

SYLVIA KOPMANN: STUDENT 1958 - 1959



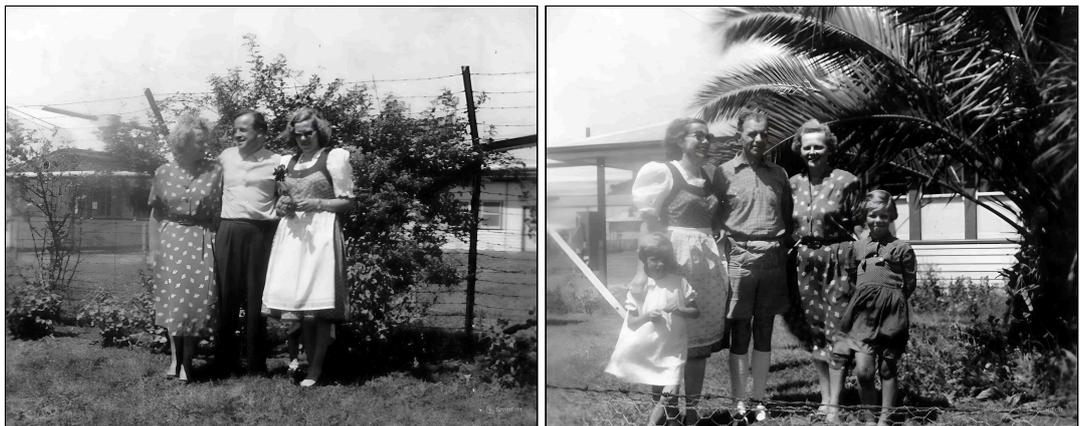
My parents were Wilhelm August Heinrich Kopmann and Margarete Muenster, and I am Sylvia, born in 1946. We came to St Albans in 1954. I was eight years old and the only child. We came from Germany and migrated on the MS Skaubryn through the Suez Canal and it took us six weeks to get here. For us children on the ship the journey was wonderful but for the parents it was terrible because they were so sick. We arrived at Station Pier late in November 1954 and were transported by train to the migrant hostel at Bonegilla. I can't remember how long we stayed at Bonegilla but the men were soon allocated jobs in different parts of Victoria.

My father was sent to work at the railways in Newport and that's why we ended up in the western suburbs. At first he was a labourer but then he became a clerk in the office because he was able to type. After we came down to Melbourne my mother went to work at Dunlop in Montague on the process line. A lot of the ladies went to work there.



Kopmann family at Bonegilla 1954 © Sylvia Bluemel

My father was always a skilled typist as far as I remember because in Germany he ran his own business and typing is something he did for the paperwork of record keeping. He was a miller. In the place we were living he had these milling machines milling grains of various sorts.



Kopmann family at Maribyrnong Hostel late 1950s © Sylvia Bluemel

From Bonegilla we were sent to the Maribyrnong Hostel in those rounded Nissan army huts. Everyone settled into the work the government had given them and life progressed. When my parents had saved enough money we bought some land in St Albans and built a house.



Grade 3 Maribyrnong Primary 1954 © Sylvia Bluemel



That was probably in late 1955 and we stayed there until 1959. We were at 25 Manfred Avenue, next door to the Heymig family who had a bungalow. Jutta was the daughter and we've been friends ever since. Jutta and her parents came on the same ship as we did and that's when the friendship started. There were a lot of other people from that journey who ended up living around St Albans, so we formed a little clan. People wanted to settle close to others they could understand and relate to.

I don't know why my parents chose to settle in St Albans. I assume where to settle was something that was discussed by the people on the ship and in the migrant camps in Bonegilla and in Maribyrnong, because when people were moving to a new area they didn't want to be alone. In that sense the Germans were the same as the Italians and the Greeks in clustering together in certain areas. I suppose, too, that St Albans being close to the Maribyrnong hostel might have been a factor.

When we moved into our house it was only half finished – I think they called that “lock up stage”. It was made of weatherboard with a tiny walk-in hall, two bedrooms, the lounge room, the kitchen which was the hub of the house, and the laundry which was out the back.



