

VERA JURASOV: TEACHER, EMPLOYMENT CONSULTANT



My parents migrated to Australia in 1949 after the Second World War. Mum was pregnant with me when they travelled here and I was born in April that year. They came from Germany: Mum was German and Dad was Russian. Dad had lived in both the eastern and western regions in Russia - initially east of the Urals but later in Minsk where we still have some relatives. He took the opportunity to get out of Russia after the war and ended up in Germany. He met Mum in Germany and they experienced the construction of the Berlin wall and the partition of the country into the eastern and the western zones. Mum was in East Germany, in the Russian zone, but she was always crossing the border.

Parents

My parents came by boat to Australia and ended up at Bonegilla. My mother was Irmgard Nowak. I think her parents may have originally come from Poland but she was from Magdeburg, which is on the Elbe River west of Berlin; it was bombed very heavily during the Second World War so anyone who survived that would have to consider themselves lucky to be alive. She was born in 1927 and was just a young teenager when the war started.



My father was Wasily Fedor Jurasov. He was born in 1910 and was originally from Vladivostok, which is on the extreme eastern end of the old Soviet empire. He was well educated and studied at university level in Russia. When they arrived at Bonegilla, Dad was assigned to a poultry farm at Kyneton and Mum was in the house doing all the housework. So yes, I was born and lived the first two years of my life in Australia on a chook farm. Then we moved to St Albans, which was a lot of empty paddocks at the time but an affordable opportunity for the new Australian settlers. Dad found employment in Melbourne with the land surveying section of the Treasury

Department in the Treasury buildings. The cartographic section was later part of the Department of Crown Lands and Survey and some of the maps that he compiled are at the State Library. He worked for a long time in topography, creating maps that looked like photographs because he was such a perfectionist. In fact some of the maps he created were based on aerial photographs taken by the RAAF.

Moving to St Albans

After moving from Kyneton in the 1950s I lived in St Albans for a long long time - until I got married, in fact. The old St Albans was just paddocks. To start off my parents bought a bungalow and then my father finished off the rest of the house himself. Mum used to shop at Perretts and the butcher's shop that was on the corner at Main Road West and West Esplanade.

We lived very close to the school in West Esplanade - we were in number 25 which is about a two minutes' walk away.

I started at St Albans Primary in 1955. The Grade 1A teacher might have been Mrs Shuffrey and there was also a Miss Nightingale with Grade 1. I recognise a number of faces from those early class photographs, including Peter Szarko, Michael Martignoles, Stefan Czyz, Joachim Simovic, the girls Margaret, Sophie, Heidi, Karen, Mary Ganger, and Bianca. Mr Enright was the teacher in the 1957 class. Ahmed Ajayoglu used to live just down the road from us and we became friends, so of course I remember him.



Vera Jurasov second from left, class 4B photo, St Albans Primary 1958

Mr Martin Cove is the teacher in the Grade 4 photo. He was a fabulous teacher. Every year he used to invite me, Ahmed, and another boy down to his place in Beaumaris for a day. It was fantastic. We would go by train to Beaumaris and he would pick us up from the station and we'd spend a nice day with his family and their two little children. Then he moved to Lower Sandy Bay in Tasmania. When I got married I called him and saw him, but I haven't seen him since. He'd be well into his eighties if he's still with us. I think he was about 29 when he started teaching.

Ahmed Ajayoglu and I became pretty good friends because we were neighbours not far from the school. His family came to St Albans from Somers migrant camp in about 1951. They were on the corner just opposite the school and we were a bit further south near the playground at Circus West. Ahmed's father was also a highly educated Russian, so perhaps it was this combination of Russian and academic heritage that formed a connection. Their place was opposite the school on the corner of Ruth Street and West Esplanade. They had a tiny shed facing Ruth Street that they made into a tuck shop where you could buy a pie for a shilling. They also had chooks running around their back yard and if you didn't have your own chooks you could always buy one of theirs for that special occasion. That little tuck shop was later rebuilt as a proper corner shop and grocery store.

Ahmed was a clever guy and we were pretty close academically. We would have contests. In those days the teachers would sit the knowledgeable students down the back of the class. Ahmed was always there at the back and I was either next to him or just in front of him. This went on all the time through primary school. He was also a good athlete but his academic interests prevailed and he became a statistician. His sister, Bella, was also very clever and was in the first intake of students to St Albans High School when it started in 1956. She became a doctor and had an obstetrics clinic in Footscray for many years.

I became involved in the marching and skipping and in grade 6 the school had marching lessons for the girls. I remember all that. I used to look after the school fish tank during holiday times. We used to bring the tank down to the house and I'd look after the pet fish. I remember the Hatjiandreas and the day that their house burnt down as we could see the smoke just across the road from the school.

