

Virve Kivi

My family came to Australia from Sweden in 1960 on the Kirribilli under the general assisted passage scheme. My parents were Heinrich Kivi and Kyllikki Ihanelma née Hämäläinen and I am Virve Lisbeth Kivi, born in 1954 and five years old when we arrived.



Kivi family en route to Australia 1960 © Virve Curtis

My father was an Estonian war refugee and my mother was Finnish. She and my father had been pen friends and she eventually travelled to Sweden where they married. I'm an adopted child. My birth mother is Finnish and went to Sweden when she discovered that she was expecting – her parents never knew about me – where she remained and eventually married.

We were at Bonegilla for three weeks, then at Maribyrnong Hostel before moving into our tiny weatherboard home at 127 Power Street (near Charles Street) before Christmas of 1960.

As space was not an issue on the Kirribilli, my parents were able to bring a number of larger items to Australia: a television, a treadle sewing machine, my mother's bicycle, and my father's moped which he rode for a few years until we acquired a car. Everything else was bought on hire purchase.

At first we lived with a Finnish family a few house-blocks away, Unto and Helmi Hietala, while our house was being built. I recall the smell of the timber frame and playing there.



Kivi home in Power Street 1960s © Virve Curtis

Although my memories are fragmented and incomplete, certain memories or impressions have remained with me. Our first Christmas was not like the ones I'd had in Sweden. As I recall, I received a brown vinyl school bag and a wooden pencil case and somehow sensed that Christmas was never going to be the same again. I think there were grass fires in the paddocks towards Taylors Road that year.



Kyllikki & Virve Kivi in back yard © Virve Curtis

We had an outdoor toilet and briquette water heater that needed firing up on a daily basis if hot water was to be had. As I recall, the man who made the weekly deliveries of briquettes in his truck was Mr Melbourne who also collected the outdoor toilet pans. Although I lived in fear of the latter occurring at an inopportune moment, it never did.

Other memories include no telephone until many years later and walking everywhere, including the SSW store with my mum wheeling the bicycle, handlebars laden with shopping bags on the return trip. One obvious thing was the lack of trees in St Albans and the western suburbs in general. Walking everywhere in the heat of summer in those days would have been much relieved by some leafy tree canopy! In comparison, Sweden and Finland were prolific in their greenery. I suspect the lack of trees in our new land had a subconscious affect on me as I still have a sense of forlornness about the place. To our delight, in time the SSW stocked foods favoured by Finns including rye bread, pickled herrings, dill cucumbers and salami.



Kyllikki & Virve Kivi at front door © Virve Curtis

Another memory involves the family next door whose two girls often did the laundry. One day the older girl came running to get help as her sister had caught a finger in the clothes wringer. Without a telephone or access to a car, I don't know what mum did but the finger was saved.

Dad built a sauna that had a wood-burning stove and stones on top. We collected the stones from the paddock on the other side of East Esplanade and the Sydenham railway line. Water was thrown onto the rocks for steam but some were volcanic rocks and exploded when heated. In lieu of the traditional birch branch whisks, eucalyptus branches were bound together – the scent was amazing. We had many 'sauna nights' and I find it hard to believe that so many people could fit into our small house.

There were about ten Finnish families living within a few streets of each other in those early years and, as mothers and fathers all worked, everyone helped each other with child minding and the men folk pitched in and laid the concrete driveways. The names of those I can remember include Ryhänen, Karvanen, Ristel, Bister, Mäntyvirta and Helenius.

The Ryhänen family had also come to Australia in 1960 and lived near us in George Street. In the early days the two families often got together on Saturday nights and their daughter Merja and I would sit around listening to the adults talk – I have always loved stories of the 'olden days'. I was intrigued by war stories and grew up knowing something of the fate of Jews. My mother's father tended towards the 'reds' in the civil war of 1918 which is known by many names, including the war of independence. One of mum's aunts was a member of the all-female unit of the paramilitary Red Guards – if caught, these gun-toting women clad in men's clothing were shot. I'm told the aunt was very fortunate to survive. I also grew up knowing about the Soviet invasion of Estonia. What is a country to do, capitulate or fight? What was Finland to do? The Western allies were aligned with Stalin and between them carved up Europe. After a short period of peace after the 100 day winter war (1939/1940) the Soviets invaded again in 1941.

Sadly, Merja and her intended, Manfred, died in a car accident around 1982. The other couples in the accident were John Swieboda and his wife Anna, and Mario and Doris who were school friends of Merja. Sadly John and Doris died and as I recall, the two survivors sustained serious injuries.

Dad worked as a machinist at Massey Fergusson for many years until a large number of employees were retrenched around 1970, but he was lucky to find other work. The day my mother went to look for work I was left in the care of Mrs Ryhänen. I'd never been separated from my mother before and ran after her, screaming for her to take me along and was rather smug when she didn't get work, a situation which quickly changed.



Virve & Kyllikki Kivi in back yard © Virve Curtis

Mrs Ryhänen and my mother worked in many of the same places, including Spencer Street (Southern Cross) Station in the cafeteria, clearing tables and the like, which both

women reported was filthy when they started but a different matter when they left. Mum also worked at Nabisco Biscuits and Tom Piper and her last place of work was the Red Book Carpet factory at Tottenham where she worked the afternoon shift for many years.

I attended the St Albans North primary school from 1961 to 1966. The principal, Mr Blain, was a kindly gentleman who used to hear the kids read aloud in his office. My reading always achieved full marks but I'm sad to say my reading comprehension took longer to develop.



