

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF MIGRATION

IMAGES, IMAGININGS AND IMPRESSIONS



18 November 2003 – 26 April 2004

This exhibition explores the memories of six adults who were children at Villawood and Cabramatta migrant hostels in south-west Sydney between 1950 and 1990. It traces their journey, from homeland to hostel to home, through the images, impressions and imaginary fantasies that they formed.

Arriving at the hostel marked the end of one journey and the beginning of another – to find a sense of place and a new identity. No matter when they came, or whether they came as migrants, displaced persons or refugees, the challenge of adjusting to new surroundings was always daunting. Success depended on the support they received.

Children of asylum seekers are now accommodated at the former Villawood Hostel, but with reduced freedoms and facilities. Like the children in this exhibition, the decision to leave their homeland was made for them. What will their memories be?

Curriculum links and exhibition structure

The exhibition, together with the focus questions and suggested extension activities, can be easily integrated into or adapted for different syllabuses. The objects, images and multimedia in the exhibition provide an integrated, interactive and contextual environment that encourages reflection, enquiry, experiential and collaborative learning.

1. HSIE (years 3–6)

Outcomes:

- Listen to life stories of people from different cultural backgrounds (Content: Change and continuity; sub-strand: Time and change; years 3–4)
- Identify some links between events in the world and the arrival and plight of immigrant groups (Content: Change and continuity; sub-strand: Significant events and people; years 5–6).
- Examine some of the cultures, ideas and traditions that have influenced Australian culture and identity, including migration, trade, religion and belief systems (Content: Cultures; sub-strand: Identities; years 5–6)
- Examine significant current events that are affecting Australian identity, eg. immigration, republican movement, internet developments (Content: Cultures; sub-strand: Identities; years 5–6)
- Investigates current community issues (Content: Social systems and structures; sub-strand: Roles, right and responsibilities; years 3–4).

2. History (years 7–10)

Outcome:

- How have the rights and freedoms of Aboriginal peoples and other groups (either migrants or women) in Australia changed during the postwar period? (Topic 6: Changing rights and freedoms; years 9–10).

3. Geography (years 7–10)

Outcomes:

- Identify the causes and consequences of political tensions and conflicts at local, national and global scales (years 7–8)
- Explain Australia's links with other countries and its role in the global community (years 9–10)
- Account for differences between and within Australian communities (years 9–10).

4. English (years 7–10)

Outcomes:

- Respond to and compose a range of texts for understanding, interpretation, critical analysis and pleasure (years 7–8)
- Think critically about information, ideas and arguments to respond to and compose texts (years 7–8).

Note: activities that explore refugee and multicultural issues should be handled sensitively and in a supportive environment.

Did you know?

- From 1950 to 1990, Australia's migrant intake increased by about a million people each decade.
- Today, nearly one in four of Australia's 19 million people were born overseas.

Exhibition structure

The exhibition has two entries. You should begin at the entry nearest to the Kings Cinema. The first section of the exhibition presents six case studies of children who came to Australia as either migrants, displaced persons or refugees. An interactive enables students to find out more about their stories. The second section of the exhibition focus on the experience of finding a sense of place and a new identity, 'From hostel to a new home' (includes a video, running time: 12 minutes).

Postwar migration: a brief chronology

1945–50

1945 Australia encourages migration to assist with reconstruction after World War II, and to offer a future for displaced persons.

1946 Assisted passage scheme resettles ex-servicemen and their families from World War II Allies – Britain, Poland, Netherlands, Norway, France, Belgium and Denmark.

1947 Displaced persons scheme brings 12 000 persons annually from Soviet-controlled nations – Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

1948 Peace treaties open the way for migration from Italy, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary.

1951–59

1952–54 Displaced Persons scheme terminated. New assisted passage schemes with Austria, Belgium, Greece, Spain, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

1956 Australia accepts 14 000 refugees after the Hungarian revolution is defeated by the Soviet Union.

1957 ‘Bring out a Briton’ campaign encourages the community to sponsor a British family and assist with their resettlement.