Building their home in Manfred Avenue St Albans 1950s © Sylvia Bluemel

My father built on as he could afford it and my mother helped with what she could. One day she was on the ladder with a broom holding up a piece of cement sheet that dad was nailing under the eaves when the sheet slipped and hit her in the corner of the eye. She was lucky not to lose that eye. When we were building the verandah at the front we threw all the building rubble into a heap at the front door and poured concrete over it to make our verandah base.



Back yard of the Kopmann home 1950s © Sylvia Bluemel

The power was not connected to the street when we came and the only heating in the house was a kerosene heater that was also used for cooking. There was a trick to getting the heater lit and keeping it lit. I remember the smell of the kerosene. Many years later when my husband and I were in Devon Meadows we looked after some plants for an old friend who had sold his nursery. Because we had an acre we brought all the plants to store at our place while he was integrating into a new property. There were a lot of indoor plants and we had a huge poly-house because my husband was madly into gardening. We got this kerosene heater and every night I would go down to light the heater to keep the plants warm. Every time I lit the heater the smell evoked those earlier memories of St Albans.

We had water connected to our block but that was just at the front of the property. You'd go out and get a bucket-load and bring that in. There was a bathroom but I don't remember much about it.



Kopmann home in Manfred Street © Sylvia Bluemel

The little house was beautiful. It wasn't the basic bungalow that you saw around the district. My father built the house in that shape with the angled roof at the front because he tried to make it look as German-like as possible. It had the push-up windows. At the start everything was unpainted and the walls were unplastered. It was a lock up stage shell and not all the rooms had floors, only the ones we lived in. It was bare floorboards until they could afford lino. But it was lovely. We did have electricity after a while.

St Albans was lots and lots of paddocks with bungalows. People lived in those bungalows because they couldn't afford to build a whole house. They were made so that people could live and be safe in a part of the building and when money became available they built on the rest of the house. In those days that was quite good.



Willy Kopmann in St Albans East 1950s © S Bluemel

I actually adored living there because you formed friendships. The streets were unmade and there were lots of paddocks. Sometimes there would be grass fires and you would have to get the old Hessian bag and start whacking. It was a bit different to now. It was a good time to grow up because you were safe, not like now. We used to play outside all the time with the local kids. We had bikes but my bike was put together from many parts. My mum and dad used to take it on a Saturday and go up to St Albans and load the potatoes and their shopping onto it and push it home. One day the bike had had enough and broke in half. It was a home-made job with different parts welded together. It got fixed so I was back on my bike again.



Grade 4A St Albans Primary © Sylvia Bluemel

At first I went to the old St Albans West Primary School. It was a long walk going all that way. We used to go as a group and Jutta would go with me. There was safety in numbers and in those days you were safe. My parents left the house early to go to work, perhaps 5.30 or 6am, so it was up to us kids to do what needed to be done – feed the chooks, prepare the meal. We lived next to each and we looked after each other. If mum and dad came home and stuff wasn't done ... watch out.



Grades 5&6 St Albans East Primary © Sylvia Bluemel



I started at the old primary school in 1955 and for a while we were bussed to Deer Park Primary because there was no room in St Albans. The Deer Park school was an old, solid brick building with the high ceilings and very cold. In the winter there was a fireplace in the corner. Next door there was a Catholic school and all we could see were the nuns' habits walking along. We were always interested to see what was going on but we couldn't see over the wall. Because I was not a Catholic I didn't know what they did but believed they prayed all day. The school wall was very solid and rendered, like a typical convent school. When the new St Albans East Primary School was built I started going there, and that would have been in 1956. I was in grades 4 and 5 because we had composite grades and they would grade you on how well you were learning. Language was never a problem with me because I learnt the language very quickly. I remember when we were at the Maribyrnong camp. Bonegilla had English lessons up to a point but not a lot. I went to Maribyrnong Primary School for a while when we were at the Maribyrnong camp. The kids there thought this was great because this girl doesn't understand any English, so they taught me all the bad words. You can imagine what I learnt and it wasn't funny – you thought you were speaking proper English but you weren't.

I don't think my story is any different from anyone else's because we went through the same experience, growing up in St Albans. I still have an attachment now. I remember the bazaars being held at the primary school and the pony rides.



