

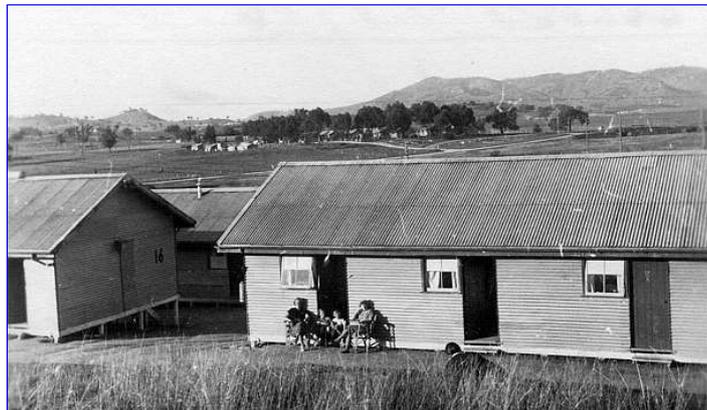
JOSEPH RIBAROW: SOCIAL WORKER, HISTORIAN



Arrival in Australia

We arrived in Australia in November 1949 at Station Pier in Melbourne. From here we were taken by train to the Bonegilla migrant reception centre, though I have no memory of the place itself as I was only twenty months old and people only stayed there a few weeks under normal circumstances. Bonegilla was the main reception and training centre in Victoria for the government-sponsored immigrants, and many were taken there immediately on arrival before being transferred to other centres in the state. We ended up in Watsonia.

Mum was Aniela Siuda, who was from the small village of Wola Kopcowa in Poland. Dad was Zyva Ribarov from Vrsac, in the south-eastern part of Vojvodina, Yugoslavia. They met and married in a displaced persons camp in Germany, just after the war. My sister and I were born in Germany: Helen in 1946 and myself in 1948. We came to Australia via a refugee camp in Italy, where the family had been accepted by the Australian immigration officials as part of the post-war refugee intake.



Hostel Life

All the men got two-year work contracts when they arrived. This arrangement was to recompense the government for the cost of transport to Australia and the initial accommodation. The work was mostly labouring jobs: factories, foundries, farmwork. Of course people had to pay for their board and accommodation while living at the hostel, so it wasn't easy accumulating savings for your own place.

Mum worked for a while at the Austin hospital when we were still at Watsonia. Migrant women used to work there as cleaners, domestics, and kitchen hands. It would have been relatively close to Watsonia because of the connecting railway line.

My first memories are of the Watsonia migrant hostel, which was a former army barracks made of corrugated iron. From what I remember of the place, the conditions were very spartan and not conducive to communal living.

Occasionally arguments would flare between neighbours at the hostel. Some of the family areas in the buildings were only separated by blankets, so none of it was sound proofed and lack of privacy was something people had to put up with it. This division of crowded living space with flimsy partitions was the same arrangement as in some of the displaced person camps in Europe.

I presume the difference here was people's sense of hope and the more confident anticipation of eventual progress into their own facilities.

Helen told me that Dad got really annoyed one day when he was working shift work because one of the neighbours was making a lot of noise and he couldn't get to sleep. He went round to tell her off and came back with a black eye because the woman's husband had thumped him.

Helen also told me that some women would get even with each other when they did the washing in big copper kettles in the laundry. They would puncture the bottom of the copper so that the water would drip out onto the fire.

It's no wonder that people left as soon as they were able to save enough money to find better accommodation. That's why St Albans was popular as a starting point. You could put a deposit on a bungalow and move into your own space. It may have been basic, but it was your own place where you could live without interference.



Watsonia Migrant Hostel: Joseph and Helena Ribarow (front row from the left).

Coming to St Albans

We came to St Albans in 1951 with very few possessions. Our end of Henry Street was mainly bare paddocks with no significant geographic features. Our new home, or perhaps new room in a better term, was all of 12 by 8 foot in unlined weatherboard, a bare wooden floor and a corrugated tin roof. That was home for the four of us.

I think the area had been used as grazing land. At the end of our street there were still paddocks with fieldstone fences topped with wire. Sunshine Avenue further away was an old road of bluestone blocks rumoured to have been built by convict labour, but local historians say it was built in the depression of the 1930s by unemployed men under the government's Sustenance Work scheme. The surrounding land was still used for grazing, mainly some sheep as I recall. I also remember some crops growing in the fields near Green Gully.

We were one family of about three thousand migrants who settled in St Albans between 1952 and 1954, a huge increase to an area which had a population of a few hundred until the 1930s, and under nine hundred in 1950.

Our home site was one of several that had recently been sold to other European migrants. Water was not yet connected to our site, but the neighbour two blocks away had a tap in the front yard and we would fill our bucket from there. At the time there was no electricity at all in the street. It's your typical "we did it rough and tough" story that people have heard before, and we weren't the only ones experiencing it.

We had a kerosene lamp for light and a single-burner kerosene-fired Primus stove for cooking. Mum used that simple kerosene stove for years, well into the 1960s.

The roads were just dirt tracks and the open drains were interesting biological breeding pools in the summer time and opportunities for miniature boat races and other water sports when it rained.

There was no sewerage, just a typical outhouse that was often built by the home owner. Unknowingly we had already joined the race for the great Aussie challenge of the idiosyncratic dunny. In fact it wasn't till the 1970s that the sewerage system was connected to our part of the municipality.