St Albans High School

I started at the high school in 1961 when Mr Wilkinson was Principal. He was a tall, gaunt-looking man, who sometimes had a ready smile. Naturally, I would walk to the high school, but I would also come home for lunch every day. My brother Alex would stay at school for his lunch. He was born at Sunshine hospital so he was a true western suburbs boy from the beginning.

I did German, geography, history, and mathematics with Mr Pavlov. He reminded me of my dad because of his Russian background. I remember Mr Ziemelis as the German teacher and Mr Henry teaching biology. I remember Mrs Sturasteps who also taught German. Everyone was a bit afraid of Mr Smith the science teacher. I loved literature and Mrs Gliddon was well versed in Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales. She was also very good at poetry. You either liked literature or didn't go into her classes. She was very quietly spoken and really focussed on passing on this knowledge. She was the head mistress and had a little office on the corridor as we went down the steps past the office. I liked her as a teacher. Veronica was also in that group.

High school was a good time for establishing friendships and a close classmate of mine was Nina Skorobogati. Other friendships included Barbara Teichman and Veronica Debevc, and Helen Smith and Lynette Cox. Nina ended up doing nursing. I believe she and her sister are living somewhere near Mulgrave; I think there were also of Russian background. We mostly drifted apart after high school. That's why reunions are great because it's about seeing everyone together again and where they've all gone, what pathways they've taken. There is a connection because we had a very good group and everybody pulled together. It was nice.

I didn't do too much socialising after school because I had strict parents who expected me to come home after classes. I went to one school social with Ahmed. Mum was also pretty strict as a parent but she finally allowed me to go to the social "under duress" but she came to school to collect me.

University and Teacher Training

After high school I obtained a teaching bursary and started at Monash university, but I hated it and didn't finish. Travelling from St Albans to Clayton was a real problem. My dad was very strict and controlling. He said: "You are going to university and that's it." He was even choosing my subjects: "You've got to do psychology, anthropology, and Russian." Well, I've got a music background and did subjects like German because I didn't want to do the others. One day I said to him that I was leaving the university and went off to Melbourne Teachers College that was attached to Melbourne University. I was there in 1970 and started teaching in 1972 at Boronia Heights. When my father finally accepted that I was doing teacher training he insisted that I not teach the little children but at university or least at the high school level. I told him I wanted to teach in the primary schools and that's what I did.

I taught with the Education Department for about 20 years mainly at Boronia Heights and Kilsyth but I also did emergency teaching at various schools.

Marriage and Family

I met my husband-to-be at a German club in Richmond. I would go past the club and eventually joined as a way of keeping in contact with the German side of my heritage and that's where I met

Evert. We married, settled into Kilsyth and built a home at Upwey. We lived there for 29 years but we are now separated. We have two boys: Kurt, named after my uncle in Germany, and Gareth. Kurt works for Dan Murphys and Gareth builds simulators for racing cars.



Visiting Russia

When I was at Monash in the late 'sixties I wanted to join a group trip into Russia, so I put in a visa application. There was a whole group of us from the university planning to go because we were studying Russian. We were all excited to go and I did all my paperwork and received my visa but then the government cancelled it. I was the only one blocked from going even though there were other people in the group who had Russian parents - everyone else went except me. Although my father made inquiries he did not find out why this happened especially as he had never been in the army. Even the Russian department at Monash couldn't discover why my visa was cancelled and no reason given. But I did go to Russia later on and I've been to Germany several times since, so whatever the glitch was on that first occasion was eventually rectified.

I went to Russia in the 'nineties to visit my relatives in Minsk, and by then there was no problem in getting a visa. I went to Germany and left my two young boys with Mum and flew over in Aeroflot. I arrived at the airport in Minsk and realised I didn't know anyone from a bar of soap and could hardly speak any Russian as I spoke mainly English and German. However, I did have a Russian-English dictionary. I saw two guys waiting and I thought one of them must be my cousin. He was there waiting for me with a bunch of flowers wrapped in newspaper. I'll never forget it. We hopped into his little car and sped along until the cops picked him up for speeding. I spent about ten days with the family in one of the Minsk suburbs. It was a nice time but very intensive and mentally draining because you're trying to communicate with hands and feet and everything. He could speak a little bit of German, which was a godsend. It was like walking into a third-world country. They didn't have a broom in the flat so everyone was twigging rather than sweeping as they would use twig brooms. They were still using horses and carts in that suburb. People lined up for bread and the shoe shop might have one pair of shoes on display. They still used an abacus in the shop. It was stepping back a long time but it was the only time I went. Because I was a teacher my cousin took me to one of the local schools and introduced me to the class.