St Albans East Primary School 1957 © S Bluemel

My parents never went to the school. My father was very strict about my learning but he didn't want to be involved with the school itself. Though he did come to school to take photo-graphs of the pony rides and things like that, he never went up to speak with the teachers about my educational progress. That was totally up to me. If my report card wasn't good, I was in trouble. He always made sure that homework was done, except he would teach me the German way in mathematics, for instance. The outcome would be the same but the method was different. The teacher used to say that I had cheated because you had to do it the English way not the German way. The same thing happened at the high school. There were things that I couldn't do and he would teach me the German way.

The main thing I remember is the sense of community in our neighbourhood. The kids got on really well and we looked after each other. The other thing was safety. You could take off all day and your parents didn't have to worry about you, which is totally different now. There was the freedom of being allowed to do what you wanted to do. You knew everybody, even up the street and up at the shops.



Going up to the railway station there was a little strip of shops about half-way up, after Errington Road. There was a milk bar and a baker there. I remember going up there with a girlfriend from down the road. She was a Ukrainian named Anna Kinatz. She's passed away unfortunately. They lived on the corner where Manfred Avenue started. She and I became really good friends. Her mother used to send her up to the baker to get Vienna bread. One day we started pecking at the top of it and by the time we got back

there was nothing left except the shell. In those days there were hardly any fences around because you just didn't do that. Her mum had a gaggle of geese. She would say "come in" when you came to their yard but the geese would chase you. The unmade roads had pot holes. They never had a car, so they had to walk everywhere just like I did, except for the bicycle.

You could sink a ship in the potholes. I remember the dunny man came to the outdoor toilets and one day the truck broke an axle going through one of those potholes and tipped over. We all stayed home from school that day. The milkman used to come in his horse and cart and we would get a ride with him sometimes. He would allow us to hop on his cart and we would go with him on his round until he headed back to St Albans.



Kopmann family of Manfred Street © Sylvia Bluemel

I remember some time later there was another recent migrant – I think he was a German named Mr Schwab – who bought a van and started importing goods from Europe. There were all these Europeans living there and they wanted their own stuff. They didn't like the white bread, they wanted their brown rye bread. They also had the Continental Reading Circle. The Schwabs had a place not far from us along Errington Road. They did the magazine run about once a fortnight.



The magazines were old, they weren't new, but they must have been expensive to get. It was something to keep in touch with your old country. Schwab started the van with the goods and I suppose he saw an opening for something else because people would ask him if he had any German books. He started importing them and it took a long time for them to come from overseas, because they wouldn't have used air transport at the time. The magazine club was a good way to keep in contact with the world because the

people read those magazines back home, particularly the Stern (Star) because that was more politically orientated. The old people used to love that one. I'm not sure if Schwab had Manchester on this van but sometimes they had beautiful tablecloths that he imported from Germany, but that might have been in the later years. As a child you weren't privy to those things that your mum and dad bought from the van. Schwab's van was a big one; it might have been an old Bedford that you could walk through. He sold anything that was non-perishable. In those days we only had the ice boxes so it was difficult to stock perishable goods. There was bread but that might have been baked locally because I know he had special breads. That rye bread was the be all and end all for them, because they didn't want white bread which my father always said it makes your teeth rot.



Three houses up from us there was a Hungarian family of Sandor Egyedi and we made friends with their children too. His wife Marjorie was English and he was Hungarian. She was a typical English rose with blonde hair and beautiful eyes; she was a gorgeous lady. They had about six babies.

We had friendly neighbours and my mum and dad grew vegetables in their garden and we passed them on, as you do. Everybody knew everyone and if you could help out you would. People had chickens so they would give you eggs and you'd give them vegetables. It was good trading. We had a washing machine and Jutta's mum and dad had a fridge but they only had an outside laundry. So we stored things in their fridge and Mrs Heymig used our washing machine. Mrs Heymig is a lovely person and still has a sharp memory. Sometimes mum made this bread-based broth. She would use the crusts of the rye bread and add raisins to make this thick, soup broth. One day a neighbour with a very heavy accent who was enjoying the dish complimented mum for her delicious "sick soup".

I remember the first time I saw a snake. There were no fences and as I was opening the laundry door I saw it just inside lying on the floor. That was the first time in my life that I saw a snake. I remember my dad telling me when we were going to come to Australia that Australia had snakes. I had never seen a snake except in picture. I had nightmares – everywhere you walked, everything you did was snakes. I was terrified.