Neighbours

In our first year there were about eight families in our little "village". Next door on the west we had a Ukrainian couple, Josef and Maria Kiezyk, and their young son, also Josef. Next to them a Polish man with a German wife, Mr and Mrs Melnik. They had no children with them and it wasn't till many years later that the Mrs Melnik was able to bring her daughter out from Germany. To the east of us was another Polish and German couple, Mr and Mrs Hoffman, with a young daughter, Veronica. Past them was a Russian couple, Mr and Mrs Dalinkiewicz, with two sons, Nick and Victor, and a daughter, Zina. Behind us all there were three occupied properties: a Yugoslav man married to a German women, then the Kasjans, a Ukrainian couple with two boys, John and Michael, and a girl, Stefania. There was a Lithuanian family at the end. This little hamlet of houses remained unchanged in the early fifties, but eventually other houses started to be built around us.

Veronica, the girl next door, was an outgoing type whose company we enjoyed. Helen and I would go to her place and listen to the radio or play with swap cards. Listening to the radio was exciting and I couldn't wait for the hour the children's programs to come on air. Adventure story time would probably be a better description as we listened to the deliciously scary episodes of Leonard Teale doing Superman, there was also Tarzan of the Apes, Hop Harrigan, and Captain Silver and the Sea Hound. Great adventures for the imagination of a growing boy.

Veronica's parents bought us presents for Christmas which we loved though our parents were embarrassed by the gesture because they couldn't reciprocate.

There was a sad ending to this family story, however, as one year the mother and daughter returned to Germany for a holiday and never returned. Mr Hoffman was left behind and ended up dropping out of the area and living somewhere in Footscray.

As more migrants settled in the street we became friendly with the Montebello children, a Maltese family across the road; the two boys, Charlie and Alfie, and two girls, Emily and Rita, became part of our regular circle of childhood friends. Joe Kiezyk next door became a close friend and as teenagers we often went fishing together down to the Maribyrnong River. Michael Kasjan across the back and Victor Dalinkiewicz became friends when we played cricket with other neighbours out on the street.

Shopping

When we first arrived there were no shops in our immediate area. A few were near the railway station but I was too young to wander around there on my own. Mum would go by train to Footscray or the Victoria Market and come back laden with string bags of goodies. If we saw her coming back my sister and I would we would rush up the street to give her a hand.

Mum and dad had established a vegetable garden, and they would grow as much as they could. It would have been what they were accustomed to back home, as they both came from farming backgrounds. They planted rows of potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, beans and peas, all kinds of staple produce. In the summertime the watermelons and cantaloupes were

luscious treats. Dad planted what fruit trees he could: apples, plums, pears, walnuts, apricots, peaches.

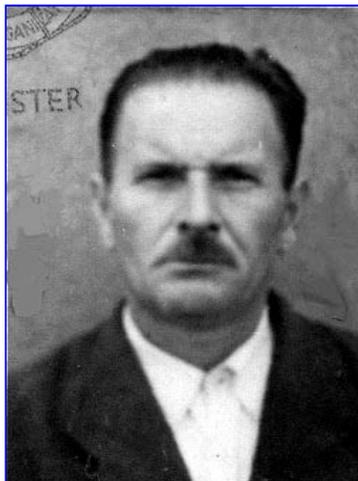
The bread was sold from the streets in a real horse-drawn baker's cart. The baker was a regular and we children would sometimes have the responsibility to buy the square tin or vienna loaves. It was always so fresh and appetising and mum used to joke about the little mouse that must have nibbled away at the end of the crust between the time we got it from the baker and brought it to the kitchen.

One of the boys from up the street got a bit too daring one time in hopping onto the footplate at the rear of the cart when the driver wasn't looking; we weren't allowed to do that. He wanted the thrill of a free ride but unfortunately with the jolting of the cart his fingers got caught in the springleaf suspension he was screaming in pain. It took a couple of men with an axe to wedge apart the spring leaves to release his hand. His fingers must have been crushed. The other, horrified youngsters were wary of hitching such rides from then on.

The iceman used to come once per week and, in the summer time when we were about, he would chip off these lovely cold shards for us to chew on, that quickly disappeared in our hot little hands. I'm told a butcher also delivered a couple of times a week but I do not remember him at all.

Once in a while, or it may have been once a year, the potato man would circle the streets and sell sacks of potatoes from his truck. Most people bought from him if their own produce was insufficient. After dad died mum could not keep up with the gardening on her own and used to buy a sackful when she could afford it because it was cheaper and more convenient in this quantity anyway. Potatoes would have been a staple food for many people.

By the mid-fifties there were about twenty different shops and businesses in central St Albans around the railway station and the adjoining main roads. A real little metropolis. I remember dad taking us there one evening when one of the shops had installed a television set in their front window. It was an amazing sight. There was a crowd of budding TV addicts gazing in wonder at this marvel. A Mickey Mouse cartoon was the thing I remember about the night with the weird-looking cartoon gang marching around the globe of the earth.



Father's Work

My father worked mainly as a labourer and process worker in various factories, and at times he was also unemployed. For a while he was with the farm harvester factories in Sunshine; the changing names of HV McKay, Sunshine Harvester, Massey Harris, and Massey Ferguson were a source of work for many men in the area.

For a while he was in Borthwicks, a meat processing plant in Braybrook, where his position was a slaughter labourer and he operated one of the blood byproduct boilers. He took us down there one Christmas for the workers' family Christmas party and showed us his work section. It was probably in 1957.

