

Things Past

Newsletter 51

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Mount Evelyn History Group Inc

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Their first Australian home

Among the thousands of Europeans who made new lives in Australia after World War II were the Skarbek-Kruszewskis: Zygmunt, Maria, sons Jurek and Roman, and 'Bama', Zygmunt's mother. This was the Polish family who rented rooms at 'Westhill' from John and Lorna Jermyn in the early 1950s. Mt Evelyn was their first real home in Australia after the Bonegilla and Maribyrnong Migrant Hostels. Below are some extracts from *Maria's Memoirs* (written 1978).

We liked our future landlords, Mr & Mrs Jermyn, and from the first moment we fell in love with their property. It was situated in a very large garden with many trees, mostly camellias, but there were also fruit trees and even fir trees and it was surrounded by green grass. The house was on top of a hillock and as the windows reached right to the floor, we had a view from each one. The rent was six pounds which we could just afford as we were still paying off our debts to the hostel for the time when Zygmunt was earning alone. At last we had our home. We had our own toilet which we did not have to share with anyone, our own bath which looked like a Roman bath as it was so big and deep; it even had steps to get into it, and above it was a shower.



Above, Jurek (George) Skarbek at Mount Evelyn Primary School, 1951.



Above, the Skarbek family in 1953. From left, Roman, Maria, Jurek and Zygmunt.

Zygmunt and Maria both found jobs but the daily commute was exhausting.

Our life now settled into a routine. Zygmunt and I got up before 5:00am and had a quick breakfast. He caught the first bus at 5:30. I started to pre-cook the evening meal and left before 7:00am to be on time at 9:00am in Queen Street. It was dark when we got up and dark when we got home after 7pm especially during the winter months when we were working back. I even lost my way home from the bus, although it was not far but there were so many trees. On getting home I finished cooking the evening meal, bathed the boys, did some urgent darning or ironing and was ready to drop dead by midnight.

On weekends we firstly played with the boys, asked about the school and their friends, then we three went to light the copper and started washing. The copper was an ancient thing. It was so deep that Roman could stand in it and only the top of his head would show. The afternoon was left for the boys and we would walk along the channel or, when the season was right, we picked mushrooms.

Mushrooms! Lorna, our landlady, was horrified when she saw us gathering what she called

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toadstools and which I called 'Rydzy'. She urged us not to eat them as she was certain that they were poisonous. When we had our first meal Lorna watched us, sitting near the telephone with the numbers of emergency services and doctor before her. When, after eating the mushrooms, we still did not show any symptoms of poisoning, she came every few minutes to check up on us. The next weekend when we again had 'Rydzy' she tried some and even liked them. Until now, I still do not know what these mushrooms are called in Australia; their botanic name is 'Lacterius Deliciosus'. ['Saffron Milk Caps' – Ed.]

Zygmunt found a job at Eildon but initially the accommodation was for single men only. The rest of the family remained at 'Westhill' but their stay came to an abrupt end.

Early one morning I thought that I was imagining things when I heard someone shouting 'Fire'. The shout was repeated and there was banging on doors. The house was on fire. Bama and I somehow managed to bring our things out, including the furniture. We were lucky that the windows reached right to the floor. It was an old timber house and burned quickly. I never saw a house go up in flames so easily.

There we were, about a dozen people, sitting on the front lawn – surrounded by our possessions. We were all stunned, looking at the cinders. Within a very short time people from the neighbourhood came – helping us all, making cups of tea, trying to comfort us; even us, the newcomers. There were complete strangers who brought food and clothing for us, who offered to take us in for the time being. Us – the 'Bloody



Residents of 'Westhill' sort through belongings saved from the fire. Photo History Group collection.

New Australians' – us, with our bad English, with our odd habits, with our strange food.

I will never forget the spontaneous goodwill and compassion the Australians showed us all, including the newcomers to their country. From that day on my love for them never wavered. They might be rude and abusive sometimes, but when they saw people in need, they went out of their way to bring help, irrespective of language, creed or otherwise.

Some officials organized that the guest house be re-opened and we could stay there without paying, someone organized the wood for the stove, someone organized the food, someone took care of our possessions, someone brought us clothing. We all went there. I rang Zygmunt and told him about the fire. He promised to come by the first available bus.