Maribymong River swimming hole at Stensons Road.

I remember the walks down to the river to the swimming hole. Our parents didn't worry that we used to go off during the day and come back at night. I remember the bike rides and the houses gradually being built so that you couldn't see across the paddocks any more. At that stage we left just as things really started to develop. There was Jutta next door and an English family and the Egyedi family who lived in a bungalow too. I remember vividly the house across the paddock where there was an English family in a bungalow and they had lots of kids and a horse. The back of the bungalows were all cement sheets and there was nothing between you and outdoors except this thin cement sheet. One day the horse kicked the cement sheet and suddenly there was this great big hole in the bedroom wall. Can you imagine it? I think the kids were tethering the horse and it didn't want to be tethered.



I spent about a year at St Albans High School but I don't remember the teachers. While I liked high school there were a few issues. The first year you have to blend in. I got the uniform and that was a struggle because it was expensive. I was very proud of that uniform but I wasn't there really long enough to make any real memories. The people I went to high school with were pretty much the people from the primary school. Steve Kozlowski was two or three years above me. He was part of the group that I used to run with around the paddocks. He was from Cowper Avenue over the paddock and we still keep in contact.

Apart from the snakes, St Albans was good. We saw the changes over five years, but then we went back to Germany. My father decided that he'd enough and wanted to go back to Germany. I don't know for what reason and we didn't ask questions. That was in 1959. We went back

on the MS Aurelia, which was an Italian ship that took us back all the way to Trieste. From there we took the train back to Berlin. My father decided he didn't want to stay in Berlin, and off we went again because what my father said went.

We went to a place called Drei Länder Ecke (Three Country Border) which is on the corner of France, Switzerland and Germany, the Black Forest, which is just across the road from Basel which is a town in Switzerland. He bought a customs house. Because they were living on the border, a lot of people that were working for the customs with the governments of Germany and

Switzerland would live in those homes. Then they would move on and the houses became available for sale.

Father was always one of those people who absolutely wanted to have a property title in his hand. He didn't believe in having to pay things off and when he had to he wanted to be the owner. He bought this little house and it had three storeys. We lived on the bottom floor and the people who rented from us on the top floors. We lived there for a good eighteen months and then he got sick. The weather conditions are so different over there because of the cold. Because we were in the forest area we didn't have summer like we do here. He was prone to blood clots and had a blood clot that wandered, but in those days they didn't know about aspirin as a treatment. We always knew he had a heart problem that we didn't know what could be done about it. He had a really bad turn in hospital and we nearly lost our home. My mother had to go to work because he couldn't work. She went across the border to Basel and was working at the railway station in the kitchen as a kitchen hand. It was a long trek.

In the winter you were stomping through snow. For me to go to school used to take about an hour just to get through the snow to get to the station to take the train to get to school by 8 o'clock. In Europe they have longer lunch times at school but I couldn't go home in that hour so when I was got wet in the morning I was wet all day. You had to take a change of clothes with you. We always spoke German at home which is something that my father insisted and I thank him for it. When we went back to Germany it was good because I could speak German and didn't have to take English classes. That was the one plus of our return.

We stayed there about eighteen months. The doctor said to him if you want to stay alive you better pack your things and go back to Australia where the climate is better and with the condition you've got the blood would get thinner because of the warmer weather. So we packed up and away we went again.



We came back to Australia in 1960. We came back to St Albans but only for a very short time because we had nowhere else to go because our old house had been sold. We moved in with some friends of my mother whom she knew through work. They were in Glendenning Street, the Maziarz family, Elise and Frank. I think they were Czechoslovakian or Yugoslav. He was a very good-looking man and she was a beautiful lady; they had two sons if I remember rightly. We lived in the bungalow out the back, just for a short period of time until my parents could get established again.

Father was lucky enough to get his old job back at the railways, so obviously they thought he was a good worker. Mother went back to work in a factory because you had to earn money again. Then father decided that St Albans wasn't for him any more. What the reasons were I don't know. I didn't ask him, I wasn't told. He bought a house in Clayton, so that was a big move. I hated it.