He brought home what food he could from the job. The workers had a system of identifying the cart of meat cuts that was available for sharing, so perhaps there was surplus produce or offcuts. One time he even brought home a little orphaned lamb in his Gladstone bag. It was such a tiny little creature which grew up chasing after us and tripping us up as we ran. We called it Borek. But of course dad as the ever pragmatic family provider eventually killed it for the meat. Helen told me that we children refused to eat the meat.

Sometimes dad was unemployed but I don't think I was really aware of this. I was only aware that when he was at home he would be working on the house. He would also take on odd jobs for friends and would often be paid in kind rather than money, and sometimes that would be in wine or beer, which mum wasn't too happy about. I think that's how we got the radio. It was an old valve radio with a 78 RPM record player in the top. I think dad liked to listen to the news.

We were allowed to listen to the Dad and Dave program that came on before the news. It was fun listening to the exploits of Dave and Mabel, cousin Bill and the others, because the stories of the characters of Snake Gully seemed exotic to us. Someone gave us some European records and we would listen to the Ukrainian and Polish tunes, not very often, because we didn't have the needles which needed replacing all the time. The radio was some comfort for mum because she found a program that played a variety of European music; I think it was called Continental Half Hour. She would listen to this when she could and I learnt to enjoy the music as well.

The St Albans men would exchange labour amongst themselves, particularly with the house building. Most of these men built their own houses and would help each other with the hard bits that needed extra hands, for example, the wall and roof construction. There would always be a celebration when all the rafters were installed - a shrub or branch of a tree was raised and prominently displayed on top of the roof to proclaim that another house frame had been successfully completed.

For a while Dad was working with a team of bricklayers and described how hard the work was on the hands, especially when they were throwing bricks up to the first floor and he was catching and stacking them. This was before the days of motorised brick escalators.

As well as working in the factory, my father also worked on the house and in the garden.

Dad was clever with his hands, he was a natural builder, a craftsman. The first job he did was to line our room. He did this with masonite which was a common material in use. It was light and probably relatively cheap, although at the time it was also a case of using what was available anyway. The other things he built quickly was the work shed and chicken shed.

The first stage of the extension house was the kitchen and small entrance separating it from the existing bedroom. So now we had a bedroom, a kitchen, and a small middle room with wardrobe space. It all looked so big in comparison to what we'd had that we were all impressed by the extra space.

Then dad started on the rest of the house. He dug all the foundation holes for the stumps, and the growing layer of bearers were also all his own work. Mum would help with the parts that she could, for there was always a spirit line or end of a long plank to be held. I was proud to have achieved my own set task, to saw off the end of one of the thin foundation markers. As a "find him something to keep him occupied and out of the way" task it had certainly worked. I felt good because I was helping dad.

Mum, Helen and I would help with holding up the weatherboards while Dad nailed them in place. We eventually helped to nail down some of the floor boards, which was also a rewarding team job. Dad would use the floor cramps to compress the series of boards until they were a tight fit and we would all hammer in nails along the pencil marks. Teresa was too small to take part. It was fun working together this way.

Dad died before he finished the internal lining of the rooms. My sisters and I would play in the unfinished sections of the house by dodging through the walls and climbing them when mum wasn't looking.

Mother's Hardships



Sometimes when dad was drunk he would get violent. Mum didn't like his drinking, especially when there was not enough money for food and other essentials. I think poverty was a strain on both of them. Sometimes he would threaten her with his cut-throat razor and this frightened us all. Mum would hide the razor until he sobered up again. I remember Helen and I both trying to get between them to protect mum at times. I don't know what they argued about.

Mum was really frightened when dad tried to hang himself. So was I the time I saw him late one night trying to do it off the doorknob of our bedroom. I remember trying to help mum but would have been too small to have been of any real assistance.

Mum must have been very lonely at times and had no one to turn to. She had several nervous breakdowns. The first time I was aware of it was after she tried to commit suicide and ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Dad had to look after us on his own, and that was the first time I remember getting some money to buy lunch at school. We didn't understand where mum had been taken. I was in grade two or three at St Albans East. I don't know how long she was gone for.

Mum's second breakdown was after dad died. I remember the police cars on the street, but I don't recall much else as I wasn't allowed inside to see the body and I blocked off as much as I could of my feelings. I was probably in shock.

Father's Death

In 1958 my father committed suicide at home, an event that led to my mother having her second nervous breakdown and my two sisters and I being put into institutional care.

It was an event that shaped my introverted character and periods of severe depression for most of my teenage life, and even occasionally afterwards. My long-term reaction was probably exacerbated by the previous occasions when I had seen him try to do the same thing unsuccessfully, and witnessing Mum's own attempt at hanging herself in the shed two years earlier had been an incomprehensible, numbing experience. Shock has the effect of numbing the senses, and at times I would retreat to that stage of deep withdrawal that tried to block the outside world from hurting you any further.

I was numb, which eased the pain, but it still hurt a lot when strangers stopped me in the street to ask me about the hanging. I was depressed about it all. I didn't understand why they were bothering me, why they couldn't understand enough to leave me alone.