The Skarbek family left Mt Evelyn after the fire and moved to Eildon.

Photos & permission from George Skarbek

Zygmunt recounted his wartime experiences in *Bellum Vobiscum* ('War be with you'). He started writing the book after the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, so that his sons and their generation could understand what war was like. Maria translated it into English in the 1960s. Both accounts have been published online by Skarbek Consulting Pty Ltd.

<http://www.mariasmemoirs.com/MariaMemoirs-A4.pdf> & www.bellumvobiscum.com

The homecoming

Norm Gordon concludes the story of his father Doug's escape from Java on the patched-up ship (*Things Past* 50).

Dad had a picture of himself with about 6 other blokes on a beach in Singapore before they were invaded. He was the only one that escaped the clutches of the Japanese.

The boat that Dad escaped from Malaysia on had been bombed & was very holey. It was the only boat that was left. They patched the holes with whatever was available (lumps of concrete) but it wasn't a very seaworthy boat. A Japanese plane flew over them but didn't do anything to them. They were spotted by the US navy heading south & told to turn around as they had missed Australia altogether.

When they landed in Fremantle they boarded the train east across the Nullarbor. My Mum was very worried about Dad as there had been no communication with him in months.

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Donation of the First Aid Post

In Newsletter 36, we quoted an extract from Tom Yates' *What a Journey* on the history of Mt Evelyn's First Aid Post (the Blanche Mitchell Competition Ground, where Railway First Aid competitions were held). Yates' account was slightly different from the version in *Tracks to Trails*. Sue Thompson later sent us a newspaper clipping that gives Blanche Mitchell's own account (*Lilydale Express* 7/12/1951).

Mr and Mrs Mitchell were warmly welcomed at the last State championships. Mrs Mitchell told "News Letter" (the Victorian Railways journal) that the skilful first aid given by the conductor of a New South Wales train to her sister, Mrs Maud Lobb, was indirectly responsible for her gift of the Mt Evelyn property to the Victorian Railways.

Travelling by train with her five children on a hot day, Mrs Lobb bought some soft drinks at Albury. The train had just started when one of the bottles broke in a string bag and severed a vein in her leg. The wound bled profusely and the conductor was summoned. Being a good first aid man, he applied a ligature to the leg and stopped the bleeding until Mrs Lobb was able to get medical attention.

'I shudder to think what would have happened to my sister had not the conductor been a first-aid', said Mrs Mitchell. 'I was reminded of the incident when, some time later, I saw V.R. ambulance men competing at the Lilydale recreation ground. They were struggling on to the ground with their arms laden with branches, cut some distance away, for the best organised stretcher event. It was then I decided I would pay my tribute to the humanitarian work done by these splendid men, by giving them land in a better setting.'

In addition to the land, Blanche Mitchell also donated a trophy in her name for a special individual event.

Rebekah Blackwolf-Mitchell and Roy Mitchell sent us a 1989 issue of the MET newsletter *Metlines*. The newsletter reports one of the last competitions held at the First Aid Post. There are photos of 'patients' gruesomely made up to simulate their supposed injuries. The Electrical Engineers No. 2 team won the trophy that year for the seventh time in a row. The article praised Roy and a colleague for saving the life of a fellow worker by performing CPR. They proved the value of the training.



Above, the competition sheds in bushland at the First Aid Post, 2007. Photo Kevin Phillips.

We also received an email from Neil Charty, former Chief Ambulance Officer, who is writing a history of the Victorian Railways First Aid Organisation. Neil was very appreciative of the information we were able to send him.

'It takes me back to when I was running the competitions at Mt Evelyn. I have not been back since my Ambulance Officers and myself were made redundant I have had contact with a few of my staff and each time they ask me have I been back to Mt Evelyn, my reply is no because I could not stand seeing all that beauty destroyed On the site are beautiful Australian Orchids.'

The terms of the Mitchells' donation precluded the sale of the land after competitions ceased in 1992. Neil was pleased to learn that the site has been kept as a bushland reserve and now he intends to come back for a visit.

