

INTRODUCTION

My name is Martina Oprey (van der Mei).

I was born and grew up in the small rural village of Engelum, in the province of Friesland. Between 1954 and 1958 two families from our village had emigrated to Australia. One family kept in contact with us and in their letters told us about life in Australia. By the end of 1959, our family too started to think about looking elsewhere for greener pastures and better employment opportunities.

After having gone through the necessary screening processes, we were given the green light. Our house was put up for sale, passage booked on a ship, important belongings packed in a crate and the remainder disposed of. By the end of February 1961, my parents (both 49), my brothers (20 and 12 respectively) and myself (18), were ready to go.



Going to Australia on the
SS WATERMAN

28 February to 3 April 1961



The following is a translation from my diary (which I started in 1958 and ended in 1962) of our journey to Australia on the migrant ship SS Waterman. I was 18 at the time.

Traveling to Australia.



28 February, 1961.

At ten o'clock in the morning we traveled to Rotterdam, accompanied by my mother's cousin and wife and my father's sister and husband. After arriving at the Departure Hall our family was immediately separated from our relatives as we had to check in our suitcases at the custom officers. After that was done we had just 15 minutes left before boarding the ship. We didn't wait but instead decided to get on with it and take our leave. Nobody knew what to say to us anymore. We in turn milled around one another, not knowing what to do next. Everything that needed to be said had been said and to prolong this only added to everyone's discomfort. This was how we parted from our relatives!

Once we were checked-in by the custom officers, we had to go straight away on board the ship. I remained on one of the upper decks of the ship until it departed, getting chilled to the bone. Our relatives didn't wait to see our boat leave the harbour, they were to upset. The departure of the ship was rather nice to watch. Passengers on board "De Waterman" started to cheer when the large doors of the Departure Hall were opened, letting in the relatives and friends. Children had been given colourful streamers which they tossed to the crowd below. Whilst the melody of our national anthem "Het Wilhelmus" was heard through the loudspeakers, our ship was towed out of the harbour. Slowly I saw Rotterdam disappear in the distance as the tugboats towed the ship to Hoek van Holland. The tugboats turned around there and we steamed ahead into the North Sea and saw for the last time the flat country side of The Netherlands. The country of my birth and where I had lived for eighteen years. In front of me, the future and a new beginning of which I hoped to make the very best. The past locked away behind the doors called "memories".

1 March.

Today is our first day at sea. The weather is still very cold and the wind quite strong. This doesn't bother me, as I spend most of my time wondering around the decks. We have been allocated a six berth cabin for our family of five, midships and on the third deck. Very happy with it. Breakfast is at 7.45 am. On the menu is porridge, bread and butter, an egg every day and coffee or tea. Twelve noon is lunch time. Soup, potatoes, vegetables, meat and dessert. Dinner is at 6 o'clock, soup, a salad or potatoes with vegetables. If still hungry you can take some bread. The waiters who serve at our tables are Chinese, they put all sorts of food on your plate and all you have to do is spoon it in your mouth. It couldn't be made easier. We don't need to do any house work in our hut either and are not even allowed to make our own beds!

2 March.

Today we past the Channel Islands. In the distance I could just see the coast line. Sadly though we were far too far away to get a proper view of it. The weather is slowly improving. Tomorrow the sun will shine all day, I am sure.

3 March.

My prediction has come true. Today is a beautiful day but still very cold. Some of our passengers are suffering from seasickness. I have seen several bending over the railings, feeding the fish. The ship's motion doesn't seem to bother me and feel as fit as a fiddle. Today we see nothing but water around us. So now and then we pass another ship. The atmosphere on board is slowly becoming a bit more relaxed. People are starting to lose their shyness and are looking to make some friends. My eldest brother found two guys from Limburg with whom he has endless conversations about radios. I did join them for a little while but that technical waffle went right over my head.

