

Train to australia

LIDIA KARDOS

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my grandchildren who, through no fault of their own, have no knowledge of the events that shaped their fathers' lives so many years ago.

To Alex, Jamie, Casey, and Kalissa. I love you!

To my daughter Regina, my little queen who started life with difficulties that she overcame entirely on her own just before her first birthday, in spite of well-meaning but inappropriate advice from the 'experts'.

Less than sixteen years separated my older son's first day at school from my own, yet they were so markedly different.

Unbelievably different!

How often I think of those intervening years, and all the dramatic moments about which my children know nothing.

Contents

Surviving That First Day.....	1
We Have Come a Long Way	4
Bonegilla – 1951	6
Not Your ‘Ten Pound Assisted Passage’	10
The ‘Luck of the Draw’	13
A Refugee in Australia – 1951	14
The Truly Organic Garden	18
Bartering To Survive	20
Educating Each Other.....	22
Friendships.....	25
A Marriage of Faith, Long Ago	28
The Degradation of Family Life	32
The Post-War Years	33
Two Epic Films	35
“You Are Under Interrogation”	37
Whooping Cough	40
What Are We Now?	42
By No Means Alone	44
Another Life.....	47
There Is Hope for a Better Life.....	50
Going Around the Long Way.....	52
Going Nowhere.....	54
Chaos and Corruption	56
New Kids on the Block	58
A New and Expensive Interest.....	61
Doing It the Hard Way	64
Rebellion.....	68

Home from the Dance	76
Towards Independence.....	80
The Catwalk	84
Going Dancing	87
Marriages	91
A Gift from the Heart	94
My ‘Special Day’	96
The Honeymoon.....	99
New Name – New Abode	102
The New Chloe.....	104
The Seduction.....	106
Back Home	111
Getting My Driver’s Licence – 1962	116
Labour Is Just Hard Work.....	119
Planning Our Modest Home.....	122
History Repeats Itself.....	126
Spontaneous Combustion	129
My Precious Princess.....	134
My Green Thumb.....	140
All In a Day’s Work.....	142
An Enterprising Duo.....	144
The Legacy	149
Goody-Goody/Baddy-Baddy	159
Residential Development.....	163
Making Ends Meet	166
A Career Change.....	170
My First Teaching Appointment	174
Our Changing Neighbourhood.....	177
Some Recreation.....	182
Political and Economic Changes	186

Me, an Investor?	189
Holiday House or Investment Property?	193
Trouble Follows	200
Flexible Itinerary – 1984	208
A Shocking Reunion	212
Revisiting The Past	218
From Croatia to Italy	224
Garda – German or Italian?	228
Tosca at the ‘Arena Di Verona’	231
Venezia, La Serenissima	237
Lunch by the Pre-Dolomites	240
Mother’s Beloved Younger Sister	243
A Medieval Wonderland	246
Nostalgia	253
A Soviet Experience	255
Heading North via South	261
Ah, Gay Paris!	264
Fair Weather in London?	267
A Slight Aside	272
The Homecoming	273
A Generation Apart But Similar	276
Life Goes On	281
Harder Times Ahead	285
The America’s Cup	290
The Beginning of the End	297
A Student Among Students	300
Epilogue: Advice I Would Give Myself At 18	304
Many Years Later: To Steve, My Soul Mate	308

Surviving That First Day

For me, school in Australia began as a nightmare. With no language skills, no friends, and no idea of what lay ahead, it was a day my consciousness refused to register. What I know for a fact is that the walk from home was long, the road rough and unfamiliar with hazards all along the way, and I was alone. There were railway lines to be crossed, with no paths, or safety fencing, or barriers. Not even warning lights. The rail tracks were laid on slabs of timber that I later learnt were called sleepers. The tracks and the sleepers were laying on a bed of stones some two to three inches in diameter. That translates to stones around five to eight centimetres. It was very difficult, not to mention dangerous to cross and the morning was incredibly hot. The trains that used that line generally came in the morning and in the evening with a lull in the middle of the day. I could never figure out why trains had an afternoon siesta until I learnt that the heat of the midday sun could cause the steel tracks to buckle, making the trains prone to derailment. That also explained why a little caboose with one, but mostly two men in it, was continually riding up and down the track.