Mum had a complete breakdown and was again hospitalised. Her distress was immense and not something I could understand. She was hallucinating, talking to people who weren't there, tearing the black trimming off the neighbour's cushions because black was the colour of death and it distressed her. She was constantly crying uncontrollably and inconsolably. At times she would be oblivious of our presence, then she would be concerned beyond all measure for us deep within her distress and despair but unable to bring it under any control. We didn't know what to do and I don't know for how long this went on, I think I was pretty spaced out myself. It was up to the neighbours to call for medical help which was probably done through the police. Mum was placed into a psychiatric institution while Helen and I went into separate institutional care facilities near Mount Royal Hospital. Though we didn't know it, Mum was nearby at the Royal Park Psychiatric Centre. I think Teresa on that occasion was looked after by a Polish family from St Albans.

It's hard as a eight- or ten-year-old to know what to do when your world is falling apart. In St Albans, suicide by hanging was not unknown, though it was not often talked about, and certainly

not by me, as I was deeply traumatised by what the family went through. Being separated from my sisters and mother probably didn't help.

In mid 1959 my older sister and I were finally allowed to come back home to Mum. As uncertain as our future was, the family was the best comfort in the world that I knew of.

Adversity and Achievement

It must have been very hard for mum, in particular after my father's death. She had virtually no help, I don't know how we managed to survive as a family. Retrospectively, I realise there was no income for some time, so mum must have depended on charity and what food she had grown to feed us.

Mum had several nervous breakdowns. This really freaked me out at the time. She must have been overcome by the lack of money for feeding and clothing us all, the lack of support. The children were cared for by neighbours at first, then went into institutions. We had no relatives in Australia and even though the neighbours helped with what they could after dad died they had their own problems and children to feed.

Life was hard for everyone. We had little of anything, but it was less of a consumer society. When Helen went to high school one of the teachers there was a great help because it was with her assistance that we were able to get some regular support from the government.

One thing I have learnt is that survival in itself is an achievement. Reminiscing often produces an element of attractive nostalgia and I suppose like anyone else I sometimes look back in fondness to youth and childhood innocence and that sort of romantic idyll, but these days I'm more prepared to acknowledge the darker side.

My parents accepted the challenge of settling into a strange, usually indifferent country, and they worked hard at it. Mum appeared to be the frailer parent, yet she's the one who survived and raised three children on her own, and that has to be acknowledged as an achievement. I've often said that having a roof over our heads was one of the major successes that was able to keep the family together. Even though we were split up several times mum had something to which she could bring us back together. I doubt that we would have survived intact without it.

Relationship with Father

I don't remember a whole lot about my father, which is a sad comment. I've mentioned him spending time with me in the migrant hostel, and I liked being with him when he was building things because this always impressed me as very clever. However, I mostly remember the things that he did rather than him as an individual personality. I now realise that he was clever at adapting things and improvising, with making-do with the materials and tools that were available to him. He built the house virtually on his own which is a remarkable achievement. He was good at metal work and hand-built our first wood-fired stove which was in the shed. He probably scrounged most of the metal from the tip, but did such a great job of it, lined the fire section with clay, had proper controlled heat flow over and under the oven, and a damper control.

(The local tip was within walking distance of home, where the road to Keilor dipped down into Green Gully. There had been some excavations there for sand extraction, and the holes were now being filled with garbage disposal. It was a good spot for scrounging the usual discarded building materials, metal, etc, and is featured in many people's memory as a useful resource for materials when times were tough.)

I was frightened of my father when he was drunk because I didn't understand this, nor why he was aggressive towards mum. At the better times I sometimes went with him to visit his colleagues. Being with the men when they were sitting around joking and carrying on, smoking,

even having a beer, was an exciting insight into the adult male world that wasn't obvious through home life. I remember going with him one time by train to Sunshine and he stopped at the pub to have a beer and bought me a lemonade. I thought it was wonderful to be included in such a manly activity.

Relationship with Mother

I think I was a very reserved character as a child. I occasionally saw mum in difficult circumstances which I didn't understand and there was nothing I could do. Some earlier happy times together included her telling us fairy tales and making Christmas decorations by gluing up paper chains and streamers. I thought she was very clever making glue from flour and water as Helen and I cut up strips of paper.

When I was older I took her for granted a lot of the time. I knew she loved me but I guess I didn't show the return feelings often enough; on the other hand I wasn't particularly demonstrative to anyone in this respect. It became more difficult in teenage years as more and more I grew away from the Polish language. I know I was fairly inarticulate in this my so-called mother tongue. I was not a very talkative boy even in English. Communicating with mum was hard as I couldn't really speak fluently in Polish and she couldn't understand that much in English.

The closest thing that we did together when I was a teenager was going with her to the English classes. She was enrolled in evening classes which were held in my old primary school. I went with her because it was dark and she wanted some company. That didn't feel too bad because there were other people whose English was of similar standard so I didn't feel embarrassed about the whole exercise.

The text books were put out by the Department of Immigration for the "English for Newcomers to Australia" program. I didn't pay a lot of attention to this literature at the time but years later when I came across a copy of one text book I wondered what it must have sounded like to these adults, who mostly would have had their education interrupted by the war and were now having to struggle, for example, with the differences between the perfect and perfect continuous tenses. Let me quote: "We use the perfect continuous tense when we speak of an action or state that began in the past, is happening when we speak and which will probably continue for some time." Did you know that there are five groups of irregular verbs? Can you name them?

I wouldn't be surprised if it seemed pretty mystifying or irrelevant in the daily lives of these men and women. What I liked about mum doing this class was the sense that she was trying to learn the ways. I thought that was great. It seemed nice and normal.

