



Australia's refugees

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Many famous and successful Australians were refugees. In the last 50 years, 600,000 new Australians were welcomed here to rebuild their lives after they fled extreme danger, imprisonment, even torture in their original countries. Often their families came to join them in Australia and they became part of everything that is Australia now. Most likely more than two million Australians now were or have parents who were refugees.

Your brief is to narrate a good story that is true. You will have to find a subject who was a refugee and interview him or her. You will then have to retell this story in your own words, using quotes from your subject and other writing techniques to bring the story to life.

You could ask your subject:

- Where did you come from?
 - Why were you forced to leave?
 - What were your most unusual experiences?
 - What was your journey to get here?
 - What hardships did you face in Australia at first?
 - And what was your story once life began again in Australia?
- and any other questions that seem relevant.

Some famous and successful Australian refugees are featured on the International United Nations website at <http://www.unhcr-50.org/gallery/igallery.html>

Have a look at some of these people to get you started:

- **Ms Tan Le, Business Development Director, lawyer, Young Australian of the Year, refugee**
- **Ms Judit Korner, Businesswoman, refugee**
- **Ms Jardin Truong, Businesswoman, refugee**
- **Sir Gustav Nossal, Medical Scientist, refugee**
- **Ms Judy Cassab, Artist, refugee**

This is an Australia-wide competition. Many schools and individuals will take part. You are invited to submit your essay to us for judging, and for possible submission to the United Nations. The date for submissions is September 30, 2002. The first Prize winner will be sponsored by Margaret Reynolds, President of the United Nations Association of Australia, on a trip to the United Nations in Geneva for one week in April 2003. The winner will also receive \$2,500. There will be a second prize of \$1000 and runner up prizes of \$500, and \$100, with 40 prizes of \$50 for the essays that best bring to life an Australian refugee story.

This is an **Australians Against Racism** initiative [www.australiansagainstracism.org]

Starting points and guidelines

Albert Shelling sent his story to *The Age* in January 2002. He has given permission for us to include his story as one of your starting resources. Albert is an ordinary Australian with an extraordinary story. His story may give you some ideas.

Finding a subject should be quite easy but will involve some investigation. You could ask your friends whether their parents were refugees. Ask your parents whether they know someone. You could ask your neighbours and the older people on your street. You could ask the Jewish community, the Vietnamese community, the Afghani community, the Lebanese community, the Croatian community, the Cambodian Community, your own community or any other community group in your capital city or nearest big town if they can put you in touch with someone who was a refugee and might like to talk or write to you. You could ask community papers and organisations on the internet. You could ask refugee associations. Maybe YOU are a refugee and can write your own or your parents' story.

Your essay should be no more than 2000 words long, typed on A4 paper, double-spaced, using a clear font. Your essay can tell the whole story or concentrate on a part of the story. Get your teacher's help with techniques for interviewing and the techniques of writing that best bring a retold story to life. Keep a copy of your essay, as it will not be returned.

Post your project to: 'Australia IS Refugees'
PO Box 107
Enfield Plaza, SA 5085 **by September 30, 2002**

You must have your name, address and phone number on the back of the project and you must have the permission of the refugee whose story you have written to send the project in for the competition. Give his or her name and contact details as well.

Your project will be judged on how skillfully you communicate your subject's story and how well you bring his or her experiences to life. Skill could be demonstrated in your use of exposition, dialogue, language, voice, and narrative structure. Judging will be finalised in August. Judges will be well-known Australian authors Phillip Adams, Tom Shapcott and Helen Garner.

The best essays will be submitted to the United Nations for possible inclusion on their website. A book form publication of the best stories will also be considered at the time of judging.

You or your teachers can contact Sonja Dechian, the project co-ordinator, on schools@australiansagainstracism.org if they need more information.

My Journey out of Darkness

By ALBERT SHELLING
Thursday 17 January 2002

Today marks the 50th anniversary of my family's arrival in Australia. Fifty years ago my mother, Guta Szmerling, and her three sons, Michael, the youngest, aged 16, Harry who was turning 20 and me, Albert, going on 22, landed at Melbourne's Station Pier. The previous year my older brother Sol came, and my father's older sister Sala, her husband and three children, and my father's younger brother Jack, his wife and four children. Three families and 16 people all told.

By the end of September, 1939, the German Reich and the Soviet Union had divided up Poland, where nearly all the members of the three families lived until the outbreak of World War II. When the Germans crossed the Polish border in the early hours of September 1, my father was on a bus heading north-east to Lodz, a major industrial town halfway between our town of Kalisz and Warsaw. My younger brother Harry and I were also on the bus. My father was looking for work, and as it was school holidays, he brought us so that we could play with his friends' children.

Because the Germans had occupied Kalisz, which was on the German border, we couldn't go home. Two days later we fled Lodz, the German army hard on our heels. We fled on foot, occasionally on a horse-drawn platform, or my father carried us on his shoulders, alternating between Harry and me.

