

From Latvia to Australia – Memories of John Liepa

Clarrie Neal & John Liepa

John was born Janis Julijs Liepa on the 21st June 1937 at Riga, the capital of Latvia, a small country located around the Gulf of Riga on the Baltic Sea. This is the story of the Liepa family's journey that finally ended when they arrived in Australia in 1949, as told by John –

Our family had lived on a mixed farm at Ulbroka, a small village, seven miles out of Riga. We had 10 cows, plus sheep, pigs, poultry and some pets. It was a self supporting farm with fruit trees, fields for growing stock feed, and vegetables that were grown in large quantities to support us through the severe winters.

The farm backed onto a State forest that was inhabited by deer, foxes, wolves, bears and snakes. Growing wild in the forest were mushrooms, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and blue berries that were picked in the springtime by Mum and all the family. Mum preserved many of these berries and also used them to make jams, she also made our own cheese. The farm work was hard but it was a good life style, that is, it was until the outbreak of the War in 1939.

I remember the blocks of peat moss being cut in the field and laid on the floor of the barn, then covered with straw to keep the stock warm in winter. In the spring it was cleaned out and used in the field as an organic fertiliser. Nearby our grandfather owned a much larger farm with a dam that was stocked with fish and yabbies.

The War Years

I remember seeing lots of big bombers flying over in formation. At night time with all the lights out we would shelter in our cellar; the flashing and the noise of the bombs being dropped giving a feeling of being in a violent thunderstorm, but this was far worse. With the occupation of the country by Germany and then Russia, Dad decided that there was no future for Latvia and we would risk all and leave. It was 1944 and the war was still raging.

We drove all our stock to our grandparents' farm who had decided to remain in Latvia, and then went home to pack our suit cases. I recall how difficult it was saying good-bye to the grandparents and other family members, remembering the good times, knowing that we may never see them again, and that's exactly how it was.

Dad harnessed the horse and loaded all our possessions into the spring cart. On our way to Riga we picked up our grandmother who wanted to see us off and then she would bring the cart back to their farm. It was dusk as we were waiting for the ferry at the dockside in Riga, where we met with some of Mum's brothers and families who were also leaving. I remember grandma holding back tears, saying to each of us "May God be with you". As the ferry departed I can still see her, waving her silk hankie, with our horse and cart in the background, and that was the last time we ever saw our grandmother.

Germany

The ship that took us to Danzig in Germany was the "S.S. Shtoben", we later heard that it had been sunk on its next trip. Dad managed to get a four wheeled cart with panelled sides and a pulling handle, we packed our cases and belongings in and with Karlis on top we set off for Berlin. We were following a map that Dad had, hoping to reach the Allied Forces, there were refugees everywhere.

From Berlin we headed to Dresden, most of the time we were walking, sometimes travelling in trains, and sleeping in bomb damaged rail carriages. There were burning buildings everywhere, the sirens were howling, we passed a bombed railway station that had been packed with commuters, it was a horrific sight. To us children it was so frightening, I was seven years old and struggling to keep going. One day I said to Dad, "I can't walk any more, you go on, I'll be alright". He picked me up and put me in the cart with Karlis and kept us going.

I remember the day when we were suffering hunger pains and Karlis was suffering from malnutrition. Mum made a beautiful meal that day, a soup made of stinging nettles with pieces of rye bread crust, bits of finely cut ham rind, and snails. It tasted good, it warmed our bellies, and we kept going.

After a few days in Dresden we pushed on, we heard a few days later the city was totally destroyed by bombs. There were army tanks, trucks, and soldiers everywhere - the Russian Army was retreating from Prague. We crossed the Czechoslovakia border and headed for Leipzig, a suburb of Prague. Our family had a frightening experience when Mum and Dad were lined up against a wall by Russian soldiers and interrogated. I believe the only thing that saved us that day was that both Mum and Dad spoke fluent Russian.

We left Czechoslovakia and returned to Germany where an American soldier in a jeep told us to keep moving and pointed us in the direction of the Refugee camps. We arrived in the town of Egarr with thousands of other refugees. The Americans were providing food and rations to all, even vitamin tablets for the children. Karlis had a badly cut foot that was stitched and bandaged by an American Army doctor. We were then moved on to the town of Rebdorf.

Rebdorf: 1945-6

Here we stayed in an old monastery, surrounded by a sandstone wall that you entered through a huge arched gateway. The War had ended but life was still a struggle, there were thousands of refugees everywhere, all battling to survive. Military Police were screening our documents while others were providing us with better food. We were sleeping in large dormitories and provided with blankets and pillows; many refugees, including Mum and Dad, were helping in the kitchens and doing other chores. Dad passed a driving course here and got his driver's licence, though with no car it was worthless. At times we would receive parcels from the Red Cross containing chocolates, and sometimes with marbles for us children to play with.