That was one of the odd things about our settlement experience. The philosophy of migrant settlement at this time has been characterised as assimilationist, that is, that migrants would give up their original language and culture, learn to fit in with Australian ways, and gradually get absorbed, assimilated, into the Australian life. The problem with this in places like St Albans was that all of the people around us were Europeans, so how could they learn to fit in with Australian ways?

Many people tell stories of travelling on the trains and being told that they weren't allowed to speak foreign languages, that they had to speak English. Some older Australians later explained they were worried that these newcomers were complaining about them and their lifestyles.

I was embarrassed by mum's lack of English at times, and occasionally having to interpret for her when often I didn't know the Polish words well enough to do a good job myself. Helen was much better at this. At home we spoke what I later referred to as "kitchen Polish" which was the simple childhood language register that is not particularly extensive or articulate. As a family we didn't progress linguistically much further than that, and I think it was probably because we didn't have the benefit of overhearing adult conversations to guide us.

Mum wasn't a great talker either as far as I remember. As soon as we were at school and talking English with our school mates we spoke English most of the time. Polish was a language we spoke at home with mum. Nowadays I can laugh and admit that I could only speak "broken Polish" whereas mum could only speak "broken English".

Ethnic Identity

I was not conscious of having a strong 'ethnic' identity, though sometimes I felt different to other children at school. I identified more with my mother's origins because we spoke Polish at home and she brought us up in the Catholic faith. We would go to with her to Polish Mass on Sundays. There were some Polish nuns from Essendon who ran the Polish language classes for children in St Albans on Saturdays. These were held in a room at the back of the Catholic church. Helen and I would go there together. We would complete our homework on the kitchen table and mum was happy to see us doing the work; I think it was one of the few educational tasks for which she could offer guidance. I did feel happy doing this. I attended during 1957 and 1958, but obviously would have stopped when we went into the children's home, and I don't think we restarted.

I knew my Polish wasn't 'proper' because when I stayed with the Wyka family they used different words and verb declensions. My younger sister also mentions recognising that other families we visited spoke a slightly different form of Polish than we did at home. Mum spoke village Polish, and I assume that there may have been variations of this. Dad spoke Serbian, so I suppose we spoke a mixture of both languages when at home.

More recently in my professional life, that is in the 1990s through my work at the St Albans Migrant Resource Centre, I have related to my Polish background a lot more than in the previous forty years. This is because I had taken on a support role with the regional Polish community welfare association. I was on the committee of management and was involved in building up the range of support services for the older and the recent immigrants. I assisted with documenting the needs of Polish-Australians. It has been pleasing to see this organisation receive recognition for the work its carried out.

I helped establish the first Polish senior citizens club in St Albans, and now there are three separate clubs in Brimbank, developed of their own initiative.

These are people of my mother's generation and I was pleased to have something to offer them, and that they accepted me as part of their community. I guess the satisfaction in my role here was possibly a belated support role for my mother's generation through the community with which she identified.

Because my father died when I was fairly young his ethnic background had less influence over my identity and community relationships than did my mother's. She had no other connections with the Serbian or Yugoslav communities so they played no part in our family life. During the '90s I had worked with the Serbian community in the region, attempting similar things as with Polish welfare, but the Serbs were much more fragmented. Through my work I also tried to develop and coordinate research into the needs of the elderly and the recent arrivals. Some of this had been successful, but the attempts at establishing a community welfare infrastructure in the region had been much less successful. However, some of the friendly visiting services that exist today are due to my efforts.

Church Influences

The Catholic faith was important for my mother. She took us to church on Sundays, and we went to Catholic school for several years as well as progressing through the usual ceremonial stages such as first holy communion and confirmation. While at Catholic school I was part of the boys choir for a while and we sang at a few church services, but I don't think it lasted very long. One



problem for me was that when a practice or performance was on after hours mum was reluctant to let me go, and I was happy enough not to argue with her about it.

In retrospect I realise that I was disappointed with the church for not really helping us out at our time of need. At least that's the way I rationalise it now. Mum had always been a church goer, the three children attended the local catholic school, and the nuns at the school certainly knew that dad had died and that mum was experiencing a crisis of some sort, but no one from the church seemed to do anything, at least as far as I recall. Granted that one time my sisters were looked after by nuns in a convent somewhere in Albert Park. But when mum was going through her crisis there was no one from the church to talk to her or show some understanding.

One time in the distraction of her grief, and I presume she was turning to God for help, she started to clean up the crucifix memorial near the church, and a nun came and told her off.

Mum was quite distressed again when the parish priest refused to accept dad's coffin into the church because he wasn't Catholic. This really upset her. Much later, when I could think about such issues more clearly for myself, I thought that religion, or at least the church, for mum at this time of crisis in her life, could offer little comfort or support. It seemed unfair.

The only one who did help was the Polish priest, Father Krasocki, who came with us to the burial at Footscray and conducted a little ceremony over the coffin at the cemetery. He was also the one who helped mum get out of Sunbury Psychiatric Hospital at one of the times of her hospitalisation after dad died. Because mum's distress had stabilised she could have been released home under the care of a responsible adult, but of course we didn't have any relatives so there was no one who could accept the responsibility or sign the release. Eventually the Polish priest did sign her out, but I think even then he had been reluctant to do so and had been pressured by Mrs Wyka who wanted to see us kids reunited with mum. But at least he did help.