At present I don't know where some of my old relations are and my written Russian does not exist. I tried to keep in contact with the relatives but all my grandparents are gone and documents are hard to find because a lot of records were lost during the war.

New Career

After finishing my teaching career I went into employment consultancy. I did that for eight years with IPA. At first I was in town and then move to Wantirna where they changed their name to

PBS. That was 8 years overall. I became national ?? But stressed to the max. You achieve your KPIs but they keep raising the bar so it's very stressful. So I resigned. The stress of working as a consultant, the stress of selling the house, and the stress of building interstate did effect me. I was a moody sort of person back then and I still have some of that capacity - I'm a worrywart. I like to be organised, to know where I'm going, I like to achieve. I always set myself goals and I stress if I don't achieve them to my satisfaction.

I left the employment consultancy to reduce work stress. One of the clients I'd worked with was running the Baton Rouge in Rowville, so I joined him there working in the front office. I loved every minute of that work. After a year he wanted to retire so I decided it was time to go to Queensland. I went there in 2012.

Parents in Retirement

My dad was a very controlling person. You could say he was clever but silly. He tried to teach us Russian every night but we spoke mostly German at home. He wanted his children to fulfill his dreams, which was probably a normal hope for refugees, but it doesn't help the children who want to realise their own dreams and ambitions. He was always studying while he was working and even after he retired he took up Italian at Melbourne University. He always complained about some stomach problems but they didn't know what it was. As a child he had contracted typhoid, which may have effected his general health, and he also had been diagnosed with some hydatid disease. When he became more seriously ill he was told he had a liver disease but he didn't trust the doctors here so he went overseas to get his health attended to. He was told here that he had to have a colostomy bag but he didn't want that so he went to Italy looking for a cure but they couldn't help him either. I was teaching at the time and tried to contact the doctors he was consulting overseas but they do not give you much information. When he came back he looked about 90. He died in Prahran in 1975 at the age of 65.

Mum is now aged 87 and she is still walking and her health is reasonable. I took her with me to Cairns and she loves it up there.

Moving to Queensland

I moved to Queensland a couple of years ago. I'd been holidaying in Port Douglas every year for some time and found the place really beautiful. I loved the lifestyle and I loved Port Douglas. "P.D." is what we call it. I thought it was a place I'd like to retire to and it happened earlier that I thought would be possible. Mum fitted into the lifestyle quite easily because I always took her with me on holidays to P.D. so she was familiar with it.

Back yard at Port Douglas, Queensland.

I arranged everything from Victoria and it's wonderful what you can do these days through the internet and the telephone. I bought the land in Bentley Park through one company. I chose the site because it's in a court and secluded. Then I found a builder with some great house designs and modified one of their plans to what I wanted. I saw their plans online and then modified the design. The builders were wonderful. It all went beautifully and I would fly up for the latest progress inspection and so on.

I got a good price for my unit in Rowville, which was really good for the move, especially as I arranged a private sale and saved the agent's commission.

My mum moved into my Rowville unit a month before we left for Queensland. She'd been growing frailer and one day collapsed upstairs. That's when my heart started working harder than normal as it was a rush to get her to a doctor at the hospital. I also went to the doctor and complained that my heart was racing. He prescribed some medication, which did help. After I moved to Cairns I stopped taking the tablets which was not wise as you're not supposed to stop suddenly. I saw

this wonderful doctor in Cairns who calmed me down and stabilised the blood pressure. It took four months but I'm now off the anxiety tablets. I've slowed down a lot in Queensland and now the work that I do is in the garden.



Back yard at Port Douglas, Queensland.

I love the heat in Queensland. My work at present is in the garden, which started off as a bare block and is now a tropical delight. I've been working on the garden for the last 18 months: planned it, shaped it, dug holes and planted lots of things. Everything grows very fast and I mow the grass twice a week just to keep up. There is lovely patio out the back to enjoy the mountain views and visitors such as Willy Wag Tails and lots of other birds as well as the gorgeous Ulysses butterflies keep me entertained. All this in your own back yard. My next project will be to install more paving in the back yard. I'll do that myself - I love doing it and it's not rocket science.



My other exercise is to get out and about. I go for regular walks with friends along The Esplanade at Cairns. I've been snorkeling, scuba diving, kayaking and trekking up the Daintree.

I left my two boys in Victoria. They were so supportive and encouraged me to go, so I achieved a passion I'd been pursuing for some time.

I now have a little grandchild in Melbourne, a 4 month old grandson called Jaxon, so I'm doing the doting nana thing. Life is good.



Vera Jurasov, 2014.

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