

## Redcliffe Museum Talk by Dr. Nonja Peters

Today, we have the opportunity to watch the documentary film 'Westlanders in Australia' by Dutch filmmaker Heleen van Berkel. Its about the Looyens family, who made Australia their home in 1976. The film follows the journey of Henk and Wilhelmina's (Wil) Looyens and their two children, Paul 8 and Natalie 5, as they migrate and resettle in Australia. It raises many questions related to migrating and resettlement in a new land. Experiences which vary depending on the policies of the time. Both Natalie and I came out at age 5, while some our experiences differ, neither of us had the advantage of English as a second language in schools, and we both grapple with a sense of identity.

Australia attracted the Dutch with promises of home ownership, a house full of white goods, a car of one's own, and assisted passage. However, it was not widely mentioned that until 1956, emigrants were subjected to means testing, often arriving without resources, having to drive old bombs—ours was an Austin A30—and having to build their homes brick by brick. My mother made bricks until she was 8 months pregnant with twins. The resilience of the Dutch is legendary, and we should celebrate it!

However, today's focus is Pierre's Mill, a licenced restaurant located, next door to the Redcliffe Drive-In in Kippa-Ring. It was established by Wil's family of origin. Her father, Pierre, an entrepreneur, had emigrated from the Netherlands after local authorities in the Netherlands had refused to let him turn his successful licensed restaurant, Café de Sport, in Ter Heijde,

Westland, into a multi-story hotel with a restaurant. Disappointed by this setback, Pierre recalled his earlier dreams of migrating to Australia, a country he had frequently visited while working on migrant ships in the 1950s. After discussing it with his family, they decided to take the plunge, despite Pierre being 52 years old. Along with his wife Clazina (Stein), their son Dick, daughter Paula, her husband Cees Bossart, and their two children, Janet (8) and Rene (5), the family set sail for Brisbane on the migrant ship SS Australis.<sup>1</sup> Pierre believed that Queensland offered better economic opportunities than other Australian states.

The family arrived in Brisbane in July 1969. Remarkably, by October 21, 1969, they were running a licensed family-owned café in Redcliffe. Establishing a café just three months after arriving was no small feat. Pierre had found a brand-new custom-made café whose owners could not operate it due to serious illness. The Queensland government had also issued more liquor licenses that year, which may have contributed to their swift success. The café, named Pierre's Mill, was marked by the striking windmill the family placed on its roof.

Pierre **handled** the bookkeeping and supply orders, Cees **was** the chef, and Paula managed the front of house. Unlike Café de Sport, where Stein had also worked, **Stein** now took on the role of a full-time grandmother and caregiver for the Bossart children, to allow Paula and Cees to dedicate long hours to establishing the fledgling café and its challenging menu.

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<sup>1</sup> The SS Australis, originally named SS America, was a prominent Greek migrant ship operated by Chandris Lines, which facilitated the journey of thousands of immigrants from Europe to Australia and New Zealand, making 62 voyages between 1965 and 1977.

By the late 1960s, the presence of the Dutch community in the small to medium-sized business sector had been rapidly expanding and would continue to do so into the early 21st century. SMEs play a crucial role in the Australian economy, accounting for over 98% of all businesses, employing around 70% of the workforce and 30 per cent are migrant-owned.

The aspiration of 'making it in Australia' as independent business owners was particularly strong among the Dutch who emigrated during the peak years of migration from 1951 to 1960. This ambition was rooted in traditional Dutch ideology, which highly values entrepreneurship. A 1960 study by Beijer et al. found that 17 per cent of Dutch emigrants cited the desire for self-employment as a key reason for their migration. Interestingly, this desire was strongest among those aged 45 and older, with nearly 75 per cent wanting to own their own business. Furthermore, seven per cent of these individuals achieved their goals within two years, while only three per cent, like Pierre, had prior self-employment experience in the Netherlands.

Research by Roberta Julien (1989), Charles Beltz and I noted the high value placed on entrepreneurial activity among the Dutch postwar cohorts in Tasmania, Canberra, and Western Australia. All those interviewed by these researchers expressed a commitment to hard work, which Wil also highlights as a family trait in her booklet about Pierre's Mill. It is notable that the Dutch do not start entering the tertiary education sector until the third generation.

In his 1956 article, economist Prof Reginald Appleyard noted that the Dutch were known for their willingness to work long hours and seek jobs that provided opportunities for bonuses and overtime, which would accelerate their path to becoming independent tradespeople or shopkeepers. If unable to secure overtime at their primary job, they pursued weekend work elsewhere. Australian employers appreciated these ambitious Dutch employees, though they sometimes perceived their directness as arrogance. The emerging stereotype 'arrogant and opinionated' posited on first-generation Dutch led many second-generation Dutch business owners to downplay their ethnicity unless they were running Dutch-specific food stores.

The nature of Dutch postwar entrepreneurship and self-employment in Australia was largely influenced by the skills the country sought for its postwar economy. It primarily recruited blue-collar workers from the Netherlands, focusing on trades-skilled, semi-skilled operatives and unskilled labour to develop its building and construction sectors, to restore essential services to pre-war levels, to boost the birthrate for defence purposes, increase manufacturing, and maintain the war-boosted economy. The 1948 Eltham Mission declared that Dutch, German, and British trade training was equivalent to Australia. However, upon arrival, many skilled Dutch tradespeople transitioned into roles as contractors or subcontractors, as unions required them to pass an English language trade test. At that time, few were proficient in speaking or writing English.

Dutch with other unrecognized qualifications often sought sales jobs in selling insurance, cars, or real estate. Eventually, once they saved

enough for a down payment, many ventured into owning milk or bread delivery rounds, followed by newsagencies, liquor stores, grocery stores, corner shops, delicatessens, or cafes. My parents started the Toodyay café.

Pierre's Mill attracted a steady stream of customers from the drive-in movie theatre next door and children from the primary school across the road. The waitresses and Pierre were responsible for interacting with the public. However, its exceptional menu and meal presentation also drew patrons from Brisbane. While many enjoyed the food, the preparation processes which highlighted the chef's significant contribution, were often overlooked. Pierre's Mill not only offered the classic Australian favourite—hamburgers—but also introduced different dishes, such as Indonesian Nasi Goreng, served Dutch-style with a fried egg on top and the Dutch beloved croquettes. The combination of the chef's talent and the café's inviting atmosphere made it a cherished destination for both staff and customers, resulting in immense success.

When Pierre wisely sold the family café in 1986 before the closure of the drive-in theatre, the Dutch presence in the self-employed small business sector, Australia-wide, exceeded 18%, ranking alongside Italians and Greeks and far outranking Australia at 12.3 per cent. However, this demographic would begin to shift in response to the aging of European migrant groups and the influx of Asian immigrants promoted by the 1973 shift to a multicultural policy.