



## CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE

Abalinx - 23 July 2016 - Peter Adamis

Today some 62 years ago a family of four stepped of the ship *Cyrenia* in Fremantle west Australia. It was on a Friday the 23 July 1954. I am grateful that all the family is well and both my parents are still alive and with us this day.

The family had been on the good ship *Cyrenia* for approximately four weeks, having left the Port of Piraeus, Greece with their destination being Melbourne, they had passed through the Red sea, stopped at Aden and then again at Bombay.

The *Cyrenia* was built in 1911 in Govan as the *Maunganui* for the Union SS Co. of New Zealand. She served through both wars and sailed over 2 million miles with the Union SS Co. *Maunganui* was sold for HML service in 1947, and was used for emigrant services from Italy and Greece to Melbourne as the *Cyrenia*. By 1952, she was being laid up for much of the year, with summer use only in the Mediterranean. The *Cyrenia* was eventually broken up in 1957. [Visit source for other migrants ships.](#)

Although the *Cyrenia* was seaworthy, being a third class passenger was not exactly something to be happy about and the conditions were harsh indeed. The voyage was not a good for the mother and she became ill when the ship struck some very violent storms on their way to Australia. I remember a large fish landing on the deck and the ship's crew trying to catch it. I remember the waves crashing over the sides of the rails and my father holding onto me as we watched from the cabin doors. I remember stopping off at either Aden or Bombay and watching the locals in their dugouts jumping to the pristine waters and collecting the coins that were being thrown overboard. Another time was when I locked all the communal toilet doors from the inside causing a panic amongst the passengers. Hmmm, it appears that I was a larrikin from a young age.

We had not known that at the times my mother was approximately six weeks pregnant with my twin brother Kon and Sister Helen and that probably explains why she was vomiting and feeling under the weather. The doctors must have thought that she suffered from sea sickness but eventually decided that her condition was not attributed to the oceans storms or to the rolling of the ship. It was decided that on medical grounds that the whole family would disembark at Fremantle as it was the first port of call when arriving in Australia and that the ship would continue on its ocean trek towards its eventful destination at Melbourne.

According to my parents they are of the belief that apart from the stormy weather their arrival in Freemantle was a pleasant one and the weather was warm and welcoming. The ship's crew had radioed for an ambulance to be at the post so that they could take my mother who was now in considerable pain directly to the hospital to be checked and monitored by the hospital staff. In the meantime, my father, Brother Phillip and I were taken by bus to Northam migrant holding camp located on the outskirts of the City of Perth. The Northam camp was a large sprawling ex-Army military camp used during WW2.

The camp like many other military camps throughout most Australian cities. Were converted into migrant holding camps with the basic amenities available, like running water, toilets, communal messes and separate housing for families with the men and women being separated. While we remained at the Northam holding migrant camp we would visit our mother in hospital and did so until she was well enough to be reunited with us. Lucky for all of us that mother only stayed in the hospital for about a week and we as a family stayed at the Northam Migrant holding camp for approximately one month. Those of whom we had spent some weeks together on the ship had been moved out and relocated according to what jobs were available at the time.

Some 27 years later I would revisit the same camp as a member of the Australian Regular Army when I was posted to the 11 Independent Rifle company The Royal West Australian Regiment. In 1982, I wandered around and identifying from the foundations left on the ground the remnants of the many buildings that had been removed. I also found a number grape vines growing in their splendour and asked the caretaker how long they had been there. He said that the grape vines were as a result of the vines being brought over by migrants from Europe and struck them into the ground to grow.

Back in the month of August 1954 the family was relocated to Manjimup, South West of Perth where my father worked on the railways. The gang of me were required to lay down sleepers in preparation for the iron rail and the train that was to eventually run on them. They worked in all sorts of terrain and under all types of weather. At one stage my father fell into the river while walking on the sleepers above on the rail road line. He unfortunately gashed his leg badly on what was a piece of driftwood that splintered off a tree. The wound needed stitches and dressing at a nearby makeshift first aid station and then he returned to work. There were no sick days then and I you did not work you did not get paid.

While our father was working on the railway line my mother brother and I lived with other migrant families near the town of Manjimup near the Post office where a migrant camp made of Army marque tents had been erected and where washing clothes, showering and toilets were on a communal basis. The food could be cooked if you had your own little stove within the confines of the tent or you used the community kitchens. Life was tough for migrants and they kept to themselves preferring the company of their own rather than mixing it with the locals. On reflection one could say that it was probably out of fear of the unknown and not knowing the language was also a drawback for many.

After a period of three months, I came down with pneumonia which necessitated the home family being relocated to Perth and me being hospitalised. My mother by this time was at least four months with the twins and with me being ill in hospital life was easy for my parents. When I came out, Mum and dad found a hotel where accommodation was reasonable and he was able to find some part time work. The next day however after my father had gone to work, he came to find that we had been thrown out of the street by the hotel owner because the rent had not been paid for another day. Dad paid the rent and we managed to remain in the hotel until suitable accommodation was found.

The accommodation that was promised was one bedroom with a bed and mattress, but turned out to be unfurnished at all. The first few nights that we stayed in the room was on the hard wooden floor with blankets that had been brought over from Greece and was part of my mother's dowry. Imagine a family of four sleeping on the hard timber floor, one being a pregnant mother aged 24, two young blokes aged three and four and the father aged 26. I know from memory that my father had brought with him his Greek Army Military great coat and covered all of us while we slept. We did not stay long in such accommodation that's for sure.

My father approached the local Australians of Greek heritage who had been in the city for many years and asked for assistance. They pointed him to the local church which happened to be close by and said that the local community may be of assistance. Without further ado, my father approached the parish priest and elders and was given a room across the street from the church. The home is still there and it belongs to the church and the local Australian Hellenic community. My memory of that home is that it was a two story building with a large indoor staircase and a small garden in the front.

My father had found work in a nail factory and later employment work as a waiter with the local Hellenic club which is still there. We made many friends, many of who have since passed on and remained until the brother and sister were born the following year. Mother and father had scrimped and saved up some money for a train journey to their original destination which was Melbourne. During the short period that we were there I remember running across the street to attend the church ceremonies being held there. My favourite days were when people were getting married and upon leaving the church, money was always thrown over the newlyweds as a sign of good fortune. My brother and I would dive between the wedding guests and gleefully scoop up as many of the penny coins we could gather. If we were lucky we could pick up a bob or two or sixpence.

In March 1955, the twins were born in the Perth hospital and on their arrival home, much merriment and parties were made in mother's honour and friends that we had made often dropped by. In fact if I remember correctly my parent's best friend Andoni Papazafiroipolos, who had come on the same ship as ourselves accompanied the family to Melbourne and was of great support to the family. Andoni eventually got married, moved to Alice Springs, raised a family and passed away when they moved back to Perth. My parents were devastated when they heard the news.

In the month of August of 1955, final preparations were made and the family boarded the train to Melbourne. All that I can remember is the movement of the train, running up and down corridors making a nuisance of myself and generally trying to keep myself busy. It was a long journey with a number of stops on the way and although I had few memories, I am sure that going over the Nullarbor Plain must have been a sight to remember. We stopped off at Adelaide and the last stop being Spenser Street station in Melbourne, Victoria. I would make the same journey by car some 27 years later with my wife, four sons, but that's another story.

As always, my apologies for the poor grammar, punctuation and savagery of the Aussie English language. All that I can say is that it is great to be alive and one does not give up in the face of adversity.



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