

Introduction



My family came from Latvija, which is one of the Baltic States and is bordered by Estonia, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania. Latvija was one of the fifteen Russian Republics and in 1991 finally became a free country. Latvija's history is a troubled one and the country has usually been under foreign domination. Its area is only 64,589 square miles and 44 per cent of the country is forested. During Soviet, Padome, times, there were high levels of environmental pollution due to rapid industrialisation, and large amounts of chemicals were used in farming practices. These problems are now being tackled. The population of Latvija is around two million; Riga is the capital city, with a population of about 600,000 people.

Life in Latvia

My dad's name was Zebalds Theofilis Zvaigzne but in Australia he was known as "Ray". Mum's name was Lidija. They were IRO refugees and fled to Germany before migrating to Australia in 1951. My sister and I were born in Germany: Velga in 1946 and I in 1948.

My mother was a secretary at a firm VEF (Valsts Elektrotehniska Fabrika - State Electrotechnical Factory). It was there she met my father. Before WW2 VEF manufactured a large variety of goods, including the Minox, which was the world's smallest camera. This is why my father didn't get called up for the war because his work was important to the war effort and he was exempt from the call up. My father used to do the costings for the projects. I have a lovely love letter from him to her and mum kept it all her life because it was still amongst her papers at the bottom of the cupboard after she moved into the Latvian village.

The VEF building is still there as we went past it on one of our trips to Latvia. My father did the costings there and he was so well organized. When he started building our house in St Albans he was meticulous about documenting all the purchases and permits for the construction, kept all the receipts and noted the cost of all the materials and permits for the construction. He was always very efficient. He was also a good chess player.



Horse and cart transport, Latvia, 1930s.

My parents met in Riga, which is the capital of Latvia. Mum lived in Riga nearly all the time she was in Latvia. She was born in Mogilev, which is now in Belarus. Dad always said she was born in Russia, but at that time Belarus was part of Russia. Her father worked for the railway, he was a train driver and that's where he met and married his wife and when mum was 6 months old the family went to Latvia. In 1918 there was fighting between the White and the Red armies and mum's parents

went to Latvia to escape the conflict. So mum was from Riga and dad was from Lizums which is about 330 kilometres to Riga to study. He grew up on a farm and it was a hard, country life. Because he was the youngest son they sent him to Riga to study. He would have liked to go to university but the war got in the way. He always did very well at school.

Marriage



They married in 1942 during the war and we have a nice picture of them sitting together at the time in a park in Riga. Mum was one of four kids and so was my dad. Two of his brothers were killed in the war: Evalds just disappeared, Bertolds was conscripted by the Russians and died, probably in Kurzeme, Latvija, but his body was never found. Only in the 1990s, after the Russians left, was a memorial allowed to be set up in memory of fallen soldiers. His other brother, Arnolds, migrated to Australia, but did not like the heat in Perth, so he

eventually settled Canada.

Leaving Latvia

The thing that was hardest for mum was leaving her family. For dad it was leaving Latvija. The beautiful green, treed countryside. He could never love the dry countryside he found himself in; he wanted the green of Europe. As well as this, he did not have much family left. As mentioned above, two of his brothers died during the war, his other brother was in Canada, his mother died probably in the late '40s or early '50s, and his father in 1958. So he had no family left. He was a fervent anti-Communist, as many of our parents were, after seeing at first sight what the Soviets could do.



Zebalds Zvaigzne (second from right) and colleagues, Latvia, 1936.

Settling in St Albans

As IRO refugees we were first taken to the Bonegilla reception centre. We were there for a little while and might have been at Red Cliffs for a while and then ended up at Somers Camp at Westernport Bay. Dad was working on the railways and was around Sunshine a lot and also Newport. That's when he bought the land at St Albans and started building. He must have bought the land from the Kings because their house was next door and we shared a slight boundary. We would walk over to their place to get cream – we were just tiny kids but we'd walk over with a little jar to their back door and get cream from “old” Mrs King. We were in Kodre Street and right near the King's house. That might have been about 1951.

When we first came to St Albans we were living in a little shed at the back of the block that we later used as the laundry and bathroom. Then my dad started working on the permanent house and drew



up the house plans by himself; he was a clever man. We have a photo of him erecting the building frame. After he built a half house he built on again. He did nearly all the work himself but there were times when a working bee was organized with some of the other Latvians. This was especially so with putting up wall frames and the roof because that was a difficult job for one man. Mum would do a lot of cooking and the men would come for the day to finish off the framing. Dad could do just about anything and perhaps that was because of growing up on the farm where you had to be self sufficient. He could build and he knew a little bit about electricity and plumbing. I think it was definitely the farming background.



