

DELFT TO MALABAR

a Dutch girl's journey

Ellie Zinsmeester



To Ellie

Think sometimes of little Holland

Where once your cradle stood

How on the other side of the world

People live, who are your kin.

*Whatever you take on in the new
country,*

What you say or what you do

Remember this and remember it well

*You are a daughter of this little
country.*

Uncle Nic

2 September 1955

Introduction

I have often wondered whether it would have been better if our family had stayed in Delft rather than come to Australia in 1953. Like many migrants to Australia I have had a foot in both countries. I still feel a deep loss at leaving Delft and especially my grandparents as that eight year old Dutch girl. I also have regrets about life choices in Australia. But my children and grandchildren are Australian, so here we belong. I am both Australian and Dutch. My story is part of a bigger story of many migrants to Australia.

I have always been interested in history, from the time my father read children's stories to me in Delft. But it was not until after my father died that I did extensive historical research on his archives and collections and unravelled our family stories. I realise now that being a researcher and historian was my natural calling.

And so here I am finally wanting to tell my own story.



1 Delft 1945-1953

My childhood memories are like little snapshots that just pop up in my mind — a street organ, a boy in the canal, stealing a church candle, sleeping between my grandparents.

Each snapshot carries an emotion.

I was born in Delft in July 1945, just a month after the war ended. It must have been awful then but of course I was not aware of anything bad. The war, like many things, was never talked about.

My parents and their parents were born and raised in Delft, with German ancestry on my father's side and Friesian on my mother's. Dad was born Willem Lodwijk Zinsmeester on 2 September 1914 just four weeks before the outbreak of WW1. He was a butcher, like his father Johannes, born in 1873. I remember my *opa* Zinsmeester always wore his butcher's apron, sitting in his chair, blind, long after Dad took over Zinsmeester Butchers. He died in 1953 just before we left Delft. This must have been hard for my *oma* Zinsmeester, born Anna Eliziena van Drongelen in 1879. My brother Johannes, after Dad's father, spent a lot of time with our *oma* Zinsmeester and her older sisters, his aunts. They had encouraged Dad to learn and study and so they encouraged him too. I think I was more influenced by my mother's parents.

Mum and Dad were married on 2 July 1941 in the Old Church where Vermeer is buried. He is still my favourite artist. Mum was born in 1917 Elisabeth Petronella Oosterhoff. Her father Hendrik Oosterhoff was born in 1882. He was apprenticed as a carpenter and became a teacher at Delft University of Technology. *Opa* Oosterhoff was a kind and gentle man. He married my *oma* Oosterhoff in 1910 in that same Delft church. She was born Petronella Kiela in 1885. I was named after her and christened in the New Church where the Orange-Nassau Royal family are all buried.

I have very fond memories of these warm and loving extended families in Delft.

I don't need to tell the history of Delft here, but it's a very historic town. Near where I lived is the site of the original De Porcelyne Fles, The Porcelain Jar, Holland's oldest and most famous delft pottery factory. And just across the road is where Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, revered





member of the British Society, was born. His giant statue stands in the Market Square. I grew up aware of such important historical events and places. It not only instilled a love for Delft but for history in general.

Delft is a lovely intact medieval town. Everybody walked or rode a bike, Mum and Dad went everywhere on bikes. We lived near the Eastern Gate close to the central Market Square. The two grand churches, old and new, my school, my grandparents and friends were very nearby. I was free to happily roam between them.

I have always had a vivid map of Delft in my mind. Whether this is from childhood roaming, tourist visits or the fact that a large map and an aerial photograph of Delft always hung on the wall of the Malabar house, and still do.

The giant map is the famous *Kaart Figuratief* published by Dirck Evertsz van Bleywijck in 1678. It shows Delft in its period of greatest prosperity but many sites are still recognisable today.

The aerial photograph of Delft is more recent and personal. It was given to Mum and Dad by my aunt when we left in October 1953. It brings back vivid memories. It was taken on Market Day, full of stalls as I remember them. You can see our house, the butcher's shop, my school, the churches, the Town Hall, my grandparents' house.

Our house was originally built for a Catholic boys' home. It seems crazy but there was a bowling alley and a chapel upstairs before my grandfather made a courtyard from them. I can remember my brother giving me a haircut there. I have funny snapshot memories like that. We actually had a slaughterhouse in the backyard. While Dad kept us out of the yard I remember looking through a crack in the wall, it wasn't pleasant.

Market Day was a big weekly event in Delft. I loved the many stalls in the square and along the canal. There was also a carnival in the square with a giant caterpillar thing that went up and down and around like a carousel. One of my jobs on Market Day was to give water to a German Shepherd that was with a blind man selling postcards. All the big events and ceremonies happened in the square too. There was also an organ that moved around the back streets, that music still makes me quite emotional. Mum would get a phone call from someone on the other side of town saying did they know that I was on the street organ again.

I had a very free childhood. Like me, most children went to school by themselves. I think now, so young but so carefree. My parents and grandparents created this safe and carefree environment. If you have had loving parents you feel secure. We still had set routines, like having dinner or going to bed at a certain time. Mum was always stricter about rules than Dad.

Mum was a preschool teacher before she married. There's also an art deco certificate for her dressmaking diploma. She always made me nice clothes, which I remember fondly. All the girls wore giant bows in their hair. Mum told a story that I wanted to go to Communion with the Catholic girls so I could wear a white dress like them. There is a photo of me sitting on a float with all these little girls dressed up. It was the adventure more than the dress that I was after.

I just can't sew, books were always more important. My sister Johanna, called Anneke, spent more time with Mum and she has always been wonderful with sewing and crochet. I didn't really play with her as she was four years younger. I didn't really play with my brother Johannes, called Jan, either, even though he was only two years older. He just seemed to spend all his time upstairs with the aunts. We were each very different and sort of did our own thing. I was a tomboy. There wasn't this boy-girl nonsense.

I mostly played with two local boys. One had a bicycle and the other a scooter, I had neither.

The boy next door lived in a carriageworks. We'd be in amongst all these hot sharp metal shavings, just playing around all that stuff. The three of us would also play on giant piles of gravel in the industrial area before being chased away. It seems crazy doing these things at such a young age. Can you imagine doing that now? But we all felt pretty safe somehow. Kids did fall in the canal occasionally and Dad had to get in to rescue them. I do remember learning to skate on the frozen canal in front of our house, pushing a chair for support. Another time with the boys I remember we were playing house and drank polluted water from the canal boats. The boys were both sick, one even got his stomach pumped, but I was OK. I must have been tougher.

As a child I never had a sense of the trauma of a post-war world with so much loss, damage and shortages. I guess this period after the war was a bit like getting over

Covid. I didn't have any awareness of the wartime German occupation either. I do remember we sang a skipping rhyme that obviously came from wartime even though I never thought about that at the time. It went something like ...

*On the corner of the street stood a Nazi
Shoot him dead in his leg
Put him in a box
Fill it up with water
And he will swim like a fish*



DE VIER HEEMSKINDEREN



G. B. VANGOORZONEN

Dad was not anti-German, he had German ancestry, but he was certainly opposed to what they did during the war. I did hear more wartime stories from my aunts and cousins on later visits. The Germans made raids to find men to send to the German front. Apparently during one raid *opa* Zinsmeester stood outside the house and told the German soldier 'they've already been here', knowing quite well that they hadn't. That must have taken courage by my grandfather saying that in German. Dad and our neighbours had dug out a well in our backyard to hide in during raids. Neighbours would warn each other.

There were also stories about hiding Jews. I think many of the people who hid Jews were connected as butchers or livestock dealers. I can picture my father just wanting to do the right thing. It was a wonderful philosophy really, just doing the right thing. It's so simple really when you think about it. The good thing about it is that we were never betrayed. There was actually a bounty for people who turned Jews in.

But as a child we never really talked about these horrific war topics. The thing I remember that really scared me as a child was Dad reading me Grimms' fairy tales, and they were grim. I've still got that book he used to read. They weren't actually meant for children were they?

Dad read and told me endless stories about the middle ages in Charlemagne's time (Karel in Dutch). I know he wanted to instil a love of history but they were so gruesome, with beheadings, betrayals, heads on spikes, no holding back. But I loved it and still do. I still have my favourite history book from then, *The Warhorse*, about the four brothers who rode a giant horse into battle with Charlemagne. A great adventure. I do have this masculine-type interest in history, the blood and gore variety. Of course I got it from Dad. Mum would say 'Oh stop it man' as he'd be forever telling people all the gory details.

I had a sense of religion from a young age but I did not stay religious as an adult. We said grace before and after meals and I went to Sunday school. I remember going to church with my grandmother and the women sitting separately. She would have Eau de Cologne and peppermints to keep me still and quiet. I admit I don't remember much about the sermons, but the church was grand. Dad collected old Bibles, like so many other things, but I didn't read them. Even though Delft was very conservative about differences between Protestant, Catholic and Jew I didn't have a sense of religious

differences as a child. Of course these animosities came to Australia with migrants but I like to think I was always interested in the differences but not the prejudices.

I really enjoyed school. It was right next to the town square and the Old Church. I remember looking up and feeling that the leaning tower was actually falling down. The school building used to be the painters' guild, so significant for Dutch art.

Preschool was very important then. I loved all the activities — drawing, cutouts, weaving, stickers. And we played marbles, skipping and rhymes just outside the school. School proper started at six years old, but it was instantly serious. I was quite a bit ahead when we came to Sydney, already writing with ink. We started off with slate, so sensible really. I went to craft classes after school. I did a fretwork of a deer which came from Delft to Malabar and hung on the wall forever.