1959 ‘Nest egg’ scheme assists the migration of Britons with over £500 and independent accommodation arrangements.

1960–69

1963 Migration determined on individual merits rather than nationality.

1965 New migration agreements signed with West Germany, the Netherlands and Malta.

1968 Australia accepts earthquake victims from Sicily and refugees from Czechoslovakia.

1970–89

1973 Refugees accepted from Chile.

1976 Refugees accepted from Laos, Cambodia and Lebanon. The first refugee boats arrive from Vietnam.

1977 Evacuees from East Timor, Cyprus and Lebanon accepted under new humanitarian refugee policy.

1982 Assisted passage is abolished, except for refugees.

1983 Refugees accepted from El Salvador, Sri Lanka and Lebanon.

1989 After Tiananmen Square incident, Chinese temporary residents allowed to stay until given permanent residency in 1993. A small boat arrives from Cambodia.

1990–2001

1991 Mandatory detention is introduced to discourage boat arrivals. Asylum seekers no longer processed at former migrant hostels.

1992–99 Humanitarian Program resettles ethnic minorities from former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Croatia, East Timor, Lebanon and Somalia.

1999 Woomera Detention Centre opens as boat arrivals of Afghans and Iraqis increase.

2001 Border Protection Bill is introduced to discourage asylum seekers arriving by boat.

Source: Department of Immigration & Multicultural & Indigenous Affairs

**Lisel Herrmann (nee Gebels), Latvia
arrived at Villawood aged 11, 1952**

Lisel and her family became displaced persons when Russia annexed Latvia in 1940. After five years in a refugee camp in Austria and stringent social and medical testing, the family was selected to go to Australia. They were among the first wave of migrants from a traumatic background, with languages and customs that Australians had never encountered.

The family brought with them household goods as well as books, photographs and paintings by Lisel's grandfather. After passing through Bathurst and Wallgrove hostels, they lived at Villawood from 1952 to 1953. Their long journey finally ended when they moved into a home which Mr Gebbels had built in his spare moments.



Lisel Herrmann with her brothers.

Focus questions

1. Read the extract from the *Sturgis Daily News* on page 5 and find out in what ways, 'Life aboard the converted US army troop transport (*General Sturgis*) was strictly regulated.'
2. Find the drawings by the Gebels children (displayed to the left of the case study of Peter Robinson). Lisel Gebel's parents prepared their children for the journey to Australia with geography lessons. In what ways could drawing the route of the voyage help prepare the Gebels children?

Did you know?

1. Between 1947 and 1953, Australia received over 170 000 displaced persons from camps in Germany. They were people who had been brought from their occupied homelands in eastern and central Europe to work in German industry during World War II, or who had fled their homes in the face of occupation and were unable or unwilling to return after the war.

Extract from the *Sturgis Daily News*

‘We must once more stress that absolute cleanliness as regards cabins, living quarters and hallways must be achieved on arrival in Sydney. Australian officials will inspect the ship before embarkation of passengers and will place the ship in quarantine if necessary. We stress once again that all beds, metal bedposts, walls and floors must be spotlessly clean.

A list will be kept on work details of all persons who do not fulfil their daily duties. This black list will be presented to the Australian Consul on arrival at Sydney. To ensure a good start in your new homeland for yourself and your family, make sure that your name does not appear on this list.

All hand luggage must be packed and ready for inspection before leaving the ship. Stolen articles will be confiscated and persons responsible handed to Australian Officials.

All persons must wear their transport numbers pinned visibly to their clothing.

All overalls and chess games must be returned. Do not pack any ship’s property. There will be repercussions. Remember that all blankets, sheets and pillow cases are ship’s property.’

— April 1950

**Peter Robinson, Ireland
arrived at Cabramatta aged 10, 1951**

Peter was raised in Ireland until his father decided to cut ties with family and economic troubles. The family came to Australia as Assisted Migrants in 1951. They did not bring any possessions with them because Mr Robinson was certain they would make their fortune in Australia.

