

EMIGRATION: MY STORY

Peter Rietveld

In the early 1950s my father considered the possibility of emigrating out of the Netherlands. He had six grown up children, some still at home, and had encountered difficult times. His flourishing taxi business did not survive the ups and downs of the war and it was difficult to make a living out of his Import-Export Business. In 1953, when my mother passed away at the young age of 49, the idea of starting again in a new country re-kindled in my father's thoughts.

As a young man, my father had been Second Mate in the Merchant Navy and had also lived in New York. Consequently the idea of setting up home elsewhere was not too difficult to contemplate. Initially his focus was on New Zealand. However, this changed when an acquaintance who was employed by the Netherland Emigration Service conveyed his enthusiasm for Perth. He said, [to father] "if you ever experience any homesickness, just visit beautiful Kings Park in the middle of Perth and your homesickness will soon disappear." This must have convinced my father into thinking Perth was a better option for our 'new home'.

With hindsight it would be considered irresponsible to make such an important decision to relocate the family. For a start Australia wanted trades or unskilled labour and neither my father nor his children were tradespeople or manual workers. His eldest son Frits (1928) had an engineering degree and worked for Philips as a design draftsman and Ruud (1931) had a Merchant Navy degree and was Third Mate with the Merchant Navy. Hugo (1932) completed Grammar School and qualified as a chemical analyst working for Philips' Research Laboratories, José (1935) worked in the office of the local hospital, my twin sister Meta (1936) did our house-hold work after our mother had passed away, and I (Peter 1936), had completed a Diploma at Technical School and was employed as a Product Design draftsman.

In addition, and from a social point of view, all three brothers had partners. Frits had already been in a relationship for several years with Trudy Reichardt. She was prepared to come along, with the proviso that they would get married first. Ruud was engaged but his fiancé decided to follow him later. Hugo was also engaged but his fiancé had to stay behind, as her parents would not consent to her leaving the Netherlands. Her family nonetheless, arranged accommodation for the three brothers through kinship networks in Perth upon their arrival.

Our father decided that the family would make the move in three stages. The older three brothers first, followed by the three youngest, with my father to follow last. They must have realised at the time how difficult it would be for Ruud to find work. The local Council in the Netherlands ran

Figure 1
Rietveld family home early 1950s
Courtesy: Peter Rietveld.



special re-skilling programs, which Ruud followed, and he qualified with a Boilermaker-Welder certificate. Australia, they were informed, had particular interest in people with these skills.

On 25 January 1955, the three older brothers as well as Frits' wife Trudy all boarded the *Sibajak*. It arrived in Fremantle on 24 February 1955. They made their home to Kadina Street and Coronation Street in North Perth. Their limited finances, meant that the three brothers had to look for work immediately. Frits found suitable employment within a week as a design draftsman with 'Steam Generators Pty Ltd'. Luckily for him the Chief Engineer of the company, also a Dutchman, recognised his qualifications and the fact that he had the experience needed for the position. For Ruud however, finding a job was more difficult. He soon discovered that he would not get a job as a Boilermaker-Welder without a Trades Ticket. His first employment was as a Mill-hand at 'Hoffmans-Mill' and 'Jarrah-Wood' Timber Mills, before moving to a welder's position with 'Tomlinson Steel Pty Ltd'. This position had come about due to Frits' connections. Hugo's first job was as a cleaner at the laboratory of 'Cresco Fertilizers' in Bassendean, before securing another job with 'Cumming Smith' in Fremantle as a Laboratory-assistant.

The bridgehead was now established and the next three members of the family could board a ship to Australia. The planning and the decision to emigrate had all been discussed and decided by the seniors in the family. Both my sisters and I - even though we were 19 years at the time - were never included in the decision-making process, nor our opinion asked. I can still vividly remember the time I was asked by my father to give notice to my employer. Firstly, it came as a complete surprise that I was going to emigrate. It had never occurred to me, even after my three brothers had left, that I too would have to leave. After all, my father, his two daughters and I had formed a close-knit, caring family. In fact, with the three older brothers gone, my sisters and I had been able to open up and make friends and we were quite happy with our existence.

When I gave notice to the chief engineer of my department, he was stunned. He could not believe I was making such a big move. I can still recall that when he asked me where I was going and I said "Australia", it also all sounded foreign to me! His astonishment left me wondering, "What had I done?"

During my employment with Grasso, I had moved up the ranks within the company very quickly. I had found my vocation, "the love of being employed as a design draftsman". In the first year of my employment with the company I was honoured with the "Most innovative person of the year" award.



Figure 2
The *Grooten Beer* arrives in Fremantle harbour
Courtesy: Peter Rietveld.

On 20 November 1955, José, Meta and I arrived in Fremantle on the refurbished troopship *Grooten Beer*. The family photo taken at the wharf that afternoon captures our arrival.

When the ship moved close to the wharf where my family was waiting to greet us, my brother Rudi called to the ship's Captain for the three of us to come to the bridge. Meta appeared first and could be seen waving to her brothers.

José and I can be seen on the wharf after we had disembarked, and a family group photo was taken later that afternoon at my older brother's home in Kadina Street, North Perth. Unfortunately the timing of our arrival in Perth and the prospect for work, were not well matched. The Western Australian economy was in a bad state. There was a great deal of unemployment and jobs of any kind were hard to find. I registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) in town, which I would visit several times a week, as well as scanning the local newspaper daily for job vacancies. It was a difficult time and not being in control of the English language, limited my chances for an engineering position.

