

Reports

The Voice So Intimate: 37 Years Interviewing Migrants¹

BARRY YORK

Barry York holds a PhD in history from the University of New South Wales. He graduated from La Trobe University where he also helped create great disorder under heaven. He migrated to Australia with his parents in 1954 and spent the next 30 years growing up in Brunswick.

In this essay, I reflect on my 38 years of recording oral history interviews, mostly with migrants, how I became interested in oral history in the first place and why I kept going with it. A desire to know my absent grandparents beyond the old snapshots on my parents' mantelpiece sparked my young imagination and early questioning. Oral history offers an entrance into the subjective dimension of history. It is my appreciation of the maxim that 'the people, and the people alone, make history' that led me to record close to 500 substantial oral history interviews thus far, mostly with working-class people. The recorded spoken word captures much about personality and background, bringing to life print-based sources. When listened to, the accents, intonations, hesitations, inflections, pauses and silences allow for an experience of history that is more than just the memories conveyed.

My commitment to oral history now accounts for more than half my lifetime. It probably stems from the fact that I never knew my grandparents. Let me explain.

My father's parents, Salvatore and Loretta (née Mercieca) Meilak, died during World War Two in Malta, years before my birth in 1951. My mother's father, Will Turner, died from tuberculosis in London in 1926. My maternal grandmother, Daisy (née Willmott), died ten days prior to my first birthday in May 1952. All I knew of my mother's parents as a child were the photos cherishingly framed and kept on the

1 This article has not been peer-reviewed.

mantlepiece of our Brunswick home. In the photos, Will and Daisy are of cheery disposition with kind faces. There are no photos of them together, but I guessed they were a loving couple.



Figure 1 Daisy Turner (née Willmott), c. 1945. Photo courtesy Barry York.

My dad had few such images but there was one of him as a young lad in Malta with his mother, a large-framed lady with a dark-toned leathery face. There is a weariness, as well as strength, in her visage. I learned much later that she had given birth to 11 children, four of whom died as babies. The main photo of my Maltese grandfather was a posed studio one. His hair and eyebrows are dark, but his thick moustache is white. His stare is vacant, but it is a posed photograph. It told me little about him.

For whatever reason, from a very young age, I missed my grandparents very much, even though I had never known them. I felt a deep desire to know more; something that has never left me.

At bedtime, when my mum offered to read me a story, I often asked instead that she tell me a story about her childhood when she was ‘a little girl’. I loved those real-life stories. My mother – and my father – were both ‘good talkers’ with excellent memories. They had an eye for detail that could be expressed with eloquence. Neither had much formal education and both were graduates from the ‘University of Life and Struggle’.

A favourite of my mother’s stories was a reminiscence from the early 1930s when she was sitting on the grassy banks of the Thames River with her sister, Vida, and a raft drifted by. Its crew were a couple of ‘black boys’, as my mum described them,

and their cargo was a large pile of oranges. My mother described the scene with such finesse that I could see the young boys with their flashing eyes and glimmering smiles waving at Olive and Vida, the two sisters cheekily waving back – and then the boys throwing to shore the gift of an orange for each of them. Whenever my mum would tell that true story, I could imagine the colour of the oranges set against the murkiness of the river, the crude raft heading heaven-knows-where. I expect the scene will be with me for the rest of my days. It came from listening to the spoken word.

I would often ask my parents about their parents: what were they like as people? Where did they come from? Did they have brothers and sisters? What jobs did they have? Did they have hobbies and pets? Did they play musical instruments? What were they like as parents? What did you like about them, and not like so much? How did they die?

These questions, which as a youngster preoccupied me about the grandparents I never knew, would later be included in most of the 480 oral history interviews I have recorded.



Figure 2 William George Turner, c. 1923. Photo courtesy Barry York.

AUSTRALIAN STORIES

My dad's brother, Joe Meilak, who had migrated from Malta to Melbourne in 1924 and worked on the wharves for 40 years, also had an impact on my appreciation for history and the spoken word. My parents and I stayed with him and his Australian wife, Daisy, in West Melbourne, after disembarking from the *Himalaya* at Station Pier in June 1954. I have fond memories, as a youngster sitting with him by his goldfish pond, under a grapefruit tree, and Joe telling me stories about the 'old days'. One

story was about how a boatload of Maltese arrived in Port Melbourne during the

1928 wharfies' strike. The shipowners wanted to use them as 'scabs' to break the strike. My uncle was proud of the fact that, on being informed that there was a strike, the Maltese refused to disembark. Decades later, this story was confirmed in Rupert Lockwood's book about the history of Melbourne's waterfront and its union struggles.²

Again, much later when I studied history at university, I realised that these kind of stories – the remembered experiences of migrants and the rank-and-file working classes – were rarely found in the history books.

After a couple of years in boarding houses in Coburg and Brunswick, my parents put a deposit on a house in Shamrock Street, West Brunswick, in 1956. I grew up in that street for nearly 30 years. Multiculturalism was not an official policy when I was young, but it was very much a reality in places like Brunswick where factories almost outnumbered trees. There were a dozen different ethnicities in our street. We all basically got on well, despite occasional nastiness. Paying the bills was more important in this low-income working-class community than hating one another. It was hardly surprising that, in 1983, when I set out to do a doctorate, I chose as my topic a history of the Maltese in Australia.

THE FIRST INTERVIEWS

I attempted my first oral history interview in 1976. I say 'attempted' because it was not exactly a success. I was enrolled in 'History 111A' at La Trobe University in a subject titled 'Victoria in the Depression'. Part of our assessment required us to record oral histories with two people who had lived through the Depression of the 1930s in Victoria. I chose two of my elderly neighbours in Brunswick – Mrs Dunbar and Mrs McColl.

As it turned out they were reluctant participants, worried they might say something that could land them in trouble. I interviewed them together in my parents'

2 Rupert Lockwood, *Ship to Shore: A History of Melbourne's Waterfront and Its Union Struggles* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, c. 1990).

lounge room. They glanced at each other nervously before answering my questions, always responding minimally. I too was very nervous, only half-heartedly asking the questions. They tried to be helpful, I think, but the combined interview lasted only half an hour.

My first attempt to obtain work in the field was in 1982 when the Bicentenary Parliamentary Oral History Project was recruiting interviewers in Melbourne.³ I failed the interview and wondered whether my reputation as a Maoist political activist in Melbourne influenced the panel. Life is full of ironies, and 25 years later in 2006 when I gained employment as an historian at Old Parliament House (OPH) in Canberra, one of my achievements was to revive the very same project which had fallen into abeyance in the 1990s.

OPH could not run such a project on its own so we entered into a cooperative arrangement with the National Library of Australia (NLA) and established Old Parliament House Political and Parliamentary Oral History Project.⁴ I recorded substantial interviews with several former MPs, and by 2016 when I retired, 100 interviews had been recorded.

I had no problem interviewing former members whose political philosophies were antithetical to mine, such as Margaret Guilfoyle, Michael Mackellar and Ian Sinclair and Laborites such as Chris Hurford. Some were migrants too. Margaret Guilfoyle was from Belfast, Northern Ireland. My solid knowledge of Australia's immigration history placed me well to record former Immigration Ministers Mackellar and Hurford.

It wasn't until 1984, seven years after my failed attempt with Mrs Dunbar and Mrs McColl, that I attempted my first proper and substantial oral history interview, with my father Loreto. I was undertaking a PhD thesis at the University of New South Wales under the supervision of David Walker. My topic was a history of Maltese

3 Parliament's Bicentenary Oral History Project, 1983–1988, National Library of Australia (NLA). Available at <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2831434>.

4 Old Parliament House Political and Parliamentary Oral History Project, 2009–ongoing, National Library of Australia (NLA). Available at <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4701473>.

immigration into Australia from 1883 when the first assisted organised group went to Queensland, to 1949 when the post-war wave was about to begin in earnest.

I had assumed a conventional approach – long hours in archives and libraries, poring over passenger lists, official reports, newspapers and more – but during my first year of research I realised that in addition to the wealth of print-based sources, I could locate Maltese people who had made the voyage and settled here in the 1910s through to the late 1940s, and speak with them about their experiences. It would be a case of searching for the human beings behind the raw data: again, the human voice expressing a subjective realm.

NARRATIVE POWER

I was sceptical about the claim that oral history was democratic and placed narrative power in the hands of the powerless, but I could see its value in giving them a voice – albeit one mediated by the lines of questioning of the historian-interviewer and by the selective ways in which an interview is used.

My topic was a new one, no-one had undertaken an academic study of Maltese migration to Australia, and everything I uncovered was filling a gap in Australian history. Mark Caruana, a Maltese community activist in Sydney, inspired and encouraged my oral history interviewing. Mark told me about a new guide to interviewing migrants that had been published by the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW.⁵ It was the first such guide with migrants in mind and provided me with an approach and a well-thought-out set of questions. It made me more confident about trying ‘oral history’ myself.

Mark provided advice as well as introductions to interviewees. It was fortunate that I had a Maltese background on my father’s side as that too ‘opened doors’. In Malta, among the older generation, nicknames were common. My dad’s family nickname ‘Tan-Nassi’ means ‘Of the trap’. An ancestor had made fishing traps on the island of Gozo where the family, with the exception of my dad, were born and raised.

5 Janis Wilton, *Balancing the Books: Oral History for the Community* (Sydney: Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales, 1983).



Figure 3 Salvatore Meilak, c. 1915. Photo courtesy Barry York.

With personal introductions by Mark Caruana plus the magic words ‘Tan-Nassi’, I was able to win the trust of my own network of interviewees. I wrote letters to local newspapers in suburbs that had significant Maltese communities and was encouraged by scores of responses over several weeks.

I cannot stress enough that in fields of research that are within living memory, print-based sources and oral history recordings can enrich one another. In addition to creating a record of subjective experience – the ‘whys and hows’

of migration – oral history can lead a researcher into new avenues for print-based investigation.

I lacked confidence at first and that is why I decided to start with a safe interview, where my mistakes and inexperience would not be taken too badly or be too embarrassing. That’s why my first proper oral history interview was with my father, Loreto, who was born in Malta in 1918. He left Malta never to return, when he joined the Royal Air Force in June 1940, when the Italian Fascists started their bombing of the island. He ended up in London after the war, where he met my mother, Olive. They married in 1947 and migrated to Melbourne in 1954, when I was three years old.

Trust is an essential ingredient in the relationship between interviewee and interviewer and that existed between my dad and me. I had a good sense of what I wanted from the interview and had sent my dad an outline of my proposed questions. I made it clear that the questions were to be a guide, that each was negotiable and that he could let me know if there were any omissions or any he would rather not be asked. This has been my approach ever since.

The interview lasted 90 minutes and went well, recorded on my General Electric portable cassette recorder. I was starting to be bitten by the oral history bug, although at this stage, I was primarily interested in the short-term usage of the interviews for my thesis.