4 March.

Tonight according to the reports, we will enter the Bay of Biscay. The prediction is that we will see more people becoming seasick. Up to now the wind has still been quite blustering with a very cold edge to it. Not the sort of weather you want to be sitting outdoors in. Most of the time I find something to do in the salon, which is on the top deck, giving a fabulous view over the water. This evening we could still see a small bit of the French coast, most likely Brittany. It was nearly 6 pm, so we could see the flashing lights of the lighthouses.

5 March.

We are now in the Bay of Biscay and our ship is bolting madly. The edges of the waves are covered with white foam, a sight to behold. My mother is seasick and has gone to her bunk. I have also seen my older brother at the railing, emptying his stomach. I am curious to see who of our family will become the next victim. At the moment I too feel a bit queasy. Not to worry, I make sure to keep my stomach full as this will help to ward off seasickness. We will be in this Bay for the rest of the day with little to see. Tonight there is a movie in the Cinema, to kill some boredom I will go.

6 March.

Early this morning we saw the first glimpses off the coast of Spain. Because it was very foggy half of it was lost to our eyes. What we saw was most likely Cape Finisterre. At present we are steaming straight towards Cape St Vincent. This point should be reached by 2pm this afternoon.

Cape St Vincent: Sheer cliffs line the shore, towering above the sea. With the sun shining on the cliffs, I see the most beautiful colours, shades of grey, green, soft pink and yellow. The sea is blue with on the waves white foam edges which shatter when crashing onto the shore, besides having carved out little hollows in the cliff face. Between two rocks, I see a small sandy beach and in the distance a small village. White cottages with bright red roof tiles. Upon a high rock, I see a light house and I salute.

7 March.

Today we are a bit unlucky. We will pass the Rock of Gibraltar at night instead of during the day, as I had hoped. One of the guys from Limburg has become my buddy and together we stood at the bow of De Waterman when darkness fell. At around 12 midnight we spotted the first little lights, most likely from Tarifa. Some time later we saw the lights of Gibraltar. Dozens of lights shimmering just above the water with at intervals the sweeping light of the lighthouse. De Waterman steamed closest to the African coast because we could see the dark silhouettes of the mountains against the bright star lit sky. The soft light of the moon and the shadows on the water created interesting dark patterns. It was wonderful to stand there and dream. We enjoyed watching this scenery until well past 1.30 am than we departed to our beds.

8 March.

Today we will steam for most of the day along the African coast. Again I see rocks walls with small gaps. These walls are very high in places because I see small white clouds sailing between the tops. There is vegetation growing on the slopes and along the shore line I see small settlements. On the water I see small fishing vessels bobbing around. Sometimes they disappear completely behind a wave then suddenly pop up again. My buddy handed me his binoculars and through this instrument I could just see Tunis. But the distance was still too far to see it clearly.

9 March.

Malta, the island once conquered by Napoleon Bonaparte, is in our sight. It is of reasonable size and I see lots of trees, also a sandy beach. It is raining outside so I am looking at the scenery from behind the salon's windows. This shower is the first bit of rain we have had since we left Rotterdam, I almost forgot what rain drops felt like. The wind is also blowing quite hard and 2/3 of the passengers are seasick. At the moment I am not feeling the best either so I moved myself to the stern, being in the fresh air helps ward off seasickness. My buddy and friend weren't feeling the best either. I found them lying in a deck chair, singing at the top of their voices. Both were hugging a packet of biscuits and a paper bag was on their lap, just in case. I settled myself next to them and joined the chorus. Silliness at times is a good activity to forget the misery you are feeling. My mother is yet again in her bunkbed and hopes I will get terrible seasick because I poked fun at her demise. I sincerely hope that this will not happen.

10 March.

Tonight, at 7 pm, we dropped anchor outside Port Said and enter the harbour at midnight. A convoy of several ships leaving Port Said are passing us at intervals. These ships, as they glide very slowly past us in the dark are lit up like Christmas trees. It is my intension to get up at 3 am in the morning to witness our entry into the harbour. We will see if I succeed!