I recall the employment officer took great interest in me and I was strongly advised to go and study as soon as time would allow. Earning my first dollar was the greatest challenge I faced. Always neatly dressed (in my suit) to visit the employment office, I was one day told to go immediately to the Capital Theatre in Perth, as they were preparing the stage for the Ice Show 'Rose Mary I Love You'. Someone was needed there for a couple of hours. Handing me a note to pass on to the stagehand, I worked there that afternoon scraping



Figure 3
Peter and José arrive at the Fremantle wharf
on 20 November 1955
Courtesy: Peter Rietveld.

the ice for several hours. At last I had earned my first few dollars. I cannot remember how much it was that I earned, just that I wanted to frame it. However, having been out of work for some time, it was a luxury I could not afford. Instead I had to contribute my earnings towards my living expenses. I was boarding at that time with my brother Ruud and cannot thank him enough for helping me out through those trying times.

Having found work, albeit manual employment with Peter's Ice Cream, I was to move the stock from the freezers to the production floor. Both my sisters were employed at that time as well - Meta at a cake shop in Leederville and José as a typist at Westfarmers in Perth. The next stage in our migration had arrived. Father could now also make his arrangements to come to Australia.

No one had thought that our father's departure from the Netherlands would present any problems. We were surprised therefore, to find his emigration permit was delayed, due to his age. This delay affected us all very much. In the end, it took a personal letter from the late Harold Holt, then Minister for Emigration, for father to be granted an emigration permit.

Father arrived in Fremantle on the *MS Sibajak* 11 July 1956. The reunion with his family at the wharf closed a chapter that had started in the early 1950s. It is recorded with a photo, which appeared in the *West Australian Newspaper*¹.



Figure 4
The Rietveld family together in Kadina Street, North Perth (left to right) Trudy, Frits, José, Hugo, Meta, Ruud and Peter
Courtesy: Peter Rietveld.

Figure 5
The West Australian, Thursday, 12 July 1956.



Looking forward to having the family together again, the five single children met up before father arrived, and decided to set up home and share the rent and operational expenses. We were lucky. We found a lovely new modern place overlooking beautiful Lake Monger, West Leederville. Together with our father, we created ‘a home away from home’.

All of us enjoyed the beautiful weather, visits to the beaches and watching the movies from deckchairs at the open-air theatres. On summer weekends, we sat on our front veranda and enjoyed watching the local Cricket Team play on the beautiful grass field adjoining Lake Monger. We tried as hard as we could to understand and fit into the new environment and culture.

I personally found it hard at times. The world had changed so much for me, mostly without my concurrence. I had to constantly drive myself forward to grasp the opportunities on offer. Emigration was presenting many challenges for me. In the years that followed, the homely family structure started to unwind. The two brothers started relationships and married, and so father moved with the rest of us into a smaller more affordable home

When two of my older brothers returned to studies again, one at Perth Technical College and the other at the University of WA, I thought it was time to join them and further my own education. I had already been employed in the manufacturing industry as a design draftsman, when I decided to join the Public Works Department and take up some part time courses at Perth Technical College.

I qualified with a Diploma in Electrical Engineering in 1968. By that time I was already married and the proud father of three lovely children. The state of Western Australia at the time was opening up to the mining industry and I decided to take part in this development. I left the Public Works Department to join Bechtel, a large construction company where I worked as a construction engineer for the next 14 years. The family status position which I held with the company, allowed me to also take my children on most of the projects, covering the State’s North West, the Philippines and Saudi Arabia.

I am retired now and living in Perth, which will always remain my home. It took me many years to overcome the feeling of being forcefully removed in my teenage years from my uncles, aunts and cousins. However, in summing up I can say, that the feelings and interrelationships I formulated with my adopted country are now part of me – I love the place. When I return with my wife from visiting relatives in the Netherlands, I return to my newfound fatherland.²

Author's Postscript

This story is dedicated to my wife Anne, my three children Michelle, Jeff, Mark, my four grandchildren Caitlyn, Jason, Mia, Morgan and my extended family.

Father He watched the development of his children very closely. He never remarried and decided to spend the last years of his life in the Netherlands. Those were happy times for him, catching up with his brothers and sisters. He passed away in 1973.

Frits Studied in the evening at Perth Technical College for an Associateship in Mechanical Engineering. In 1963, after joining an international engineering company, Frits moved subsequently to Sydney, the USA and to Germany. In 1971 he settled with his family in the Netherlands, where he worked for many years until his retirement in 1991. Married, they have two Australian born children and three grandchildren.

Ruud After working in the Goldfields as a Boilermaker Welder, he returned to Perth and started a cleaning business from where he retired. Ruud and his wife passed away and he has three children and four grandchildren.

Hugo From 1958 he worked his way through university (University of WA) and obtained his Ph.D degree in Physics in 1964. That year he resettled in the Netherlands as a research officer with the Netherlands Research Foundation ECN at Petten, from where he retired in a managerial position in 1992. He developed the worldwide known Rietveld Method for the determination of the molecular structure and/or composition of materials by means of X-ray or neutron powder diffraction. For this he was awarded the Aminoff Prize from the Swedish Academy of Sciences in 1995, the Barrett Award from the Denver X-ray Conference in 2003 and the Dutch Royal Order of Officer, in the Order of Oranje Nassau in 2004. He is married and has three Australian born children and four grandchildren.

José After the breakup of her marriage, José resettled with her two children back in the Netherlands (1972). She remarried and passed away in 2000. She has five grandchildren.

Meta Meta is married and lives in Perth. Her husband passed away and she has two children and one grandchild.

ENDNOTES

¹ West Australian Newspapers 11 July 1956, page 3

² References: Family members in my story.