Peter's mother worked in the Commonwealth Hostels office at Cabramatta Hostel, so the family was able to live there from 1951 to 1956. Peter has strong memories of hostel life and recalls that families who made their huts more homely were a concern for management, as they were harder to move on. At that time there were no enforced restrictions on how long migrants stayed.



Peter Robinson and a friend.

Focus question

1. Look at the menu, entertainment card and postcard of the P&O migrant passenger ship, *SS Mooltan*. Suggest how life aboard *SS Mooltan* would be different to *General Sturgis*?

Did you know?

1. The first known use of North Head as a quarantine station was in August 1828 and it remained in operation until the early 1980s. During this period, 580 ships and more than 13 000 people were quarantined at North Head.
2. According to the 2001 census, 50 234 Australians were born in Ireland.

**Vuokko Wells (nee Roppola), Finland
arrived at Villawood aged 10, 1960**

In 1960 Vuokko and her family of ten migrated from Finland in search of a better life in Australia. Strange food and the unexpected suddenness of nightfall were among Vuokko's first impressions on arriving at Villawood Hostel. She also recalls being disturbed at seeing cockroaches in the shower and laundry blocks.

Vuokko's family made pancakes on a kerosene heater in their Nissen hut, to compensate for the hostel's tasteless white bread. She remembers how other Finns at the hostel provided her with the friendship she was unable to find at school. Vuokko has since become an artist and often paints the Australian landscape, although she recalls thinking it was ugly when she first arrived.



Vuokko Wells (nee Roppola).

Focus questions

1. Find the storybooks, carved robin and memory books that Vuokko brought from Finland. What was Vuokko's school life in Finland like?
2. 'At school Vuokko remembers feeling alone and not liked ...' Suggest possible reasons why.

Did you know?

1. According to the 2001 census, 8259 Australians were born in Finland.

**Sara Bressa (nee Diaz Rivera), Chile
arrived at Villawood aged 15, 1975**

Sara and her family made a dramatic escape from Pinochet's political dictatorship in Chile in 1975. Before leaving, Sara experienced many horrific events on the streets of Chile – shootings, neighbours disappearing, people not returning home from work – which still cause her uneasiness.

When the Rivera family arrived in Sydney as refugees they were taken to Westbridge Units at Villawood. Nothing seemed familiar and none of the family could speak English, but they tried to communicate with hand signals and music. Sara was sad to leave the hostel in 1977, however she was also happy that her family would finally have a normal life.



Sara Bressa (nee Diaz Rivera).

Focus question

1. Sara brought with her treasured possessions such as a diary, teddy bear and books. Find these objects and suggest why each of them was significant to Sara?

Did you know?

1. According to the 2001 census, 23 420 Australians were born in Chile.
2. Australia accepted a significant number of refugees from Chile after the military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the Allende government in 1973.

**Thanh Ngo, Vietnam
arrived at Villawood aged 15, 1979**

After the end of the Vietnam War, Thanh's parents thought their children's future was doomed. To enable Thanh and her brother and sister to leave Vietnam, they paid a huge sum for 'safe' passage on a boat with an unknown destination. Nothing was guaranteed, so family members left at different times.

Thanh was accepted as a refugee by Australia in 1979. After arriving at Villawood, she shared a flat at Westbridge with her brother and sister. Thanh thought of the hostel as a 'one star hotel' which provided three meals a day, hot showers, room cleaning and a change of sheets once a week. With little English, Thanh spent months in an Intensive Language Unit at Chester Hill High School before entering an ordinary classroom.



Thanh Ngo.

Focus questions

1. What mementos of Thanh's journey are on display? What happened to her possessions during her 'safe' passage from Vietnam?
2. Despite the hardships of living in a refugee camp, waiting for resettlement, Thanh and her friends had occasion to celebrate. What was this occasion and how did they celebrate?

Did you know?

1. According to the 2001 census, 154 830 people were born in Vietnam.
2. Since planned postwar migration started, more than 599 000 people have arrived under humanitarian programs, initially as displaced persons and more recently as refugees.