I was so happy that we were coming back to Australia. My time in Germany wasn't fantastic. Number one because of the education. I had started high school here and I was just getting to enjoy it. I wasn't a very good scholar but I was passable. You had your friends and suddenly you get torn away. Schooling in Europe was a different kettle of fish altogether. There are no uniforms, for a start, so you are not equal. Those people who have money dress their kids in the very best of the best. And those people who don't run around not in rags but not the best either. It was horrible. I hated it. The education here in Australia is different to the European education. History here is all English history and over there it is all European history. When I got back to Germany I ended up having to have special tuition to catch up. I absolutely hated it. When my father said we were coming back to Australia I was elated.

Moving from St Albans again was heart breaking because when coming back here I thought I would be with my friends and pick up on my schooling, but that didn't happen. After that I lost interest in schooling. I was 14 which was the school leaving age at that time. When we shifted to Clayton I enrolled in Springvale High School but because school uniforms were so expensive I wore my St Albans High School uniform, which was a no no – Springvale High would not accept it. It wasn't that different but I got into big trouble with the teachers. The prefects would dob you in and the teachers would tell you off. My parents said they couldn't afford a new uniform, so one of the teachers said we have a second-hand shop and you can have a second-hand uniform. I said no because I was too proud to do that. I said I would wear my own uniform because it was good money that my parents had paid. Anyway, I got picked up quite often for not wearing the right uniform.

I lost all interest in school and when I turned 14 I got myself a part-time job at Coles in Oakleigh. I asked the manager there if there ever was a permanent job available if I would be eligible even though I was only 14. My father wanted me to keep going to school but in the end he said that the only way I could leave school was if I got a job. I said I had a job. So I started a fulltime job at Coles in Oakleigh. I enjoyed it.

When we first moved to Clayton it was hard for me because I had no friends and I wasn't allowed to go out, not even allowed to go to the youth club, because I was too young. I think I was so angry with my parents for not having stayed in St Albans. As a young girl I had no say in the matter because you have to go with your parents. I had retained my St Albans friendship links because I wrote letters to them while I was in Germany. We kept in touch because I liked writing letters. Well, in those days you didn't have texting or email and you didn't dare use the phone not that many people had them. Letters were the way to go and that's how I kept informed on what was happening here and the latest music and things like that. When I did come back to St Albans I thought it was terrific. It wasn't to be.

I was working in Coles for two years and used to travel from Clayton to Oakleigh on the bus. You know how you get to know the people on the bus? There was a lady, Mrs Lemon, who said if I ever wanted to change my working life she had a position available in the counting house, where all the money from Myers in Chadstone would come to the office and there were machines that would count the coin and we would count the notes. So I transferred over to them. It was a good idea to do that. I worked in the office in Myers at Chadstone for about two years and then I met my husband-to-be, which would have been about 1962 because we got married in 1964.

My future husband, Peter Bluemel, was a rep for Moulded Products which was part of Nylex and used to sell contact material and plastic by the yard. Because they sold to Myers he would come and check the stock to see if anything needed replenishing. In those days it was up to the rep to work out what had been sold and what needed to be ordered. He was German and at first I thought he was aloof so when he came I used to take off into the storeroom to avoid him. Lo and behold I finished at Coles and started working at Chadstone and was sitting in the cafeteria and who walks in but this Peter. He sat down with us and had a cup of coffee and he asked me out. Even though I was 16 I wasn't allowed to go out. My mum at that stage was working for the hospital for the aged in Cheltenham and my dad was still working at the railways. I said to Peter I can't go out without permission but you can ask my father if you want, but it's going to be no. Peter met my father and I don't think they ever got on very well but at least they were able to communicate. It is what it is. Anyway, Peter and I started going out.

Peter and I married in 1964. I worked at Myers and had to work Saturdays, which was awkward. We were living in Devon Meadows down in Cranbourne and Peter was working in Melbourne but not on Saturdays and for me to get to work every day was hard. Every other day of the week Peter drove to head office in Collins Street and he would drop me off at Myers in Chadstone. On the Saturday I had to make my own way there so I then decided I wouldn't do that any more, but I stayed in the city and worked for George Laurens for a couple of years, the debt collector. Pete drove me in because he worked in Collins street. I decided it was a bit far to go to the city every

day and Peter changed his employer to Melbrick Sunglass Company, so he wasn't driving to the city any more. I asked for a transfer to the Frankston office, which was closer to home and on the bus line. That's where I ended up but I didn't like it. I ended up in Notting Hill behind the Monash University in Clayton. There was a factory G E Electrics making toasters and such and I started working there.