I drifted away from the church in my mid teenage years. This wasn't a particularly conscious or traumatic decision, it was more like an atrophy of relevance over time. Father Val Noone was an example of a different type of priest; he seemed more attune to the daily lives of us teenage boys, and I remember him in discussions at the high school. He even occasionally played basketball with us, which was unheard of compared to the other priests I had known. He was a good person to talk to, and it's undeniable that some empathetic discussions often help bring your own problems into a more realistic perspective.

Several years later my older sister, Helen, wanted to get married in the Catholic church but the priest refused - it wasn't possible because she was marrying an Orthodox rather than a Catholic man. So the wedding ended up being held in the Orthodox church, which welcomed and blessed the ceremony and the wedding vows were held on their premises. All three of her children were later christened in the Orthodox church, but the kids themselves are not church-goers.

Both my sisters had maintained their religion, but each had chosen other churches in which to practice their faith. Religion itself has been more important to them than the specific church in which it is conducted, if that explanation makes sense. My younger sister and her family are regular church participants within a very caring Christian community.

Education and Employment

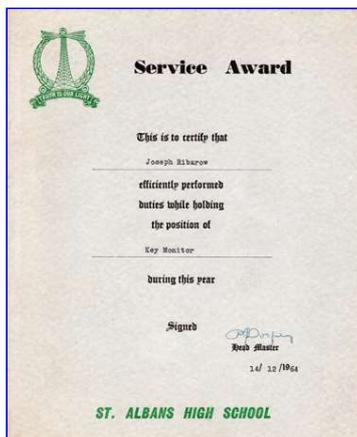
My sister Helen started at St Albans Primary in 1953. The following year I also was taken there to be enrolled, but the school was already full to the brim (according to family lore) and they told Mum to bring me back next year. So, I didn't start school that year.



Grade 1B, 1955. J Ribarow is at the rear, second from the left.

I started school in 1955 when I was nearly seven. This sounds quite old these days, but it wasn't unusual for some of the European families, for example, in Poland before the war it would have been fairly normal for village children to start their schooling about that age; but most likely it was that the local primary school was absolutely full - they were bussing children to other suburbs - so deferring new enrollments was a strategic decision.

I may have learnt a few English words from Helen, but still I found the school system quite strange because I didn't understand the language. When the St Albans East Primary started, I was sent there; that was grade two, probably in 1956. I think the Catholic school extended its buildings in the following year and I was transferred there.

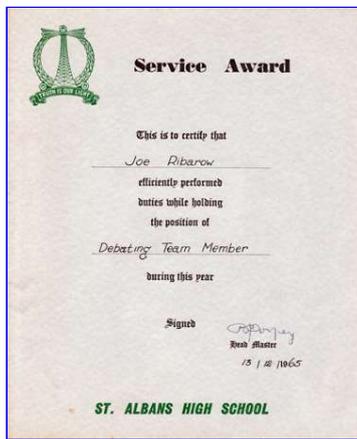


In 1961 I went to the St Albans High School. I enjoyed high school for the friendships, also subjects like mathematics, physics, and English. Some of the teachers were interesting personalities who encouraged you to extend your intellectual horizons.

I wasn't a brilliant student; I passed my matriculation with a second class honour in physics, which I was pleased about, but with a fail in chemistry, which I wasn't particularly good at and didn't particularly enjoy.

My tertiary studies were erratic. In 1967 I was offered a place at Monash University to do Sciences, but decided against that because of the travel and lack of financial support.

I enrolled in a teacher training course through the Melbourne Teachers College, which provided a studentship allowance, but I didn't even survive the first year because my study skills were not good enough. I was very depressed about it and hid my failure from the family for months. My mother and older sister supported me and encouraged me to regain my confidence.



I soon discovered one of the paradoxes of educational achievement - some employers thought I was overqualified, some that I was under-qualified, so neither of these types were interested in me. I never was a confident or assertive teenager and a sequence of these rejections affected me more than they should have. So I learnt the hard way that to get a job you have to tailor your background details to suit the requirements of the position. It may not have been entirely honest, but at least you got a job.



Eventually I reduced my expectations and got a job at Spauldings in Albion and worked there about a year just to earn some money. Working as a labourer and process worker in a rubber factory certainly introduces you to what you don't want to do for the rest of your life, so when I had saved

enough money I bought a motorcycle and started doing a business studies course at the Footscray Institute. I was there a couple of years before I ran out of money. But by then I had improved my study skills and regained my confidence.

I worked in a variety of jobs: the credit office at Myer Melbourne, interviewing for market research companies, petrol pump jockey, dismantling cars at a wrecking yard, mathematics tutor, painting ... you name it. I gradually became involved in voluntary community work, which became my main interest.

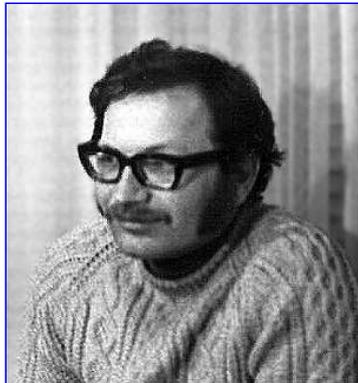
By the early 'seventies it was pretty obvious that many people in the area were pro Labor, and when the Australian Labor Party with Gough Whitlam as its leader was elected to government it was a real morale booster in the west.