11 March.

I overslept this morning and I am very much ashamed of it. My buddy on the other hand was present on time and is now teasing me relentlessly for my slackness. We will square one day!

It was 7 am this morning when I opened my eyes and discovered to my horror that De Waterman had already entered the harbour. I immediately rolled out of my bunkbed and hastened to the upper deck to still see a bit of Port Said. Well, what I saw didn't disappoint. Our boat was surrounded by small vessels loaded with all sorts of stuff, the owners all yelling, one louder than the other. To our regret we were told that we could not go on shore, due to some political reason. Soon after lunch we departed the harbour of Port Said again and steamed towards the Suez Canal. Three Egyptians remained on board including their small vessel with merchandise. The first section of the canal was quit boring. The landscape dry and colourless. But after a few hours the landscape became more interesting. On the Egyptian side I saw an endless stretch of sand, lightly shaped into dunes by the wind. Because of the sun and patches of shade it created a picture of strange colours.

Purple coloured sand hills bordering onto yellow ones and behind those soft pink ones. On the other side of the canal I saw a road and a railway track. Several species of trees did grow there. Between this I spotted at times a clay hut or a small settlement, recognisable by the never absent spire of the minarets, slim little towers in shades of white or yellow. Every so many miles we past a military post where the soldiers greeted us by loudly shouting "Bye Bye. The women, all covered up from head to toe are much shyer and don't dare to greet us at all. At 12 noon our boat reached a junction where the anchor was dropped. A convoy of 32 tankers from Port Said had priority over De Waterman, so we had to wait until they pass us. The three Egyptians with boat and all were lowered into the water and had to fasten the hawsers. The three men stepped on shore but didn't bother to fastening their vessel. The little boat of course started to drift and was soon in the middle of the channel. The people on board, who had been watching, started to laugh and one of the Egyptians looked up to see what was going on. Well, you should have seen the look on his face, worth a penny. He looked at his little boat and then started to undress. But what he peeled off! No, first he took off two pairs of pants followed by two long johns, after that a short one and the last one he was wise enough to keep on. Then he started on the upper layers. First a cotton shirt followed by a wooden jumper, another shirt and two singlets, finally he stood with bare chest. He dived like a penguin into the water and swam with ease towards the vessel to retrieve it. We all had a good laugh. People on board of our ship all suffered from the heat and this fellow stood stiff with all the clothes he had on. We couldn't comprehend that he didn't melt from the heat. Around 7 that night the anchor was lifted again and our boat steamed towards the Red Sea. By that time it was already quite dark. My buddy and I remained on deck until 11 pm. We enjoyed sitting in the darkness and as an attraction, looking at the occasional lights. We also saw a bit of the Great Bitter Lake, that was lovely, those numerous twinkling little lights reflecting in the water. Behind that the dark silhouettes of trees and rocks. Because we both couldn't stop yarning we decided to call it a day.

12 March.

Today we enter the Red Sea and it is getting warmer. I have already discarded several layers of clothing and still feel very hot. I ask myself what will happen when we are in the Indian Ocean because there it will be hotter still. This morning I read in the Ocean Post that the temperature back home was 10 degrees C with local mist. Two more days to go and we should reach Aden. Hopefully we will be allowed on shore and find some mail there for me also. In Port Said I had received a letter from my best girl friend.

13 March.

Today we have a bit of good luck, we should be in the harbour of Aden at 10 pm tonight. I find this very sympathetic of our captain. We are also allowed on shore to have a look at Aden. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagent to walk one day on Arabic soil. But you never know your luck! At the moment we are passing The Twelve Apostles, twelve large rocky islands, all uninhabited.