Over time, I learned from my successes and my mistakes, and my interviews became more probing and substantial. The longest interview I ever recorded exceeded 20 hours and took place over several sessions with Ted Bull (1914–1997) who was the communist leader of the Melbourne waterside workers.⁶ The average length of my interviews is between two to three hours, often recording more than one session, as even the best interviewee tends to fade after ninety minutes or so. As the interviewee will more than likely never have another opportunity to have their life story recorded, I take this very seriously, and still to this day feel anxious before an interview.

Some interviews have been more focused as opposed to the usual ‘whole of life’ approach, such as my project recording peoples’ memories of the late great wrestler and showman, Chief Little Wolf.⁷ Another project from 2020 recorded recollections of 10 old comrades who marched in 1970 in solidarity with the Vietnamese on the Waterdale Road demonstrations in Melbourne, and focused on what happened on the three marches – the only occasion in all the Vietnam War protests in Australia that police made arrests at gunpoint.⁸

WITH BRAVE HEARTS AND STRONG ARMS

Between 1984 and 1988, the research for my thesis took me to archives in most Australian capital cities. I also visited regional towns where Maltese had settled prior to World War Two, such as Mackay, Broken Hill, Wollongong, Canberra, and the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. The latter at one time, was known as ‘Little Malta’. Overseas, I undertook research at the Palace Archives in Malta and

6 Ted Bull, interviewed by Barry York in Melbourne on 9–11 December 1988, National Library of Australia (NLA) <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2413853>.

7 Barry York, ‘Big Chief Little Wolf’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 58 (1998): 29.

8 La Trobe University, Recollections of Student Activists Donated to La Trobe University Archives (23 August 2021). Available at <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/announcements/2021/recollections-of-student-activists-donated-to-la-trobe-university-archives>. Accessed 8 August 2022.

at the Public Record Office in London, bringing my trusty GE portable cassette recorder wherever I went.

In 1988 I completed my thesis ‘With brave hearts and strong arms: Maltese immigration into Australia 1883–1949’. The oral history interviews were useful to the thesis, but I made the mistake of compartmentalising them into separate chapters rather than integrating them into the body of the text. The thesis and subsequent book would have been more engaging and insightful had I opted for the latter, but also would have been a challenge for me as a writer of average ability.⁹

PROJECTS

Apart from my doctoral thesis completed in 1988, my main projects in immigration-related oral history were for the NLA.¹⁰ I became principal interviewer for major projects covering Maltese-Australian folk life and social history, Polish Australians, and the Australian Lebanese Historical Society.

In 1988 with the Bicentenary promoting a new multicultural version of Australian identity, migrant communities were encouraged to research and write up their stories. Commissioned by The Italo-Australian Club in Forrest, Canberra, I researched content for their commemorative publication and recorded dozens of Italians, including descendants of those who went to the national capital in the 1920s to work on construction of the provisional Parliament House.¹¹ The interviews remain in cassette form, awaiting digitisation and deposit with a library.

Other commissioned work included a series of interviews jointly funded by the ACT Heritage Library and the Migrant Resource Centre, with migrants who settled in

9 Barry York, *Empire and Race: The Maltese in Australia 1881–1949* (Kensington NSW: NSW University Press, 1990).

10 National Library of Australia, York Collection (2019). Available at <https://www.nla.gov.au/collections/guide-selected-collections/york-collection>. Accessed on 8 August 2022.

11 Salvatore Gambale, Aldo Bongiorno and Barry York, *Canberra: Our Italian Heritage* (Canberra: Italo-Australian Club, 1988).

Canberra in the 1950s.¹² Living and working in St Albans in Melbourne's western suburbs in the late 1990s for two years as a Research Fellow at Victoria University of Technology, I recorded oral histories with about 40 local Maltese from the area (known as 'Little Malta') who had mostly migrated in the late 1940s and 1950s.

In 2000 I was asked to interview the celebrated industrial photographer, Wolfgang Sievers.¹³ He was in amazingly good shape for an 87-year-old man and is among the unforgettable people I've met through oral history. An interviewer with expertise in photography might have emphasised Wolfgang's work but for me, there was a fascinating and important experience of migration as well. He had honed his skills in Germany as part of the Bauhaus movement, and the experience of his homeland formed him, as he brought much in his invisible baggage on the boat.

Immigration is rarely far away from any interview because it largely has been so important to the progress of modern Australia. In 2009 the ACT Heritage Library commissioned me to record interviews with retired bus drivers,¹⁴ and in 2018 with former staff of the Honeysuckle Creek space tracking station.¹⁵ In both cases with the bus drivers and space trackers of Apollo 11, there were individuals who had migrated from other countries, and I made sure to record that life-changing facet of their story.

Perhaps my most memorable interview was with Mario Bulfone, better known as Mario Milano.¹⁶ Growing up in Brunswick, many of us young blokes were big fans of the wrestling. Mario was a hero to the Italian community and in 1967 he defeated the villainous 'Killer' Kowalski, for the World Heavyweight Championship. There

12 1955 Oral History Project, 1987–2005, ACT Heritage Library, HMSS 0275, <https://librariesact.spydus.com/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/ENQ/WPAC/ARCENQ?SETLVL=&RNI=443833>.

13 Wolfgang Sievers, interviewed by Barry York in Sandringham on 20 March 2000, National Library of Australia (NLA), <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn294660>.

14 "Fares, Please!" Retired ACT Transport Employees Club Oral History Project, 2009–2010, ACT Heritage Library, HMSS 0327, https://www.library.act.gov.au/find/history/search/Manuscript_Collections/fares_please_oral_history_project.

15 ACT Apollo Oral History Project, 2020–2021, ACT Heritage Library, HMSS 0571, <https://librariesact.spydus.com/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/ENQ/WPAC/ARCENQ?SETLVL=&RNI=731090>.

16 Mario Milano, interviewed by Barry York in Tullamarine, Melbourne from 18 October to 15 November 1997, National Library of Australia (NLA), <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/155405>.

was a feeling of unreality about my meeting with Mario in 1997 at his home in Tullamarine, Melbourne. In the interview, I emphasised Mario's migration experiences as well as his wrestling career.

INTERVIEWING AND QUESTION GUIDES

In all these interviews on the migration experience, I used the same basic question guide that I had developed from my first use of Janis Wilton's guide, and later also by drawing on the whole-of-life question guide of journalist Mel Pratt who had recorded interviews for the NLA in the 1970s. The question guides I use today reflect my 38 years of practical experience. The benefit of having used the same basic approach since 1984 is that the interviews can be cross referenced, patterns discerned, and a more solidly grounded analysis undertaken.

My basic question guide has four broad fields: 'Personal background', 'Emigration', 'Australia' and 'Sense of identity'. The approach I have developed can be used with any migrant group, but I must stress, is a guide only, and a good interviewer fosters conversational flow while being able to pursue any new leads.

Beginning the recording with a brief statement of the date and year, name of the interviewee, and reason for the interview, I proceed to ask about personal background: village/town of birth and upbringing, parents' backgrounds and occupations, formal education, first paid job, when and how they first heard about Australia and their expectations of what it would be like as an emigrant destination. As part of this section, I ask also for the family nickname. As mentioned earlier, this can be a significant identifier.

For the 'Emigration' questions, I seek to understand why the decision to leave was made, was it made alone or with others, how the family responded, and why Australia? When did the move take place? Did they see the move as permanent? What belongings did they bring on the ship? The voyage has always fascinated me and over the years I have developed more specific questions about it. So, the name of the boat is the starting point for a wider exploration of the nature of the voyage, the conditions, and routines on the boat.

My third broad category is 'Australia', which means settlement experiences. Some key elements of this section are disembarkation, initial impressions, accommodation, employment, Maltese community life, the Church and Maltese priests, contact with Malta, assistance offered to others to migrate, and likes and dislikes of Australia compared to Malta. An important question in this section is 'Did you feel welcome in Australian society?'

The fourth grouping of questions form a conclusion to my interviews and focus on 'identity'. I ask whether they have been back to Malta and, if so, when and why; how did they feel being back in Malta and how did they feel coming back to Australia; in which ways are they still Maltese today; did they marry a Maltese; if they have children, do they speak the language and, finally, 'How do you regard yourself today? Maltese? Australian? Or what?'

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

A turning point in my oral history work was meeting Mark Cranfield in 1988, head of the Oral History Program at the NLA. Mark invited me to record interviews with former Heads of the Immigration Department and arranged my training in the library's technical equipment. It was exciting to learn how to use professional recording equipment; at the time, the bulky Nagra E reel-to-reel recorder.

Through the technical training I became good friends with the NLA's sound archivist Kevin Bradley, who was to become President of the International Association of Sound and Audio-Visual Archives, and Assistant Director-General of the Library's Australian Collections and Reader Services. In 1995, Kevin and folklorist Edgar Waters and I made a memorable trip to the western suburbs of Sydney where we recorded Maltese folk singers known as *ghannejja* (pronounced arn-ay-uh). This cultural work helped create a significant record of Maltese folk music which had probably been kept alive more in Australia by the 1940s and 1950s generation of migrants than was the case among the Maltese in Malta.

In a 1997 trip to Sydney, Kevin and I met with Georgina and Zaren Camenzuli and recorded their account of the voyage to Australia on the *Skaubryn* in 1958 – the only

migrant ship to sink at sea. The disaster was made worse for the Camenzuli family when the motor on their lifeboat failed to start, and they feared being swept under the water by the whirlpool created by the sinking ship. As calm settled, fins could be seen in the water circling the lifeboat.



Figure 4 Loretta Meilak (née Mercieca), c. 1935. Photo courtesy Barry York.

Mrs Camenzuli had written an *ghana* (folk song) about the frightening experience and Kevin and I recorded her song which is now on YouTube.¹⁷ She said she wrote it while at home doing the laundry, not unlike practices in Malta with her generation of women. Kevin Bradley is an excellent musician and quickly learned the Maltese guitar tunings and on occasion would join in with performances, much to the delight of the local Maltese. He later completed a thesis on Maltese folk music.

SING SOUND TO EXPAND POTENTIALITY

Oral history is basically about sound archiving – it is the voice that is essential. No transcriber, no matter how good, can capture the variations, intonations and nuances of the voice. The best oral history recordings adopt the whole-of-life approach, emphasising aspects that are historically important, such as migration, and allow for greater reflection on the part of the interviewee. While there might be other uses such as a book or thesis, the audio quality and preservation of the recording is what makes oral history special.

17 'The Saga of the Skaubryn', a Maltese folk song by Georgina Camenzuli and her husband Nazzareno, recorded by the National Library of Australia (NLA), 1997. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xc5UllkD3Uw>. Accessed 6 August 2022.

