

## HELENA VASJUTA nee RIBAROW: BANK CLERK, SALES ASSISTANT, VOLUNTEER



### Arriving in St Albans

When we first came to St Albans late in 1951 it was mainly open paddocks. There were about eight families in our little area of Henry Street. Opposite us there was a small farmlet, or the remnants of one, with a few horses and a pond on the corner. This was the type of property that was now being redeveloped into residential blocks, and before long that's exactly what happened to this one. Further east over Leslie Street was some grazing land still in use with a few sheep visible if we ever explored down that way, and at times I remember the farmer growing grain of some sort in those fields.

Our home was a one-room bungalow, which eventually became the bathroom. It was made of weatherboard and was completely unlined on the inside. The four of us lived in just that room for some time, before dad built an extension. We didn't have any water connected at first and had to fill our bucket from Mr and Mrs Melnik's place two houses away as they had a connection in their front yard.

### Childhood Pastimes

My brother and I made friends with Veronica from next door and we'd have fun playing together. We were never allowed to stray very far from home. On some of the fun days we did simple things like sitting on the nature strip about a hundred yards away from home, backs against the old corrugated iron fence of the farmlet across the road, picking wild daisies or bachelor's buttons and making dandelion chain necklaces like mum taught us. The profusion of yellow flowers was delightful and we chanted some now-forgotten nursery rhyme.



Veronica Hoffman, Peter Rajek, Helena Ribarow, Teresa Ribarow (front), Joseph Ribarow; c. 1957.

There was the small farm property still fenced off across the road. This was an old chook farm that belonged to the Lewis family but I don't think it was operating when we moved there. Occasionally we saw a horse roaming in the fenced paddock opposite us. We were delighted

when we would hear a meadow lark and spot the little bird hovering above us in the air. It was a tranquil scenario. At the corner of the crossroad of Henry and Walter streets the farmyard was screened off by corrugated iron fencing adjacent to a pond. The house itself was in Walter street and flanked by rows of large pine trees, and a couple of really tall gums in the centre of their large back yard, which was an unusual sight in the area as there were very few trees visible to us.

## Starting School

Life was even rather funny when you look back. I remember getting a real shock when I first went to school, because I hadn't realised that there was another language. Around our little neighbourhood there were only a few houses, all with people of European background, and we could all understand each other to some extent because we grew up hearing different languages - usually there were some common words and people often spoke several languages anyway. At that time we were too young to realise that they were different languages, although we had been told that people came from different parts of the world. However, countries meant nothing to us.

School was different, because it was probably the first time I would have heard English. When I first went to the St Albans Primary School in 1953 I didn't know what was wrong, because I could see that the teachers were talking, but it didn't make any sense to me. It was almost as if I had been struck deaf.



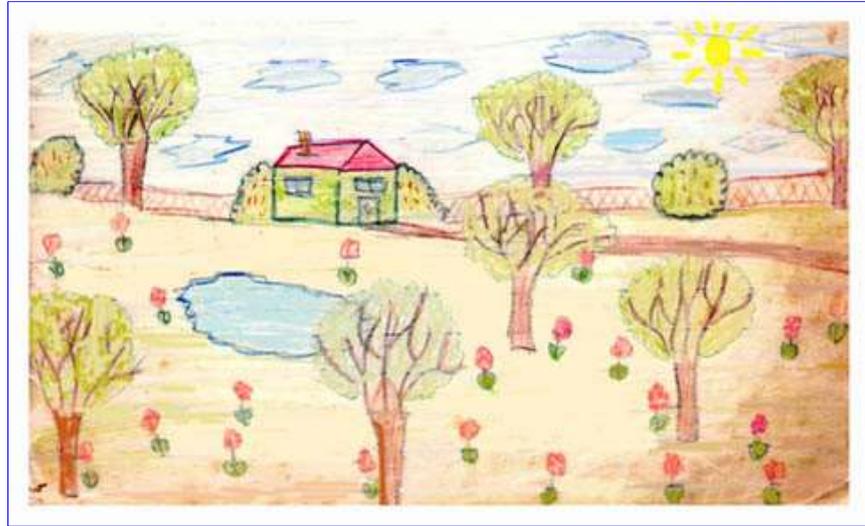
Grade 3c, St Albans Primary School, 1955; Helena Ribarow is in third row second from the right.