"Ray" Zvaigzne (left) and work colleagues. Newport rail yards.

Dad used weatherboard for the outside of the house, which was typical for most of the houses that were built locally in the fifties. Mum clad the building after dad died because she couldn't manage the repainting and external maintenance, but now the people who are living there have pulled the cladding off and are renovating the exterior because there are nice weatherboards underneath.

Early memories of St Albans. I remember walking to school and there being huge smelly gutters with ice on them. The roads were unmade, which was a huge thing, and I also remember playing in the streets. Another thing we did a lot was roam the paddocks – our road was unmade, not many houses, there was a creek that flooded occasionally in winter. We used to walk (my sister, Yvonne Correlje and her sister Karen, and myself) even past St Albans West School. There were some paddocks, surrounded by dry stone walls. I have a beautiful memory of wheat harvesting one summer. They used a team of about four horses, probably Clydesdales. It was such a magnificent sight. Those open paddocks have been filled with houses for a long time now.

Early School Days

I was a very shy child, especially at primary school, and always hating it when my name came up because it was a difficult name to pronounce for the Australian people; but you get more confident as you grow older. We mostly spoke Latvian at home but mum and dad were pretty sensible and knew we had to learn English to get ahead at school. I think I could read some English before I went to school - I probably picked some up from my sister as she was ahead of me. We all loved reading at home so that was a great encouragement.



I loved horses. I had a horse for many years and that's why we moved to St Andrews to have bit of country space for a horse and we also love the environment. My daughter is also interested in horses and still has two. She joined a pony club when she was five and that was a constant activity until she was about twenty, so we spent a lot of time together around horses, especially with me towing horsefloats around the countryside. Growing up I remember going to McTaggart's riding school. That was probably just after primary school and I used to do that with Yvonne Correlje. McTaggart's used to ride up from Footscray of an early Saturday morning and they would bring up a whole lot of horses for the weekend and camp them out at Kings Road. Yvonne and I would go horse riding around the paddocks in Stevensville – at that time it was just starting to be built up so there was still some open space. We'd have a bit of a ride around the paddocks and go home. I never had my own horse as they were too expensive to keep. And my father always said having

come from a country background that with having just a house block there was no place for horse – it was too much work.



McTaggart's Riding School, Main Road West, St Albans.

At primary school I remember Mr Goble giving the boys a strap. They were terrible in those days with their ideas of discipline. I cried the first day I went to school and they had to call my sister to comfort me. I was very friendly with Yvonne at primary school and she was my best friend. We made up lots of stories and very imaginative games. Yvonne was in Ruth Street and we'd walk to school and walk back again. No one drove in those days. If you wanted to go somewhere you walked; your parents never took you anywhere you had to get there yourself. I remember walking along all those unmade roads.

St Albans High School



Dace Zvaigzne, front row second from left, Form 1D, 1961.

I started at the high school in 1961 and stayed there until form 5 in 1965. I did the commercial stream and never liked maths. I remember Mr Pavlov as the maths teacher and he scared me a bit. I was never good at maths and wasn't interested in doing it. Miss Tempest taught us economics in form 5. Mrs Pavlova did the sewing. Mr Scarff and Miss Butler were just fantastic. My sister and I really liked Shakespeare and the teachers made it very interesting. I have great deal of admiration for the way they taught. They took us to see plays and got us to read the play out loud. We went to see Macbeth and were supposed to meet the actors afterwards but one of them was injured during the sword fight so we couldn't meet them after all. That was at a theatre in South Melbourne.

I played hockey and really enjoyed playing; in fact I was captain of the hockey team one year. That was the only bit of sport I was good at. I was probably in year 4 or 5. My sister played hockey as well so I had a bit of a head start. We used to play for Footscray in the end. We'd take a train and walk to the ground. Later one or two of the team got a car so we could get a lift and later still I got a car. That continued for few years but stopped when I went to uni. I thought I would join the Monash team but it wasn't the same and I dropped out of hockey.