Dad brought all my Dutch schoolwork over and it's still here in Malabar. My school books and drawings are signed *zmt* — short for Zinsmeester. I'm impressed at my neat handwriting, not bad for a six year old. I also have my Friendship Book, often kept by girls then, with many greetings and farewells from schoolfriends and teachers.

I would go to my grandparents' place after school as they lived around the corner on the Molslaan. I have so many nice memories of that — eating fish from the traditional fish market, cups of tea that was mostly milk, having soup in a sickbed by the fire, holding skeins of wool while *oma* Oosterhof rolled it into balls or sorting her button box.

My *opa* Oosterhof was a lovely man. I remember him taking me on the tram to the beach and buying croquettes. There's a lovely photograph of him with my brother and me after visiting the Houses of Parliament at The Hague. He was quite religious and patriotic, a great supporter of the Orange Royal family. He left school early to become a carpenter's apprentice but ended up teaching at what is now the Delft University of Technology. Dad was good with his hands too, and so is my son Willem, who also carries his name.



Elle Financie
Bè, bè, lammelye 
Bè, bè, lammelye
Hèl je al wat wòl? 
Ja, ja, kindjehèf,
Ik Hèl mijn huidje vol
Een wondagpak voor je pa 
En een mooie doek voor ma
En een paar kousjes 
Voor jou gef ik nog doe



I was not aware of the decision to migrate to Australia. I guess I must have sensed some anxiety in my parents and grandparents in early 1953. Dad's father died earlier that year, so it must have been a terrible decision to leave his mother. Before we left everything was being packed up into giant crates for trucking to Rotterdam and shipping to Australia. They must have been amazing packers because there was a lot of stuff, with much still here in Malabar.

I stayed the last couple of days before leaving Delft with my Oosterhoff grandparents. I have very strong memories and emotions of sleeping between them, picking up on the sadness of the parting. It must have been awful for them to lose us. *Opa* Oosterhoff gave me a new book of poems by Annie MG Schmidt who was to become a hugely popular Dutch writer for children and adults. The cover illustration by Wim Bijmoer of a very modern kettle became equally famous. It's full of such quirky Dutch humour.

When I think about myself as that little Dutch girl leaving Delft for Australia I just thought it was a big new adventure. I was a free, confident and curious child. That curiosity has stayed with me ever since.





2 *Sibajak* 1953

The ship swarmed with youngsters.

The Age, Thurs 3 Dec 1953, p3

Just before we boarded the ship my cousin gave me two dresses she had made for me. I loved them because they were so different. Everything was different. It was an adventure.

The Dutch motorship *Sibajak* sailed from Rotterdam on 28 October with a record number of passengers — 1,005 migrants, including 347 children under 12. I was one of them.

Sibajak was typical of Royal Rotterdam's elegant liner design. Passenger cabins were on the outside of the ship, the passenger decks were wide and airy with shelter from direct sunlight with much outdoor seating. Her maiden voyage was in February 1928 from Rotterdam to Jakarta via Suez. In 1941 the ship was configured as a troopship for the British Ministry of War and transported 75,000 troops during the war years. After the war it was engaged in the mass emigration of European Dutch as a result of new migration agreements between the Dutch Government and various countries. The *Sibajak* carried 25,000 emigrants in this role.

Dutch ships often had Indonesian names. *Sibajak* means 'the rich one', the name of a volcano in Sumatra. I remember there were Javanese stewards. We were on bunks that had been fitted out for its role as a troop ship in the war. We came via the Suez Canal but I don't remember other places or if we got off the ship before Australia.

I used to roam around the ship by myself. I guess I have always been a bit of a loner. I do remember the Crossing of the Line ceremony that Dad wanted us to join in. I've got my brother's certificate for being dunked. I don't remember being dunked myself but I know I had a red woollen swimsuit. Just snapshot memories.

When we eventually arrived in Fremantle we went to a beach and collected shells. We proudly brought them back to the boat, washed them and left them on the basin to dry.

But when we came back to get our treasures we discovered that someone had thrown them out, probably Javanese stewards.

The *Sibajak* came into Sydney Harbour on 5 December 1953. I remember coming up the harbour pulled by tugs, floating under the giant Harbour Bridge and docking near tall rock faces. I realise now this was Darling Harbour wharves where most migrant ships docked. Dad took a whole series of tiny photos of the voyage with his commentary in Dutch.

I think we were all both excited and bewildered to be in this new country.



3 Scheyville and Bunnerong 1953-58

Staying in a migrant hostel is meant to be a short transitional experience, but we stayed six years. From that adventurous eight year old Dutch girl I was a young Australian woman by the time I left. It was too long.

From *Sibajak* to Scheyville, for as soon as we landed in Sydney we were all crowded on buses for a place called Scheyville Migrant Centre. We had no idea where we were going. It turned out to be an old army camp at Scheyville near Windsor. It was the height of a Sydney summer and very hot. It was also Christmas holidays so there was no school. I do remember there were all these anthills that you could stir up with a stick and then run to escape the ants. To think in Delft I would be skating on that icy canal at Christmas time.

I got a hairbrush for my first Australian Christmas. On Sundays we went to nearby St Matthew's Church Windsor, built in 1821. While I now appreciate its heritage significance, of course at the time it passed me by. What is very old by Australian standards is not by Dutch. I certainly remember going to a milk bar in Windsor after church. Australian ice cream was OK.

When school started again at Scheyville I was shocked at how regimented it was. Children were lined up and marched into the school to marching music. I wrote about this to my old teacher in Delft and she wrote back with a parcel of letters and drawings from my old classmates. It makes me very emotional to see these. It was only six months since I was in that Dutch classroom doing drawings and rhymes like they were sending to me on the other side of the world.

We were only in Scheyville for about three months. Then we were bundled into the back of a truck with other families and taken to Bunnerong Migrant Hostel in Matraville on the edge of Botany Bay. The site is now Heffron Park.

The Bunnerong hostel site has an interesting history. In the 1930s the Bunnerong Park playing fields were dedicated by the state government on the site of nineteenth-century Bunnerong Farm. During WW2 the park was commandeered for naval stores and large domed-shaped Nissan huts were erected. After the war these facilities were deemed



De school.



Jan Jaap Johan. $75 + 2 = 77$
Loes Els Anreke $88 + 24 = 112$
Ellie Rica.
Corrie

Beste Ellij.



Hier ben jy op gerveest Ellij.





perfect as a migrant hostel. While some Nissan huts remained, we lived in large wooden barracks. There was a shop and the whole building complex was still surrounded by sports fields. My son Willem and I visited Bunnerong recently. I was very annoyed because only last year they razed the last Nissan hut. I wrote and said they should have used it as a museum.

Most adults left the hostel for work each day. Dad got a job at the brand new General Motors car assembly plant in nearby Pagewood. He also embarked on an ambitious project to build us a house in Malabar. Like many migrants he couldn't get a mortgage, so they had to slowly build their own houses from whatever and whenever materials were available. That's why we stayed in the hostel forever.

Mum worked at Prince Henry Hospital at Little Bay. She started out cleaning and ended up in the Pathology department. Even though it was a fairly low-key job she loved being part of a team there. We used to visit Mum at the hospital on holidays and I remember seeing all these specimen jars. I think adults didn't really think much about the effect of such things on kids. Mum rode to work on her Dutch bike she brought out from Delft. But it was stolen and that must have been really awful for her. She worked at Prince Henry until she was 60. I donated one of her uniforms to the hospital museum. It's still a bit strange going to Little Bay without Mum being there.

I'll never forget the wonderful Christmas carnival that Prince Henry put on each year for local kids. There was a Santa Claus, pony rides, stalls and treats. I took my own children to it with Mum years later.

There were no English classes at the hostel but I learnt fairly quickly in my first year of school. I spoke Dutch with Mum and Dad at home, but I think my Dutch has stayed a bit like a child's version. Mum and Dad eventually learnt English from their work. Mum was probably better than Dad, maybe because he remained so attached to his homeland. In 1956 a Dutch newspaper came out and did an article about us as a typical Dutch migrant family. I'm actually wearing a Dutch girls' outfit with hat, apron and clogs sent out by relatives.

But I wasn't that typical Dutch girl in the photo. I was a tomboy. I played cowboys and Indians and I made sure I was always the Indian chief. We were also pirates after we visited the Pagewood film studios where they had this huge pirate fantasy land. I later

discovered that this was the set for *Long John Silver*, the pirate movie that was an international success, including a Dutch language version in Holland! These escapades seemed like a continuation of what I did in Holland playing with the boys. There were so many adventurous things to do in the area, our parents didn't know what we got up to. There was a whole group of us, mostly Dutch kids. We all brought this spirit of adventure with us. I was also a Girl Guide for a time. Be prepared! It was a good time.

I have two lifelong friend from this time in the hostel. Annie came on the ship after ours and to Scheyville. I met her there and she and her family moved to Bunnerong at the same time as us, all on the back of a truck. They were a Catholic family so we wouldn't have had so much contact in Holland. My other Dutch friend Marja came on the same ship *Sibajak* but we only first met in the Bunnerong hostel. Marja has fond memories of the time in the hostel too. Her family moved to La Perouse not far from the hostel. So we still went to the same primary school together.

I went to primary school at Matraville Public School, walking distance from the hostel. It was an excellent education with a very mixed bunch of kids. At that age we were all very outdoors, always playing games in the playground. I kept all my schoolbooks from that time.

Maths was my biggest problem because Dad thought the school system was wrong even though it produced the same result. Dad had his own ways of calculating. I had to go along with what the school said but it annoyed him. I wasn't that wonderful at maths and I think that was part of the reason why.