It creates a primary source where none previously existed. My interviews will be around long after I am not, and sadly most of the people I recorded in the 1980s and 1990s are no longer with us. However, their life stories and reflections on their migration experience in the early twentieth century live on in their own voices.

How we use oral history is a big question, and the YouTube clip of the Camenzuli's song is an example of the possibilities.¹⁸ Of course, the interviews can be quoted in books and articles, and books based on transcription can be historically valuable. My substantial interviews with Emmanuel Attard who came to Australia from Malta in 1916,¹⁹ and Michael Cigler a Czech refugee who arrived in 1949,²⁰ both formed the basis for published titles. A multi-session oral history I recorded with Mrs Josephine Zammit, an extraordinary woman who pioneered a scheme to assist young Maltese women to migrate and was an early figure in ethnic radio in Sydney, also became a book, with recordings donated to the National Film and Sound Archive.²¹

The technologies that allow oral history recordings to be used creatively are commonplace now. In 1998 Kevin and I co-produced a twin CD package called 'Maltese Voices Down Under' which consisted of oral history excerpts based on the themes of 'Memories of the homeland' and 'The Voyage', interspersed with folk music recorded in the Maltese clubs of western Sydney and Melbourne.²²

My time at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House (MoAD) between 2006 and 2016 saw me compiling blog posts using excerpts from the oral histories I recorded, making sure to tag each

18 'The Saga of the Skaubryn', a Maltese folk song by Georgina Camenzuli and her husband Nazzareno, recorded by the National Library of Australia (NLA), 1997. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xc5UllkD3Uw>. Accessed 6 August 2022.

19 Emmanuel Attard, Mark Caruana and Barry York, *Emmanuel Attard, From Gozo (Malta) to Gallipoli and Australia* (CIMS, 1994).

20 Barry York and Michael J. Cigler, *Michael Cigler: A Czech-Australian Story: From Displacement to Diversity* (CIMS, 1996).

21 Barry York, *Josephine Zammit MBE: A Maltese Woman in Australia* (Summer Hill, NSW: Matzn Pty Ltd, 1989).

22 Barry York, *Maltese Voices Down Under: Memories of Malta and Gozo and the Voyage to Australia* (Melbourne: Victoria University of Technology, 1998).

interview with as many fields as possible.²³ The posts with images and sound links of the interviewee could then be shared widely via social media. The museum also embarked on a program to put full interviews online where interviewee permission was granted to do so. It is not up to us to narrow the ways in which interviews might be relevant to others but, on the contrary, to expand their potentiality.

I was 33 when I recorded that first proper interview with my father Loreto in 1984, I'm now more than double that age and a septuagenarian. Since retiring from full-time employment in 2016, I have continued interviewing for NLA and interviewed friends and family as a token of appreciation. And what a precious thing it is for those interviewed and their families, more so when the interviewee passes on – as most of mine have done. To hear the voice of a deceased loved one is akin to a magical experience: the voice so intimate.

23 Museum of Australian Democracy, Oral Histories. Available at <https://oralhistories.moadoph.gov.au/>. Accessed 6 August 2022.

Enabling Agency – Language Awareness with Migrant Interviewees

CAROL MCKIRDY

Adults learning English inspired Carol to collect oral histories. Their stories were inspiring and important and oral history enabled saving them for posterity. Collecting migrant histories is her biggest passion but she has also recorded for multiple organisations. As well, Carol is a TAFE NSW Head Teacher of Literacy and Language.

I have been recording oral history interviews for almost 15 years. Many of the interviews have been with members of migrant community groups who have settled in the Sutherland Shire, Sydney, NSW. The Sutherland Shire is a refugee welcome zone and a settlement area for people from numerous diverse language and cultural backgrounds. I work collaboratively with communities to record the history of narrators' lives before and after settling in Australia. To date, I have recorded the oral histories of Sutherland-based Sudanese, Chinese, Latin American, Indian, Egyptian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Russian speakers, Italian, Iraqi, Dutch and Maltese people. The oral histories are stored at Sutherland Shire Library and the State Library of NSW.

I turned many of the oral histories into videos that cover key aspects of a project, using digital story-telling software to make videos. This creates an online product that summarises the project for easy access to the project's content and for the community's website. They are also available on the NSW Royal Historical website. As a Head Teacher of adult English Language programs, I created freely available lesson resources (that draw on oral histories) for adult language and literacy students in Australia and overseas. Students love learning how to become better readers, writers and speakers using lesson materials that are authentic and based on real lives.

Over the years, I have learned that interviewers must be mindful of an interviewee's English language proficiency. Migrant non-English speaking interviewee settlers – both recent and long-term – do not always develop English capability to native or near-native proficiency. For an oral history interview to be effective and for the interviewee

to sustain agency of what they have to say, the language of the interview must be clear and demonstrate an awareness of how difficult it is to communicate effectively in a second language. Many of the interviews I have conducted have been with emerging English language users who understand the power and importance of telling their story, especially as they have frequently been witnesses to significant events.

There are many phrases that are not problematic for a native English speaker, but which may not make sense to someone who has English as a second language. For example, in oral history interviews, 'speak frankly' is a common suggestion given to an interviewee before the interview begins. An interviewee who is a native speaker of English or who speaks English with native proficiency, will understand that the interviewer is asking the interviewee to speak truthfully, honestly and openly – a perfectly reasonable request. For someone from a culturally and linguistically diverse background who speaks English as a second language, the collocation might be confusing and be taken literally; they might wonder 'Who is Frank?' The interview will begin in a confusing manner because the interviewer makes a request that lacks clarity. There are cultural implications as well; speaking frankly can be a culturally inappropriate request for some interviewees because speaking frankly in their first language and culture is inappropriate, rude or even dangerous.



Figure 1 Friends at the launch of Sudanese People in the Sutherland Shire – a Moving Community oral history project, Sutherland, NSW, 2010. Photo courtesy of Mark McKirdy.

Another point interviewers should be aware of is the delivery and phrasing of questions. For example, an interviewee requested to 'state your name' may be confused as the word 'state' has varied meanings, and 'state your name' sounds interrogatory. 'What is your name / Tell me your name' are more familiar and welcoming and less confusing.

I have also learned from personal experience that oral history, with its focus on listening and collaborative creation between the interviewee and the interviewer, should not be hindered or disrupted by inattentiveness to the interviewee's language competence. Linguistic features such as idioms, phrasal verbs and euphemisms should be thought about carefully before being used in questions and in response to an interviewees' answers in an interview dialogue.

For example, if an oral history interviewer isn't careful, what is said in an interview may go straight over the interviewee's head – they might not get the picture, nor be able to make heads nor tails of it, figure it out, or it may be all Greek to them! Idiomatic language can be perplexing and in English the use of idioms is commonplace. Because English, in many respects, can be understood both literally and figuratively it can be very perplexing to a second language English speaker. English is also an inventive and constantly evolving language, so words are added or change meaning frequently. For example, the words 'sick' 'ridiculous' and 'filth' mean wonderful as well as sick, ridiculous and filth depending on the user. The word 'cool' can also mean 'hot' and 'hot' can mean 'sexy' and 'sexy' can mean 'stylish' and so on.

Native and highly proficient English speakers may find it difficult to avoid speaking English without using the features that make it an expressive and vibrant language. However, during an oral history interview, interviewers need to speak plainly so that the interviewee understands exactly what is being talked about. Unnecessarily using figurative or difficult language in an interview adds extra demands to effective participation. Using English grammar correctly is invariably challenging for an English second language user. In the context of an oral history interview, incorrect English grammar can inadvertently alter the meaning of the narrative. Oral history interviewers should engage with the interviewee by listening carefully and clarifying

inconsistencies. The same applies for preposition usage, limited vocabulary leading to less than effective word choice, pronoun selection and incorrect use of articles and tenses. From my experience, I've learned that, as oral history is ultimately a recording of the past, it's very important to establish with the interviewee exactly when something occurred in their narrative.

The way an interviewee speaks in English can affect how the narrative is understood both by the interviewer during the interview process and by listeners later. A 'foreign' accent may be difficult for the interviewer to follow; the interviewer should therefore listen carefully as the interviewee speaks and, when unclear, paraphrase a response for the listeners' benefit and/or clarification by the interviewee. It may pay to ask questions that encourage and support the interviewee to tell their story in shorter chunks of information with pauses between each new piece of information and to encourage the interviewee to speak slowly.

I have found that although interpreters are effective, there are limitations. Oral history projects, particularly small community projects, may not have sufficient funding to employ interpreters. Relatedly, there is sometimes the temptation to use friends and family in the interviewee's community group in Australia which, at a local level, may comprise a handful of families. An interviewee may feel compromised using an interpreter with whom they have a personal or community affiliation.

For emerging users of English, interviewers should be extra careful. Awareness of second language issues in an interview is essential in establishing a rapport with the interviewee in order to facilitate a relaxed and successful interview.

Teaching Oral History to Family Historians

LINDA HUNT

Linda Hunt is a lecturer in media at the University of Tasmania and a former broadcast journalist. She coordinates the oral history unit within the University's Diploma of Family History.

I have vivid memories from my childhood in Tasmania of weekends spent combing church cemeteries, searching for the resting places of my Scottish, German and Irish ancestors. You see, my mother was an avid genealogist, and she loved the challenge of tracing the family tree and searching for the physical connections to the past. I found the experience both creepy and fascinating. Crumbling headstones, vases of dead flowers and overgrown plots – these are the images I remember. But I also remember that each cemetery contained a wealth of stories. Each headstone told a story. A story of a life well lived. Sometimes of a life cut short. There were family plots where you could see generations of the one family. I found the experience deeply moving and connecting, even when it wasn't the headstone of an ancestor. My early understanding of family history was one that was deeply rooted in the past.

As a journalist, I worked across print, radio and television over several decades, mostly in broadcast news, and the stories I told were anchored in the present. My job was to tell the stories of the living. Surely my news career was far removed from the study of history? But history isn't just something assigned to the past, history is happening now. I have come to realise that, as a journalist, my stories captured history 'in the moment as it happens'.¹ And this is the gift and opportunity oral history provides our Family History students. They gather recollections of events, sometimes long past in memory, but they also capture people's experiences contemporaneously with the historic events they are living through. Oral history storytelling

1 Evan Faulkenbury, 'Journalism, COVID-19, and the Opportunity of Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 7, no. 2 (2022): 253–59.

adds richness and vibrancy to our experience and understanding of events, people and places.

