

Carmen Xuereb

My parents were Aida and Philip Xuereb who migrated from Malta in the 1950s. My father was born in 1928 and grew up in an orphanage in Valletta, Malta. His mother died when he was very young and his father couldn't look after the children. Dad never spoke much about it so we didn't really know much about dad growing up. While in the orphanage he learnt his trade as a cabinet maker, so they did prepare him for life to that extent. Then his father died when Dad was 17. Dad left the orphanage in 1949 to join the army and that was after the war.



Marriage of Aida and Philip 1952 © Carmen Hickey

Dad met Mum while he was in the army and they married in September 1952. I was born in 1953 and at that stage Mum and Dad were contemplating migration. The plan was for Dad to come out first to see if Australia was the place for them. He came out on his own in 1954 to scope out the lay of the land and supported himself by working in rural Victoria laying railway lines. He returned to Malta and then brought out my mother and I in 1955. We came out on a ship that sank the year after our journey, so we were lucky. Originally we lived in Collingwood and Richmond and then we came to St Albans.



Dad applied for a job at the PMG but didn't get it, so he said to the employment officer "You put posters up all over my country saying come to Australia the land of opportunity. What opportunity? I can't get a job here." Dad was then handed an envelope and told to read it, which he did, because one of the good things that happened in the orphanage was that they taught him to read and write in English. This was the beginning of a 30-year career with Australia Post. He started as a postman in Richmond and later worked as a supervisor in the CBD. He was trained on the job by Alan Reeves and they formed a friendship that lasted for over 60 years.

When Dad brought Mum and myself out from Malta he didn't have permanent accommodation for the family. Our first place in Collingwood was above a fruit shop which was not the best. Dad was soon told to find somewhere else or Mum was going back to Malta.

Next day he was delivering mail to an address with a Maltese name and noticed that they had a sign advertising a room for rent. They were Charlie and Lorla Cutajar. He told them that his wife and daughter were coming out and asked if he could rent the room. They said yeah, but he forgot to mention that Mum was pregnant. So that was two families with six kids between them in the one small house. Three days after we moved out of the fruit shop the place burnt to the ground, so the family was lucky to have avoided that disaster.



We stayed with the Cutajars for a while and became good friends for over fifty years. They ended up moving to Kingsbury and it became a weekly ritual that they would drive out to St Albans on a Sunday to visit our family.

We moved into a bungalow in East Esplanade on the corner of Conrad Street. When we were in Richmond we were living with the Reeves initially. They bought a bungalow in St Albans and that's the reason we came to St Albans because Mum wanted to maintain a connection with the Reeves. They were Alan and Bernadette and we became

their neighbours. They moved first and we followed and bought the place next door.



Alan and Bernadette Reeves were very well known in St Albans because they were good dancers and established ballroom dancing classes at the old tin shed on Errington reserve. They had 14 children who all went to the Sacred Heart school. A lot of their kids were the same age as us and went to the Catholic school so we all got on together. Bernadette has now passed on and Alan is getting on in years.

In St Albans we soon got to know all the neighbours and they all were very friendly and helpful. All the children walked to school and never worried about playing outside. My parents never had a car so whenever we went anywhere it was always walking or by train or a ride with somebody.

We had a chook farm across the road from us owned by the Murrells. Mildred was the matriarch and we always knew her as Nana. She'd make sponge cakes and all this

Aussie style food that mum couldn't do. There were lot of sheds out the back of their farm with chickens and turkeys. The turkeys frightened me a bit but I loved to go and see the baby chicks just after they were born. Nana was white-haired and a beautiful old lady. We didn't know our real grandparents so we always knew her as Nana. I remember she had three sons: Jim and Fred and Percy. Her husband must have died early because we never knew him.



When we started in the bungalow there were five of us – mum, dad, myself as the eldest child, then Monica and my brother, and then my younger sister came along. The bungalow had three rooms: the kitchen with the table in the middle, the dresser on one side and the sink on the other; the main bedroom was my parents' room where they slept with my baby brother; and what was supposed to be the bathroom my dad converted into a bedroom with bunk beds – he built a wardrobe and with a curtain it was a room divider. The dunny was outside. We had the copper for hot water and a steel bath. When the kids were young the steel bath would go on the table and the hot water from the copper was brought in and that's how we bathed.

When I was young St Albans seemed to very vast, especially when you walked everywhere. Our bungalow seemed to be the end of St Albans on that road by the railway line; it was all pretty empty past our patch of housing.

We spent a fair bit of time down at the river which was

a popular spot for a lot of people. That was quite a walk. There were horses still around at the time and you'd see kids riding their horse down the road or in the paddocks. Conrad Street and Main Road and others were unmade roads, with just a gravel topping. But they were happy days and seemed to be uncomplicated.



I went to the Sacred Heart Catholic school right through from preps in 1959 through to grade 6. Sacred Heart was very multi-cultural. I remember the Herald-Sun did a front page spread about the school because there were so many nationalities. My favourite all time teacher was Miss O'Brien, who was my preps teacher; in those days a child did not know or refer to a teacher by their first name. Her parents were Mary and William O'Brien who lived in Winifred Street

Most of the kids thought Sister Charles was a stern teacher; she had the senior students and all her classes were big. The parish held an annual fete about November which everyone enjoyed with carnival rides and horses. I also remember a carnival that I attended in West Esplanade where they had camels and the kids got to feed

the young ones.