Our family went to the Presbyterian Church, the Calvinist equivalent of the Dutch Reformed Church. We went to the Welsh Presbyterian Church in Chalmers St, Surry Hills. It's a beautiful church with an upper gallery. After we went to Stanmore Presbyterian Church where the service was in Dutch. Sunday was a family day of rest. We'd go for walks and sometimes I remember we went to the ice skating rink in Prince Alfred Park.

For high school I went to Crown Street Girls' Intermediate High School in Surry Hills for the three years 1958-60. I travelled by bus from Matraville to Taylor Square and got to know this Darlinghurst and Surry Hills area very well.

There has been a public school on the Crown Street site since 1877 and it went through different types of schools — girls, boys, primary and secondary. The existing school is a very imposing two-storey stone and brick Gothic Revival building with a distinctive three-story tower with a fine



metal spire. The Intermediate Girls' School operated from 1929 to 1960 when it reverted to a primary school.

I was very proud to go to Crown Street Intermediate. It was a select school with subjects geared to going on to the Leaving Certificate and university, such as Physics and Chemistry rather than Biology. I also did French and Latin. Unfortunately I don't remember a special teacher at Crown Street. The French teacher was unusual. She was Scottish and made quite an impression because she painted her legs with makeup instead of stockings. She loved history and would tell us all about the Romans and other ancient history. Maybe I took in more history than French. I was also quite good at drawing but it also got stuck back then somehow.

I'd play hockey at Moore Park on Saturdays. We'd do the long walk there past Sydney Girls' High School. I also played Vigoro, a type of cricket. We went swimming at Wylie's Baths in Coogee. These were good times with my classmates. I can tell this when I look at my Friendship Book from that time, lots of fun and caring comments.

I sat for the Intermediate at Crown Street School in 1960 when I was 15. I could have gone on to Sydney Girls' High School to do the Leaving Certificate and maybe to university like most of the other girls. But my parents didn't know how to help. It was the whole migrant and hostel thing, the language especially. They just believed it was the standard thing for girls to leave at the Intermediate and go to secretarial college. It was also just far too long in the hostel without a real home environment. My sister Anneke feels the same, maybe even more. Something happened about this time to make me lose direction. If we'd stayed in Delft maybe it would have been different, maybe I would have taken a different path. My favourite aunt Annie stayed single and played the violin in an orchestra. She was a very emancipated woman and the closest person I had to a role model, from afar.

I have always thought I didn't have confidence in myself about school. Looking back, I am sad I didn't reach my potential. I know now that historical research would have been right up my alley.

4 Malabar 1960-64

When we finally moved into the half-finished house in Malabar it was a great relief to leave that hostel. But it wasn't instant joy as a family home because we actually lived in the garage!

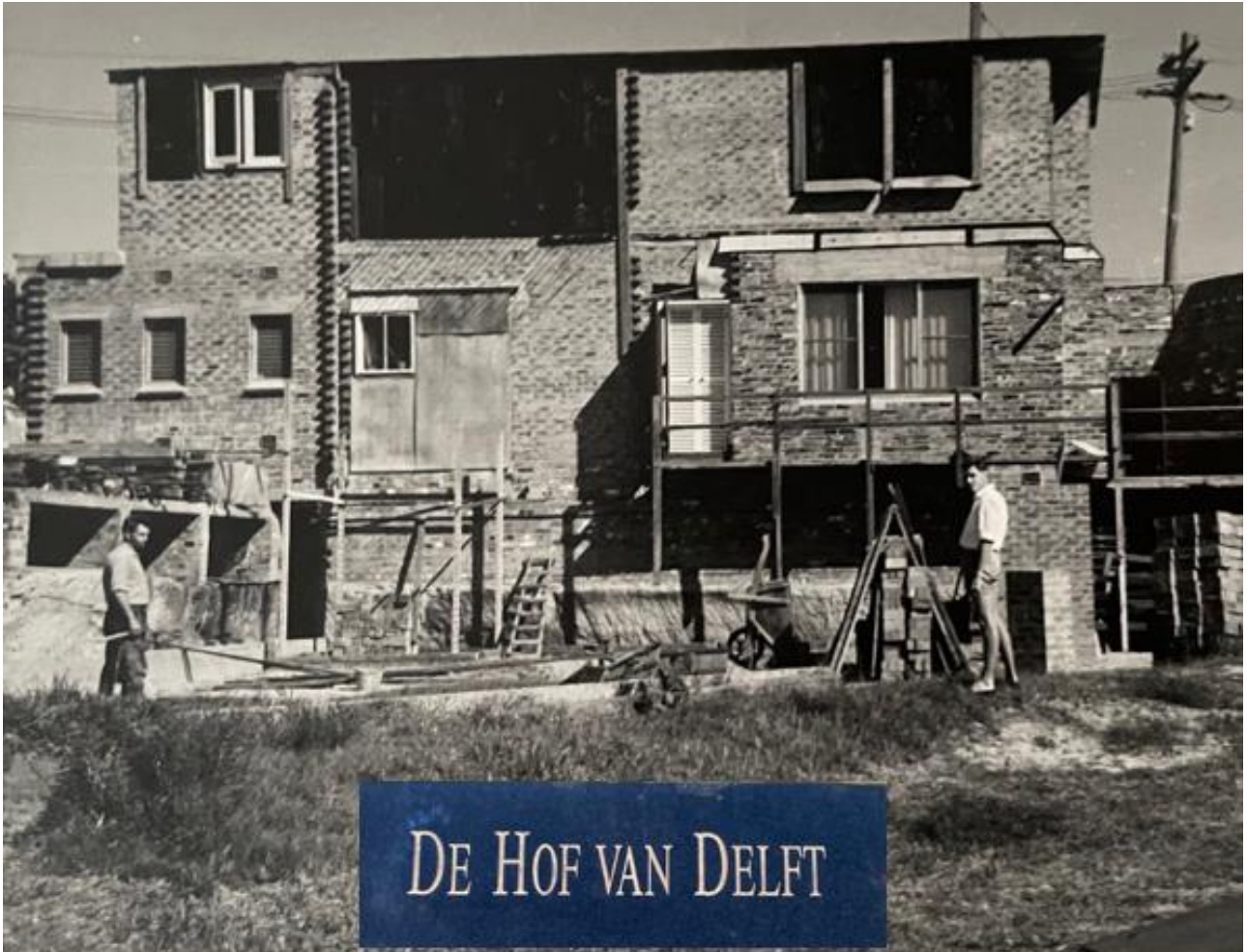
We had always come to the house regularly while Dad was building. Jan helped him with bricklaying, or at least counting all the bricks in the architect's drawing. Surprisingly Dad had engaged an architect to design the house. He was William Bower and I remember him as a German who spoke with a lisp, quite an interesting sound. But not surprisingly Dad took over doing things, the house changed shape and Mr Bower disappeared from the project.

Generally though Dad had good relations with suppliers and tradespeople, he respected their skills.

Gradually a sense of normalcy came to the Malabar house. Jan studied his antique catalogues and wrote often to the Delft aunts and cousins. Anneke had a horse in a paddock nearby. I had dancing lessons at Maroubra Junction and went to some local dances.

It was impossible to forget Delft in our Malabar house. Some said Dad created a Delft museum, and they still do. From the name on the front *De Hof van Delft*, literally Court of Delft, the house became more and more crowded with Dutch things — giant metal cattle scales from the butchery, portraits of William of Orange, maps, aerial photos, paintings, Delft pottery of all sorts and chests, bookcases and cupboards bulging with books, albums, and archives. It was always just there as Mum and Dad's place, now I know every inch of it.

Mum and Dad had some interesting visitors to the new house. Some of Mum's hospital work colleagues used to visit. The most interesting was Herta Hinterberger, a well-respected biochemist specialising in amines and infectious diseases. She was also a Viennese Jewish Holocaust survivor. This started to open my eyes to the reality of the Holocaust and the resilience of so many Jewish people. Even more awareness came through family friends Tobias and Anna Boas and their daughters. They came to Australia on the ship before us in 1953. I knew that they had survived the war



while most of their family had been murdered in the gas chambers but I hadn't known that Toby's brother and his family were among those hidden by Mum and Dad at home. I was to find out even more about this relationship much later through Dad's papers which contained several key letters written to Dad by Toby. But at the time they visited Malabar they were just Uncle Toby and Aunty Anna. I remember there was often discussion about kosher food practices and Dad's love of rare meat.

Looking back, my teenage years were difficult times. I guess it was the identity crisis thing. I couldn't see a direction in my life, the type of occupation or relationship or lifestyle. I couldn't picture going on to Sydney Girls' High like many classmates. My friend Annette became a hairdresser, others went into nursing. I dutifully did the secretarial course my parents wanted but couldn't see much fulfilment in it.

The Sydney Technical College Secretarial Course was a very popular course among girls like me. I don't remember much about the actual secretarial course but I must have done well enough because I have certainly spent a lot of time working in this area since. Correspondence, filing, accounts, office management and public relations have always come naturally to me, even though I wanted and could do more.

Perhaps the most memorable thing about my time at Sydney Technical College was the annual sports day. Of all things I did shotput and javelin. I used to bring the javelin home on the bus.

When I finished business college my first job was at Rosebery. The business was run by members of the Order of the Plymouth Brethren who were very hard taskmasters. They expected me to do whole payrolls when I was just out of Tech. So I applied for a job at Schweppes Soft Drink Company at Alexandria and became the first secretary to the accountant. It was a very hierarchical company even though I had a separate office for a while.