**Consuelo Ivonne Mare (nee Guardado
Arteaga), El Salvador
arrived at Villawood aged 14, 1990**

Ivonne's parents were business owners in El Salvador who feared that their lives were in danger during the civil war. Ivonne can remember the sound of bullets being fired and people screaming in the streets. When her parents made the decision to flee she was excited about seeing other countries, but also sad to leave behind her extended family.

Ivonne's family was accepted for resettlement in Australia in 1990. She remembers being taken to Westbridge/Villawood Hostel where they stayed in a little flat for only five weeks. The family spoke no English and had no time to get settled before they were moved to a migrant hostel in Wollongong.



Consuelo Ivonne Mare (nee Guardado).

Focus question

1. Although Ivonne and her family did not speak English when they first arrived in Australia in 1990, she moved through high school to become a history teacher in Fairfield. Ivonne attended intensive English courses, to catch up on her English. If you had to attend these courses, for example during the summer holidays, in what ways would your holiday plan be affected?

Did you know?

1. According to the 2001 census, 9696 Australians were born in El Salvador.

Hostel memories

Some common childhood memories of living at the hostel relate to the food, the friendships and the freedom ... and the big cockroaches and spiders. Kitchens were not included in family accommodation so food was queued for and eaten in canteens. As all meals were provided, parents were able to go to work and their absence gave children the freedom to explore both inside and outside the hostel.

The canteen and laundry provided opportunities for many cross-cultural friendships which endured after leaving the hostel. Laundry areas also provided opportunities for the clandestine cooking and sharing of more culturally acceptable food. While many missed the social atmosphere of the canteen after they left the hostel, they didn't miss the meals.



Canteen staff at Villawood Hostel.

Focus question

1. Hostel food is remembered as 'foreign and tasteless' yet many missed the social atmosphere of the dining hall after they left the hostels. Why do you think this was?

Did you know?

1. The administration of hostels was handed over to Commonwealth Hostels Limited in January 1952. This Commonwealth-owned company operated until 1978.
2. In NSW, from 1948 to 1978, migrant hostels operated in Adamstown, Balgownie, Bankstown, Bathurst, Bradfield Park, Bunnerong, Burwood, Matraville, Cabramatta, Cronulla, Dundas, East Hills, Ermington, Goulburn, Greta, Katoomba, Kingsgrove, Kyeemagh, Leeton, Lithgow, Mascot, Mayfield, Meadowbank, Nelson Bay, North Head, Orange, Port Kembla, Port Stephens, Randwick, St Marys, Scheyville, Schofields, Unanderra, Villawood, Wallerawang and Wallgrove.

From hostel to a new home

In the 1950s and 60s migrants at Cabramatta and Villawood hostels were housed in corrugated iron huts that were originally used by the army. Known as Nissen huts, they had six rooms which accommodated two families. Each family had two bedrooms and a common area. Children and their parents remember the hostels as places of security, a 'retreat' from the stresses of an unfamiliar environment.

The hostel was like a 'global village' which eased the transition into the society beyond. Many residents chose familiar areas around the hostels for their first home. They often built their houses on weekends with the help of hostel friends. As a result the Fairfield, Bankstown and Liverpool areas are among the most culturally diverse communities in Australia.



Inside a Nissen hut.

Focus question

1. The hostels were furnished with drab, standard-issue furniture. So why do most migrants remember the hostels as places of security and a 'retreat'?

Did you know?

1. Fairfield City is one of the most diverse cities in Australia, with 133 nationalities represented and over 70 languages spoken. According to the 2001 census, 53% of Fairfield City's population (95 343 people) were born overseas.

Video

See what life was like in the hostels. (running time: 12 minutes)

Pre-visit activities

1. Locate the following countries with the help of a world map:

Latvia, Ireland, Finland, Chile, El Salvador, Vietnam

2. Visit the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission website:

http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/face_facts/ref_hm.htm

- a. What was the Displaced Persons Program?
- b. Find out the definitions of refugee and asylum seeker as adopted by the United Nations.
- c. Do an audit of several newspaper articles on issues related to refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. Have a class discussion about the perspectives towards refugees and asylum seekers presented in these articles.