Nuremburg - 1947

Here we were transferred to the DP's camp at Valka, previously used as a POW barracks; a huge camp packed with DP's from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland. The camp had a large canteen, a police station and a First Aid room. All the barracks were the same - rooms down each side of a long hallway, fitted with twin bunks, electric light, stove, tables and benches.

It was here Mum became friendly with another Latvian family, the Konrads. Their children Jon and Ilsa became our swimming champions of the 1950s. Mrs Konrads was a dentist, she pulled out a decayed tooth of mine, but with no anaesthetic it was a day I will never forget. I also remember having a photo taken of myself wearing an outfit that had been made from an army blanket, it kept me warm.

Life became more settled and all children had to attend school and Sunday school. I was learning both the Latvian and English languages, I found the English language very difficult to learn.

We had a little vegie garden and Dad made a chicken coop for our chooks. They provided us with fresh eggs and on special occasions we even had a roast chicken. Dad did a course to become a policeman, and got work as a gate man.

1948

Immigration programs were being prepared for entry to the USA, Canada and Australia. With long waiting lists for the first two countries, Dad decided it would be Australia for us. All the family underwent several health examinations, screenings, x-rays, etc. in the town of Swinefurt. Any police records were also checked. We received our passports and went to Schienport for one week where we were told to start packing. Dad made two large wooden crates for our belongings and I painted the signs 'J LIEPA SYDNEY AUSTRALIA' in bold letters that were attached to the crates. I also made signs for our suitcases and bags.

With Nuremberg under the control of the USA Occupation forces, many refugees elected to remain in Germany, but Dad was not prepared to take that risk.

We travelled by bus to Nuremberg station where we boarded the train to Austria, a train of basic old carriages packed with refugees. We then boarded another train with soft seats and compartments for our trip to Italy; police were manning the checkpoints on the border. After passing through the Alps we arrived in Aversa, then travelled by bus to more holding camps, this time surrounded by chain wire fences with barbed wire tops. At one point we were dusted all over with a DDT powder and Dad was furious, he was aware of the dangers from the powder and made us wash it all off.

We were moved to Serengalia on the Adriatic Coast, then onto Banyole, overlooking Naples and the Isle of Capri. It was good here as we could swim during the day and we were fed soups and pasta. We waited another week here before we boarded the 'SS Wooster Victory' for our trip to Australia. On board the sexes were separated, men and boys on one side and women and girls on the other. As we left I remember seeing an active volcano from on the top deck.

Out on the open water many of us were squeamish, only a few dined that night on the meal of spaghetti and parmesan cheese; however we all improved and found our 'sea-legs' after a few days. The ship crossed the Adriatic Sea and through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea where I saw my first pyramids, a marvellous sight. The ship stopped at Aden and Port Said where Arab traders came alongside to sell their wares, using ropes to get the goods up on board. On board I saw a group of Arab workers smoking from a large glass bowl that had pipes attached. They were also eating slices from a huge piece of fruit, green skinned, the inner flesh was red and there were lots of black seeds; the first melon I had ever seen.

Crossing the equator was very humid and hot, the crew celebrated by having 'King Neptune' turn the hoses on the passengers to cool us down. I saw my first flying fish, some actually landed on the ship. Our next stop was to be Australia and what a wonderful sight Fremantle was, the wharves were lined with migrants who had arrived previously, welcoming and presenting us with lots of fresh oranges and bananas.

After refuelling and replenishing supplies the ship set sail for Sydney for what proved to be the worst part of our trip; the ship buffeted all the way across Bass Strait by storms. The hatches were battened down, doors were kept locked, at times meals could not be served and most passengers were sea sick. One day I opened a door and ventured out, I received a kick up the backside and warned "never do that again". So after five years of what was hell at times, through war ravaged Europe, we had travelled from one side of the world to the other. This was to be the day we began a new life. It was May, 1949.

Australia

We approached the Sydney Heads on a cloudy day with misty rain, but they still looked great; seeing the big bridge in the distance made me feel good. Everybody was excited as the ship docked and the sun came out, the city of Sydney an unforgettable sight, but where were the natives with their spears. Next morning we disembarked in orderly fashion down the gangplank with guides checking our documents and directing us to the bus.

We were taken to the dining room on Central Station to have our breakfast, our first meal in Australia and what a treat it was. Nice tables, white crockery, little silver tea and coffee pots, toast racks, Kellogg's Rice Bubbles, porridge, jam and honey. What a treat! Mum all the time reminding us - to behave, not to rush our food, show your manners. It tasted great - a breakfast I'll never forget.

After breakfast the guides took us to the waiting train, we all sat in our carriage watching the trains come and go and the passing parade of commuters. Mum remarking how nicely dressed everyone was and their smiling faces. I kept looking out the window till I fell asleep.

Nearing our destination of Bathurst it was getting colder. It was freezing and snowing when we arrived, nothing like the hot weather we had heard about. We boarded our bus to the migrant camp at Kelso, the rows of huts similar to what we had experienced in Germany. In the barracks we were issued with suit cases, hand bags, a mattress, sheets, pillows, blankets etc.