I have seen a small section of Aden, but never have I seen such poverty and neglect than there. The view of Aden from our boat, anchored in the harbour, was beautiful. High brown rocks with a multitude of cottages clinging onto it. The sun shone brightly upon the white and yellow painted houses, almost hurting our eyes. Not much green was to be seen, except along the harbour edge where I noticed a row of trees. In the harbour I saw a few other large boats anchored. One Dutch ship the "Amerskerk". One from Japan and a few I couldn't place. From England the "Victoria" was there, a very large aircraft carrier belonging to the navy. It was a monster, our boat but a nutshell compared with that one. Eight fighter planes were parked on the flight deck and amongst these military personal were seen running about or driving around in little jeeps. From our vantage point it just looked like an ant colony, all this continues movement. At twelve noon we were given permission to go on shore. Small ferries carried us across the harbour. After our passports were checked, we were allowed to go through the gates and found ourselves in the harbour district of Aden. The city itself is located on the other side of the rocks and could only be reached by cab.

The street we walked along first was lined with shops and appeared quite Western. The footpath though was a different matter, missing a section here and there. Behind the shopping strip it became very Eastern, and how! Dirty tenements lined the street on both sides. Arabs who were having their siesta were seen sleeping on the footpath or sandy lane in their cots. The less fortunate had stretched themselves onto a piece of cardboard, with a stone as a cushion. Seeing them laying on the ground you would think they were dead. Between all this half naked kids, dirty and in ripped clothing were playing games. Traders were selling their wares straight from the footpath, especially those selling fruit. But the fruit on sale I wouldn't eat if you paid me a pound. Everybody was touching it and the multitude of insects swarming around it also added to the contamination. In front of the dwellings we saw lots of goats who merrily wondered in and out of these, depositing their droppings as they go about. This made us very careful where to put our feet lest we slipped or stepped in it. The stench was overwhelming and nearly made us sick. I was asking myself how a human could live in such filth. Because of this we didn't linger long and escaped to a small park we saw. It was lovely there. Tall palm trees, orchids and even a bread tree grew there. The bread tree is totally bare of leaves and on the bare trunks I saw large black seed pods hanging, a bit like the ripe broad-beans I have seen in my grandfathers garden. A statue of Queen Victoria stood in the middle of the park. Whilst in the park we chatted with a local. When my eldest brother offered him a cigaret, he refused. When asked for the reason why, he answered "I am not allowed to smoke, being the month of Ramadan". A bit past 2 o'clock that afternoon saw us back on our boat. The first thing I did was to have a good hot shower. I felt quite dirty with all that dust and filth that had collected on my skin, also the heat of the day which makes one perspire for two. How will we cope when we arrive in the tropics?

14 March.

Well, we are on our way again. Last night, around 6 o'clock, our boat was towed out the harbour of Aden and we are now on our way to Fremantle. That will be a very long stretch, 14 days of nothing else to see then water. Up to now there has always been a bit of land visible on the horizon. Around 12 noon we will pass the island of Socotra and see just a little bit off the coast of Africa.

This night, together with my buddy and his friend, I got talking with two Chinese waiters. A very jolly conversation it did turn out! One of them by the name of Chang Kee has promised to teach me to eat with chopsticks, because I had asked whether they too ate with them. My buddy is already quite excited by this prospect, hoping that I will make a terrible mess. I wish him the same, so I will have the last laugh. When thinking about this, it seems to me a bit daunting and quite an art to grip some rice between two bamboo sticks and transport it into your mouth. O well, we will see, in two days time all will be revealed.

15 to 17 March.

This afternoon we visited the Chinese waiters and given two plates, one covering the other. We were told to take these to our cabin. Because the top plate was used as a lid, I couldn't see what was in the bottom plate, although I did smell something very delicious. When in our cabin we took a look and burst out laughing. The plate was filled with cooked rice mixed with fried onions, meat, bacon and several spices, many unknown to me. It had a lovely aroma so we quickly started to eat it. It was indeed delicious. The only disappointment was that I couldn't find the chopsticks, the reason for all this. The Chinese had the last laugh.

