother was involved in domestic work for other people. Later she also worked at the Montessori Homes as a maid.

### **Mother and Father's marriage.**

Their marriage was celebrated at St. Dimitrios' Greek Orthodox Church in High Street, Prahran. Following the service they had their photographs taken at a studio where the background was of the gondolas in Venice! The marriage was celebrated with a meal and the following day the couple went to their respective workplaces. Following their marriage the Yiannakis family lived in Prahran. They did later move to Inkerman Street, North Caulfield.

At one time after their marriage when Father returned from work he was very lethargic and weak which worried Mother who tried to remedy the situation by feeding him more sweet foods! When Father went to the hospital he was diagnosed as a type 1 diabetic needing to be treated with insulin. Much later Father died of pancreatic cancer. Now Aris's brother-in-law and Father's brother are both diabetics.

The family spoke Greek at home. In this Prahran area there were many Greek people.

The family found these early years difficult working long and late shifts and shifts at different times. Both his Father and Aris believe that hard work gets you results, Aris thinks that in the footwear business there are no short cuts.

### **Yiannakis family and schooling**

In 1962 their first child, Aris, was born followed by a daughter 2 years later.

Aris did not go to a kindergarten, a neighbour or a friend would gather several children at her home 4 or 5 days a week. Aris attended the Hawksburn Primary School in Malvern Road, which is no longer in existence, and continued to the Prahran High School for his secondary education. This school is also no longer in existence. Aris did go to Greek school on Saturday afternoons, to help him to read and write the language. Today his children are expected to have sufficient Greek to be able to greet their grandparents but not much more.

### **Aris's sporting experiences**

Initially Aris played Australian Rules football and soccer. Prahran High School had a very good reputation for its soccer teams, probably due to the Greek population of that area, but not for football. Some students went on to play for European clubs. But in football Aris recalled being beaten by Melbourne High School, where there were budding VFL players in the team, by 30 or 40 goals! Later on Aris did play cricket for 6 years in the Mercantile League in Albert Park against Port Colts and Cluden.

Aris's sister did not play any sport, Greek girls were expected to stay home and study or help in the house. In general education was the way to get ahead.

### **Aris's post-school training and working life**

Following his secondary education Aris went to the Swinburne Technical School and completed 1½ years of a Business Course. He left there when he had the opportunity of a position as a Junior Clerk at the Prahran branch of the National Australia Bank (NAB). From here he progressed from Ledger to First Teller to Main

Teller to Security Clerk. In total he worked for the NAB for 6 years.

Aris described himself as a 'restless youth'. He had obtained the job at the NAB thanks to Father introducing him to the manager. The job at the bank was good - a clean job, Aris had to wear a tie, social activities included drinks after work. But after returning from a holiday in Europe Aris wanted to do something for himself in the way that Father had, so he decided to go into a trade. When he gave notice to the NAB one of the CEO's offered him a financial incentive to stay in the bank!

### **Aris's entry into the shoe repairing business**

One of his uncles had a very successful business as a shoe repairer in the Hawksburn shopping centre. Aris had been working for him part-time at the weekends learning the shoe trade for a year and then after his holiday in Europe Aris worked with him full-time for a little over a year.

In 1987 he saw an ad in the paper of a shoe repair shop for rent in Armstrong Street, Middle Park. Aris was already familiar to some extent with the shops in Middle Park as the Lemnean Club, to which his family belonged, was located there on the S side of Armstrong Street. When Aris arrived to inspect the shop it was already occupied by an architect, the owner had advertised for a shoe repairer as he thought the shopping centre needed a shoe repairer because Sam Brown was getting older and had a heavy work load. This is the premises currently occupied by a coffee shop. Aris had to set up the entire shop with whatever machinery and fittings he needed.

Aris introduced himself to Sam Brown telling him of this planned venture. Sam was happy about this so long as Aris did a good job. After Aris opened up and Sam saw that he was doing a good job Sam endorsed his customers to come to Aris, Sam also gave Aris some advice. As the business grew Aris asked the landlord if he would like to be involved in an expanded business but he suggested Aris do this on his own. So then he became a tenant of the Lemnean Society of Victoria at his present location at 3 Armstrong Street.

### **Aris's marriage and family**

While his parents lived in North Caulfield, Aris was married to Helen in 1989, an Australian girl also of Greek heritage, her family came from the Peloponnese in the S of Greece. Helen's father came from Kalavita, the highest peak there where it snows. There is a rack railway to the magnificent view from the top of the mountain, this was also the scene of a nasty incident during WW2. Helen's parents had come to Australia at the same time as Aris's parents, they had been married in Greece and had a son before they came to Australia, her mother is from Argos in the southern Peloponnese.

### **Returning to Greece**

It took Mother and Father almost 30 years before they returned to Greece.

### **The Lemnean Society of Victoria**

The building in Armstrong Street has been occupied by the Lemnos Society since the 1970s. Prior to the Lemnean Society purchasing the building it had been used as an advertising studio, for photographing cars and the like. Aris was involved with the Lemnean Youth Society here. Later it was refurbished making a reception hall downstairs, upstairs there was a coffee shop/bar where members could go for a drink. To this day the building is still owned by the Lemnean Society, the downstairs tenants pay rent for their premises including the

Tattslotto, the gymnasium and Aris's shoe repair business.

The Lemnean Society is now based in Springvale Road, Braeside. It is mainly comprised of senior, retired members with some people of Aris's generation, although Aris does not take his children there. The ethos of the Society has changed over the years, although it does support the music and culture of the Lemnean community, young people are proud of their heritage but have interests outside this culture. Financially the Society is strong but the number of members is declining.

### **Conducting a business in Middle Park**

Aris has never lived in Middle Park. Regarding running a shoe repairing business here his view is that as it is not impulse shopping and out of every 100 who walk past only 2 or 3 want to have their shoes repaired. The people who stop at this group of shops only wish to buy a Tattslotto ticket, a newspaper or have their shoes repaired. As Middle Park is an affluent suburb where people are concerned with their appearance so that the dry cleaner and the shoe repairer do very well. Also these people buy good quality shoes which are worth repairing and they are not afraid to have them repaired. Aris's customers are predominantly female as they have many more pairs of shoes than men. Repairing these good quality shoes gives Aris a sense of satisfaction as he can do a better job with leather shoes rather than synthetic ones. He finds the Middle Park residents very friendly and loyal to him, in the way that he aims to be loyal to them by doing a good job. He has got to know many of the local people in the 20 plus years he has been running this business.

Aris supplied an earlier photo, taken in 1990, of himself with his father in the first shop. He also supplied a photo of himself taken in 2011 which featured in the CoPP newsletter *Diversity*.



Aris with his father in the first shop, approx 1990.