That first day I came home at lunch-time. I didn't know what I was supposed to do, and when everyone rushed out at lunch-time I thought they were going home, so I left as well. I had a vague idea where to go and when I got near the church I felt relieved, because mum had taken us to church and I knew where our home was from there. Mum was surprised to see me and took me back. I've always remembered this day as my introduction to Australian education, and I think it's a good story to tell about how you learn about life even when you don't know what to expect.

I was transferred to the new school in Station Street when that opened up in 1956, and then went to the Sacred Heart school in 1957.

## Polish School

My brother and I also went to Polish classes at the Sacred Heart Church during 1957 and 1958. These Saturday classes were for the elementary level and were run by the Polish nuns from Essendon; they were our first introduction to grammar, spelling, and writing in Polish. Mum liked to see us doing our homework at the kitchen table, and Joe and I both enjoyed drawing pictures and the colouring-in exercises. We stopped going to the classes when we were put into the childrens home, and we never did go back.



Artwork for the Polish classes by Helena Ribarow, 1957.

## School and Work

I stayed at Sacred Heart until Grade 7, and then went to St Albans High School in 1960. I enjoyed the new school, and got very good results. That year I was top of the class at the mid-year exams, and I was pleased when the form teacher, Miss Cordell, wrote that I was one of the best pupils in the class.



Veronica Hoffman and Helena Ribarow, Henry Street.

I started working part-time for Ted Earl in 1961; he had a shoe shop in Main Road West, though later he transferred the business to Alfrieda Street. I would work on Saturdays and during the school holidays. I would give most of the money to my mother so that we could start fixing up the house. Mr Earl was a really kind and compassionate man.

I obtained my Intermediate Certificate at the end of 1962. After that I applied for a job with the State Savings Bank, and ended up working at their Sunshine Branch. I worked there for a number of years while still working part time at the shoe shop.



Helena Ribarow (left) and friends from St Albans High School.

I eventually left the bank and was working full-time for Mr Earl, but then reverted to part-time work when the children were born. Since I started working for him after school in 1961, I would have worked for about 20 years with him, until the early 1980s.



Earls Shoeland in Alfreda Street, 1970s.

## Siblings

I have a brother who is two years younger and a sister born when I was six years old. Joseph and I were born in Germany after the war, and my sister Teresa was born in Melbourne in 1952.

I remember dad taking us to the hospital to see mum and the baby. Teresa looked so small and cute it was a real wonder to see her. I remember feeling very responsible for her and tried to look after her at home. She had us all worried one year when she wandered away with the young boy next door; they must have been about three or four years of age. When we discovered that they were missing everyone was frantic and search parties of neighbours were scouring the streets for them. They were eventually found unharmed, having decided that they would go exploring the world towards the railway station and all the shops down there.



## Health Issues

I sometimes wonder how much of my agoraphobia and overeating is due to my childhood experiences. One can block off memories, but the anxieties and fears don't necessarily go away. After my father committed suicide in 1958 mum had a breakdown. She was sent to hospital and my brother and I were sent to a children's home; my sister stayed with a family in St Albans. When mum was sent home well again after six weeks, neither my brother nor I was released from the children's home. My mother would go to the Social Welfare Department almost every week to ask them to send us home, but they refused.

Eventually I wrote them a letter and asked them to let us go home so we could all be together again as a family, and so that my mother would not get sick again because we were separated. Mum took this letter to Social Welfare and within two days we were sent home. We had been at the children's home about six months. I was thirteen years old at the time.

## Work History

At fourteen and fifteen I worked during school holidays and on Saturdays to bring in some extra money into the home. At sixteen I left school to go to work and earn money to help support my mother, brother and sister. At seventeen I worked three jobs to help the family as we were poor. I was giving my mother three-quarters of my wage and she was able to save some of this and we finally had water in the house when I was eighteen years old.

Between seventeen and twenty I had problems of severe depression. A car accident in which I injured my head left me with very bad headaches, but it wasn't till I collapsed at work that I went to a doctor for medical advice. That was the beginning of my tranquilliser treatment.

Despite these problems I worked as much as I could to provide some financial security for the family and also to try to put some money aside for my own future. We slowly began to make a few improvements to the house and furniture, and that was nice to see. Mum liked that.

## Marriage



The marriage of Basil Vasjuta and Helena Ribarow, 1966.