At Schweppes I also learnt more about the dominance of the English establishment in Australian companies and institutions. My boss the accountant was very English and he was always concerned that someone might apply for a job with a Catholic, Irish or 'foreign' name. I remember making a comment to him that I suppose I was mostly WASP without the Anglo-Saxon bit. The switchboard operator was also very concerned about people not speaking English 'properly' and I had a go at her as I had learnt

English myself. It's funny to think looking back there was still so much prejudice if you were not WASP.

I only lived at Malabar for four years and it was hardly finished by the time I left. I left because I married Waldemar Fuchs when I was just 19. Was I naive, carefree, in love? Whatever the reason it took me from Malabar into another adventure.



5 Leichhardt 1964-75

In some ways at 18 I was a very determined young woman. But I got married very young and to someone who didn't respect a career for women.

Waldemar Fuchs — Waldi for short — was born at the beginning of the war in a small village on the border of Russia and Germany. Many people there became refugees after the war. He was one of the single men they brought out to Australia to work in manufacturing and engineering projects for two years or so. Waldemar grew up with a hard father who had been captured by the Russians after he had gone back to his home in West Prussia. He was sent to the Crimea and didn't get released until 1957, the last lot kept as POWs. I don't think Waldemar ever came to terms with this relationship.

To be truthful I have found it difficult to talk about this time, such as how we met and courted, because it had such a sad ending. But when I look at the photographs from this time, which I have not done for decades, I see smiling faces, even looks of love, fun times with each other and friends, and of course the delight of the children. Dad really liked Waldemar because they shared a German ancestry and were hard workers.

Waldemar and I were married on 15 August 1964 at the German Lutheran Church in Goulburn Street, Sydney and after at Mum and Dad's house at Malabar. I had just turned 19. We went on our honeymoon in his VW beetle. I was very young, naive and optimistic.

I virtually taught him English when we first met and we only spoke in English together.

We bought a tiny single-fronted brick house in Flood Street, Leichhardt. The closest station was a short walk to Lewisham. Leichhardt was an inner-city working class suburb with a big post-war influx of migrant families, predominantly Italian but also Greek and odd mixes like us Dutch-German newlyweds. There was a woman in the weatherboard house next door who had six children. They used to say it took six children to look after one mother.

Of course Dad got at our house with gusto. He immediately ripped out the side window and put in an aluminium one. I came home from work one time and someone had stolen the nice front







door knob. Waldemar came home from work and said, 'What happened to the door knob?' Somebody fancied it obviously.

We had friends and it was very easy to get around in the inner city. Annie, my friend from hostel days, and her husband Dieter were living at Dulwich Hill. We'd just walk over to see them and go to a restaurant in Petersham or to the German Club for drinking and dancing. Annie and I had sewing machines and made lots of things, we seemed to be forever knitting. Then they moved out to a big house in the suburbs. Annie is in Mudgee now and Dieter has just turned 80. Maija also came to my wedding. We went with Maija and her husband Norbet on camping trips to the country. I had to put my bum out on the road to have a pee.

Waldemar liked fishing and especially to go rock fishing at Little Bay with his Greek friend. I'd go along for the adventure and to see Mum and Dad. One time we were fishing off the rocks and our dog caught a wobbegong. Fancy that.

Of course life always changes with kids. Willem was born in 1969 and Lis came just 18 months after in 1971. This was a very happy time with two little adventurous children. The kids had a sandpit and Petersham Park was nearby. They went to Petersham Preschool.

We went to Mum's hospital for Christmas parties with Santa and horse rides. Maybe that's where Lis' love of horses started. Once Waldemar brought home a wallaroo joey from a shooting trip. Willem and Lis really wanted to keep it but it's not fair to the animal is it? I just loved those times with the kids and all their little adventures.

In 1974 we went overseas as a little family. It was my first trip back to Delft, that's 21 years, and now with my two small children to meet some extended family. But it didn't go well at all for this is basically when my marriage broke up. Waldemar had gone over first and he got involved with someone he had known before coming to Australia. She was really desperate to get out of her village and enticed him to help her. I ended up coming back by myself with the children. It was pretty miserable.

Waldemar eventually came back to Australia and we got back together at Leichhardt. Big mistake. I tried to make it work but he really didn't want it. It's funny to see some

photos of myself from this time when I must have wanted to tart myself up to impress him. That was a big mistake too.

I was only 30 with two little kids. Financially it was not a problem because Waldemar paid towards the children. But he thought that was enough. Mum and Dad were very upset and thought everyone went through bad patches. But we can only tolerate differences to a limit.



6 Blakehurst 1975-87

After we separated Waldemar and I agreed to sell Leichhardt and buy a bigger house for the children. We settled on a place in Blakehurst and so that's where the children went to school. Willem in particular has very happy memories of his childhood in Blakehurst and doesn't feel anything affected him. Lis is not so sure about her experience. The children spent every second weekend with their father. I'm not sure how they managed because he was such a workaholic. Carol was my good friend at Blakehurst when the children were little.

I was very involved with the children when they were young but I just don't know why some people choose to be single parents. I joined a group called Parents without Partners and we went on outings, including a big trip to Canberra and the Snowy Mountains. But some things were tough. For example, Willem was dyslexic and it was very stressful trying to find the right help for him. Mrs Turvey was a wonderful teacher for him and he made a lot of progress with her which allowed him to succeed in other areas. Willem handled these challenges so well. He was always nice to the teachers and they liked and supported him in return.

In some ways I think I neglected Lis a bit dealing with Willem. But Lis was an independent spirit. She was a great horse lover. Her father brought her a horse which we kept at a paddock in Kurnell. The weekend trek from Blakehurst to Kurnell to see her horse was demanding but it allowed us to spend time together. Lis was into just about everything, including water polo and tennis.

When my marriage to Waldemar broke up I changed a lot of things about my life. Uppermost was mental stimulation and learning. I launched into a whole series of TAFE courses, starting with a Welfare course. This reskilling also allowed me to shift from purely secretarial work to areas with more responsibility.

In 1980 I took up a really interesting job in the office at Mascot Public School, about a 30 minute drive from Blakehurst. I loved the variety of teachers and students in that area. I'd take Dutch spicy biscuits on multicultural days. At that time there were some very groovy young teachers. After all I was only 35 myself.

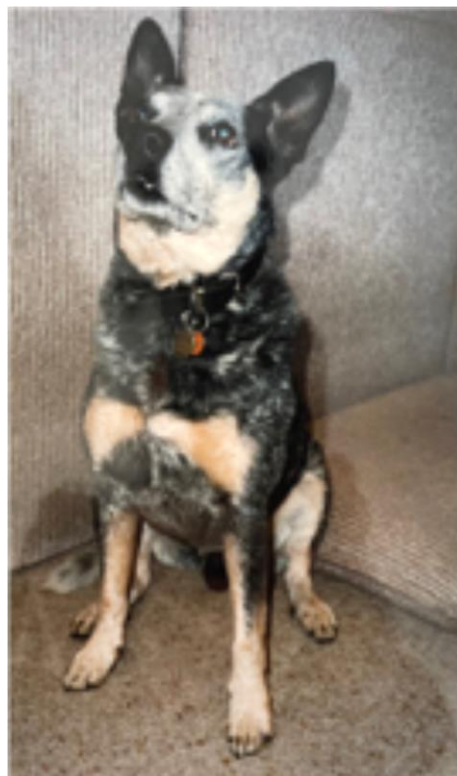




Here I was a proud single mum with two kids and a great job doing stimulating courses and group outings. I had finally found myself and I fall for the 'consummate conman' with 'charm syndrome'. What is far worse, I married him. I refuse to name him and I have got rid of everything to do with him, it was that bad, really. I can't believe we stuck it out so long, even separating and getting back together for near 20 years.

After leaving the job at Mascot School I worked for a time for Family Life Management. Ironically, they did marriages and marriage counselling. It was run by the Baptist Church and my boss Ian was a minister. He and his wife Galinda were delightful. I organised the pre-marriage weekends.

Things were not going well on the Blakehurst home front. The biggest tension was not between me and the 'consummate conman' but between his stepdaughter and my daughter Lis. This became so unbearable that Lis moved to Brisbane to stay near my sister Anneke and her husband Henk. I decided to follow her.



7 Brisbane 1988-90

After Lis went to Brisbane, she was only about 15, I decided to follow her. I moved to Brisbane to be with her and bought a house there. Willem then came up too. Lis had brought her beloved horse with her and I brought my dog Bluey and somehow inherited another dog called Tex. So it was a lively and fun house and good to be together.

