

ERASTS ZIEMELIS: GERMAN TEACHER AND PHOTOGRAPHY MENTOR, 1962-1972



Erasts Herberts Arnolds Ziemelis was a Latvian national who was born in 1920 to Herberts and Olga Ziemelis. Erasts Ziemelis married Vilma Berzins and they had two daughters: Sarmite who was born in 1943, and Zaiga who was born in 1947.

During the war in Europe the family was registered as "Foreigners and German Persecutees". They were accepted for settlement in Australia and travelled per USAT General W M Black, departing Naples and arriving at Melbourne in June 1949; Erasts' occupation was listed as labourer. There were about 770 passengers on board being resettled under the International Refugee Organisation Group Resettlement Program. Erasts'

father, Herberts Ziemelis, accompanied them on this journey but the mother, Olga, was not included on the passenger list so she may have already passed away. The family was initially accommodated at Bonegilla, as they are included on the Bonegilla Migrant Experience website.



The family were separated after arrival. Erasts was destined for the Army Camp at Balcombe (Mount Martha). Vilma and the children were going to join Mr Wilson in Dandenong Road, Frankston. Herberts Ziemelis was headed for the Sale Hospital where his sponsors were Vija and Visvaldis Putnins who were Latvian immigrants who came to Australia in 1948; one must assume the families knew each other before migration and were probably relatives, as Vija's maiden name was Ziemelis.

The family became naturalized citizens in 1955. It was quite a productive year for Erasts, because he obtained his Bachelor of Arts at Melbourne University in the Faculty of Arts, and later obtained his teacher training certificate at Melbourne Secondary Teachers College. He was fluent in Latvian, German, and English.

He started teaching at St Albans High School in 1962 in the subjects of German and History.

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1962 staff, Mr Ziemelis is in third row, second from right.

In 1963 the family were living in Camberwell, with Erasts working as a teacher and Vilma as a process worker. Herberts Ziemelis was in Kooyong with Lidija Ziemelis and working as a cleaner. Herberts Ziemelis died in 1968 and was buried at Fawkner.

In the 1960s Erasts Zielemis was the guiding mentor for much of the school's involvement in the annual Inter-School Photographic Competition and St Albans which was declared one of the best amongst other High and Technical Schools and Colleges. In 1971 he was the supervisor and photographer for Alba, the school magazine. He was also involved in school and after-school hours in the photography classes for twenty Form 5 students.



Mr Ziemelis with Form 4E, 1965.

Ziemelis was also active as a volunteer in the Latvian community and was one of the first leaders to establish the Melbourne Latvian High School. The high school level Latvian language course began at University High School before transferring to Melbourne Latvian House in St Kilda, which was established in February 1972. Ziemelis would have been proud for the Latvian community when the Australian Government funded the language classes and the centre was



officially named a school within the state of Victoria with the option to learn elementary and advanced Latvian.

Sadly, Mr Ziemelis was able to savour this development only very briefly, as he died unexpectedly in March 1972 at the young age of 52 years. The St Albans High School Advisory Council, staff, and pupils placed funeral notices in newspapers as a mark of respect. His remains were cremated at Springvale.

Zaiga Ziemelis died in 1979 at the much younger age of 31 years.

Vilma Ziemelis nee Berzins died in February 1997 and her cremated remains were scattered at the Springvale Botanical Cemetery in Greater Dandenong.

Remembering Mr Ziemelis



Mrs Wright: Mr Erasts Ziemelis was a teacher of German background who was a good photographer. He was taking the school photographs in the early years and did a very good job with that, and was assisted at one stage by one of the Costa boys. Mr Ziemelis also encouraged students to take an interest in photography, which a number did. There was gap in the school photographic records after he died, until they appointed a professional service to take over this responsibility.

Phillip Spivey: Mr Ziemelis had a passion for photography that he tried to pass on to students. He taught me to love photography by letting me practise with his beloved Leica Camera. My current passion for photography came from him, for which I am grateful.

So, even though I didn't pick up on the academic side from the teachers I did get inspired. Some teachers have the knack of doing that.

Albert Achteberg: The photography club was conducted at lunch time by Mr Ziemelis. He certainly was a great influence on my life as I continued doing part-time professional photography for the next 30 odd years.

Marilyn Anderson: In my final year [1967] at St Albans High I was a prefect as well being on the school magazine committee and was playing in the girl's hockey team. The magazine was a challenge because an official school magazine had not been published for several years. Mr Ziemelis, one of the senior teachers who taught German and was the school's unofficial photographer, was our guide and mentor; other students on this group included Maija Svavs, Leo Dobes, Joachim Simovic and David Beighton. I'm happy to confirm that Alba was definitely published that year.



1971 staff - Mr Ziemelis is on the right in front row.

Written by Joseph Ribarow

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