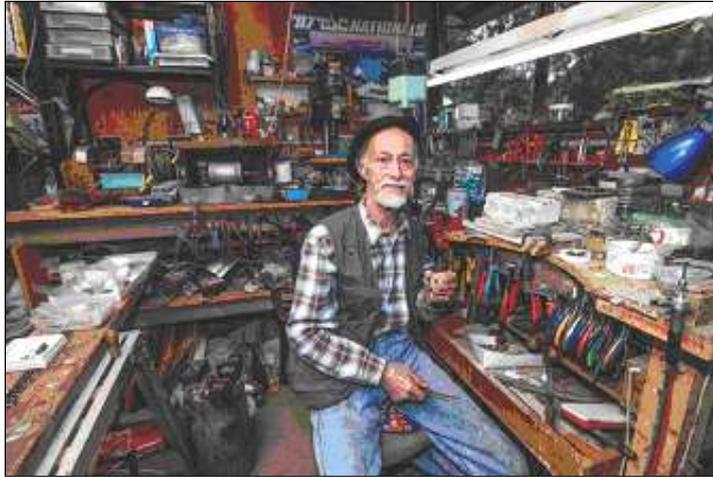
After I finished form 5 at the high school I went to work for a solicitor in the city. I was a good student but my parents didn't have very much and so I went to work. I got a job with a solicitor in town doing clerical work and it was probably one of the most interesting jobs I had. You would go to the courts and deliver things and search titles, which you don't have to do now because it's all online but at that time it was all done by hand in the titles office. I continued in the job until I went to uni and was studying part time. I did my matriculation at University High School part time because it was close to where I was working. Then I got a university scholarship which was a great help, not that the tuition fees were as expensive as they are now. I realized that if I worked for another year I would be eligible for a living allowance, so I did that and got into Monash where I studied economics and politics from 1969 to 1971. After that I did librarianship at RMIT in 1972 and started working at the old Caulfield Institute as my first job as a librarian. I started in the cataloging department and that was fairly routine but interesting nonetheless. Thinking back, the work with the solicitors was quite interesting even though it wasn't well paid.

Travelling Overseas

After Caulfield I went travelling overseas. My sister married quite young in 1965 and she and her husband went to South Africa and then they were based in Switzerland; they were overseas a long time. I wanted to visit her because she'd just had a baby who's now forty. I lived and worked in London for six months and then did one of those overland trips back home as you could do: through Europe, Greece, Turkey, Iran Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and eventually arrived home. I was very lucky because a few years later there were all the problems with Afghanistan and Russia. You've never been able to travel that easily there since, so I was lucky I did it then. I was travelling with a group so it was relatively safe; it was easier with a group. Even then you had to be a bit careful in some of the isolated places. I was careful to be well covered and then people would respect you. You have to respect other cultures.

Marriage

I came back in 1974 and worked in Coburg State college and after that at the medical library at Repatriation General Hospital. After that I married Tony Fitton. We met at Coburg State College where I was working and he was a mature age student. We married in 1977 and we have four children: three sons Russell, Neville and David, and one daughter, Maya. Now I have grandchildren and they are a real delight. Tony was a teacher for most of his life but was always interested in jewellery. He now makes jewellery and he is part of the Open Studios in the Shire of Nillumbik. He's fascinated by old Celtic symbols and is always on the web getting new ideas for his jewellery designs.



When we went to Paris a few years ago we went to all the museums and saw many Celtic artifacts, which were really interesting. Paris is such an amazing centre for art. We had an apartment in Paris for a month so it was a wonderful visit and we had time to see more than the usual tourist experience.

We've lived in St Andrews since 1977 and love living here, but one of the obvious disadvantages is the reliance on cars for transport. When the children were young we had to drive them around. Apart

from that we loved it. We have great neighbours even though some of them are not close geographically speaking.



My sister Velga left the high school after year 5 and worked for a firm of solicitors. In fact she worked in the same firm that I did. She married Brian in 1965 when she was only 19. He was a metallurgist and got a job in Switzerland, so they went overseas and traveled almost everywhere. They had a wonderful life in Europe. After 25 years they came back to Australia in about 1980. They lived in Sydney for a while and then separated. She is an arts teacher. She always wanted to be a teacher and must have gone in as a mature age student in fine arts, which is something she always loved. She taught in the secondary school system but it took her a long time to get a job because there was an oversupply of teachers and it took her so long to get an appointment. She worked as sales rep for an arts supplies business and eventually started getting a few teaching jobs. She now teaches mature age students arts and fine arts at RMIT to year twelve students. She also paints. She is

now separated and has two children: Brett and Lee. Velga and I are going to do the Trans-Siberian Railway trip together.

It was rather a lonely life for my mother and she did not have many friends. Her English was not very good in the early days but it improved when she eventually began to work. She was very much a family person and her life very much revolved around her kids and her husband. The family always came first. She wasn't very outgoing and that was very hard. I think the happiest time of her life was when I had my children and she was the most amazing grandmother – absolutely devoted and helpful. She was a widow by then and living at Hurstbridge. She was absolutely delighted in her grandchildren and very close to my older son Russell: she adored him. Velga had children but they were overseas so they were older when they came back.