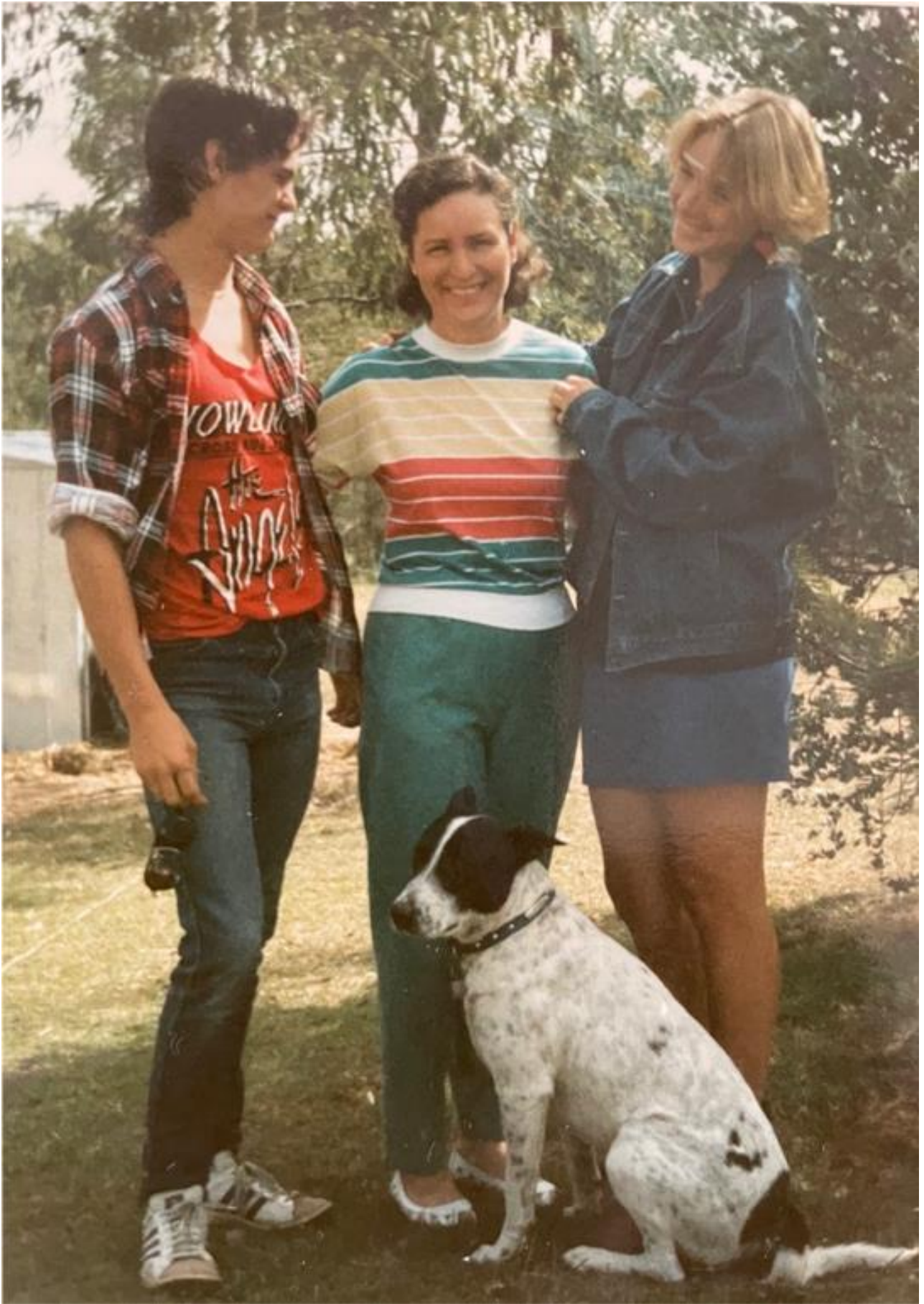
I had a great job in the Library of the Queensland Art Gallery. The Gallery had opened in 1982 on Southbank and its sister institution, the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, had opened in 1985. And this was adjacent to the new Expo site. The World Expo 88 had an average attendance of 100,000 people a day, with a staggering total visitation of 18 million. So Brisbane was a pretty exciting place to be at that time.

The 'consummate conman' was not really part of the Brisbane time. He would come up now and then, to do his so-called business.

Lis met her boyfriend Warren when she was very young. But they seemed good for each other so they got married at a very young age, actually at 19, the same age I did! Waldemar put on a big wedding for them at the Casino on the Gold Coast.

After Lis was married I was very concerned about being so far from Mum and Dad so I returned to Sydney.

It's all very complicated, I would have preferred a much simpler life really.



8 Narwee 1990-2000

When I came back from Brisbane I bought the house in Narwee so there was no longer any financial relations between Waldemar and me as there had been at Blakehurst. Willem was working with his father at his factory in Padstow. He met Tracey there as she was working for Waldemar too. Willem and Tracey got married soon after. It was a lovely wedding.

I don't know why the 'consummate conman' and I got back together at Narwee. He had set up a business in North Sydney and it was such a financial disaster that we almost lost the house. He could sleep with this stuff going on but I couldn't. After that he spent all his time in the Narwee garage.

In these unhappy circumstances I started to do lots of things by myself, to cope really.

I did all these short courses at TAFE, the WEA, Sydney University Continuing Education —philosophy, history, creative writing, you name it. I also did a whole series of walks around Sydney looking at different types of architecture. I was a member of the Historic Houses Trust for quite a long time and did National Trust tours too. I didn't have anyone I knew who was interested in these things so I did it on my own, but that way you meet new and interesting people. That probably kept my sanity, a way of keeping the brain working.

I remember I did a TAFE course on oral histories with older people. That's when I did a part of my own story which received very positive comments from the teacher.

'You give the reader a beneath the surface image in all of your work,' she said. 'Please, please keep writing for you do have a talent for words.'

This little essay was the first time I had reflected on my own life in that way and it surprised me how strong that emotional attachment to Delft as an eight year old girl was still with me 40 years later. This is what I wrote then ...

I had no say in our family coming to Australia, because I was too young. In hindsight, after weighing up the pros and cons, I believe it would have been better for our whole family to have stayed in Holland. But we are here and must make the most of it, because we have been here too long to be able to live in Holland



now. As well as this I have Australian children, one of whom is married and another engaged to an Australian, and I'm sure they would not wish to live anywhere else.
(1993)

I had some interesting jobs in this period, good and bad. I became the PA for the Director of Nursing at St George Hospital. I confess I called her the St George Dragon. Needless to say I didn't stay long. Another unfortunate experience was working for a Trust company where my boss didn't want women to wear pants, only skirts. I stuck that one out for a year.

My last job was as the administrator of the Cabramatta Community Centre. It was very rewarding to be entrusted with such responsibility. I was there for six years.

As you can imagine there was a very diverse community in Cabramatta at this time. Of course there were the infamous Vietnamese gangs with lots of drugs. They had to take the needles out of the sandpit in the preschool next door. But all the Vietnamese families were wonderfully happy and community-minded, as well as the Cambodian, Nicaraguan, Afghan and more.

I was involved in organising so many things, with an amazing team of staff and volunteers, such dedication was inspiring. My boss was Jon English's sister Jan. I loved being a mentor for lots of the younger kids. And the contact with so many migrant communities was incredibly rewarding as I realised I could empathise with their experiences from my own. There was a Palestinian Christian family, a well-educated Afghan man who still had a brother in a refugee camp, the Vietnamese accountant who had been a teacher in Vietnam. So many good migrant stories from around the world. I put a big map of Australia on the wall to help these people learn more about Australian places.

It was during this hectic but rewarding working life at Cabramatta that I got my first bout of cancer. My friend Carol was a very important part of my life at this time as she came with me to the cancer specialists. I don't know what I would have done without her.

Unfortunately I had to leave the Cabramatta Community Centre to undergo the cancer treatment. After that I basically looked after Mum and Dad. I kept my marriage

problems from them but they had to accept things when it ended. I never bothered to divorce the 'consummate conman'. He turned up on my birthday with a bunch of flowers and I just said this is not a good idea and closed the door. Sad really, he turned religious when he became ill and has died. Tony, the solicitor who sorted out our affairs, was a really nice person. He is one of those decent people I have very fond memories of in my life.

The period I had on my own without 'the consummate conman' was probably one of the best periods I have had. I was getting over my cancer treatment, financially secure with a car and no ties. The Narwee house actually became what I called 'the welcoming house' entertaining family and friends.

At this time I also developed a closer relationship with my brother Jan who lived in a historic house in Marrickville. This opened up a period of new adventures into history and heritage but also profound sadness and loss.



9 Marrickville 1997-2007

My brother Johannes, known by most as Jan or John, was just two years older than me but always seemed older, I guess because he was so tall and a loner really. I realise now that I am more like him than we both imagined. He was very handsome, and very dapper. Apparently there was a comment on his school report that hopefully he would work for somebody who appreciated a refined taste. He was an eccentric character with some of that proverbial Dutch arrogance.

My brother was an antique dealer from a very young age. He was the male heir and so Dad's favourite. Dad took him to exhibitions and they collected and marked up all these little catalogues. It was like an apprenticeship. The first gift Jan ever wanted was not a toy but a little pewter dish with lions on it that he saw in an antique shop window. My daughter Lis has it now.

When we were in Bunnerong, Jan waggled school to go to Lawsons antique auctions. He would meet up with these old ladies from the North Shore, just like he spent time with the old maiden aunts in Delft. When I was young I used to go to auctions with him too, trying to keep up with his long strides. When he set up his own antique business, he would go back to Holland and buy a whole load of stuff to bring back. I learnt so much from my brother and I have always enjoyed keeping special things from his collection.

Jan lived in a wonderful Federation cottage in Marrickville with many original features, including three fireplaces. Of course Dad got to it and replaced all the floorboards and built a garage at the back. Jan made it his haven with giant paintings on classical themes and an eclectic mix of antique furniture and objects, each chosen with his keen eye.

Jan was very involved with the Marrickville Heritage Society. He became President of the Society in June 1995 and was very active in Heritage Watch, especially a campaign to save the spire of St Clement's Church. He was very passionate about all sorts of things.

My brother got me involved with the Marrickville Heritage Society. I first went to a gathering where he was presented with the Marrickville Medal. I found I loved the

atmosphere of this group of heritage enthusiasts. It was a real mix of people, young and old, couples and singles, straight and gay, academics and boffins. They had regular meetings with talks, local walking tours and bus trips to historic places in all parts of Sydney – Cockatoo Island, Arncliffe, Rouse Hill,



Parramatta — and further afield to the Blue Mountains and Norfolk Island. Above all it rekindled a shared passion about history and heritage with my brother.