As a young girl I started dancing with the ballet school which met at the back of someone's house. It might have been Carol Martin's place in Leonard Avenue. That seemed to be far away at the time. I went to the ballet school between the ages of 7 and 13. A lot of girls went to that dancing school.

After finishing primary school at Sacred Heart I went to the Marian College in Sunshine through to 1972. That was my regular morning routine for years: walking to the station, catching the train, walking to the school.

The early days were fun days. Dad was a carpenter by trade and he built a cubby house in the back corner of the yard with a little table and chairs. It was special and we loved it. When the Cutajar children came on Sundays we had our little tea parties in there. That's what amused us.

In the early 1960s we ended up selling the bungalow and moving to a bigger place at Sylvester Crescent, which was just around the corner from the Catholic church and school. We lived in Power Street for a little while when the house was being built in Sylvester Crescent. The old bungalow sold and mum and dad had some friends who lived in Power Street with a four-bedroom home and only one son, so we lived with them for a few months.



Mum was so happy about moving into the new house. It was her pride and joy and she always said she'd live there till the end. It was a bigish place for the time: there were three bedrooms, a kitchen, a lounge-dining room, and later we extended the meals area. It was three times bigger than the bungalow we had been living in. Some of our visitors thought it was a palace because it looked bigger than normal.

My mum had so much pride in her family and her little plot of land. She worked very hard through paid employment, doing the housework and growing vegetables in the back yard. She enjoyed roller skating and we have a photo of her roller skating down the driveway. She was a gentle, kind person but she loved watching the

hurly burly of World Championship Wrestling and Roller Derby and all the characters.

One year there was a fire at the back of the garage. We had one of those old brick incinerators and were burning some papers when the wind blew the curtains out of the garage and they caught fire. By the time the fire brigade came the garage was gone and I lost all my schoolbooks and my childhood toys including one of the first Barbie dolls. Dad lost all his carpentry tools. He'd built all our furniture. He'd built all the kitchen cupboards for mum and the kids' bedroom furniture. He did a lot of odd jobs to supplement the family income.

In those days you bought things on lay-by. Mum and dad bought their new furniture locally. There was the Paterson's Furniture Store and Stevens also had a new home wares store in East Esplanade. Everything was put on lay by. They bought lounge furniture and carpets. Mum took a lot of pride in their house, as did a lot of the migrants who came to St Albans.



Dad worked the night shift with the PMG in the city. He'd leave home about 10 o'clock at night to work the night shift. He did that for years and years. He'd come home early in the morning and sleep a few hours and get up around midday. Then he would often work in the garage before going to bed fairly early and then getting up to go to work again.

Mum worked at ICI for many years in the detonator department. It was hard work because ICI was full of dangerous chemicals. Our neighbour John Gigacz was an industrial chemist from Czechoslovakia who also worked at ICI. They were a lovely family. Mum worked at ICI for many years before moving on. Her first job had been as a tea lady and people couldn't understand how well she managed that because she couldn't read or write, even in Maltese. She was quite young during the war and was taken out of school to help support her

family. She was working when she was 13, so she only had an elementary education but she could add up and manage money. If any money went missing, she would know about it.

After she finished her job as a tea lady she found it hard to get other work because she wasn't literate. That's why she ended up working at ICI. She left ICI when my sister was born; she wasn't supposed to be working there when she was pregnant but because she was so little it didn't show. Then she got a cleaning job with the ANZ bank in the city and did that for years. She loved it because she said it wasn't that hard because it was cleaning offices which was no big deal, vacuuming and dusting and picking up papers. I'm sure it was easier than ICI, and less dangerous than working with chemicals. I've often wondered about that because in 1989 both my mother and my sister were diagnosed with cancer within three months of each other. They had the same type of tumour. Fortunately my sister survived but my mum didn't and died in her early fifties, which is much too young. My sister was in her early twenties and never was a smoker when she developed cancer.

Dad was very active. He retired from full-time work at age 65 but kept working as a volunteer. He was with St Vincent De Paul for 20 years. He worked with the soup kitchen and was distributing sandwiches in the housing commission area around Footscray. I sometimes went with him to St Bernadette's in Ballarat Road to prepare sandwiches. He'd done a fair bit of work early on at the Sacred Heart because of his carpentry skills, such as maintenance work on the buildings.

What impressed me was that many of the migrants had lots of skills. They might have been self taught but they were always willing to have a go at just about anything – carpentry, mechanics – a lot of it seemed to be self reliance, the determination to improve and not be restricted by lack of money. You did a lot of work yourself and you learnt along the way.

Another family I remember from the old neighbourhood are the Barnards. Fred was a builder who did a lot of work for the Sacred Heart parish. When the Gigacz family bought their property in Sylvester Crescent they were soon in real trouble because the builder went broke so the family were left with nowhere to go. The Barnards lived in Winifred Street and Fred built a lot of houses in St Albans. Anyhow, Fred told John Gigacz not to worry as he would take over the construction for them. That's the way things were – people would pitch in and help.

My father sold the old family home in 1998 and decided to retire to an apartment in the city, where he moved to in 2002. In 2008 he under-went open heart surgery and spent the

next decade in very active ways mainly working as a volunteer with St Vincent de Paul and traveling several times on visits to Malta. He died on 3rd April 2018 due to liver cancer at the age of 89 years. His funeral service was held at the Sacred Heart Church.

(Article written by Carmen Hickey née Xuereb, 2018.)



Carmen Xuereb at circus 1950s © Carmen Hickey

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