'The last Chief Ambulance Officer will be going back to Mt Evelyn to do nothing else but to regain some very happy times in my life and to smell that beautiful air.'

After reading a recent news item in which station staff reportedly failed to assist in an emergency (*The Age*, 14/4/2012), Neil thought of offering his services to train the current crop of transport workers in First Aid. 'They said they did not need the level of training that we provided, looks like they at least need the basic training.'

Neil also wrote, 'Thank you for taking the time to care about the history of our little competition site. It was given to our First Aid members by a person that had a lot of respect for what we did.'

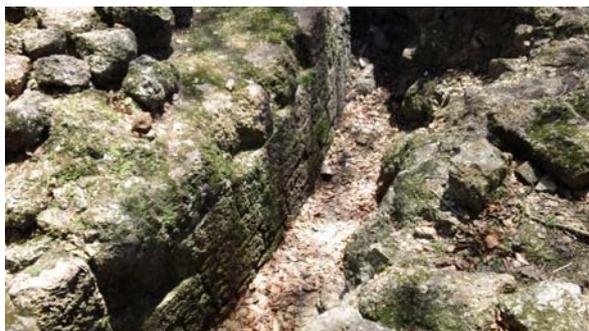
Karen Phillips

Exploring old Malacca

Melaka/Malacca is another World Heritage City site. Sadly the pre-history on display is negligible, with the tourist expected to admire old Chinatown and Dutch and Portuguese ruins. The Portuguese and Dutch remains are in poor repair, except for the Dutch Stadhys Complex. This is well worth a visit, but is aimed at the general visitor. It features exhibits on the different ethnic groups (store models dressed in costume), a room of Prime Ministers, and Australian pennies of the forties, fifties or sixties alongside ancient coins, with little or no description.

The Stadhys Complex includes a room on Zheng He ('Chang Ho'), the Chinese admiral who traded with India and Africa in the fifteenth century, under whose command admirals in the Chinese fleets *might* have circum-navigated the world, *might* have explored the Mediterranean, *might* have reached the Antarctic ice, *might* have visited the east and west coasts of Australia, *might* have arrived at the Americas, and whose maps *might* have been used by Columbus and sparked the Renaissance in Europe. The Chinese left markers and cast bells at places they visited. Some islanders worshipped the memory of Zheng He as a god. For background to this fascinating story/ myth, see Gavin Menzies' book *1421* or <http://www.gavinmenzies.net/china/gavin-menzies-videos/>

The locating of more sections of the early Portuguese city wall seems to be viewed as a nuisance, as this delays the building of yet more shopping malls. The poor resourcing of any excavation and display of the finds is sad. The locals undervalue their 'old' history in favour of the 'first mosque' and 'first Chinese temple' – all poorly recorded (probably 200-300 years old). The plan for attracting tourism seems to be having paper flowers and ghetto



Part of the Portuguese city walls. The Portuguese ruled Malacca from 1511, the Dutch from 1641.

blasters on the trishaws, rather than improving the quality of the history on display. But history there undoubtedly is, just littered around!

Text & photo Paula Herlihy

Memorial to the fallen

Mt Evelyn servicemen who gave their lives in the two World Wars and Vietnam now have their name, age and rank, unit, date and place of death listed on a plaque at the RSL Memorial Garden.



Family members unveiled the plaque at a remembrance ceremony on 22 April. The Avenue of Honour replacement plaque, which has been relocated from Wray Crescent, was unveiled by WWII veteran Len Polkinghorne OAM.

The homecoming

From p.2

Ma (Doug's mother, Jean Gordon) said not to worry he will be home in 6 days & he was. Ma had very special insight to the unexplainable. Dad played poker with the Americans on the trip east – won about 10,000 pounds & lost it all again by the time he got to Spencer Street Station – walked off the train with ½ a bottle of Scotch for his troubles.

Norm Gordon

From Kev's rain gauge

Rainfall for April 2012 for Mt Evelyn, McKillop, Melbourne and the Melbourne average.*

Mt Ev	McK	Melb	Melb Av
110.0mm	139.5mm	49.4mm	57.4mm

* McKillop readings courtesy Jean Edwards. Melbourne figures from Bureau of Meteorology website.

Kevin Phillips

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