Jan had played it low-key as a gay man but he kept it totally quiet about having AIDS. It was devastating when I came to know about it. Just a few weeks before he died I thanked him for not telling me because I would have spent years worrying about him. When he was very ill he asked me, 'Do you like my house?' I regret now that maybe I didn't give the enthusiastic answer he was hoping for.

We made it possible for Jan to die in his Marrickville house because that's what he wanted. He became seriously ill in early 1997 and died in July 1997. Mum was devastated. Dad was very stoic but in his way broke down too. He is buried in South Sydney Cemetery where Mum and Dad are now too. My plot is there as well.

In October 1997 at the RAHS Annual Conference I accepted a *Certificate of Achievement for the Late John Zinsmeester* awarded by Hazel Hawke, Chair of the Heritage Council. And soon after I wrote a story about Jan, his Delft background and Australian achievements, for the Marrickville Heritage Society journal *Heritage 10*.

Jan left his house and collections to my sister Anneke and me. This caused a family drama. Anneke was not so interested in the house or contents because she lived in Brisbane. She really just wanted to sell it while I was more sentimental and attached to it. Dad had asked me not to sell it for the same reason. This was the opportunity for me to resolve lots of things. I finalised my separation from the 'consummate conman', sold the Narwee house, bought Anneke out of her share of Jan's house, and moved to Marrickville myself.

When I moved in I felt Jan's presence everywhere. He'd filled his house with special things. I couldn't sleep in the room where he died. John Williams, my brother's antiques friend, helped me to organise a lot of his things. He is looking after the auction of his collection now.

I loved living in Marrickville, the mixture of different people, the shopping, the parks, the convenience to so many inner city places. My grandchildren liked the time there too. Heidi would come and stay with me and I'd light a big fire. I'd take the kids to the Sydney University museum and Midsummer Night's Dream at the Botanic Gardens.

For a long time since my young teenage expeditions with Jan I had lost interest in objects and auctions. I realised that living in Jan's house in Marrickville and becoming involved with the Marrickville Heritage Society was a gift from him really. It was sad but very rewarding.

My brother was the family historian and he would have sorted out all this family collection. But when he died that role passed to me. I owe it to him to fulfil that role and privilege.



Willem Fuchs (nephew of John Zinsmeester), Richard Blair, Diane McCarthy, Rev. Chris Clerke, Ellie Zinsmeester (sister) & Willem Zinsmeester (father – seated) at unveiling of John Zinsmeester plaque St Clement's Anglican Church, Marrickville 12 October (photo: Scott MacArthur)



Optimistic Society members auditioning for parts in 'Water Rats' on 27/9/97 Goat Island tour. Standing from left: Denys Tanner, Harold Welsh, Zena Hodges, Anne Walter, Shirley Doolan, Harry Stone, Shirley Hilyard, Gwenda Welsh, Danie Ondinea, Anne Catton, Ian Phillips, Kay McGrath (bending), June Cameron, Margaret Russell, Laura Dunn, Lyn Smith, Hillary Goldsmith, Norma Lawson, Keith Lawson, Noeleen Curran. Sitting etc: Frances Muller, Richard Blair, Del Stone, Valerie McLeish, Phyllis McCorquodale, Diane McCarthy, Ellie McKenzie, Cheri Lutz (in front). Those on tour but not pictured: Margaret Dortkamp, Robert Lutz, Chin Lian Tsuei, Beryl Winter.

10 Malabar

After Jan died I basically focussed on looking after Mum and Dad at Malabar, while keeping sane by having an independent life at Marrickville. It was very strange to spend so much time in Malabar and to witness Mum and Dad's world.

Mum was the long-suffering Dutch wife, but this was the persona she adopted too. Mum had no interest in books while it was Dad's whole world. She read true romance stories. She got a lot of pleasure from handcrafts and was so good at things like that. But some things were really tough on her, especially Jan's death and my marriage breakups.

But while Mum appeared a conventional housewife she had a life beyond Dad and his Malabar domain. She worked at St Henry's Hospital until she was 60. She had some very good women friends, such as Jo. They went to England together and Jo visited Holland with her. Mum was a member of the Maroubra RSL Club and she played bingo and the pokies until she was quite old. I appreciate my mother's reserve more now. She never liked boasting — she didn't like you putting yourself out. The best praise Mum gave was 'you've done your best'. I do think that held me back.

I was caring for Dad a lot after Mum died in 2003. I never stayed at Malabar when he was ill. I couldn't cope with too much as he was quite demanding. I'd put him in this comfortable water chair while I tried to do the washing or something and he would be constantly shouting Nell, Nell. Dad always called me Nellie and Mum Ell. I'd go home to Marrickville at night and that way I could cope. Towards the end Gary, who worked for Home Care, stayed the weekend.

After Dad died in November 2006, Willem helped Gary lay him out and that was a huge thing for him. Then we had the funeral at his Malabar house. Dad was no longer religious so that was his special place.

Willem was always very interested in the house and its collection. He was very close to his grandfather and even looks like him more than his father. Willem wanted to move into Dad's house but Tracey thought it was too much like a museum. Now Tracey has actually become very interested in all this stuff. Maybe we should have sorted all this stuff out ten years ago.



For all Dad's lifelong pining for Delft, he was actually a bit funny about going back to visit. Eventually he did go back and sent these funny letters to Mum saying he had regrets about ever leaving Delft. The only other time he flew was to Melbourne to go to Toby's grandson's *bar mitzvah*. I sat with the women upstairs with the men downstairs. It went on forever so Dad went for a walk and when they thanked him, he wasn't there. That's typical. Dad had such a sardonic sense of humour, not typically Dutch. He'd look at things in interesting ways. I think I've picked up on that a bit.

Dad was always making things. From when we first arrived he had a bench set up at the hostel, making things for us. He made me an axe for playing cowboys and Indians. Then there was Malabar and the many houses that his children and grandchildren moved in to. And then the way he organised and documented his lifelong collection. I'm endlessly fascinated at his documentation of everything in his life. It was all a great adventure for him. My father could have done anything if you think about it.

After Dad died in 2006 I did not want to touch his things for a long time. I couldn't let go of any of it because it was so important to him. I went on lots of heritage excursions, reconnected with some Dutch friends and societies and travelled overseas often. Eventually I started to explore Dad's collections and another whole world opened up to me.

New Dutch friends

An interesting experience in my recent life has been my friendship with two gay Dutch men, Alex and Paulus. This would not have happened if I had not had such a hopeless marriage and done so much by myself, and especially becoming involved in the heritage and antiques world with Jan and the Marrickville Heritage Society.

I first met Alex at Arncliffe House museum when I visited, probably with the Marrickville Heritage Society. I heard this Dutch accent and there was Alex. We instantly made contact and it developed from there into a good friendship. But he's gay!

Alex is brilliant and strange, a complete loner and hoarder. His house at Arncliffe is crowded with stuff. He's a book crazy person, with several degrees and a big memory. He was a horticulturalist and worked as a gardener at Kirribilli House. I learnt a lot

from him and we did so many things together. I had a lively intellectual connection with him. But he could be a difficult person, that Dutch arrogance thing again!

Alex and I used to go all over the place. We were involved in Wentworth Park markets together. We'd go to op shops and book fairs to buy things for the market. Alex has now got a Vietnamese friend, Michael, who is my son's age. Michael is very good for him, taking him to horticultural shows and the market stall.

I first met Paulus when I volunteered at the Broadway Op Shop run by another Jan, also Dutch. Paulus and I connected because he often went to auctions looking for interesting Dutch artefacts. I introduced Paulus to Wentworth Park antique market and to the Dutch Australian Cultural Centre. Paulus claims he introduced me to the DACC but it was the other way around. It certainly became a big part of his life. He became Chair of the DACC in 2016 and remained on the Board until recently. He's 80 now.

Paulus recently went through my father's files and selected some things for the DACC collection. They were mostly things related to broader Dutch history and migration to Australia rather than my mum and dad's story. I am still frustrated at how he mucked up my files doing that.

Looking back this has all been a bit of a ride with Alex and Paulus. There's the antiques and Dutch connection but it has been interesting being so involved with the gay world. Of course my brother Jan was gay and there is a Sydney Dutch gay network. It's funny to think of me as a tomboy playing with those boys in Delft and here I am with gay friends now 70 years later. I like making those connections.

Dutch identity

My Dutch identity has of course always been a part of me but it has been stronger and weaker at different times of my life.

I still watch the Dutch news. I have always spoken Dutch although I think it's stayed a bit like a child's language really. I think Dad always thought in Dutch. Mum and Dad never took out citizenship but I took out Australian citizenship to get a passport. It felt wonderful when I got my Dutch citizenship back.

The Malabar House never let you forget you were Dutch. Dad created a museum to Dutch history and culture. But for most of my adult life it was 'theirs', not necessarily 'mine'.

Then there have been my many visits to Delft and members of the extended family. Even though my first trip back in 1974 was not a happy one I have made many happy visits since, always learning more and reinforcing my Dutch identity.

The Holland Festival held at Fairfield Showground since the 1980s has been a major annual event for the Dutch community. I went with Mum and Annie and we met Marja there. There was also the famous Dutch Shop at Smithfield with all whacky things Dutch, linked to the Dutch Australian Cultural Centre.

My personal Dutch connection in Australia has been through a lifelong friendship with Annie and Marja who I first met at the hostel as young girls. We're each very different people but have kept this long-standing connection.

Ada is a more recent friendship but she has been important in helping piece my story together. After I became involved in the Dutch Australian Cultural Association, Marja wrote a little story about me and our shared Dutch background in the newsletter, including that I went to Crown Street Intermediate Girls' High School. Ada was actually working as secretary of the school and she contacted me because they had reunions of people who went there. I didn't go but I sent her some class photos I had.