I met my future husband, Basil Vasjuta, when I was eighteen and I was twenty when we married in 1966. It seemed only natural to live with my mother to continue supporting the family, and also for my husband and I to save enough money for a good deposit so that we could build a new home. We lived with my family for three-and-a-half years and continued to support them while my brother and sister were still at school.

At twenty-two I had my son, Paul, born in 1968. My first daughter, Christina, was born in 1971, and then Sonja was born in 1976. The 'seventies and 'eighties were my busiest years as a mother with three children to care for, but I always kept in contact with my mother and made sure she was taking care of herself.



## The Tin Shed

I became more directly involved with the Tin Shed in the early 1970s after the birth of my first child. I had stopped working full time so I could devote some time to other activities. I would go to the Tin Shed to meet other young mothers and to keep in contact with friends. Lorna Cameron and Evelyn Mullenger had started up a playgroup and I would take Paul there quite often when he was a little bit older. I've always had a lot of respect for Lorna Cameron and I knew she helped a lot of people through her voluntary work. I also became a volunteer there and spent the next 25 years as part of the regular team of helpers. I had to stop when my health became too bad.

The Tin Shed was a great way of helping people. We started the first migrant English classes, and a number of Tin Shed volunteers became the tutors for people wanting to improve their English. I found that speaking Polish was useful in communicating with a variety of Slavic people.

I also started organising all our recycled clothing through our Swap Shop, as we called it. I would pull apart all the older jumpers and use the wool to crochet rugs, which were then donated to people who needed blankets. I really enjoyed the Discussion Group that would include guest speakers from all sorts of places, plus we would visit other groups in Melbourne. It was a good way of learning about lots of new developments and becoming aware of places that were able to assist people.



Because we ran all these activities people would come to ask advice; we were able to help because we had experienced the same problems ourselves and knew what worked, or where people could go to get more specialised assistance.

## **Mother's Cancer**

Going to hospital with Mum was often an all-day exercise because of the long wait at the hospital. I didn't mind the waiting, it was the treatment when we eventually got to see a doctor that was really upsetting.

One of the worst times was when I finally convinced her to see a doctor about her gynaecological problems. It was a real problem getting her there in the first place. After waiting several hours we finally got to see someone, it turned out to be a couple of young trainees, a man and a woman, who didn't even appear to know what they were doing. They would whisper together, ask a question, then go back to whispering again. They were even smiling and laughing together. What sort of treatment is that to put anyone through?

Mum had some tests done and I had been waiting for the doctor to tell me the results. He was somewhere else, on some other floor or ward so I just had to wait. He phoned the nurse's station for something and she told him I was still waiting. When I got on the phone he told me mum had cancer. I fainted and they wanted to admit me into the hospital, so I had to explain that I had to go home to look after three kids. It had been a shock to be told such information over the phone with no forewarning. At least he could have told me in person.

We went back to the hospital with mum to try to explain about the cancer and convince her that she needed a hysterectomy. We had told the hospital to arrange a Polish interpreter so that things could be explained to mum as clearly as possible. What we didn't anticipate was that all the hospital staff at the session would be men and the interpreter wasn't even Polish. Needless to say, when you have an elderly European women in the presence of strange men it's difficult to get her to talk about any personal matters, and certainly not about gynaecological problems. I think the situation must have been very threatening to mum. She refused to believe she had cancer and refused to have any treatment. Her health deteriorated over the next two years and eventually I brought her to my home so I could take care of her. She died in 1982.

## **Children's Progress**

My son Paul went to the technical school and trained as an electronics technician with RMIT. He married Dawn Robinson in 1991 and they established their own home in Melton. Christina went to my old high school, now called St Albans Secondary College, but transferred to Buckley Park High School for her senior years. She then went on to study nursing at the Victoria University of Technology in St Albans and has been enjoying that as a career. Sonja went to Kealba High for her secondary education, and is now enrolled in business studies at VUT.

In 1996 Paul and Dawn had their first child, Daniel. He is my first grandchild and I take great delight in spending time with him and watching him discover the world.

### **Helena Vasjuta**

**1996**

[Helen died of cancer in 1998 at the age of 52.]



Helena and her children (L-R): Christina, Paul, and Sonja, 1998.



Terrie Crook and Helena Vasjuta, 1998.



Joe Ribarow, Helena Vasjuta, Terrie Crook; 1998.



Helena Vasjuta with grandson Daniel and family.

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Photographs courtesy of the Vasjuta family.