I remember our first evening meal, each table set with a bottle of red sauce and a bottle of PMU sauce. We had lamb chops, baked sausage and gravy, mashed spuds and peas, white bread and butter, jam and honey - I had a go at the lot. That night was very cold and we all put our mattresses together on the floor to help us keep warm. Next morning there was snow on the ground but it melted quickly through the day.

We were all assembled in the hall and from a blackboard we learnt about the Australian currency - half penny, penny, threepence, sixpence, shilling, florin, the pound, five pound, ten pound. Only to discover that when we went out into the community there was another system used by many Australians which confused us even more - a ha'penny, tuppence, a trey bit, a zac, a deener, two bob, a half note, a quid, a fiver and a tenner.

It was the same with the English language, we learnt to dot the i's and cross the t's, but outside we had to understand sayings like 'you don't say', 'fair dinkum', 'pull your head in', 'Stone the Crows'. There were many other phrases we heard for the first time, often used with other descriptive adjectives. (John is well remembered by his workmates on the mutton board for his use of the phrase "Stone the Crows" which to John became "Stone zee Crows".)

After two weeks at Bathurst Dad was offered a job in Sydney at McKenzie's sawmill at Rhodes. He accepted and stayed through the week at the Meadowbank Hostel. Dad liked that saw mill and continued to work there for another 20 years.

Bathurst was getting warmer and I was eager to explore, I found strange birds - a black and white bird that warbled, also a pair of birds that sat on a pole and "ha ha ha - laughing at each other", very unusual I thought. Another day there was a paddock full of rabbits, I could hardly believe my eyes, how could there be so many rabbits in the one paddock?

I felt nervous going to school the first day but the teacher was good and introduced us to the other pupils. I travelled by bus for two weeks to the Kelso Public school before I was transferred to the Bathurst High School. One day two girls offered me a chocolate sandwich, I accepted it and enjoyed the salty taste, and have enjoyed Vegemite ever since.

Another day on the bus I had a difference with another boy, just a little pushing and shoving, the driver told us to "hoof it". I had to ask the bus driver what it meant, he firmly said "it means you get off this bus you little Balt, and walk home". Later the other boy and I shook hands and we became friends.

After a few months we were transferred to the Greta migrant camp, a much larger camp with two canteens, two cinemas, sports ovals, tennis courts, and a hospital. The brown timber huts were known as 'Chocolate City' and the galvanised iron huts were known as 'Silver City', terms used by the soldiers during the war. Mum got a job as a cook in one of the mess halls, and finished up in charge. Mum had to attend English classes - I remember them singing such songs as 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' and 'Waltzing Matilda'.

After a few weeks at Greta Public School I was transferred to the East Maitland Boys High, a good school with plenty of sports. I joined the school cadets and loved their week- end camps, particularly those held at Gang Gang. At one stage I thought I would enlist in the Regular Army but Dad said "Son, don't you think we have had enough of the Army life".

After school I worked in the canteen to get some pocket money, I saved enough to buy a wrist watch; still have it and it is still ticking. I also bought a Malvern 3 Star racing bike that I rode all over the Hunter district.

With Mum and Dad both working they had saved enough to put a deposit on a four acre block of land at Marsden Park. In 1951 Dad started clearing the trees and I travelled on the train from Greta every weekend to help him. We slept in a car shipping crate and cooked our meals on a primus stove, I was not getting much rest but felt I was growing up fast.

Riverstone

With the block cleared enough we commenced building our new home, it was to be a fibro home with a galvanised iron roof. Building with very basic tools, it took us two years to complete. We laid the foundations, using water to get the correct levels. The timber had to be creosoted to protect against termites. We also built a garage at the back, and made a lot of our own furniture. The house was completed in 1953.

We made the move from Greta by train, all our belongings packed in the luggage van at the back. We had no regrets at leaving the Greta camp, over the years we had seen too many.

I attended Richmond Rural School and Karl attended the Marsden Park School. I left school in 1953 and after working a few days on the farms at Cornwallis, I decided that farming was not the job for me, so I got a job on the mutton board at the meat works. Over the years I became a slaughterman, made lots of good friends, and stayed there for 30 years.

In 1950 Dad bought a Phillips radio for 31 pounds, it was good for learning even if we did listen to such shows as Bonningtons Bunk House, Dad and Dave, Slim Dusty, Reg Lindsay and for two hours on Saturday the two HR Tops of the Hit Parade.

One of the biggest moments in my life was when all the family attended a Naturalisation Ceremony at Blacktown to become Australian citizens. We had to swear the Oath of Allegiance on the Bible and we were each presented with a Certificate, at last we were all Australians. Other refugees from Latvia that settled in the Marsden Park area in the 1950s were the Viksnaks, the Heinrichs and the Blumanis families.

John and his brother Karl returned to Latvia in May 1993 for a four week holiday to visit their older brother and several cousins who had remained in Latvia.

Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information, documents and photos supplied by John Liepa.