This Saturday we celebrated the feast of Neptune. It was a cracker and I laughed myself silly on seeing Neptune, his wife and the retainers in their outfits, faces decorated with paint and grease. Neptune's wife wore a wig made from rope, with two footballs tucked behind a wet very tight fitting T shirt as breasts. A tuff looking lady. Passengers who were willing to be baptised were lined up first then sorted into groups of five. These groups were then presented to Neptune. I was standing some distance away watching, enjoying the activities the first victims had to go through. My buddy and

friend showed up still dressed in their pyjamas. My buddy was first and got off very lightly but his friend got into trouble because he hadn't finished his drink, a mixture of sambal (very hot Indonesian spice) and water. As punishment he got his back scrubbed which by the look on his face he didn't mind very much. Then one of the retainers spotted me and boy did I get a trashing. I was first seated on Neptune's wife's lap and as a treat was given a lettuce leaf. Very delicious! Then I was summoned to appear before Neptune. There I got severely lectured. I was accused of having made the Bridge dirty and had smeared a dirty substance all over the deck floors. I protested profusely, claiming to be innocent of all charges which went down very badly. I was soaped in with a black substance and put in the stocks. One of the retainers stuffed a herring in my mouth. Not to be content with this punishment, I received a further soaping with a colourful sticky slimy substance. The passengers who were watching were in stitches and I too burst out laughing, spitting out the herring, which a retainer very quickly put back in my mouth again. A handful of flour was thrown in my face as punishment with the result that I couldn't see a thing anymore nor utter a word. I was left standing there for a bit until I was released from the stocks and thrown in the swimming pool. For good measure my tormenter dunked me at least four times before I landed back on deck. I then ran to the showers and had a look at myself in one of the mirrors. My face was black as soot and my hair full of lumps of sticky starch. It was quite a job to get myself clean again but after half an hour of vigorous scrubbing I had removed most of the grime. Back on deck my buddy inspected me and to his delight discovered still some grease in my neck.

28 March.

During this night my buddy and I sighted the faint outlines of our new homeland on the horizon. It was a balmy night with the moon shining brightly over the sea and a clear sky with millions of twinkling stars above us. We had amused ourselves until midnight with singing songs with help from my Buddy's friend, my eldest brother and another friend. The plan was that all five of us would stay on deck because according to the second mate, we could expect to see the Australian coast around 2 am. But we have been deserted by them, those lazybones. My buddy and I then dragged two deck chairs to the bow section of the ship and settled ourselves into these. After we talked for a while it became rather quiet and on investigation also found this hero fast asleep. I got very carefully out of my deckchair and wondered of to the railing. Far in the distance I saw the faint flashings of a light house, for the rest only water and sky. In the distance, behind that faint light, lay a whole new future for all of us, yet unknown. No doubt we would find hurdles in our way but I wanted to be positive about our new future. By 4 o'clock that morning I discovered a row of little lights on the horizon and at the same time felt a rain drop on my skin. Big black clouds started to pack together on our starboard side, indicating a change in the weather. With great difficulty I woke my buddy, who with sleepy eyes looked around, not realising where he was at first. I pointed to the little lights in the distance which became very slowly larger. Together we watched this scene for a bit, each lost in thought. Suddenly the wind started to blow very hard, whistling through the riggings as our boat started to bolt. Two minutes later the rain came down in buckets. The chairs in the salon started madly to slide about. The temperature dropped also by at least 20 C, becoming very cold all of a sudden. By the time the storm receded somewhat the dawn had broken but the sky remained dark grey with a heavy drizzle coming down. The first impression we had of Australia was a dismal one.