The Diploma of Family History was first offered by the University of Tasmania in 2016, and from the start oral history has been a core unit of study. Since then, more than 2,200 people have enrolled in the oral history unit, and it is impossible to describe our average student. I have been either a tutor or lecturer teaching into the oral history unit since 2018, and each iteration I am amazed and impressed by the students I meet. Ignore the stereotypical, narrow view of family historians as being female, lacking education and marginalised by academics.² Yes, most of our students are women (89%). And yes, the average age is 60 years. But to concentrate on those numbers would be to ignore the diversity and breadth of experience of our cohort. The diploma brings students from across the country together, with New South Wales and Victoria providing the greatest numbers (29% and 20% respectively). Their ages range from 18 to 92 years and their educational experience is also widely varied. Some already have previous higher education qualifications (including doctorates) while for others their highest level of education is a high school certificate.³



Figure 1 Diploma of Family History students visit St David's Park monuments in Hobart. Photo courtesy of University of Tasmania.

2 Tanya Evans, 'How Do Family Historians Work with Memory?', *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 1 (2021): 92–106.

3 Source: University of Tasmania.

But everyone has a story to tell, and everyone has the right to tell their story, so providing our students with the relevant skills and confidence to do so is both a challenge and a privilege. We've designed the course content to take students through each step of the storytelling process.

The oral history unit is taught fully online, as are all the Diploma of Family History units. Students work through the content at their own pace, but they are not alone. We have interactive discussion boards for students to exchange ideas and an 'Ask the Teaching Team' discussion board monitored daily during the week. We now also include several live Zoom tutorials to provide synchronous learning for students and the opportunity to 'meet' teachers in the (virtual) flesh.

The students are taken on a learning journey. We begin by developing an understanding of oral history as a research method and how (and why) it can be utilised in family history. From there, students begin planning their individual oral history projects. The most challenging aspect of project design is choosing who their narrator will be. As we tell our students, the person you interview – the narrator – is someone with a story to tell. They don't have to be an extrovert or well known or highly successful. But they do need first-hand experience of the topic, issue or place being explored and perhaps have a fondness for recalling past events.

The interview itself can be a daunting prospect for our students. An interview requires research, planning, and a degree of confidence to conduct. (As an aside, one of the most confronting elements for students seems to be hearing their own voices when they are listening back to the interview for transcription. It's not surprising – after decades working in broadcast, I'm still horrified by the sound of my own voice!) So, we guide them through the technology they can use, as well as how to prepare, conduct and transcribe the interview. For the majority, these are new skills and this can be a steep learning curve. But each year, the feedback from students is that, although their biggest challenge, this was also the most rewarding aspect of learning oral history.

As a media academic, rather than an historian, I approach family history through a storytelling lens. What I've found while teaching the oral history unit is that telling stories is a major motivation for family history students, and oral history creates a new path and format for them in which to tell stories. They are connecting on a very emotional level with their family stories and (sometimes) their ancestors. They are given the opportunity to bring to life the stories of the people who matter to them.

We know that family historians are a passionate lot – a trait my mother displayed, hence our weekends searching cemeteries. What I have learnt as coordinator of the oral history unit is that the motivations of family historians are so much more than simply uncovering the scandalous convict ancestor. A strong motivator for undertaking family history is leaving a legacy for future generations and oral history practice introduces our students to the opportunity to do so through rich interviews and storytelling. Our students are taught to understand that through their interviews and the stories they create from those interviews, they can ensure familial knowledge is not lost.

We also have students who use this unit to explore issues of identity (their own or of a family member), and to challenge existing assumptions about family life. As I have mentioned, our students have varied and eclectic backgrounds and oral history allows them to explore this. We have students who conduct interviews with family who are members of the Stolen Generation, or who are adopted, or who live with disability. We have others who interview young people who live in non-typical families – members of queer or blended families. (After all, history is happening now.)

History has often been told using male voices and through official accounts. In media studies, we call the dominant voices in news, the primary definers.⁴ They are the individuals and the institutions granted media access, often because they are the

4 Stuart Hall et al., 'The Social Production of News (1978)', in Chris Greer (ed.), *Crime and Media* (London: Routledge, 2019), 239–50.



Figure 2 Linda Hunt interviewing then Environment Minister Tony Burke in Antarctica in 2012. Photo courtesy of Linda Hunt.

official sources or in positions of power. They are the voices who get to frame our understanding of history. A challenge for journalists is to find other voices, to search beyond the official version of events or issues. And there is a very similar challenge and opportunity for family historians. Contemporary oral historians can challenge this silence and raise marginalised voices, such as those of Indigenous Australians. They can help inject greater diversity into the stories of our past, integrating groups whose history was often not taught when they attended school. The process of unpicking and unravelling family history produces strong emotional responses and this is transformative for family historians.

Of course, I cannot write about teaching oral history without mentioning (at least briefly) the pandemic. As COVID-19 began infiltrating the news in early 2020, I was preparing for the start of a new semester of teaching. Existing learning content which taught people how to make their interviewees comfortable; how to choose the ‘best room in the house’ to conduct the interview; and how to get the best sound from their smartphones, suddenly became obsolete. The need to pivot was sudden and quick. (In February 2020, Zoom was a novelty, now it’s a necessity.) The

challenges presented by coronavirus continue. Illness severely impacts study, and when scheduled interviewees fall sick, timelines and deadlines need to be flexible. On the flip side, our students have embraced the challenges and technology, and understand the storytelling opportunities that living through a pandemic provide the oral historian.

The value of oral history in family history is perhaps best understood by sharing the reflections of a student, who told me that the anecdotes and stories they had collected from their narrator, put 'flesh on the bones of their family history'. Everyone has a story to tell. Oral history provides our students with the skills and knowledge to tell those stories.

South Australia's British Migrant Stories: Mini Podcast Series, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia, 2020

BIRGIT HEILMANN

Birgit Heilmann holds a PhD from the University of Goettingen in Germany. She has worked in the museum and gallery sector since 2010 in several museums across Australia and is currently working as curator at the History Trust of South Australia.

The idea to create a mini podcast series using existing oral history interviews was born in March 2020 after the Migration Museum in Adelaide closed its doors to the public due to the pandemic. We had just opened the travelling exhibition, *British Migrants – Instant Australians?*, produced by Museums Victoria. The exhibition explored personal stories, social history and contemporary impacts of post-war British migration on Australian society.

Between 1947 and 1982, over a million Britons immigrated to Australia. Most of them hoped for better life opportunities far away from post-war Europe. There were several assistance schemes that helped British migrants to settle in Australia. One of the most popular was the 'Ten Pound Pom' assisted passage that allowed Britons to travel to Australia for only 10 pounds, with their children travelling free of charge. British migrants who received assistance had to remain in Australia for at least two years, otherwise they had to repay the fare and their own way back home to England.¹

With the museum doors closed during the pandemic and unable to proceed with any physical public programs, I was looking for a way to provide online content to present material about British migrant stories in South Australia. I dug up oral history recordings which were conducted by the History Trust of South Australia and The University of Adelaide between 2012 and 2014 for the Hostel Stories Project. This research project was supported by an ARC Linkage grant to the

¹ Immigration Museum, *British Migrants – Instant Australians?* (Melbourne: Museums Victoria, 2017), 37.

University of Adelaide in collaboration with a range of community partners, including the Migration Museum (History Trust of South Australia), the cities of Charles Sturt and Port Adelaide Enfield, State Archives of South Australia, and the Vietnamese Community in Australia (South Australia Chapter). The research team included Professor Rachel Ankeny, Dr Karen Agutter, Daniella Pilla, Justin Madden, as well as Catherine Manning from the History Trust of South Australia. They interviewed around 50 participants who responded to a public call out for contributors to the project. The aim was to capture the experiences and personal memories of migrants living in migrant hostels, reception centres and camps in South Australia between 1947 and the mid-1980s.²



Figure 1 British migrants arriving at the Elder Park Migrant Hostel, Adelaide, 1948. South Australian Government Photographic Collection, History Trust of South Australia, GN14994.

I selected interviews that were conducted with British migrants to create digital and South Australian content that complemented the *British Migrants – Instant*

2 More information about the project available at, The University of Adelaide, Hostel Stories; <https://able.adelaide.edu.au/humanities/hostel-stories/>. Accessed 9 May 2022.

Australians? exhibition. Before proceeding with my podcast project, I discussed my plans with the former project team from Adelaide University to avoid any interference with the ongoing research.

From 15 interviews conducted with British migrants, I focused on five recordings, the full transcripts of which I had access to. This made it easier for me to access content quickly and create the podcast in a limited time frame.

I explored three individual themes for a mini podcast series – namely the topics ‘return migration’, ‘a mixed bag of memories’ and ‘Elizabeth – a city of tomorrow’. These topics were present in all interviews and aligned well with the rationale behind the *British Migrants – Instant Australians?* exhibition.

RETURN MIGRATION

I selected the theme because the topics of British migrants returning back home to England or dealing with difficulties in Australia are not often raised when talking about Ten Pound Poms. It has been estimated that just over 25 per cent of migrants returned to Britain. However, between a third and half of these return migrants re-emigrated to Australia and became known as ‘Boomerang Poms’.³ The selected interviewees gave insights into different reasons for returning home, such as homesickness, financial struggle and not finding what they had expected in Australia.

Listeners to our podcast can follow the story of Jim and Mary, who first migrated to Australia in 1966. Mary remembers:

He [Jim] never stopped whingeing, whinge, whinge, whinge because, see, being English and that, he missed his soccer, and he missed going to the pub with my brothers, [...] so after four years of listening to him whingeing I said ‘right, I’m sick of this we’re going back’. So we went back.⁴

3 James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms: Australia’s Invisible Migrants* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

4 Jim and Mary W, interviewed by Catherine Manning, Whyalla, 17 May 2013, recording and transcript held by the History Trust of South Australia.

Jim subsequently adds, 'Oh, the biggest mistake I ever made in my life'.⁵ Eventually, they returned to Australia.

A MIXED BAG OF MEMORIES

The memories British migrants have of their arrival in Adelaide, and settling into their new lives vary from person to person. This shows that there is never only one migrant narrative but many different ones. For example, Joyce and her husband Harry, together with their two children, Lynda and Glenn, arrived in Adelaide on 11 September 1954 after a long journey from London by ship. Joyce didn't like what she saw when she arrived:

We got off at Outer Harbour and it was on a Sunday. And it was very, very quiet. I was very upset coming, there was just our family and one other family and that was all going to the hostel and we had this little bus pick us up and took us through Port Adelaide and very quiet. I didn't like the look of the Outer Harbour at all – I felt a bit sad really, when I saw it, it wasn't what I expected.⁶

The memories of Mary and Jim with regard to their first impression of Adelaide are quite different to Joyce's. Mary recalls her first impression when they were on the way from the airport to Smithfield Hostel north of Adelaide:

I forget what that road was called, [...] but anyway, whatever road it was, I can remember all these car yards and all the bunting and lights everywhere. And I thought it was really glamorous. You know, all these lights, lights everywhere you know, and I was really excited.⁷

5 Jim and Mary W interview, 17 May 2013.

6 Joyce Shorrock, interviewed by Catherine Manning, West Lakes, 7 February 2013, recording and transcript by held the History Trust of South Australia.