I came to visit St Albans after I got married in 1964 and we were living in Clayton. I took a drive down to St Albans in the late 1960s and I couldn't find my way around any more because it had changed so much. I knew the main street and I knew where Manfred Avenue and Errington Road were, but the houses even in our street were mansions. I remember as a young girl walking down Manfred Avenue to the main road there used to be a big paddock there with a great big shed. That shed always used to frighten us kids because we had to walk past it and we thought the boogie man was hiding in there. That shed was now blown on an angle because of the effect of the wind over the years.



Main Road East St Albans in 1956 and 1963.

I fell pregnant in 1969 with my eldest daughter. We then bought a road house in Cranbourne on the South Gippsland Highway before the highway was duplicated. It was called the 31 Mile Café because it was 31 miles from Melbourne. We bought the business with Pete's mum and dad who put their house up for sale and used the money as collateral. We bought from a Russian guy and it was the biggest mistake we ever made because the books had been fiddled and the business income was not as good as it was made out to be.

However, the café purchase was good because it came with 10 acres. We had chooks and Pete's mum was an excellent cook so we had roast chicken and she baked German cakes. There used to be a McEwans store in Dandenong with a café, and mum would supply the cakes for that café for extra money just to be able to survive. Our café opened really early in the mornings for the truckies for coffee and breakfast. Peter's mum and I shared the workload. We were open seven days a week because there was the petrol as well and you had to stay open to make some money. Peter's dad had cows and used to make his own butter. He had chickens hence our roasted chicken meals. We ended up with pigs to eat all the food scraps, so it must have been like the small St Albans farms in the earlier days. The pigs were sold to some Italians who slaughtered them and made salami.

In 1969 we were moving out of that joint. Pete and I bought a block of land in Devon Meadows, an acre of parkland for \$1,100. We built a beautiful ranch style home for \$14,000. When you look at the prices now ...

In 1972 our second daughter was born. We were there for 45 years and then we sold up four years ago because Pete became very ill with heart problems. It was the only home the girls had ever known. It was the typical scenario of open landscape going back to my recollections of St Albans' days but on one acre of land. It was St Albans reduced to an acre where the girls could do what they wanted, climbing trees, building cubby houses, sitting on blankets on the grass enjoying their fairy bread. In a way it was my childhood reincarnated, because they had that freedom. It was excellent.

I used to tell them stories about running around the paddocks and putting out fires with Hessian bags. I remember there was one family who did have a fence around their property and they were the Oldakers in Manfred Avenue – they're back in England now. They had a fence and one time someone was playing with some matches and almost set fire to the fence. That's another fire we put out with Hessian bags. You try to instill those memories in your children but they can't visualize it because they haven't lived there. It has to be experienced to appreciate it in the same way.

The people who came to Australia on the same boats have their own experience with similarities of open spaces and freedom. My girls grew up with wallabies along the road and koalas in the trees. We didn't have them in St Albans though we did have magpies. You make your own history by making friends when you were little, going through primary school together and going through high school together.

Pete didn't go to school in Australia at all because he came out in 1953 when he was 14 and went straight to work. He came to Australia on the same ship as us but one year earlier. The people that he came with formed lasting friendships till the time of his death. They also went to Bonegilla and then settled in Edithvale.



Kopmann family of Manfred Street © Sylvia Bluemel

Pete had an interesting tale about losing and finding connections. Some people that they met on the boat had two young girls but the families lost contact after leaving the hostel. Years later when Pete was traveling on the train he recognised the girl by the buttons on her cardigan. The two families reconnected through that chance meeting and thereafter maintained a close friendship for many, many years. That was the same scenario for Jutta and I who came on the same ship and established a lasting friendship. Those people congregated together afterwards because of the friendships that formed over those six weeks of travel. I think a lot of people stayed where they first settled. They might have changed houses and streets but they stayed in the neighbourhood. That would have been my choice.

