

ANNA VENNIK: HOMEMAKER



My family is of Dutch origin and we came from Rotterdam to Australia in 1955 as assisted migrants under the Australian and Netherlands governments' migration agreement. I remember that because it was the year before the Olympic Games were held in Melbourne. My father was Pieter Vennik and my mother was Femmigje Mulder. I was born in 1944 and was ten-and-a-half years old the day we left home, and I am now 68. There were six of us who migrated - as well as Mum and Dad there were my brother Jan who was the oldest of the children, my older sister Cornelia and my younger sister Geesje. My other brother Peter and sister Hilda were born in Australia.

The only person that my father knew in Australia was a man in Perth, so that was not much help when we came to Victoria. The conditions of the supported migration scheme meant that my dad had to work for two years in the jobs that were arranged for him by the government. We first went to Healesville and I think that was because work was available there.



My dad was a cabinetmaker and French polisher and I still have some tables and chairs that he made. Dad had done some training as an electrician and then cabinetmaking, but was told that in Australia he might have to work in a semi-skilled capacity. My sister Corry was quite well educated and had started working in Rotterdam as an apprentice saleswoman, but the only job that was available for her was in the Healesville laundry, which is still there. My Dad and my sister Corrie had already learnt some English but the rest of us didn't. Another condition of the migration scheme was that we had to learn to speak English.

Then we moved to 59 McArthur Avenue at St Albans and my father worked at Sunshine Cabinet Works. My parents tried to start a business on their own but they didn't have the money so that's why he ended up working for Sunshine Cabinet Works. He also built the rest of the house as we lived there.



Peter Vennik building the family home, 1950s.



Vennik family (L-R): Peter, Jan, Corry, Geesje (in front), Pieter, Anna, Femmigje.

When I started at St Albans High School the headmaster was Mr James Barker. Mr and Mrs Barker were an English couple, I believe, and lived near the school on Main Road East. I stayed at High School until I was 14 and then it was off to work in the textile industry where my sister Corrie was employed.

Mum's house in the front room had an organ and a piano. I learnt piano when I was small but my brother was more proficient. My brother died of Chron's disease, which is chronic inflammation of the intestines. He had a short life and died in 1960 at the age of 22. He had an operation and ended up dying of blood poisoning. He played the piano and we've always had a piano or an organ in the family. My father could play and he encouraged us to learn. I still have a piano but I seldom try playing these days as I'm out of practice and the piano is out of tune.



Jan Vennik at piano with (from the left) Anna Vennik, Evelyn Vroom and friends.



Mum and dad met when they were aged 17 year but when I was at that age and keen on a boy my parents thought I was much too young for a boyfriend. I became engaged to Ross Alan Frost in June 1965. He was from Ascot Vale and the only son in his family. We married in the St Albans Presbyterian Church, which was one of the first churches built in St Albans. It is now known as the St Albans Uniting Church.

Evelyn Vroom was a bridesmaid at my wedding. She was living in Leonard Avenue and was a bright girl at school. When she came to St Albans High she didn't speak much English so the teacher paired her with me because I could speak Dutch. Evelyn picked up the language quite quickly and you could see she was going to succeed educationally. She has ended up as a professor of nursing in Queensland

but still has a unit near the railway station. I was bridesmaid for her wedding to Ken Hovenga – they had two girls.



There were other Dutch families who settled locally. Henry van der Kruys drowned while trying to save a child at the St Albans swimming hole and his wife Maria had to bring up eight children on her own. At least the whole community rallied to provide some financial support through their crisis. Another family was burnt out. A Dutch club was formed in St Albans to help people make friends and socialise especially for the wives who were stuck at home on their own during the day. They used to have singalongs and hold Christmas functions.

Martin Los was an optician and ran a small business from his home on the corner of Main Road East and Oberon Ave. Mr Coort was an auto electrician and had his workshop in Main Road West.

Mr Elzinga and his family also migrated from the Netherlands. They moved to the Footscray area before their home was built in St Albans. That was in the early fifties. He was as painter by trade and worked at a paint shop in St Albans. His first name was Fonger and his wife was Sjoukje, so they became known as Fred and Jill. I

believe they had two daughters and a son. They were connected with the Presbyterian church in East Esplanade where I was married.



I remember Mrs Agnes Stevens was a lovely and generous woman who worked very hard as a volunteer. She gave us woollen blankets against the cold and I've heard that she helped many people through her work with the school and the church. Her sons John and Doug were also nice and they were also helping people in the area. They became local businessmen and real estate agents.

I experienced health problems when I was in my twenties. A year before I got married I had a range of symptoms that were diagnosed as depression but persisted so I went for a second opinion. At the age of 22 I was given a week to live because I had a swelling the size of a tennis ball on the brain. At first they thought they couldn't operate and the only thing they could do was radiation treatment and drain it but in the end they decided to operate. I had two operations – one lasted 14 hours and the other 9 hours. Well, I survived but it effected my speech permanently. Nevertheless I got married and had two children.

We bought our first block of land in Sydenham in 1964. We used to go for drives up there to have a look at it and plan what we would do with it ... but there was nothing there! We ended selling it to someone who bought it as an investment. Now there is so much development out there it is hard to believe how quickly the time has gone.



After I finished my high school years I worked for 11 years in office, then married and had two children. I went back to work after 8 years and then worked for 26 years as a disability carer for the Moonee Valley council. I am now retired for some years, so I've had just a very ordinary life!

My mother died in 2001 at the age of 84 and my father in 2005 at the age of 89 and they are both buried at Altona. One of their ambitions had been to go back to visit Holland that had been their home, which they did and really enjoyed it. I still have their photograph that was all posed in the photographer's studio with them dressed in folk costume: Mum in clogs, bonnet and striped skirts sitting at the spinning wheel, and Dad standing beside her in his beanie and long-stemmed pipe holding a cane basket. It's a nice, happy memory of them that I keep in the living room.

These day days I am a widow and retired to a nice unit in Taylors Lakes, which is all built up but it was all empty paddocks when were first went looking for land out in Sydenham. I enjoy catching up with my old school friends and go the school reunions when I can. I still have a piano but it is badly out of tune as I seldom have the time to practice.

I still see Evelyn Vroom, or Evelyn Hovenga as she is these days, whenever she comes down to Melbourne as we have remained friends. She's done rather well for herself academically since her start at the high school. She trained as a nurse and kept doing more and more courses and is now a Professor at the Queensland University. She's been there for years and is an expert on computer information systems for nurses.



Anna Frost nee Vennik, 2012



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Steve Kozlowski, Anna Vennik, Rob, and Evelyn Vroom at the 2006 High School reunion.

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