The Diaz Rivera family at Villawood/Westbridge Migrant Hostel, 1975. Courtesy Sara Bressa (nee Diaz Rivera).

Post-visit activities

1. The different journeys

- a. Divide the class into six groups.
- b. In groups, select one of the six case studies. Discuss the child's experience of relocating to Australia and living at the hostel, using the text, images and objects in the exhibition.
- c. Each group gives a short presentation on the case study they selected.
- d. Have a class discussion about the different experiences of the six children.
- e. Children of asylum seekers are now detained at Immigration Detention Centres such as the one in Villawood. Have a class discussion about the experiences of these children in detention, with reference to information and images contained in sources such as
 - http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/borders/centres/villawood_irpc.htm
 - http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/children_detention/submissions/artwork/index.html
 - http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/children_detention/psy_review.html

2. Hostels and multiculturalism

'Hostels were part of the flowering of Australian multiculturalism. Migrants took Australia by its bootstraps and brought a different culture. Where would we be without them?' Terry Astor-Smith, Villawood Migrant Hostel Manager, 1964–1980.

- a. Can you find any evidence in the exhibition that supports the claim that 'hostels were part of the flowering of Australian multiculturalism'?
- b. Divide into groups and discuss the question, 'what is multiculturalism?'
- c. In groups, discuss the challenges and opportunities that come with multiculturalism.

Further resources

Online

1. Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA)

<http://www.immi.gov.au>

The site provides information about the Australian government's policies on refugees and asylum seekers, including background information and fact sheets.

No 1: Immigration – the background – 4 November 2001

No 2: Key facts in immigration – 11 November 2002

No 4: Over 50 years of postwar migration – 29 May 2001

No 6: The evolution of Australia's multicultural policies – 1 July 2003

No 7: Productive diversity: Australia's competitive advantage – 15 September 2003

No 8: Abolition of the 'White Australia' policy – 6 November 2002

No 61: Seeking asylum within Australia – 12 November 2003

2. Face the facts – teaching resources for use in Australian classrooms

http://www.humanrights.gov.au/info_for_teachers/modules.html

Prepared by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), it consists of activities linked with a range of key learning areas for years 7–10. Teaching notes, student activities and work sheets are provided. The 'What's it like to be a refugee?' activity is recommended as a pre-visit activity while 'Perceptions – refugees in the media' and 'Migrants and multiculturalism' are good as post-visit activities.

3. Migration Heritage Centre

<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au>

The website provides stories of migrant experiences – their struggles for belonging, tradition and adaptation, celebrations of survival and achievements.

4. OneWorld, many democracies

<http://www.abc.net.au/civics/oneworld/>

This is a collection of collaborative online projects for schools. They are intended to aid the teaching of Civics and Citizenship.

Videos

See Film Australia – <http://www.filmaust.com.au>

1. *Destination Australia – a land of immigrants*
Examines the history of migration to Australia over the last 200 years.
2. *Destination Australia – the migrant experience*
Examines the migrant experience in Australia from the early colony.
3. *Immigration – the waves that shaped Australia*
Provides a short history of migration to Australia and explores the contributions immigrants have made to Australian society, such as the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme.
4. *Our century: through new eyes* (episode 20)
Examines how at the beginning of the last century immigrants had to be white and preferably British; by the end of it, they came from everywhere to join one of the most diverse populations in the world.

Please note

These websites were available and suitable at the time of publication. We advise teachers to check sites before recommending them to students.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES
OF MIGRATION

IMAGES, IMAGININGS AND IMPRESSIONS



For more information on the exhibition
*Childhood memories of migration:
images, imaginings and impressions,*
visit the Powerhouse Museum's website
<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com>

For more information about education support
or your booking, contact Education and Visitor
Services at the Powerhouse Museum:
Telephone — (02) 9217 0222
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