29 March.

Fremantle is the first Australian harbour City I visited and isn't the prettiest. Today we did quite a bit of walking around the place. First through the shopping centre and after onto the beach. The landscape is rather flat. The first thing you have to take into account is the lefthand traffic. The shops I do like and how the windows are dressed, especially those of the fabric stores. I have seen beautiful nylon fabrics on display and also the cotton fabrics with the small check designs made famous by Bridget Bardot. It was quite warm during the day, so we didn't stay too long. Back on board, I decided to take a nap as I had missed out on a night's sleep, feeling very tired. I must have fallen into a deep sleep because when I did wake up, I heard terrible noises. When I peeped over the

edge of my bunkbed became promptly sick. Everything in our cabin had been turned upside down. It dawned on me very quickly that we were caught in a storm. My mother was restlessly moving around in her bunk, not feeling well either. When I looked at my watch, I saw that it was 7 pm, I had slept for over three hours. That De Waterman had departed the harbour of Fremantle I hadn't noticed at all. I had to go to the toilet, so jumped from the upper bunk onto the floor but landed straight on my back. I silently cursed, because I had hurt myself. I got onto my feet again but this time crashed into the door of our cabin, by hanging onto the handle I prevented another tumble. I managed to reach the toilets walking like a drunk. In the passage way I saw many others stumbling along like myself, somehow this made me smile. I made it back to my bunk without further incident despite the fact that my stomach was churning. Turning my face to the wall I pretended to be asleep but in reality was wide awake. One moment I was standing upright in my bunk, the next moment tipped onto my head, as our boat roller coasted over the waves. The wind howled through the riggings, rain hit our porthole and the waves crashed over the bow onto the decks. This made me think back to the autumn storms in Friesland, the sound of the rain hitting the metal roof of our house and the wind whistling around the gable window of my bedroom. Myself safely in bed securely tucked under the blankets. I had moments that night that I doubted whether we would make it through the night, as De Waterman was tossed about by the storm in the Great Australian Bight. I just had another look at my watch, it is 3 am and the storm has not abated at all.

We survived the storm but heard that a priest broke his arm during the night and two wooden crates have crashed through a wall in the hold. At present it is again a beautiful day but a lot cooler than four days ago. Another two days and we should reach Melbourne. In a way I am glad that this journey is nearing its end because the atmosphere on board is declining. My buddy and friend had left in Fremantle. Other friends will disembark in Melbourne, leaving only us to travel onto Sydney.

Well, what do you know, friends who where to disembark in Melbourne will travel to Sydney with us. The husband has been advised by the Emigration officer that his changes of finding work in Sydney are better than in Melbourne. There are steel works near Sydney and also a few coal mines. I am happy that they will continue on because my mother has become good friends with his wife.

1 April.

We have docked in the harbour of Melbourne. At noon we met the daughter of a cousin of my father, she picked us up from the quay side and took us to her home in Clayton. Tomorrow is Easter Sunday and at 3 pm we will leave Melbourne again for the last leg of this journey. Then a new life will begin for all of us.

3 April.

Today is Easter Monday and early this morning I witnessed our ship steaming through the heads into Sydney harbour and docked at the Pier in Woolloomooloo. Our papers and passports have been checked several times by different officers. Some of us waiting in the queue for over an hour. After that we were told to bring our luggage to the quay side. Now we had to do it ourselves! I have dragged three of them on shore, making me sweat profusely as it is very hot outside. When ready to get a fourth one, a young guy started to speak to me. "Excuse me lady, can you tell me something about your trip", I was asked. Because I didn't understand what he said, I answered "I am sorry, but I can't really understand you, I am a migrant". I want to speak to a migrant the fellow said. Then he started talking again and I caught the word "big waves". At first it made no sense to me but then I started to get the drift of his dialog, because he also mentioned Fremantle and Melbourne. It had to be about the storm of course! I told him as much as I could in my broken English and he appeared to understand what I was saying. When satisfied he asked for my name and penned that down as well, then wished me good luck in my new country. A very funny encounter indeed. At eleven all migrants, destined for the migrant camp, had to assemble near the gates where busses would pick them up. As our family also belonged to that group, we joined them. So began our next adventure!