But I did meet up with Ada at, of all things, a Dutch gathering on the occasion of the coronation of the new Dutch king, Willem Alexander, in April 2013. The Masonic Centre had a big screen of the coronation, awards were given out to worthy Dutch Australians and Dutch food was consumed – croquettes, meatballs and other unhealthy Dutch snacks.

The Dutch Australian Cultural Centre is a more recent enthusiasm for me. It was at Smithfield in a Dutch shop. They had a professional archivist who has been diligently working for years, an ex-teaching nun. The archive is now at Tasman Village. I started going to this Dutch family genealogy group run by the DACC. It was a bit strange because most did not speak Dutch. I went first and then Paulus got involved. They're

a bit protective of their group because they have been going a long time. They had interesting talks and asked me to speak about the hidden Jewish families.

Then in 2014 I was asked to contribute to an exhibition and book for the Randwick Library, *A Migrants Story Mementos* project. The idea was to tell a migrant story around a specific object that had been brought from a person's homeland. I chose to tell our family migration story around Dad's Wooden Box. Here is a copy of the story and photo of box.

This old oak box was made by my father, Willem, in Delft, the Netherlands, in 1929 when he was 15. He made it for his father Johannes, which is why there is a J carved inside the lid. Our family, consisting of my father, mother, brother, sister and myself, came to Australia on the M S Sibajak in 1953 — as did two large wooden crates, packed with all our belongings and household goods, including the box.

The box once again holds memorabilia. Its main contents now are unusual objects given by the grandfather to the grandson. It is a reminder of a dear father, grandfather and great-grandfather. It represents the practical skills Dutch boys were taught, to stand them in good stead throughout their lives. It is also a reminder of what people brought with them when they travelled to distant countries, knowing that they might never see their relatives, friends or homeland again. It is symbolic of people who, like my parents, had a strong need to be surrounded by tangible objects from their Dutch past and heritage, and the memories associated with these objects.



Travels

I grew up with my father's postcard collection. It was my geography of Europe. Sometimes I'm not sure whether I remember visiting the place or seeing his postcards.

After Dad died I went overseas with Willem for four weeks. We went to the Antwerp Station which was incredible. Belgium colonial money built all these monuments. We took the train to Ypres. Willem wanted to see the battlefields, especially the German cemetery. I found it very moving. There's a statue called 'The grieving parents' by artist Kaethe Kollwitz. We also went to the night ceremony at the famous Menin Gate. We stayed in a tiny hotel with two small beds and had a nice breakfast.

We also went to lovely Bruges. Me being my father's daughter, I went round the back of the church and saw all these broken bits that weren't used in the reconstruction. The curiosity thing. I have this Bruges Cathedral postcard and it's the same scene as on this tapestry cushion and it's also the scene in the film *In Bruges* when he jumps off. I can't help making these connections, it's like when I'm travelling, travelling in the mind.

When I travelled to Delft I stayed with my cousin Roos, the youngest cousin on my mother's side. She was great to stay with but she didn't like travelling or going to museums. She is more interested in her dogs than in art or history. So I often visited museums and historic places on my own. But I did travel a lot with Roos' cousin Marijke. We had many terrific trips together. She could bring me out of my shell. She's a very patient person and culturally aware. She'd take me to these strange places, like a cafe in Antwerp with all these religious statues. Another time we took the train to the coast in Ostend.

So many vivid pictures float through my mind of Dutch cultural sites I visited. In The Hague I visited the beautiful building of a famous modern architect. The Hague Museum had an exhibition called *Holland at its Loveliest* with romantic paintings from the late nineteenth century. The World Museum in Rotterdam has an incredible Indonesian collection. In Amsterdam there is a wonderful handbag museum. I regret not buying a souvenir one.

In 2010 I did a cruise on the new *SS Rotterdam* of the famous Holland America Line.

It left from the old wharves at Rotterdam, it was very nostalgic to leave from the same wharves as we did in 1953. The cruise went to Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki and St Petersburg. I remember the incredible Vasa museum in Stockholm. But the highlight was a tour of Alvo Alto architecture in Finland. I remember the beautiful wall hangings done by his wives, famous designers in their own rights but overshadowed by him, as usual.

The last time I went overseas was just before Covid. I spent a week by myself in England. I took the train to Cambridge. I loved the Fitzwilliam Museum with its wonderful Dutch art collection, as well as a fine China collection. I spent ages looking at things, then having a coffee break and chatting with strangers.





Family historian

After Dad died in 2006 I did not want to touch his things for a very long time, they were so important to him. When I sold Marrickville and moved into the Malabar house, I brought a lot of Jan's collection here too. When I got my new cancer diagnosis I decided I had to do something about these vast and daunting collections.

Dad's archives were all in binders and boxes crammed into various Dutch cupboards. He was meticulous about documenting his life and the pictures and documents he accumulated. But this was less the case as he got older. I have found the strangest things just popped into the strangest places. I think I'm just a custodian of these family heirlooms and it's my responsibility to find a home for them.

The books were probably the easiest. Leo Berkelouw, the well-known Dutch antique book collector, came to look at Dad's collection and took a lot of the war stuff. My sister did too.

Dad loved maps. Besides the large one on the wall he had many map books which I gave to Berkelouw's to sell as well. Of Dad's precious Bibles I kept one and donated a rare Bible to the Dutch Australia Cultural Centre which they restored. Paulus went through the collection of papers and took a lot to the Dutch Australia Cultural Centre that had no direct family reference.

The paintings are an odd mix. There were four watercolour paintings that must have been collected by my uncle who worked at the Delft Pottery and brought back by my brother. I probably should have given them to the Pottery but I gave two to my cousin. Of two small watercolours in my brother's collection, one is of a baby's head and it turns out to be of a Stuart by van Dyke, presumably a copy. There are two so-so paintings that always lived in the stairwell, of William of Orange and the place where he was killed. I was always fascinated by this distant connection with the British Royal family. A small oil painting of Delft was given to my father by his old friend Leo when he left.

My father's postcard collection has been my picture of the world since childhood. His sisters travelled all over the place and sent them to him for his collection. What to do with them?

Dad also kept photographs because they kept people alive for him. He was a very sentimental person. He kept the most special ones in the oak box he made for his father. This is Willem's treasure now.

On my trips to Holland I would take odd things back that Dad had brought out. The craziest was a four-metre square Dutch flag that I donated to the Dutch archives even though it was heavy to take back. I don't know what will happen to the giant iron cattle scales still on the wall at Malabar, a relic of the Zinsmeester family butchers. Most of my brother Jan's antique collection has gone to auction and is still being resolved.

The archives are the most daunting because they carry so many intimate secrets of past lives and family stories. There's a shipping list with the names our little family and Maija's Smit family. There are my parents' passports, Dad still with his apron on and never smiling for the camera. There's an interesting certificate that our church gave when we left, basically a reference from the Dutch Church to the Stanmore Presbyterian Church we went to here.

Such family archives say a lot about the migrant experience of many but few people are interested in the intimate details of this one Zinsmeester family. Except on one major topic.

The Righteous Among the Nations

I did know the story about Mum and Dad helping Jews in the war. This was mostly through contact with Uncle Toby and Aunty Anna whose relatives were involved. While Mum and Dad were still alive I tried to get them to tell me more about how they hid Jews, but they just didn't want to discuss it. It wasn't until I went through all Dad's papers with my new researcher hat on that I found out the details, indeed the full glorious story.

Amongst Dad's papers I found a letter sent to him by Toby Boas. It's a lovely letter describing the Boas' voyage out on the ship before ours and even telling him to bring clothes for hot sunny days. I realised that the letter must have meant a lot to Dad. I sent it to Toby's daughter Margaret and she was so pleased with it and that we had re-established contact. I then discovered that Toby had written a reference for Dad commending his actions in helping Toby's brother and family during the war. Toby wrote —

London 12. 8. 52

Hiermede verklaar ik ganne,
dat Willem Hinomuster wonende
oostende 49 Delft, in de oorlogs-
tijd veel illegaal werk heeft
verricht. Hij heeft mijn broer en
schoonzuster het leven gered door
ze in zijn huis op te nemen. Hij
verzorgde ook distributiebussen
en deed alles wat hij kon terwyl
ze zonder geld waren. Ook hun zoon
en schoondochter waren een tijd bij
hem ondergedoken.

Verder nam hij nog voor korte
of langere tijd in zijn huis de twee
Polis vrouwen: kind en zwager. Van Praag
de Traugh heeft van mij. De twee broer
en vrouw. Dit waren alle ...

Herewith I gladly declare that Willem Zinsmeester living at Oosteinde 49 Delft, carried out a lot of illegal work during the war. He saved the lives of my brother and sister-in-law by taking them into his house, he took care of distribution cards and did everything that he could while they had no money. Their son and daughter-in-law were for a time in hiding with him. He further took into his house for short or long periods, Mr Bliz, wife and child and brother-in-law. I van Praagh van Praagh, cousins of mine. Mr Groen and wife. These were all Jews. Also some non Jews whose names are unknown to me. Those who could pay he charged f15 per week. He also supported me during these difficult years as much as he was able to. He is one of the few who do not boast about what he did for his fellow human beings during these difficult years.

(Handwritten letter of reference in Dutch from Mr T. Boas for Mr Willem Lodewijk Zinsmeester.

London, 12 August 1952.)