Virve Kivi at St Albans North Primary 1961 © V Curtis



Virve Kivi at St Albans North Primary 1962 © V Curtis

Around 1968 we moved to the other side of St Albans to Orford Street in the new estate east of the high school.¹

Other Finnish families moved to St Albans in the late sixties, but the flow of Finnish migration slowed in the early seventies and some people then eventually returned to Finland, including my daughter-in-law's maternal grandmother and my parents (1994), who are buried in the cemetery at the Turku Cathedral where mum had been confirmed in the thirties.

¹ The housing development east of the high school was known St Albans Main Estate in the early 1960s and was later known as Sunshine Park.

Although my family was never involved, many Finns belonged to the Finnish Society of Melbourne. The society was established in 1958 and had a hall in Altona North and, judging by their Facebook page, remains a vibrant and active community.

From the mid-sixties we attended the Finnish Pentecostal Church, which in the early days consisted of a handful of people who lived across Melbourne and had a lot of house meetings. I'm still friends with my childhood friend Raiji née Villstaedt from that time, whose family lived in Nunawading. The parents of my daughter-in-law Rebekah have kept the Pentecostal Church going in Melbourne and whilst its numbers are dwindling, the churches in other cities including Brisbane and Canberra continue to flourish.

I attended St Albans High School from 1967 to 1971 and was Form Captain in 1B. During this time I 'hung out' with another Finnish girl, Pirjo "Piipi" Dyster, whose family came to Australia in 1967. We were in the same class until fifth form in 1971 but we lost touch when I left school at the end of that year. Other Finnish kids at the school included Tuula and Merja Helenius, Simo and Timo Hakala, Mervi Mantyvirta, Merja Ryhanen, and Paivi and Anne Tammilehto.



Virve Kivi at St Albans High School 1967 © V Curtis

Regarding the social movements and politics of the sixties, I've always been somewhat conflicted: I gather these movements arose as a backlash against the 'boring' fifties and associated materialism and the Vietnam war. I think that far from being boring, the fifties gave people a sense of stability and normality and I can't say my family was exactly boring.



Miss Landon & Virve Kivi, St Albans High 1971 © V Curtis

A teacher at high school who had a profound effect on me was Miss Landon, whose first name I don't recall ever learning and whom I only had in fifth form. Miss Landon was a Canadian and a fantastic teacher but none too pleased when I left after year 11 (1971) to go nursing!



I started my nursing training at Footscray and District Hospital (now Western General Hospital) which in those days was an on-the-job, three-year course of theory and practice in the hospital nursing school and on the wards. I would like to think that Miss Landon would be rather pleased that I went on to complete my nursing degree and also some further studies.

As I've looked back over some of the old school magazines, I'm impressed by the literary skills of the contributors, amongst them some former classmates: surely a testament to those teachers who instilled a thirst for learning but also the intelligence and aptitude of the large numbers of students whose first language was not English and did not speak English at home.

Some years ago, a Finnish academic was in Australia doing research on the educational outcomes of the children of Finnish immigrants. My Finnish childhood friend Rajja and I were interviewed as part of the project. I received a copy of the findings, but as my Finnish is very rudimentary I didn't get much from it except that educational outcomes of immigrant children are generally very high.

The older I get the more convinced I am that there are fewer than six degrees of separation.

My husband Paul and I moved to Adelaide in 1975 as newlyweds and lived in Bridgewater, in what's known as the hills. We discovered that a friend of ours (Leonie née Carrick) and her three siblings, Noeline, John and Wendy, had also attended St Albans High School. Leonie started at the school in 1959 and appears in the class photo of that year. I think I came across the names Ribarow and Szwed in some of the class photos with one or other of the Carrick children.



Leonie Carrick and Virve Kivi c.2000 © Virve Curtis

Leonie's husband Jim is a builder and built our house in Adelaide, where we lived for 14 years and where our three children, Olivia, Nathan and Brendan, were born. All are married and Paul and I have nine grandchildren who are aged between 3 and 18 years.

We returned to Melbourne in 1989 with Paul's work and have lived in Donvale since then. I always managed to get nursing work and it was a given that our children would go to university, which they did: Olivia (who has four children and an ex) completed a BA and later a teaching degree and teaches primary school; Nathan studied chemistry and continues to

work in this area but in sales; and Brendan did a double degree in commerce/engineering and later completed an MBA and continues to work in this area.

My Finnish daughter-in-law Rebekah (née Suomalainen) grew up in Craigieburn but both sets of grandparents lived in Broadmeadows. Her paternal grandparents were very involved in the Finnish society. Rebekah's brother-in-law, Ian (Ismo) Vainikka, is the minister of the Lutheran Church in Melbourne. It is called the Mikael Agricola Finnish Lutheran Church and is the oldest Finnish church in Australia. It was established in 1961 in the aftermath of Finnish immigration into Australia and named after Mikael Agricola, a student of Martin Luther and the father of the Finnish language. I've also read that it's thanks to the church that Finland has had 100 percent literacy for over a century.

My other daughter-in-law (née Rybar) and her family are from Serbia but are of Slovakian ethnicity. Her family moved to Australia about 1990 and settled in the eastern suburbs. Her three siblings were all born in Australia.

In 2010 I made contact with my biological mother and my three half-sisters, and in the following year we all met in Sweden at our mother's house. My son Nathan with Rebekah and their two children were with me and what a surreal and truly amazing gathering it was! Sometimes I wonder what path my life might have taken had we remained in Sweden.

I'm still working in the health area and these days it's for the Australian Government through the Department of Health.

I recently visited our old family friend, Mrs Ryhänen, who still lives in their little weather-board house with its picket fence in St Albans. She is now in her nineties and still has a wonderful memory. The roof of our old house is visible from her place but the former home is unrecognisable although the original concrete driveway remains, albeit crumbling away like my memories of the old place.

(Article written by Virve Curtis née Kivi, 2018.)



Paul and Virve Curtis with grandchildren © Virve Curtis