7 Jim and Mary W interview, 17 May 2013.

ELIZABETH – A CITY OF TOMORROW

The last episode focuses on settling in and finding a new home in South Australia, with a particular focus on the suburb of Elizabeth. Situated 30 kilometres north of Adelaide, Elizabeth was used as a drawcard to bring particular Britons to South Australia. The construction for Elizabeth began in 1954 on 3,000 acres near Salisbury purchased by the Housing Trust. The city was inaugurated by Thomas Playford in 1955. The layout of Elizabeth was based on the model the British had adopted for their new towns, providing neighbourhoods within the town with their own primary schools, shops and local facilities.⁸



Figure 2 An example of one of the house styles being built at Elizabeth. Australian official photograph by Don Edwards, 1958. History Trust of South Australia, PN00926.

New arrivals were able to find work at industrial sites such as the Weapons Research Establishment, General Motors-Holden, Pinnock's and James Hardie. However, Elizabeth took some time to catch up with European pop culture. Jan, who had reluctantly migrated as a 19-year-old with her parents, remembers that it was quite a different vibe at the dances.

8 Susan Marsden, *Business, Charity and Sentiment. The SA Housing Trust 1936–1986* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986), 277.

My sister and I went to a dance one night at the Salisbury Youth Centre. I came out with my mod clothes, so I had three quarter boots on, I had denim, I had a black tartan vest thing – you know, the works! And we went to the dance and we were freaks. Nobody came near us and all the girls wore sticking out dresses and long gloves, – they were just so far behind us.⁹

This project enabled me to bring South Australian British migrant stories to life and to demonstrate how oral history recordings can be re-used beyond the initial research project. The accessibility of the recordings, including the metadata and full transcripts, helped me develop themes and attain permissions to publish the podcast content.

The podcast series is hosted on the History Trust's Soundcloud account <https://soundcloud.com/historysa>. It is also accessible on the History Trust's website, including full podcast transcripts and resources, <https://history.sa.gov.au/south-australias-british-migrant-stories/>. Since they were published in August and September 2020, each episode has reached an average of 254 downloads from various podcast platforms distributed via Libsyn.

9 Janet Coolen, interviewed by Justin Madden, University of Adelaide, 9 April 2014, recording and transcript held by the History Trust of South Australia.

Interviewing Women Who Protested Against the Vietnam War

ALEXANDRA PIERCE

Alexandra Pierce is a teacher, reviewer, editor, researcher and podcaster. She is developing these interviews about the Vietnam War into a limited podcast series. Her next project, Paper Defiance, has her interviewing indie bookshop owners. Past projects of note are the podcast Galactic Suburbia, and anthologies Letters to Tiptree and Luminescent Threads.

When I took over teaching a Year 11 Modern History subject in 2011, I was given curriculum materials that focused on the Vietnam War and American anti-Vietnam activities. As the daughter of a veteran, I knew something about the Vietnam War, but not the protest element; as I taught the subject that first year, I wondered if there had been similar activities in Australia. Eventually, I found a documentary about a group called Save Our Sons, which pointed me towards some prominent women in the protest movement. I then tried to find more information about women's activities, but while there were many women in the images from the time, and some were mentioned in contemporary newspaper articles, they weren't discussed to any extent in the history books. In the general histories, when individuals were named in relation to the protest movement, it was usually (male) draft resisters – not the people who supported them, or the people who went to rallies and, sometimes, to jail. I was disappointed by the lack of available information, and thought 'someone should do something about this!' Since 2018, I have interviewed nearly 50 women who actively opposed the Vietnam War and the National Service Act. Despite having no previous experience in oral history, I had some experience in podcasting – in particular, a podcast devoted to interviewing people. It is worth noting that, after I had commenced my research, Carolyn Collins' book *Save Our Sons* was published; Collins examined the experiences of the different groups around Australia that existed under that name.¹

1 Carolyn Collins, *Save Our Sons* (Monash University Publishing: Melbourne, 2021).

Arguably the leading Victorian woman involved in the protest movement was Jean McLean who, in 1965, was fundamental in setting up the Melbourne branch of Save Our Sons. Initially I asked McLean to come and speak to my students, which she was happy to do. McLean is a fascinating woman, who eventually went into state politics and has been involved in various issues like the independence of Timor Leste and nuclear disarmament. She is widely read and not afraid to state her opinion on issues or people; my students loved her. To meet, in 'real life', a figure we were studying in history was an astonishing encounter for many. The experience of being able to hear someone's actual voice as they tell their own story is part of the reason I decided to record women's voices, preserving that personal aspect with much more immediacy than written words allow.

Having met McLean and seen her speak to my students, she was naturally my first choice for an interview. McLean has been interviewed many times about her involvement in the protest movement, and has her story down pat. This was a challenge in itself: trying to come up with questions that hadn't been asked before, or at least asking in different ways. On reflection, McLean was a suitable first interviewee: she is easy-going, welcoming, and always happy to talk about her experiences.

Locating women to interview has been the greatest challenge of the project. Reading newspapers and the minutes of meetings held in archives gives names, but at least some women have changed their names; or their names are common enough that my emails tend to begin with 'I am wondering if you are this person...' (I have received several 'sorry, not the person you're looking for' replies). Given that these events happened more than 50 years ago, I am also faced with the sad reality that many women have already died, or are too unwell to be interviewed. As well as searching for specific women, I have also sent hopeful emails to organisations and groups that I think might have likely women in their ranks today. Such emails have yielded a few valuable contacts.

Fortunately, after interviewing McLean, she sent me to two other members of Save Our Sons. This snowball methodology has been the means through which I have found at least half the women I have interviewed – I initially contact one woman, who then puts me in touch with one or two more.

My interviews have been undertaken either face to face or remotely. Unsurprisingly, over the last two years, for most interviews I have made use of Zoom, Skype and FaceTime. The realities of lockdown have, somewhat perversely, helped with this; older women who previously hadn't had much use for such technologies have now had lots of experience and are comfortable chatting to the screen – and also felt comfortable talking to a stranger in that way even while COVID-19 was raging. For the face-to-face interviews, my trusty pocket recorder, a Marantz, has been invaluable.

I have a set of five standard questions for my interview subjects:

1. when they were born
2. whether they came from a political family
3. what their motivations were for being involved in anti-Vietnam War activities
4. what activities they actually undertook
5. how they would reflect on the involvement of women in general, in those campaigns.

These questions allow me to compare different perspectives. They have also served as springboards to explore the variety of attitudes and experiences of different women.

In terms of motivation, some of my interviewees had explicitly Communist perspectives on the issues; others were outraged at American (and, by extension, Australian) imperialism; still others horrified at the loss of life on all sides. Activities undertaken were even more diverse. Amongst Jean McLean's many activities, she was the co-chair of the 1970 Moratorium Committee and visited North Vietnam. Sue McCulloch was the voice of a pirate radio station set up when protestors took over the student union building at Melbourne University. Helen McCulloch, Kaye Lovett, Martha Kinsman and Christine Ross were involved as Monash University students; they collected money to send to the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Vietnam (an action that was officially treasonous). Margret

RoadKnight sang folk songs at any event she was invited to. And some women ‘just’ turned up to a few demonstrations, in particular the May 1970 Moratorium. I am most interested in recording women belonging to this last group: women who had never been involved in any sort of political activity before, but who decided to turn up on that day to make known their objection to a government policy.²



Figure 1 Section of crowd demonstrating at a Vietnam Moratorium march on the steps of Parliament House, Melbourne, Victoria, 1970. Donated to the Australian War Memorial by Ron Gilchrist; accession number P00671.003. Found at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C40174>. Public Domain.

Recording the experiences of women at this point in Australian history is important for many reasons, including documenting changing attitudes towards politics, and public participation in politics. Many of the women I have spoken to continue to be involved in activism, such as anti-nuclear protests, fighting for refugees, and climate justice – or, indeed, going into politics. On a personal level, I have always been aware of the ephemeral nature of historical records. In previous research projects I have enjoyed trying to sort through what has survived of the early Roman empire,

2 The Melbourne Moratorium, on 8 May 1970, was the biggest political demonstration in Australia to that time; estimates of size depend on who you talk to, varying from 60,000 to 100,000 people. Images from the time show that it had a mix of gender, age and social status.

or 11th-century English and Norman chronicles. This project has given me a much greater appreciation of both the necessity and the difficulty of oral history. I have heard the same story a few times but with different actors involved, and I have heard the phrase ‘I’m sorry I don’t remember’ on countless occasions. At the same time, women who initially worried they would not remember much have turned out to have very clear memories of their motivations and experiences, often to their own delight, which has been a reward in itself. And many of them have been pleased to know that their stories, and those of other women, are being recorded for posterity.

There are two curriculum areas where teachers could make use of these interviews. Firstly, Unit 2 Modern History (taught at Year 11) asks students to look at the anti-war movement against the Vietnam War within the context of the Cold War, something several interviewees discuss. Secondly, one of the outcomes in Unit 3 and 4 Australian History (Year 12) explicitly mentions ‘the Save Our Sons campaign [and] the Moratorium Movement’.³ Although I have not personally made use of these interviews in the classroom (not having taught Year 11 history since I began interviews in earnest), my hope is that they will be particularly useful to secondary school students. I have seen how students respond to primary sources they can clearly identify as coming from an individual, and particularly one who seems more relatable than, for example, Winston Churchill or Eleanor of Aquitaine: they begin to understand that history is made by and impacts on real people. Hearing the voices – with the intonation, hesitations, and stumbles of real conversation – has an even greater impact.

These interviews will be housed in the digital archive of the State Library of Victoria and accessible to the public through the library’s ‘Protests, activism and dissent in Victoria’ collection.

3 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, ‘History Study Design 2022–2026’ (VCAA 2020), 63.

‘Light breaks where no sun shines’: Reflections on Memories of Displacement

INDIRA CHOWDHURY

Indira Chowdhury is an oral historian based in Bengaluru, India where she heads the Centre for Public History at the Srishti-Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology. She founded the Oral History Association of India and was its President from 2013 to 2016. She was also the President of the International Oral History Association from 2014 to 2016.

We meet several times in January of 2012, and again in May that year. Our meetings are marked by his memories of fleeing from Burma (now, Myanmar) in 1941. The war, the submarines, the mines, torpedoes and the call sign of Radio Tokyo which he used to listen to as a 20-year-old. Padi Venkataraman Krishnamoorthy, a.k.a. ‘PVK’ was born in Burma in 1920. Although the name of the family village – Padi – just outside Madras (now Chennai) remained embedded in his name, PVK hardly had a relationship with his village. His father, Venkataraman, who was from Madras Presidency in India, had found a job in the prison department in Rangoon (now Yangon) and migrated to Burma with his family.