St Albans was experiencing a transition. Second generation migrants were progressing through secondary and tertiary studies and taking a direct interest in community participation and social action. The abolition of university fees meant that young people from working class backgrounds could afford to study at university. It was a time of optimism and energy. Women had finally received equal pay, which was a significant milestone in the struggle for gender equality. Young people who had agitated against the war in Vietnam now turned to protest about the French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Children who'd cut their teeth as intermediaries between family and public worlds were learning to make their voices heard.

Political involvement in local and national concerns became an interest, particularly as eighteen-year-olds could now vote. Neighbourhood action was generated around the issues of health, education, child care, poverty, and feminism. Regional agitation developed local consciousness, identity, and social planning: education action, deprived west seminars, regional council for social development, regional commission, and even funding from Canberra. The best thing about it all was that people were working together whether they were first or third generation St Albanites. It was really exciting.

I became involved with several local groups, including the Western Region Council for Social Development. It was an excellent introduction to grass roots community action and social planning. In St Albans, with the strong support of our local councilors, we lobbied to form a new community centre, which received funding through the WRCSD. This led some of us to experiment with the establishment of a Learning Exchange. People involved with this included Danny Vadasz, Lindsay Chatterton, Anne Ferguson, Elaine Cameron, and others I've already

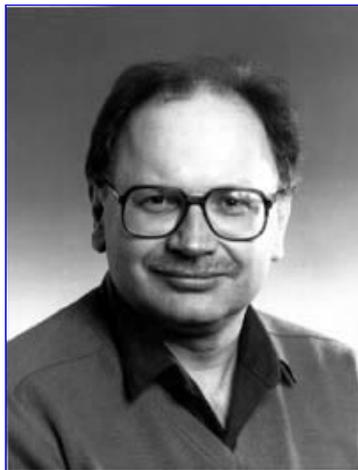
forgotten. Our inspiration was the innovative leadership of John and Kerry Burke from the Malvern Learning Exchange, who even came to St Albans to give a real hands-on demonstration of their publication processes. This type of networking introduced us to new people and new ideas. Unfortunately, the St Albans Learning Exchange did not survive the inevitable outflow of its volunteers into further education and employment careers, but it sparked a number of interests that continued under other auspices.



In 1976 I was accepted into a social work course at Phillip Institute in Bundoora, and completed the course in 1979. I have worked in the community services sector and local government ever since.

My first professional position was as a social worker with Ethnic Care Force in Thomastown; this was sponsored by St Johns Home for Boys and Girls, a part of the Anglican welfare system. Then I worked at Footscray Council as a generalist social worker and counsellor in their Community Services Department.

I had married in 1976 and separated in 1988, when I quit the council job and enrolled in a computer science course at La Trobe University. It was really an opportunity to reflect on what I was going to do for my personal future rather than as a new career aspiration.



I started working at the St Albans MRC late in 1989 as the executive officer and worked there long enough to qualify for long service leave. Some of my work at the MRC was really exciting community development, and some of the things so boringly bureaucratic they would have been rejected from the script of "Yes Minister" as being too outlandish to be believable. Overall, it was a very positive experience because of the interest and support of many individuals working together for the community's benefit.

I had been having a number of health problems during the '90s. I nearly died in 1993 due to complications related to gallstones. I've had hypertension ever since then and this started to get worse in 1999. My doctor was telling me I had to change my life - the usual: don't work so hard, reduce stress, lose weight, start to exercise regularly, change the diet, etc, etc.

I left the MRC in 2000 and did another year at Latrobe University to attain my Masters in Social Work. I enjoyed the year very much. I have been self employed since then, working as a consultant to several organisations. I find the part-time nature of this type of work a much more stress-free existence, though the income is not as regular.





Family and Friends

My mother died of cancer in 1982 at the age of sixty-two. She had continued to live in the house in Henry street until she was too frail, and then moved in with Helen.

My sister Helen had married Basil Vasjuta and they built a home in St Albans, not very far away from my mother's place. Helen died of cancer in 1998, at the age of fifty-two. Her son, Paul, is married with two children and works for the Civil Aviation Authority. Both her daughters are working: Christina as a nurse, and Sonia in business administration.

Helen, my older sister, had been the most stable and supportive family figure in my life as a teenager, especially because she acted as a mediator between Mum and myself whenever needed. It really does make you realise how short life is and that there are some things you should do together while you can - to quote the late Harold Chatterton: "You're dead a long time."



Rear: J Ribarow, C Crook, T Crook, Helena Vasjuta, Christina Vasjuta, Basil Vasjuta
Front: Mrs Aniela Ribarow, Paul Vasjuta.

My younger sister, Teresa, is married to Christopher Crook, with four children and living out Geelong way. Of the two younger girls, Amy, is still at high school, and Maggie at university in Sydney. Penny is a primary school teacher, and James works as a computer graphics artist, tutor, and cartographer.

Other people have been helpful in the family's settlement.

Lorna Cameron was probably the first Australian who took any real interest in our family. This was through high school, though the help she provided had nothing to do with her role at the school. I suppose these days we would say she was a mentor for both Helen and myself. She went out of her way to accept people into her life, and at the same time encouraging them and supporting them to achieve some security and independent survival. She did this and helped many others despite being a widow with five children to support.