I realised the significance of Mum and Dad's wartime role when I came across the Courage to Care project, a Sydney Jewish Museum travelling exhibition project collecting stories of Holocaust survivors and those who helped them. Courage to Care is an initiative of B'nai B'rith, a global Jewish service organisation promoting human rights and social justice, specifically the courage of individuals who stood up and confronted discrimination and injustice, especially non-Jews who protected Jews in wartime. That was my mum and dad.

I made contact with the Sydney Jewish Museum and as soon as I showed them the research and archives related to Mum and Dad's story they became very interested in acquiring them for the museum collection. It was a lot of work with the museum. Besides the research I had to do a lot of documentation and translation of material for them, but Jana Vytrhlik, curator of collections, was incredibly supportive.

The Sydney Jewish Museum succinctly outlined the Boas-Zinsmeester story based on my research:

Tobias' brother Samuel Boas and his wife Betty (nee Bamberger) survived the war in hiding. Their son Jozef 'Jopie' Boas and daughter-in-law Roosje 'Roza' (nee Hamme) stayed with the Zinsmeesters for a time. Jozef and his wife Roosje Boas were picked

up by the Germans on the street on 17 May 1943 in Delft and deported to Westerbork. They were both murdered in Sobibor. Their little daughter Betty Dora survived in hiding, first with the Zinsmeesters and later with Hendrik Kwant and Maria Apolonia Kwant (nee Kraan), also butchers in Delft.

There were other references and commendations for our emigration process, some referring to Dad's role in helping Jews. The most evocative source material was a series of photographs of the Boas family. These were complemented by photographs of Mum and Dad and our Zinsmeester house, the actual scene of the dramas.

Other items in Dad's collection of interest to the Jewish Museum included a French magazine of Dutch people being killed, a book about Dutch Nazis, a scarf that one of the women spun when in hiding and a collection of poems for St Nicholas written for when the Jewish families celebrated Christmas with my parents. Dad had also kept all these illegal newspapers, sometimes just roneoed sheets.

Of course I could not stop until I had researched all of Dad's collections on this topic. I found another story through my own research that had never been documented. There was a Hungarian couple with a little boy who had been hiding with Mum and Dad for a while. I found a concert program in Dad's papers indicating that the father, a musician, went to a Christmas evening concert with my parents. I pieced all this together from Dad's documents.

I also found out about a sad interesting story about my Aunt Annie, Dad's sister. She worked in a Jewish orphanage as a violin teacher. All the girls in the orphanage were sent to Sobibor and murdered and Annie couldn't do a thing to help them.

I sent a full list of Dad's material to the Archives in The Hague. They asked for certain ones so I took them when I went over. I also took material to the National Institute of War and Holocaust Documentation in Amsterdam. It made the trip really worthwhile, not only the family connections, but rewarding for me as a researcher and historian.

The Sydney Jewish Museum work also set a slow ball rolling for a submission for Mum and Dad to be honoured as two of The Righteous Among the Nations. This is a global project by Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem. Yad Vashem define The Righteous Among the Nations as

'non-Jews who took great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust. Rescue took many forms and the Righteous came from different nations, religions and walks of life. What they had in common was that they protected their Jewish neighbours at a time when hostility and indifference prevailed'.

What became my 'Jewish project' dragged on for years. My friend Judy who lived in Israel and was involved with Yad Vashem helped me negotiate the complex Israeli correspondence involved. And the ongoing support of Jana at the Sydney Jewish Museum was crucial. All this was fascinating, frustrating and rewarding because it finally came to fruition. Mum and Dad were officially accorded the Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations by the Assembly of the Directorate of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem on 7 May 2018. Mum and Dad were truly gone by then but it was a profound legacy for me and our extended Zinsmeester and Oosterhoff families.

Anneke and I received the Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations on Mum and Dad's behalf from the Israeli Ambassador at a ceremony at the Sydney Jewish Museum on 4 September 2018. I spoke about the stories and collection items I donated. I ended my talk with these words —

'In conclusion, I would like to quote from ... the Diary of Anne Frank:

Niet in rijkdom of macht ligt de grootheid van de mensen, maar in karakter en goedheid.

Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness.

I believe my parents were all of these things and, like others who risked their own lives to save their fellow human beings, shone a light in the darkness that engulfed them.

Thank you all for this opportunity to give them the recognition they deserve.'

There were many members of the Zinsmeester and Boas families all assembled for a group photograph. I'm so glad my sister Anneke came as we were a bit estranged since Dad died. She was going to sit at the back and I said 'no, come up with me' and so we accepted the medal together. Perhaps this was as rewarding as receiving the medal itself.

Sydney Jewish Museum presentation group photo above, from left to right —

Anneke (Johanna) Winkeler nee Zinsmeester, daughter of Willem and Elisabeth / Willem Fuchs, Ellie's son / Phillip Winkeler, Anneke and Henk's son / Ellie (Petronella) Zinsmeester, daughter of Willem and Elisabeth / Henk (Hendrik) Winkeler, Anneke's husband / Jenna Winkeler, Phillip's wife, with daughter Sasha / Ken Moschner, grandson of Tobias and Anna Boas, son of their daughter Margaret Moschner nee Boas / Hanna Winkeler, Phillip and Jenna's older daughter / Lynne Heyman (nee Isaacs), granddaughter of Tobias and Anna Boas, daughter of their daughter Beppie (Rebecca) nee Boas and Les Isaacs / Jennifer Isaacs, sister of Lynne / Margot (Margaret) Moschner, nee Boas, daughter of Tobias and Anna Boas / Heidi Fuchs, Willem and Tracey's daughter / Tracey Fuchs, Willem's wife / Jared Fuchs, Willem and Tracey's son.





An absolute highlight to conclude all this work on the 'Jewish project' was my contribution to the Jewish Community's annual commemoration *Yom Hashoah*, remembering the Holocaust, at the University of NSW in April 2019. I was asked to speak about my parents and light a candle for the Righteous Among the Nations. The Clancy Auditorium was crowded and there was a beautiful *Cantor* performed just before I got up to do my thing, It was the most overwhelmingly emotional experience of my life.

I saw through documenting the Jewish stories, getting the medal and giving parts of Dad's collection to the Jewish Museum. I did it for Mum and Dad. They tended to focus more on Dad but Mum was there. They were a couple, they were partners. And I am so proud of them both for what they did before I was born. And I am proud that I could be the family researcher and historian to reveal it to the world and help get them recognition.



11 Conclusion

It's very strange being back in this Malabar house that Dad built when we first came to Australia. There's nothing of mine here, it's a strange feeling. I've put off looking into my story because it was so emotional. I didn't want to go into my personal life because I kept thinking about the break-up of my marriages. I owed it to Dad to organise and disperse his collection. It has been a daunting task but I can't let things go, I'm like him. But as I have let these things go to various homes I realise that I have been unburdened of them. I feel freer in time and spirit to think about more personal things, about myself really. I have rediscovered some things about myself.

I realise that I have always had a love of history. This should have been my calling way back after sitting the Intermediate Certificate rather than going to secretarial college. I do like things to have order and I don't like all the files and photos being mucked up. I guess this is partly personality and partly secretarial training. But it's also the skills of a researcher and archivist, before the history work can be done.

I love history because there is always something new to learn. Since I was a child I have loved the Middle Ages, especially in Northern Europe. My favourite book at the moment is *Lotharingia: A Personal History of Europe's Lost Country* by Simon Winder. It's about the carving up of old Germany by Charlemagne. I also love more scholarly historians like Simon Schama. But really it's not the books themselves the way Dad or Jan loved them. My interest is in the people and their stories. I always like to hear about people's backgrounds, maybe because of my own migrant experience.

I remember helping a Bangladeshi family buy furniture for their new house in Lakemba. They ate wonderful vegetables bought from the market for next to nothing. Recently I went up to the local Malabar bakery and there was this interesting looking man with a carved walking stick. I couldn't help commenting on his walking stick and asking him about his background. He said, 'I'm an Aboriginal Jew.' I just burst out laughing and said, 'Wow, how wonderful.' I think he was tickled by my reaction because as I was leaving I heard him say 'what a wonderful lady'. So my curiosity was rewarded. Even more recently I went to the optometrist. She has Greek background and her name is Antigone. I looked up the meaning of her name, which was very interesting and





complex. I enjoyed talking with her about it while she stared into my eyes. There was a Chinese woman at reception whose name was Ping. It sounds simple but it had an interesting meaning too. And so on it goes for me.

So when I started my story I didn't really plan to go through all these personal photos and their hidden stories. But seeing them has brought back the good things. My clever grandson Jared asked me if memory was more from photos than experience. For the first time in many years I have been looking at personal photographs and the memories come flooding back. It's wonderful to share their stories with my family.

I called my story 'Delft to Malabar, a Dutch girl's journey'. Throughout my entire life since that eight year old Dutch girl came to Australia on the *Sibajak* I have felt a push and pull between my Dutch and Australian selves. Maybe now that I have told my own story I can bring these two selves into one. There are Dutch and Australian parts of me in the one person. But my family is Australian and so this is where we belong. Willem and Tracey with Heidi and Jared, Lis and Steve with Janine and Brad. They are each hard-working, creative and gentle souls.

I'll end with a very fond memory, with photographs, of a wonderful recent holiday in Tasmania with my children and their partners — Willem and Tracey, Lis and Steve. We hired a big car and toured around that beautiful place. We spent so much time joking and teasing each other and had such a lovely time together. History, scenery, fresh food, fresh air, family and fun. Who could ask for more?

The content of this story remains the property of the author Ellie (Petronella)
Zinsmeester

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Emmett

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Disclaimer

I acknowledge there may be conflicting memories to the events described in my life story and it is only intended to reflect my personal account.