The men were red-faced and wore broad-brimmed hats. They looked big, rough, and scary but after seeing them day after day the sight of them became more familiar. Eventually I got used to their friendly wave and smile. Each day either one or the other would wave and call out, “Top of the day to you, girlie!” Of course I had



no idea what they were saying, but eventually I got the courage to wave back. Back in those days, the place where I had to cross, the train line was just a single track with a siding near the station. It needed to be safe and well-maintained as this rail was the only form of transport to the northern and western towns in Victoria. But will I survive this daily negotiation with oncoming trains and slippery rocks underfoot?

Those first few days were traumatic as I came to realise that at eleven years of age, I was being placed in a vast room that contained some forty or more noisy children, who were of an average age of around seven. Class sizes were huge in the 50's in Melbourne's western suburbs. There were not enough schools or teachers to cater for the huge influx of migrants. Of course the same can be said for Sydney, and most big towns, so obviously, cognitive development amongst the students and within the mixed classes ranged wildly between the younger children with a relatively high IQ, and those older children, with perhaps a broader life experience, and survival skills. Teachers coped as best they could. At least sometime they could master some respect if corporal punishment was immediate. But separation of the ringleaders required at least two teachers acting together as soon as these louts started to needle each other. The kids were wild, and discipline was tough. In the dusty schoolyard, fights broke out in all corners amongst girls as well as boys, and with little or no supervision, they often ended in quite serious blood fights. Back then, no boy ever wanted to be called a sissy, or a softie, or mummy's boy, and the girls were always ready to taunt anyone who showed any weakness or dressed differently or had in their lunchbox food that was in any way different. Name-calling was a favourite pastime, and many of the insulting rhymes being chanted around the playground would start a fight. The parents who were summoned to the school because their little Johnny or Jane misbehaved were informed by means of a note from the principal, sent home via Johnny or Jane. How crazy was that? Did they think the kids were stupid as well as naughty? Obviously, either the parents never got the note, or they were too busy working to attend, or could not speak English, so most parents had no idea of what their children's school life was like, or what mischief they got up to.



What I dreaded most was the end of the day when the troublemakers joined their siblings. On the way home, they would pick fights with the more vulnerable. Anyone who intervened was quickly drawn into the melee. Sixth graders can be quite tough and vicious when in a group, and on occasion the constabulary had to be involved in separating them.

Much as we hated the area in which we lived, we had our own miserable property by the time I started school in 1951, in St Albans. At least it was away from the refugees' holding camps. My parents of course were devastated to learn that their daughter, who had already begun grade 4 in Italy, nearly two years earlier, was now in a class of beginners. We understood that it was to be a temporary measure, until my English language skills improved and in fact the ordeal lasted little more than a month. I dare say that the teachers realised that the teasing and taunting I was being subjected to on a daily basis was far worse than my inability to understand the lessons fully. By the end of the first term I was back in grade 4, though still amongst the oldest in the class and definitely the tallest.

We Have Come a Long Way

We had practically nothing more than a seaworthy chest and two, now battered suitcases when we berthed in Fremantle and from there, the powers of the time decided that we were to continue on to Melbourne, then from there, we were taken to a family holding camp in Bonegilla. To arrive at the Migrant Refugee Camp we had to be transported ‘en masse’ from the port where we disembarked. We must have looked a pathetic, lost, tired, and insecure group. All the immigrants had just their carrying luggage with them. Their sea chests would be delivered to them later.

Old army troop carriers were despatched to pick us up and deliver us some two hundred miles to what would be our ‘home’ for a while. Initially we travelled through unpainted and rusting iron-sheeted warehouses, then the trucks followed a residential route and we were amazed to see wooden houses suspended on matchsticks (stilts), all with corrugated iron roofing and little buildings all around. Later we learned that these were the outdoor ‘dunnies’ that were emptied once a week by someone with a truck who carried a bucket on his head—empty on his way in, but full on the way out! Then there was the separate laundry with one, two or sometimes three raised concrete tubs and often with no doors.

As we continued further out we came to some areas where housing styles seemed more along the solid European brick construction and we were told that these were the houses that the Wogs, Dagos,