Dad died of cancer in 1973 and mum lived till 2008. Dad started getting sick a long time ago but he never told us, and in those days you didn't tell people. It wasn't until his condition got very bad that we found out. Mum was part of the Latvian Evangelical/Lutheran congregation which had a church first in East Melbourne and then in Surrey Hills, which was a bit of trip. A lot of things were a fair way away from us and dad never drove. We went sometimes to plays and events at Latvian House, which was at Elwood. You had to take a train and a tram. And if you had something at night it wasn't easy getting back home and having to walk in the dark at night. None of us were very big on organizations; we kept to ourselves a bit. It was a hard life even though there was always food on the table and we had clothes, but there was never any money left over and if we went to the pictures it was always something special.



One thing I do remember is because dad was with the railways he would get a free ticket on his holidays, so we went on lots and lots of trips on his holidays. We'd go to the beach, and I remember going to Daylesford though we had to pay for the electric train portion of the journey. We'd go the Healesville which was a very popular spot. There was a train that went there and we walked to the sanctuary. I can't remember anything about the sanctuary as I was just a little girl but I remember that walk because for me it was so far and

I probably complained bitterly. We liked Williamstown and Sandringham beaches. We didn't go to Altona so much but Williamstown had the nice park. We also liked St Kilda. Dad

didn't like the sun so much so mum would watch us girls playing in the water and he would sit down on the grass in the shade and read and wait for us to come back. We had some friends at Warbuton with about 180 acres of bush and we'd visit them. They were the Mezaks and dad knew them way back in Latvia and I think we were probably in Germany together and probably also at Somers camp. It was a long-standing friendship on dad's side. There was a real old shack on the property and we'd go up there for New Years sometimes. It was really nice. There was a taxi there but we would often walk to East Warbuton and it was a long walk, about an hour and a half.

Extra Curricula Activities

Mum was very much a home body but used to work for Tom Piper in Port Melbourne where there is now some very expensive housing. She used to work there on the holidays when they had the fruit canning. It was seasonal work but in the end they asked her to stay on. It must have been funny for her in one sense because there were a lot of Yugoslav women working there and they would talk amongst themselves but mum could understand because she also knew some Russian which is another of the Slavic tongues. It amused her sometimes because they assumed she understood only Latvian. The work must have been boring but I think she liked getting out of the house and meeting people, because by that time we were out doing our own thing. She lived a pretty traditional housewife role. She never went back to Latvia: she could have gone after the Russians left but she didn't. Whether it was too emotional to go back ... I don't know why she didn't. When dad died I read all her letters and her sister had written "Why don't you come back?" Once my children came she would not even think of leaving because they meant so much to her. She was very traditional - dad was always the head of the household and that was the way it was. He was a kind man and very quiet, but you wouldn't want to cross him. He was always the head of the house.



Dace, Margaret, Barbara at class reunion, 2014.

I kept in contact with Yvonne Correlje for a while when she was in Mont Morency and she was still interested in horses so we went riding a couple of times. I have not seen a lot of her recently; she lives in Tasmania now. I sometimes get emails from Sofie Dziedzic and Boronia Mazurek who is in

Queensland. Keeping up with some old friends through emails is at least manageable. After the high school's 50th anniversary, my sister met Carol Dusting, Ingrid Whitten and Leslie Grenfell and they were such good friends and they get together every few months, a few times a year.

Since retiring I've devoted more time to family history and creative writing. I joined the Diamond Valley Writing Group and some of my poetry is included in their publication, there was another book by the Birrarrung Poets, and recently (2011) I've published a chapbook. With regard to family history, I've been going through my mother's documents and translating the letters that she and dad received from my aunt and uncle. I've also joined the twitchers and written articles for Yarra Valley Birdlife in their publication Lyrebird Tales; these have included my sightings of birdlife in Latvia and urban birding in Paris, which I observed while travelling overseas.

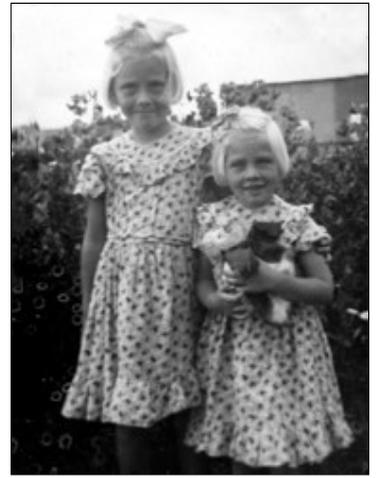


Dace Fitton nee Zvaigzne, 2015.

Turning over stones

Some stones are
Smooth and time-worn,
Some are rough and
Chafe my skin.
There are hidden crevices,
And secrets.
Other stones are too heavy
To bear.







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Extract from "Turning Over Stones" poem from Sequenza: sequence poems by the Birrarung Poets, 2012.
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