Peter always had an interest in good music rather than rock'n'roll. When we got married we had lots of parties and always had German music. The love of music was instilled in him. We ran our own import expert business for a long time and he was in and out of Hong Kong for many years, probably about ten years because we were importing from Hong Kong. Then in 1984 he had a bad heart attack due to stress because of business problems. We got taken in by the Chinese business partner and nearly lost our house. Peter became quite ill and could only do odd jobs around the place. Where we lived in Devon Meadow there were some market gardens and he'd

give a hand there for some pocket money. He had a heart problem and couldn't breathe properly but that wasn't enough to qualify for a disability pension. So I ended up going to work and he stayed at home. I had two jobs to support the family.

Pete did what he could but he did things mainly at home. He got a job with the nursery man because they knew each other from working at Moulded Products. However his love of music never ever died. He would listen to the radio and comment about their poor music selections and would often say if he could just get an hour of air time on commercial radio he would show them what good music really is. He always had cassettes, tapes and records. In about 2004 a radio station opened in Cranbourne and they were looking for presenters for ethnic music. The radio station was being built in the community centre in Cranbourne. It was before Christmas in 2006. Pete went in for an interview and was accepted. He received some training and started his music program. He had a two-hour program and at first was presenting it in English and German, which took a long time. He progressed and one of the other presenters said it would be easier to make it German language only because that was the target audience. We had relatives in Berlin so we could get music sent from there. He progressed and had two-hour shows every Saturday and Sunday morning and an hour of English. Saturday and Sunday mornings were from 6 to 9am, then he got a drive-time program on Monday afternoon. I helped with the broadcasts by doing the phone work. We also got invitations to put on music shows at some of the local German clubs. I think that legacy of music was one of the highlights of his life in later years.

I've done a lot of volunteer work since I retired. I was with Neighbourhood Watch and used to go to all the meetings at the Dandenong cop shop. We would have speakers once a month and walk around the streets trying to spot hazards, delivering monthly newsletters to tell people what was going on, promoting safety issues.

Then I did a course on palliative care but I had to give that up because Pete's health started declining and I thought my place was at home. At that stage there were a lot of hospital visits required. Pete gave up the music program when he became ill. Then I was diagnosed with cancer and that was another journey. It was a shock but we got through it. Pete's health declined even more and required greater medical intervention because he had cardio-myopathy. We decided we couldn't stay any more on the property because we couldn't maintain it. It was a blessing in disguise when we didn't have the big property any more. My mother had died a long time ago and my father had moved to Queensland. When he got sick we brought him back down here, so there was a lot of work involved in the years between with the family including the in-laws.

Now I've gone back to voluntary work. I'm with the "phone a friend" group. I ring from home or go to Scoresby where the office is and ring people. There is a community group called Bridges and they take people to their appointments or provide busses that take you on shopping trips, there's even pet walkers. Some of it is for the elderly who can't get out on their own. I'm in the phone a friend program and contact people who are ill and so isolated they have no-one. I ring them once a week and we have a chat. It's amazing what people will tell you over the phone, because you do build up that trust of non judgmental anonymity. Fortunately we have other helpers who we can refer to if more direct help is need such as transport or mediation with authorities.



Sylvia Blumel nee Kopmann at new home

When we moved to this smaller property in June 2014 it was a blessing because we didn't have the pressure of the big property any more. We'd lived on that old property for 45 years with total freedom and there were few neighbours. After we decided to sell we didn't know where we wanted to go. An estate agent from Cranbourne was showing us some properties in Narre Warren which we always knew as a nice place with gardens and nurseries. When we were in Devon Meadows Pete really loved the garden and he had planted three white birches which is leading back to his links with Germany and the song Drei Weisse Birken, which was one of his favourites. When we pulled up to the property here, lo and behold, there were three white birches in the front yard. We looked at the house from the outside and decided this was the one. This was the first really beautiful home that we could move into without having to do lots of painting and redecorating.

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A move is a big thing and it was bedlam for us at the time. Having been 45 year at the old place it was heart-breaking to leave as you were leaving behind all those memories. The house is just a house, just brick and mortar, and your memories come with you in boxes. Strangely enough on the last day when removalists came to take the last bits away and we locked up with the handover of keys, it was just a shell and when we spoke in the kitchen it was just an echo. In the end everything went smoothly. Unfortunately, Pete was here only six months.

Sylvia Bluemel nee Kopmann, 2018.



Voyage to Australia 1954 © Sylvia Bluemel
