

My journey to Australia **by Ursula Aruma, senior participant at AMCS social cafes**

We were called Burghers (descendants of European colonisers) – under the White Australia Policy, only those of European descent were welcomed. Sri Lanka gained independence from England in 1948, and many more Sri Lankan Burghers began to immigrate to English-speaking countries, including Australia. Why we came to Australia? My 2 brothers first migrated to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. Eventually all my family (except myself) consisting of 2 brothers, 3 sisters and my parents all migrated to Australia since the late 1950s because of better prospects in Australia. Because I was married to a Sinhalese and had 5 young children (all under the age of 7), it was not easy for me to migrate to Australia to join my family. In the 1970s 1972, ethnic tensions began in Sri Lanka, and Ceylon became a republic and changed its name to Sri Lanka. Buddhism is given primary place as the country's religion, and the children were forced to learn in the Sinhala stream, because now after marriage I was carrying a Sinhalese surname.

We both were working in Government offices for 16 long years, but decided to apply to migrate to Australia to join my family as milk, rice, clothing and groceries were rationed and money was scarce. We applied for migration in 1972 but only received our Permanent Residency status in 1974. We had to have a working voucher to migrate and eventually my father managed to send us one with his good influence with the parish priest of his church.

We arrived in Australia on 13 June 1974. I was talented in stenographic skills, cooking and sewing my own clothes etc. We arrived in Australia with 2 Malaysian dollars and just the clothes we were wearing (which were summer clothes). We came via Sydney with a stopover at Singapore. I remember we pawned my watch and gold chain just to pay for hotel accommodation and purchased some essentials in Singapore. During transit in Sydney, we found it extremely cold in June (coming from a tropical warm island,) and my husband had to lend me his coat to cover myself and the youngest child who was 2 years old.

My brother picked us up at the airport and took us to my sister's place in Noble Park. We were looking forward to a nice rice and curry, but were treated with salmon and pasta, which we loved, and had to get used to the fact that my sisters had changed their cooking habits and entertainment habits too. We had to remove our shoes as we entered as the house was well carpeted and spotless! Because there were 7 of us, one of my other sisters kindly organised accommodation for 3 months at a place in Vermont South. The owners of the Vermont house had gone on holidays for 3 months and kindly allowed us to stay free of rent. So settling down was made easy for us. She had even collected boxes of clothes and cutlery and rations and sheets and towels from friends. My brother brought us boxes of groceries and non-perishable food to keep us going the first few weeks. The children had a ton of fun as the house was equipped with garden toys and bikes and a sand castle etc. Winter didn't bother us as the house was well-heated. My parents who had arrived in 1973 came to live with us in Vermont, so we were able to look for employment immediately. We can call ourselves very lucky as my husband found employment in the railways in 2 days and by the first week I found employment as a typist at Myer's

PBA Accounts department. We were also blessed because my sister found a kind gentleman who was driving to the city daily so he picked us up every day and took us to our workplace.

As we began to settle down, we had to repay some of the money we borrowed for our travel tickets so we took up 2 jobs to pay off \$10 a month toward. We started cleaning a school for 2 hours to make ends meet.

Now our 3-month term of accommodation was coming to an end and we had to start looking for new place to live. We could only afford a 3 bedroom house but no one was willing to rent a 3 bedroom house for a family of 9 (because now we had mum and Dad living us too).

Photo of Mum and Dad



Again, after much searching, we were blessed to find a 3 bedroom house which was so dilapidated that the owner was willing for us to rent it. It was in the beautiful suburb of Malvern East. The house and garden were not looked after because the old occupant had passed away. The grass had overgrown almost to knee height. The kitchen and cooktops were covered with cobwebs. Fortunately, my husband was a handyman and between the 2 of us and my in-laws, we managed to make the house liveable. We even painted the walls and the Agent allowed us 3 months' rent-free. Soon my husband had the garden cleaned up and the lawn mowed. The neighbours were so loving and helpful, they loaned us their lawn mower and were happy to see that the house was being rented by us. We even found a wheelbarrow and pick axes and other tools buried in the long grass! They came in useful for us.

Below is the picture of my 5 kids and their cousin in the Malvern East house after we cleaned up the garden.



So our first impressions of Australia, was that the people are loving and helpful to migrants. Australia was now like heaven to us. Transport was a luxury as we were close to a tram line and the trams were not jam-packed like the buses in Sri Lanka, when you had to hang on to the pole above you to stop yourself from falling when it jerked on pot holes. Having being used to a manual typewriter and stencils to make copies, an electric type writer and copying machine were like magic to me.

After 2 years, we managed to obtain a loan to purchase our own house in Westall. We had to show a deposit of \$3,000 to purchase the house for \$30,000. So we took a loan of \$3,000 from one bank and put it into the National Bank. Having shown this deposit, we were granted a loan of \$30,000 to purchase a brand new house on Fairbank Road, Westall. But sadly, just before we were able to move in, someone crashed into the front of our house, damaging the dining room. People advised us to cancel the contract and said this was not a good sign, but my faith was strong. Lightning doesn't strike twice, so I agreed to keep the contract and move in once it was fully repaired to our satisfaction. The children were admitted to the primary school across the road. From then onwards, we moved on to higher and better positions in our employment. Australia is a land of great opportunities. My husband did a library officer course part time, and worked at the CSIRO as a Library officer. I was raised to the position of Admin officer at Chisholm (then it was called Caulfield Institute of Technology) and later on moved to Kingston Centre to work for the CEO. My husband retired as a library officer in CSIRO and myself as an admin assistant in 2012.

We were fortunate to travel to Sri Lanka many times and also buy our first home in 1976 which we would never have been able to purchase if we lived in Sri Lanka.

We are blessed to have celebrated 57 years of marriage this year. Sadly, we lost 3 children at a young age.

I must mention, this was not at our first home in Fairbank Road, Westall but after we moved to Springvale South in Juther Court. We purchased our house in Westall for \$30,000 which had 3 bedrooms but we extended it with 3 more rooms upstairs to accommodate my large family as they grew older and my parents too. The extension cost us just as much, another \$35,000 to add 3 more rooms and a toilet and bathroom upstairs! It was my strong faith that helped me during these difficult times of losing my 3 children and 2 daughter-in-laws within a period of 7 years! Now we are left with 2 sons and 4 grandchildren.