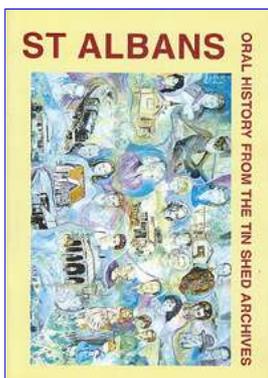
Wladimir Czernik was a Polish-Ukrainian man, the father of Otto Czernik, whom I met through high school, who also offered moral support for the family. My younger sister and I would spend time with the family, particularly with Otto and Helen who were our respective ages. The Czerniks had settled in the area about the same time as we did but we had not known each other earlier because their house was in another part of St Albans. They showed us an example of family stability and continuity, a role-model of family life. They also guided and encouraged us to support mum and each other in our daily lives. They were very caring people.

The Wyka family were supportive of me when they took me into their home one of the times that mum was hospitalised. I was there for some time until mum returned, but they never received any financial assistance and they never complained. I remember that all the children, particularly the older ones, Tony, Barbara, and Richard, seemed to accept it as natural that I was there. The Wykas were very kind and I really appreciate the support they gave us.



Front row: Jutta and Nick Szwed, Cathy Hatjiandreou, Paul Nowatschenko, Kathy Chatterton.
 Back row: Joe Ribarow, Peter and Olga Nowatschenko, Lindsay Chatterton. Mid 1970s.

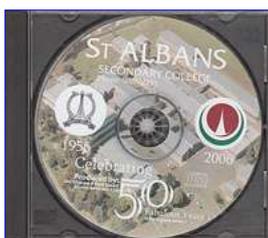
I've kept up a close friendship with a several school friends. Lindsay and Kathy Chatterton and I have played a weekly card for the last 18 years, and we have been in regular contact much longer than that. Peter and Olga Nowatschenko are also long-term friends. I've enjoyed being "Uncle Joe" to the Chatterton and Nowatschenko children as they were growing up; now they are all in university. Otto Czernik and I have progressed from the camaraderie of electronics to house construction and renovations. I've caught up again with Nick and Jutta Szwed, which has been a pleasant experience. (I'm surprised that Nick is still barracking for Collingwood as passionately as he did back in primary school. Oh well, I guess no one is perfect ...) I've enjoyed the class reunions that have started in recent times and hope they continue.



Immigration Consequences

In these days of economic rationalism some people question how successful the immigration program has been to Australia.

I believe you can see the benefits all around you. Not only in St Albans and Brimbank, but the whole western suburbs and many other regions of Melbourne. If it wasn't for immigration this would probably still be a semi-rural area of poor grazing land and marginal agriculture. The immigration-led boom of the 1950s not only supplied the labour for the factories but also the markets for the consumer goods. The multiplier effect of the demand for housing, community facilities and infrastructure, education and so on, are so well known that I don't need to repeat the argument.

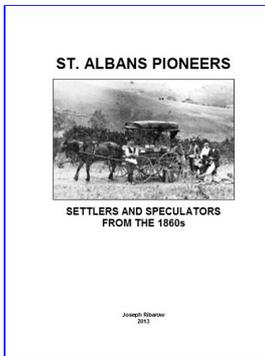
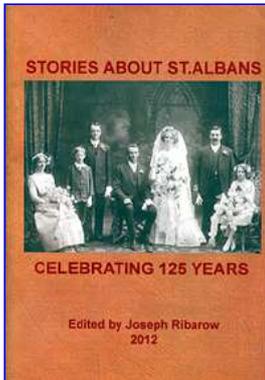
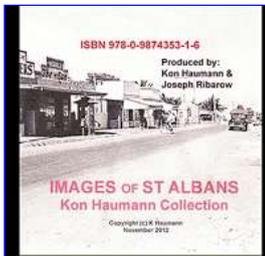


Immigration brings in professionals and skilled workers as well as refugees and displaced persons. The experience all around the world is that lesser skilled immigrants take on the tough and dirty jobs that no one else wants to do, so they perform a necessary function in the labour force.

If you look at my family specifically, then it must be acknowledged that government support had been necessary, in terms of unemployment benefits or sickness benefits, at the times

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when my father was unemployed and then later when my mother was too sick to work. But I've worked since I was fourteen, starting part-time when I was at high school. I have never applied for unemployment benefits, and only once received sickness benefits for about three weeks in the last forty-five years. Mind you I'm not saying there is anything wrong with receiving unemployment benefits if you need to, because that is part of the social contract that is important for people to survive in the modern world.

My sisters have also worked since their teenage years and have successfully raised families who also are working productively and contributing to society through their individual families and personal activities. For many years we have all contributed to society through voluntary community work, which includes church work, youth activities, community welfare, neighbourhood centres, and fund raising for a variety of causes, just to name a few. To me this is all part of the success of the original family settling into and becoming an integral part of mainstream Australian society.

Today we are inextricably part of Australian society, and Australia is inextricably part of our lives. To me that's undeniable success.

Although I no longer live in St Albans I am still involved with it, particularly through the St Albans Community Youth Club as a volunteer and with their committee of management.

In recent years I have been documenting the history of the neighbourhood and its people, because I believe there are many unique and interesting stories amongst the diversity of its residents that deserve to be acknowledged and appreciated. It still has a quirkiness that is refreshing. Last year, as I turned up for a meeting at the Youth Club, a white streak flashed past me on the road. I turned around, and there was a goat running full pelt down the middle of the main road amidst the unconcerned traffic. I thought: where else but St Albans ...



Joseph Ribarow, 2003

Bonegilla photograph by Kon Haumann, others from family archives.
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