Burma was administered by the Bengal Presidency in colonial India and many Indian families from Bengal and Madras Presidency moved to Burma for work. PVK’s father had also built a house outside Rangoon, expecting to spend the rest of his days there. But World War Two changed everything.

PVK: I did my English Honours in Burma. We had a professor who was an Australian; I was a good student. The war came, on the last day of December – in 1941. We could not take the exams. Not only me, hundreds of people,

Note: The title echoes Dylan Thomas’ poem, ‘Light breaks where no sun shines’. I am grateful to P.V. Krishna- moorthy (1920–2019) for agreeing to be interviewed. Thanks to my friend Lata Mani for introducing me to PVK. I am grateful to PVK’s family members for being generous hosts during my interview sessions. I thank Piyusha Chatterjee for transcribing the interviews. And last but not the least, I thank Vivek Dhareshwar for insightful conversations about displacement.

including the Burmese, because in the university, all the professors and everybody ran away, and Rangoon fell [to Japan].

PVK's memory of that moment in the distant past is rerouted through another linked memory related to Japan. If the first belongs to the period before his life in Burma was disrupted, the second belongs to a time when he had established himself professionally in broadcasting. PVK joined All India Radio and rose to become Station Director, serving in several cities in India and later became the Director General of Doordarshan – Indian National Television.

PVK: I was an avid listener to Radio Tokyo. There used to be a tune which they played at the beginning of their news, which I will play to you later. It was a very attractive tune. I used to practise it on my harmonium. Many years later, on my way back from the United States, when I went to study television, I was spending a couple of weeks in Tokyo. I went to the piano studio and they said, please play your national anthem. And I played the national anthem, and they liked it very much. And then I said, 'Shall I play something that I know?' And I played that tune. They were hurt!

IC: Hurt?

PVK: Because they were defeated [in World War Two]. This reminded them of their defeat.

IC: They told you that?

PVK: They didn't – I could see it in their faces.

The battles with the Japanese in Southeast Asian theatre of World War Two were referred to as the Burma campaign by the British. For PVK – the approach of the Japanese army was marked by the fall of Kota Bharu in Malaysia. That date, 8 December 1941, remains indelibly etched in his memory, perhaps because the fall of Kota Bharu triggered his flight to India. History competes with memory – and most accounts associate early December 1941 with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.



Figure 1: PVK as a radio announcer, All India Radio, 1944. Photo courtesy of Indu Balachandran.

The battle of the Pacific is often forgotten. Memory, permits us to wander into different geographies and different time zones. For PVK the date coincides with the date of his grandson's birth many years later, occasioning a commemorative act that connects past and present. Kota Bharu symbolises not just the war and the consequent displacement of his family, but also evokes the places that the family could no longer return to.

PVK: I was in Burma until Kota Bharu in Malaysia fell. In fact, my grandson is called Kotabharu, he was born that day, December 8th. [Laughs] The moment the Japanese entered the Malay peninsula, it was finished so far as Burma was concerned. But because the British were fed on their own propaganda, they didn't know that they had not a ghost of a chance. Singapore was taken like that!



Figure 2 A C-47 aircraft releases parachutes with ammunitions and rations for American troops on the Myitkyina front, Burma Campaign, 1941–45. Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museums (collection no. 4700-06), public domain.

The family debated the wisdom of leaving. They had made their lives in Burma, built a home there. Though he was the youngest, PVK had argued based on the news he was listening to that it was too dangerous for the family to stay on. His recollections were also moulded by the understanding he had about intercommunity relations.

PVK: I can't boast – but I was the only fellow who said, 'We should not stay. It is too risky for our women. And we cannot go and live in Burmese villages; we have never lived there'. If we had got friendly with the villagers of Burma, we could have gone and lived there – which most of the lower-class Indians did. But we couldn't have lived there.

So it was decided that we would leave. But the government said, 'people in government service cannot leave'. My father was very old, he was already a pensioner. Then there was my mother, my sisters, all the grandchildren, my aunts – we had a large family. So myself and my cousin were allowed

to board the ship as volunteers – as helpers to the old people, women and children who were allowed on the ship.

My brother-in-law was in service, my immediate elder brother was an engineer on the China road. He couldn't come. My eldest brother was at the Thai border, he was a geologist. My second brother was in the Accountant-General's office; he could not leave. I was the only fellow – a non-essential.

In the chaos that followed, the family splintered; uncertainty loomed large. The story of the fragmentation of the family is recounted in fits and starts – recreating in the narration the anxiety, insecurity and fear that accompanies all families that are displaced by wars. PVK's brother-in-law, his older sibling and uncle walked to India through Nagaland. The oldest among his siblings, trekked through the Hukawng Valley in the northernmost part of Burma. Once back in India, they could only live a dispersed life – as none of their relatives had the means to accommodate them all until they found their feet. The family that had migrated and settled down in Burma for professional opportunities had now returned to their 'home' country as displaced people.

PVK: They had a miserable time – my eldest brother came walking along with a few friends. He came to Calcutta and he could not answer questions like – who are you, what is your name? He had cerebral malaria. They found, from papers in his pocket, some indication as to who he is. [We had] a phone call from a man in the Finance Department. And of course, Ramakrishna Mission, Marwari Relief Society – they used to come to the camps, identify people, ask questions to find out who they are. Some of them were suffering from amnesia. Some were totally sick. My aunt who was 60 walked; she refused to leave her husband and come with us.

We lost a servant – the fellow got malaria and died. Malaria was rampant. At night, you were sleeping in the open. The Nagas of whom you talk – as if they were head-hunters, were great helpers.

IC: So was the family finally reunited in 1941 itself?

PVK: We had some relatives. But they were also ‘hand-to-mouth’ people, couldn’t accommodate such a huge crowd. Who the hell can look after so many people? We scrounged – very bad period, very bad time.

The narration moves back and forth – between the journey by foot of members of his family and his own journey by sea. He offers us a rare insight into the admiration so many Indians felt for the defiant Indian nationalist Subhash Chandra Bose who had collaborated with Imperial Japan during World War Two, hoping to free India from British rule. The first Indian National Army that was founded by the revolutionary Rash Behari Bose existed until 1942 and was revived by Subhash Bose in 1943. In PVK’s account, it is Subhash Bose’s intervention that saved his life in 1941. Time stretches out in his memory, describing a journey by ship that was unable to enter ports in India, rendered treacherous by mines. The years and historical details fuse together.

PVK: The journey by ship was supposed to be two-and-a-half, three days. But we were held up because we couldn’t enter Madras (now Chennai), because it was mined. We couldn’t enter Calcutta (now Kolkata), because it was mined. We couldn’t go to Chittagong (now Chattogram, in Bangladesh), it was mined. Chittagong was part of India at that time. But we had one option – to go to Gopalpur-on-sea. That means, mid-sea, you come on to a catamaran. How are these old people to get into a catamaran? So the man [captain] took a risk and got into Vizag (now Vishakapatnam). Not because of us, but because he had to transport back British troops to Rangoon.

Vizag was not mined, because the British kept that open for their troops to get out, to fight in southeast Asia. This ship, I understand, when it left with the British troops, was submarined just outside Vizag. The same ship.

IC: By the Japanese?

PVK: I told you, they were following us. But for Subhash Bose, Mr P. V. Krishnamoorthy might have been under the Bay of Bengal. He [Bose] had told the Japanese, ‘You torpedo any Indian ship taking Indian refugees, you lose my sympathy. Don’t do that. That will antagonise the entire Indian nation’.

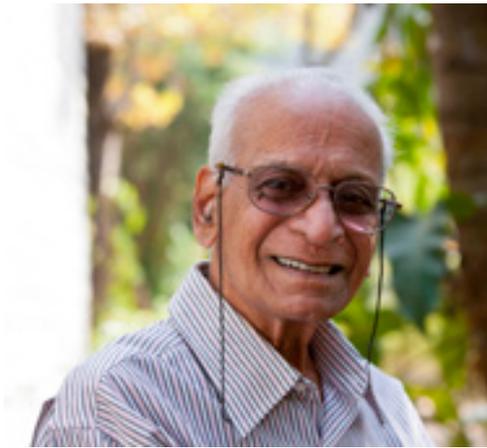


Figure 3: PVK, c. 2010. Photo courtesy of the author.

Accounts of displacement conceal themselves in life stories of the displaced, affixed with glue that doesn’t wash off. During my last interview with PVK in May 2012, I ask him about the Emergency that was in force in India for 21 months between 1975 and 1977. Declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Emergency had suspended civil liberties and censored the press. PVK had been appointed the Director

General of Doordarshan (Indian National Television) in 1976 in the middle of that dark period of Indian democracy. Was he nervous taking charge of national television at that point? In his response, he returned once more to that fateful journey he had made 70 years ago. This time he elaborated details that spoke of what that journey really meant to him. His words came spilling out, recalling the trauma of that moment, and yet, those old wounds no longer bled.

PVK: You know, my life has always been a challenge, when we left Burma, with just our *dhoti* and our shirt – that gave us the guts to face anything in life. Nothing can be worse than walking into the unknown.

When you’ve got on board that ship and it was bombed from above by the Japanese and half my family was left behind on the wharf, the other half was on the boat and we were asked to go into the sea – and the captain told us to get down from the deck, and go to the hold. We had to leave all our food and what little we had on the deck and we went down. When we reached the sea,

the captain said you can go up to the deck, when we came up we found all our eatables, everything was stolen. Even our beddings were not there! What more disaster do you want in life?

We started our lives with a big question mark 'What next?' So these pinpricks don't matter to me. I have faced life squarely.

The journey of one who has been forced to migrate is always a voyage into the unknown . But that journey also holds within it lessons of fearlessness that resurface and fortify survivors when they confront crisis. Their recollections bestow courage even on the listeners , enabling us to look back on the vast seas we have crossed to find our feet in new lands. Time stretches its hands towards lessons we must absorb from difficult journeys. Light breaks where no sun shines.

Sydney's Post-war Greeks in Popular Memory, The Greek Australian Archive Project

NICHOLAS DOUMANIS AND KATHY KALLOS

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Kathy Kallos began her career teaching English and Modern Greek before moving into journalism to work as a reporter, researcher, producer and sub-editor for the ABC and SBS. She is a member of Oral History NSW and is now pursuing her passion in gathering, preserving and interpreting life stories.

What do we know about the history of the Greeks in Sydney in the post-war era? What kind of world did they try to create for themselves? How did they become 'Greek-Australian', and what did that mean? There is a vast literature on the history of Australian immigration, particularly for the post-war period, but these kinds of questions have not been addressed to any significant degree. Part of the reason has to do with limited access to primary sources to migrant subjectivities, which can be provided by oral histories and by collecting materials such as photographs, diaries and home movies. The Greek Australian Archive Project, which is a joint venture between UNSW and the State Library of NSW, seeks to address that need by producing a rich repository of historical sources. Scholars from UNSW will produce oral histories and collect materials that speak to the story of the Sydney Greeks, which will then be curated and archived in the State Library.

Another reason why Australian scholars have barely considered the ideas and aims of its non-English-speaking immigrants has had to do with the assumption that such matters lack significance. Beyond their contribution to food cultures and national productivity, migrants and their cultures seem irrelevant to the larger themes of Australian historical development. What has been of interest is integration. There

is an extensive body of scholarship that draws largely on official records, including departmental policy documents, commissioned studies and statistics, and which has monitored integration, education, welfare and workplace discrimination. During the 1970s and 1980s, social scientists like I.H. Burnley, Eva Isaacs and Gillian Bottomley used official materials to provide an extensive social profile of the Greeks.¹ Ample consideration was also given to migrant perspectives and how ordinary Greeks were coping with the challenges of settlement. Reginald Appleyard, for example, conducted a project that monitored the experiences of women that ran over four decades.² The thrust of this general body of literature, however, was to assess the merits of the migration programs and their social impacts. As such it provides a ‘top-down’ perspective. Some works that have emerged from within the Greek migrant population, and which have paid close attention to internal structures (churches, associations), give a sense of the kind of communities that the Greeks wanted to build. Led by Michael Tsounis and Anastasios Tamis, this body of material gives insights into community politics, associations and the conflicts that frequently erupted between competing sectional interests.³ These works tell us a great deal about how community elites set out to create institutions that would service important cultural needs, particularly those relating to faith and religious practices. Yet in focusing on the community’s leadership and its political movements, they also offer a different ‘top-down’ perspective that only addresses social and cultural questions indirectly. They only touch on matters of migrant agency, and on how individuals and families met the challenges of settlement.

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- 1 I.H. Burnley, ‘Greek Settlement in Sydney, 1947–1971’, *Australian Geographer* 13 (1976), 200–14; Eva Isaacs, *Greek Children in Sydney* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1976); Gillian Bottomley, *After the Odyssey: A Study of Greek Australians* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979)
 - 2 Reginald Appleyard, Anna Amera and John Yiannakis, *Black Night, White Day: Greek Women in Australia; A Longitudinal Study* (Rydalmer: Avago Books, 2015)
 - 3 M. Tsounis, ‘Greek Communities in Australia’ (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1972); A. Tamis, *The Greeks in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Nicholas Doumanis, ‘The Greeks in Australia’, in R. Clogg (ed.), *The Greek Diaspora in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave, 1999).

The Greek Australian archive is being developed by UNSW's Nicholas Doumanis and George Kouvaros with the support of a team of researchers. The centrepiece of the project is an oral history collection consisting of at least 100 interviews that will reflect the community's regional background diversity. It will feature migrants from different regions of Greece and from other parts of the Greek-speaking world, particularly Cyprus but also from other parts of the diaspora (e.g., Egypt, South Africa, Ukraine and Russia). One important question that arises is the way these various groups managed their differences. How did they overcome these differences when it came to organising parish church committees or Pan-Greek associations? What regional music and dance traditions were chosen for Greek balls? Did differences inhibit intermarriage? How did these differences influence the making of Greek-Australian identities? Although Greeks liked to present themselves to outsiders as a single group, they nevertheless showed a marked preference for socialising and intermarrying with people from their particular town, island or locality. It is also the case that regional background had been a source of tension in pre-war community conflicts. The project will consider the extent to which these factors were important in the post-war era.

The project focuses on subjects now in their eighties and nineties; those who arrived in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, and those born in Australia and who witnessed the rapid expansion of the Sydney community. The majority of new arrivals were young people in their twenties, and the vast majority came from humble village backgrounds. Preliminary investigations have shown that although they came from very traditional village communities with pre-modern amenities and only had a primary school education, they had also been receptive to the modernising influences of the city. Hence young migrants arriving in Sydney were already sporting modern dress fashions and hairstyles, were listening to the most recent urban Greek music, and were avid soccer fans. The project accords special attention to photography, not only to see how these young immigrants wished to present themselves to each other and to folks back home, but to see how generating photographs had become a new practice for capturing life experiences and how these experiences were relayed back home. As most of the newcomers were young, they also had the energy to work many jobs. They were willing to marry and start families and had the ambition of

starting businesses and participating in associations. The project aims to investigate migrant dynamics with a view to giving a fulsome depiction of the Sydney Greek migrant experience that addresses the issue of agency, as well as how they became Greek Australians and what that meant.

A special feature of this project is its focus on Greek neighbourhoods, which allowed newcomers to find a footing in Australian society, and which probably played a major role in forging a distinctive Greek Australian culture. One can confidently say that neighbourhoods gave new arrivals time to adjust and acclimatise, for they could immediately socialise with people that spoke the same language and quickly develop social networks through which they could acquire useful information. Neighbourhoods provided such valuable resources as Greek food, medical and other services in their native language, information about jobs and services provided in their own language, and Greek social and cultural institutions, particularly churches. Before World War Two, a small Greek neighbourhood had formed across Redfern, Surry Hills, Paddington and Darlinghurst, which is also where the first two Greek Orthodox Churches were built. As these suburbs were walking distance from industrial zones such as Zetland and Alexandria, post-war migrants flocked into Redfern and Paddington, where they could also access established Greek-run butchers, grocers and useful amenities. As their numbers expanded, however, the community spread into Newtown and Enmore, and became especially prominent in Marrickville, which was also close to factories. Their neighbourhoods would feature many more Greek spaces and often with Greek signage: bakeries, delicatessens, sweet shops and cafes. The project seeks to elicit as much information as it can about the function that these neighbourhoods played in Greek migrant lives; what they remember about their routines and interactions along King Street in Newtown, along Marrickville Road and along Oxford Street. It also seeks photographs that show the way these spaces were organised and how they were presented to the public.

By the 1980s most of Sydney's Greeks had relocated to suburbs in the south and southwest, including Marrickville, Earlwood and Kingsgrove. The project explores the symbolic significance of this second migration, and how possessing detached homes with ample yardage was seen as an 'advance'. The typical Greek now liked a modern

brick home with columns and an orchard to grow tomatoes, zucchinis and cucumbers. Cars made the old neighbourhoods, in which people could access their needs by foot, redundant. Greeks could get to and from shops, church, the Greek cafe and relatives with their motor vehicles, which also needed to be housed in a garage.

Most of our interviewees never imagined that one day their stories might be worth recording, but so far they have been very receptive to requests for an interview. They are largely motivated by the need to inform future generations. The project therefore meets an important community need, and is supported by all Greek associations.

INTERVIEWING MARRICKVILLE'S GREEK COMMUNITY - KATHY KALLOS

As a journalist, I have explored countless stories; however, none are closer to my heart than those of the Greek migration experience. For the Greek Australian Archive Project (GAA), I have returned to the neighbourhood of my youth in Sydney's inner west to record untold stories about how new lives were established by post-war Greek migrants on the other side of the world. These narratives are rich with themes of displacement, resilience, cultural ties and community.

I have witnessed first-hand the challenges my own Greek migrant parents faced for over 40 years as they ran their seven-day-a-week mixed business, while also raising their four children above the shop. By growing up in the 1960s and '70s amongst thousands of other Marrickville Greeks, my story is not unique; however, it provides a distinct blend of 'time and place' to conduct oral history interviews with greater intimacy, knowledge and awareness.

The interviewees illustrate their resourcefulness, as livelihoods were created by seeking and seizing opportunities. Businesses such as grocery shops, bakeries, barber shops, continental delis and restaurants were overwhelmingly operated by Greek migrants. Others were attracted to the area due to its proximity to industry offering work for those with few skills.

These stories are told in either Greek or English, with the native tongue often prevailing, despite the length of time interviewees have called Australia home. The Greek spoken word is a useful adjunct to the project, providing an important cultural and linguistic archive. The nuances of language, accents and dialects showcase the diverse regions that make up the Sydney Greek diaspora.

The late Dimitrios Danas who opened Marrickville's first deli on Illawarra Rd in 1962 said that he never felt like a foreigner living and working in the area as everyone spoke Greek. He conceded, however, that the environment made it difficult to learn English. He eventually learnt to read and write what he described as proper English by completing a correspondence course, which paved the way for him to become a Justice of the Peace.⁴

Maria Giannakelos, a co-owner of the iconic Corinthian Rotisserie Restaurant on Marrickville Road was only 17 when she came to Sydney from Lesvos for her arranged marriage to Fotis. Long before she started making some of the best Greek food in Sydney, Maria worked in an undergarment factory in Marrickville's Silver Street, operating large industrial machinery. She recalls the language difficulties she encountered in those early days: 'The Australian lady, the boss, would say pass me the scissors, I was silent, I'd wait, and she'd ask me a second time to pass the scissors, I gave them to her, and she'd throw them down, you know they swore at us because we didn't know the language. I'd go home at night and cry'.⁵

The irony was that while Greek migrants were trying to learn English, they saw the imperative for their children to learn Greek. Like most Greek kids of my generation, I went to Greek afternoon school, and it was non-negotiable! I contacted my former Greek school teacher Athina Stavrelli for the project. It was an emotional reunion for us both, as we'd not seen each other for over 45 years. She explained how crucial it

4 Dimitrios Danas, interviewed by Kathy Kallos in Sydney on 20 February 2020, Greek Australian Archive (GAA) Oral History Project, State Library of NSW (SLNSW), 9663966, <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/npApBW51>

5 Maria Giannakelos, interviewed by Kathy Kallos in Sydney on 5 December 2019, Greek Australian Archive (GAA) Oral History Project, State Library of NSW (SLNSW), 9658167, <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/nX6aVD0Y>

was for early Greeks to pass on language, culture and traditions. She also noted the weight of responsibility teachers like herself carried in fulfilling those obligations. It wasn't always easy, as students would come to class exhausted after a full day at school. She would engage them with songs for fun, but perhaps more importantly, to keep them awake.

As an adult you reflect on those years with a clearer perspective of the historical and social context of the era. Through the oral histories, one gains a deeper understanding of the daily physical and mental challenges new migrants faced as they juggled work commitments, family responsibilities and holding on to their Greekness.

In the words of another Marrickville Greek teacher, the late Panagiota Banbas, 'Without our language our nation would be forgotten...and our culture and our traditions would've disappeared'.⁶

So too, the objective of the Greek Australia Archive Project, is to keep their stories, their challenges and their legacy alive, in perpetuity. And as we've already seen, it's a race against time.

6 Panagiota Banbas, interview by Kathy Kallos in Sydney on 11 October 2019, Greek Australian Archive (GAA) Oral History Project, State Library of NSW (SLNSW), 9658157, <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/nV2l6Wgn>

Something Almost Magical

TONI PALOMBI

Toni Palombi is a writer whose work has appeared in the Guardian, Roads and Kingdoms, and Emrys Journal among others. She is currently pursuing a Masters by Research (focusing on life writing). She has worked in not-for-profit organisations in Asia and the Middle East and currently works for one in Australia. This piece of creative non-fiction writing was composed from fragments of oral recollection communicated by her father.

Beside me is a black-and-white photo of my grandmother, taken a few years before her death in the 1930s. Her trusting eyes gaze beyond the confines of the lens, peering across time and space. Perhaps she trusted that stories that even she could not imagine would one day be told.

My father was born a few months after Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini met for the first time in Venice in 1934. He grew up in a town in Italy surrounded by mountains and the ruins of Roman villas. A couple of years later, as Mussolini was forming an alliance with Nazi Germany, his sister was born.

In 1939, as World War II exploded, my grandmother died. She was in her mid-twenties. My grandfather was left with two small children – aged five and three. My father comforted his younger sister, who could not understand why her mother had suddenly disappeared, never to return.

My grandfather's mother helped my grandfather care for the children. A generous woman with a kind heart, she would wrap my father in a tight embrace. Tears fell down his cheeks as he thought about his mother: the smell of her skin, her long hair that would fall on his face when she hugged him.

My grandfather remarried about a year later. He worked long hours, leaving the house at 4 a.m. and returning 14 hours later, long after the sun had set. Work was scarce during the war, and he took whatever he could find. My father and his sister,

still grieving for their mother, spent the days alone with their stepmother. In his father's absence, she abused him almost daily. Beneath her blows, my father fell into a silent world. On the occasions when he found his voice to speak, she would ridicule him. In fits of rage, she demanded he called her 'mum', refusing to feed him if he did not utter this word. Faithful to the memories of his mother, he refused.

During the days, he would run from the house, spending time in the town, watching the adults whose weary faces made them look older than their years. Sometimes he would walk for one hour, passing several towns, to reach his uncle's home. His uncle and aunt would give him a plate of pasta and bread. His growling stomach devoured the food.

Attending school was a treat for my father. He was captivated by stories, which offered an escape from the violence. After school, he would return home, weighed down by a bag full of books. One afternoon, he sat at the kitchen table with his books and pencil in hand, concentrating on his homework. He wrote carefully in his only notebook, making sure each word was written as neatly as his seven-year-old hand would allow. Nearby, his stepmother stood watching him as she sliced tomatoes for the pasta sauce. Wiping her hands on her apron, she approached my father. Snatching his pencil from his hand, she scribbled lines all over his neat text. His heart beat fast as he looked at his notebook. How could he explain this to his teacher? He took his notebook and bag of books and went to his room, his cheeks stained with tears.

He never told his father about his stepmother's abuse. He did not want to make trouble. What if his stepmother left? Who would care for him and his sister?

At the age of eight, my father was sent to work before and after school. He would be rustled awake at 4 a.m. and told to work on a farm, a five-minute walk from his house. As the moon sat high in the still-dark sky, he toiled in the fields lined with artichokes and potatoes. He carried the plough, which loomed over him, feeling frightened by the sounds of animals he could hear in the distance.



Figure 1 Padua, Italy. Photo by Adriano Cantarello on Unsplash.

In 1943, Allied troops landed in Sicily. King Victor Emmanuel III, who had reigned over Italy since 1900, ordered the arrest of Mussolini. The country declared war on Nazi Germany, its one-time partner under the Axis alliance. The Allied forces advanced slowly north, fighting German troops stationed throughout the country. It was a time of scarcity: shops, flour mills, and schools were closed. Planes roared overhead, dropping bombs. As they came closer, the residents of the town ran to the mountains, taking shelter in the caves. People huddled in the caves overnight, clutching their families tight. One night, during intense bombings, my father and his family ran to a church in a distant town, seeking shelter. The churches were always open, offering shelter to those fleeing the violence and destruction.

After prolonged fighting, the Allied forces liberated Rome from German occupation in 1944. One year later, they defeated the Nazi forces. Mussolini, who was rescued by the Nazis from an Italian prison, was captured and executed by members of the Italian Partisan Resistance.

When the war finally ended in 1945, my father was 11 years old. Many parts of his town had been destroyed. An old church, which had stood for centuries in the centre of town, lay in ruins. He walked around the town, stepping over mounds of rubble and shattered buildings. Miraculously, his home had not been bombed.

After the war, he was not permitted to return to school. His stepmother wanted him to work to provide a full-time income for the family. By this time, she had given birth to her own children. The same hands that were used to abuse my father were now gently caressing her infants.

My father was sent to work on several nearby farms, wherever work was available in the war-ravaged country. He returned home late at night, giving his stepmother all his earnings. During storms, when rain pelted from the heavens, she forced him to collect wood in the mountains. He walked for over an hour to reach the mountains, with no raincoat or boots. He walked home carrying an armful of wood, the sky streaked with lightning.

When he was 12, my father was sent to work on a farm some 40 kilometres from his house. Too far to return home each day, he spent the nights sleeping in the stable with cows. He fell asleep in the draughty stable, his skinny body shivering beneath his single blanket. He returned home every three days for bread to sustain him for the days he was at the farm, and to hand over his income to his stepmother. The first time he went home, he told his stepmother that he was too frightened to sleep at the farm alone. She yelled at him and forced him to return the next day as soon as it was light.

The owners of the farm, a family who lived in the main house, were kind to my father. They could not understand why a young boy was sent alone to toil fields and sleep with animals. He spent the days working, barely looking up from the rows of artichokes, tomatoes and potatoes. During the summers, the sun burnt his skin. In the winter, he would plough the muddy earth beneath the rain and snow.

One day while at the farm, his food supply ran out. Too shy to ask the family for bread or *lire* to buy food from the nearby shop, he slept beside the cows, his stomach

growling. The next day, he planted rows of cabbage and beans on an empty stomach, before finally returning home. It was raining. By the time he returned home, he was wet and famished. His stepmother saw him and said nothing. Grateful she did not want to yell at him, he heated some hot water for a bath. He then found some bread and smeared it with honey and sat by the fire.

My father spent a decade working on this farm returning home to collect food only twice per week. Although he was rarely at home, his stepmother made it clear he was not welcome.



Figure 2 Venice, Italy. Photo by Social History Archive on Unsplash.

In his teens, my father began to think about leaving Italy. Many Italians were migrating abroad in search of work, travelling as far as South Africa and Australia. Eager to leave, he completed his first application at the age of 16 but was told he was too young. Later, in 1956, when he was 22, he was accepted by Australia, a distant continent he knew nothing about.

Standing outside his home, my father bid farewell to his father. Embracing my grandfather, my father said, 'I will never return to Italy'.

A man of few words, my grandfather said nothing. My father's stepmother did not embrace him. 'Send money from Australia', she said.

My father boarded a train to Rome. His passport rested on his legs, a picture of St Anthony tucked within its pages. Six decades later, the tattered, yellow-stained picture still sits within the same pages. The train passed mountains, valleys and small towns, which he would never see again.

My father boarded five separate planes over a seven-day period to reach the southern continent. Halfway through the journey, he spent two days in Hong Kong. Walking through the hot, crowded streets, he experienced the unfamiliar presence of leisure. There were no fields to plough, no tomatoes to collect. He smiled at the friendly strangers, who were warm and welcoming.

A few days later, he finally arrived in Australia. Within two days, still jet-lagged from the long journey, my father began working at a factory. For the first time in his life, he saw the money he earned from working. It took one year, and all the overtime shifts available, to repay the loan for his passage to Australia. He toiled at the factory for 20 years, never once calling in sick.

After work, my father would write letters to his family. The letters were short and polite. For the first few years, he sent as much money as he could to his family each month. This was only possible by working overtime. His stepmother would receive the money in Italy without a word of thanks. He was not sure that his father knew that he was sending money; he did not think it was necessary to mention it.

Years later, he heard that his stepmother complained that my father never helped the family.

Like many migrants, he attended English classes after work. It was the first time he had sat in a classroom since he was 11 years old. The class, held for three hours, three nights per week, was filled with migrants and refugees, keen to learn this language which felt alien on their tongues. As he wrote the unfamiliar words of this language in his notebook, thoughts of his stepmother came to mind. While no longer physically present to scribble in his notebook, her memory was still strong.

The more English he learned, the more he could understand when strangers yelled out to him, 'You don't belong here. Go back to your own country, *wog*'.

Government policy and social attitudes in 1950s Australia expected migrants to assimilate. Through its immigration program, Australia increased its population from 7.5 million in 1945 to 13 million in 1975. Even though southern Europeans were the least preferred by the government, many Italians migrated during this period. The White Australia policy was a series of acts with a common goal: to achieve and maintain a white, British national character.

At the beginning of the 1960s, a letter arrived from Italy. My father looked at the envelope covered with familiar stamps before opening it. His father and stepmother wanted his sister to migrate to Australia. My aunt was the final tie my grandfather had with my grandmother. He read the letter twice, his heart filling with worry. How could he care for a single woman? He shared a single room with another Italian man. They shared a bathroom with six people and a kitchen with many more. It was all they could afford.

My aunt had no choice. Nor did my father. He bought her a ticket on a large ship and found a house they could both live in. For 28 days, my aunt sailed alone, watching the changing sky. By the time she arrived, she saw that the stars in the southern hemisphere were upside down. She adjusted to life in Australia, living with my father until she was married several years later.

My father married a few years before the White Australia policy was abolished in the early 1970s. He was 34. When the factory he was working in closed down, he visited other factories from morning to night, asking for a job. On the fifth day of job hunting, he was offered seven weeks of work to fill a labour shortage. After seven weeks, he was made a permanent employee and given a navy-blue uniform, which he would wear faithfully for the next 23 years.

Becoming a father was the intersection of the past and future. As he played with his children, memories of his mother embraced him. The last time he played was when he was six years old, prior to her death. Looking at his children's young faces, he was determined to give them the opportunities that were absent from his life. The power of education was drummed into their young minds. For my father, education was something almost magical. A wall in his home is draped with his children's degrees, like a shrine.

The wounds inflicted by his stepmother – the timidity, lack of confidence – slowly began to be replaced with belonging: to a family, a new community, a life that was his own. My mother encouraged him to speak; the words emerged slowly over the years, but were always tinged with shyness.

My father never returned to Italy. Nor did my aunt. My grandfather spoke words, few as they were, as if they belonged to a different history. Looking back more than half a century later, my father is insistent that his father was a man who had little choice given the difficult circumstances: 'He was a good man, a hard worker, a man with a good heart'.