It took us three days to travel the 100 kilometres to Warsaw. Every so often planes would swoop down and machinegun a line of fleeing people that left many dead and wounded. They flew so low I could see the pilots' faces in their cockpits. By the time we got to Warsaw much of the city was in ruins. We slept in a different place each night and walked the city by day. We had no roof over our heads, no clothes other than what we had on, and no food.

A young woman from a welfare organisation came to my father's rescue. She arranged to place us in an orphanage. Unfortunately this orphanage was Catholic and we were Jewish. We were abused, made fun of and generally mistreated. Why? After all, we were all kids, there was a war on, and the Germans were killing Catholic and Jewish Poles alike. Harry was seven years old and I was nine; we were miserable.

A few days went by, until this angel of a woman came to our rescue again. She was able to transfer us to a Jewish orphanage run by the now legendary Dr Janusz Korczak. Here staff and children immediately made us feel at home. (Though Dr Korczak was Jewish, the Germans offered to spare his life because of the reputation he had gained running orphanages, but he chose to follow his orphans to the gas chambers.) Harry and I were not orphans, but because of the circumstances we were allowed to stay.

When the Polish Government surrendered and the German Wehrmacht entered Warsaw, my father made his way back to Kalisz and arranged for his aunt to bring us back. This aunt lived in Germany until 1938 when the Third Reich ordered all its Jewish citizens from Poland to go back there. When the Germans entered Kalisz, she posed as a Volksdeutsch (a German living abroad), and joined the Wehrmacht as a military nurse. That way she was able to bring Harry and me from Warsaw back to Kalisz. At last the family was reunited. (My aunt later joined the underground, was apprehended and killed.)

By November, 1939, it was clear to many people that surviving under the German occupation would be hard. Parts of our family were already incarcerated in the Kalisz ghetto and the rest were in hiding. The three families decided to try to cross over to eastern Poland, which was occupied by the Soviet Union.

We left Kalisz by train at midday, all 15 members of our family, the youngest a baby of two months. I was told to carry the baby's nappies. There was hardly room to stand in the carriage, let alone sit. I now realise that I was already an asthma sufferer, I was so

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short of breath. Our train took us to Praga, a suburb of Warsaw. We spent the night at the station, huddled together so as not to lose one another.

Next day we boarded another train, to Malkenia, a small border town. The conditions on the train were the same as the day before. As we alighted from the carriage, local Poles offered us a way to bypass the German border guards - for money, of course. We were also warned that these same people, having pocketed the money, might then deliver you straight to the German border police and get more money from them. So we ignored their offers and followed the sign that said Border Patrol, a short walk from the railway station. Not to do so would have landed us into German hands anyway and by trying to avoid the border patrol we would have risked our lives.

Soldiers were all over the place. They forced the crowd trying to cross the border into a yard. A German officer and a Polish translator appeared from a small house and ordered us to hand over money and valuables of any kind or be hanged. To reinforce his message, the officer pulled back a screen to reveal a gallows right behind him with a corpse hanging from it. Grown-ups were shoved and beaten, we children were terrified. As we filed through the narrow passage inside the house, my father was hit on the head with the butt of a handgun and bled for a long time after. All this to force us to give up every penny we had. Finally we were pushed out the back door. Ahead of us was emptiness, nothing for as far as the eye could see. No-man's-land, and beyond, the Soviet Union. This was the day, in November, 1939, that we became refugees.

Heading east, we came to a place with several barns and haystacks. The local farmers demanded money from us to stay in the barns. We had to accept - we were lucky to find shelter at all. We learnt that some of our elders were negotiating with the border guards to allow us passage further into occupied Polish territory and that we should wait until they did. But in the hungry and cold nights mostly in the open,

with babies and children crying for food, patience gave way to nerves. A few days went by. Suddenly, as though it were planned, groups of people in threes or more started walking towards the border guards, with children in their arms and bundles hanging from backs and shoulders.

Soon we gathered speed and started to run, a wall of people, hundreds of metres long. Mounted soldiers galloped towards us, trying to stop us. My father knelt on the ground, pleading with the horseman above to let us go. In broken Russian he said he would rather have us killed than turned back to the Germans. We learnt later that Russia's policy was to let the refugees through, while making it as difficult as possible.

My father, his sister and brother, and their spouses, had arranged that if we lost sight of each other, we would reunite in the town of Bialystok. We travelled the 100 kilometres mostly on foot, occasionally catching a ride on an open horse-drawn platform or a train. Autumn was closing and the weather was growing cool. By the time we reached Bialystok it was snowing. We found the refugee camp and the three families were reunited. The conditions in the camp were horrific. We slept in tents in mud fields and no one had much clothing or enough food. So began our first "processing", the first of many to come.

The adults in our families then made a fortunate choice: to apply for work in the Soviet Union. Woe to those who thought to wait out the war in the camp, or to turn back to collect the rest of their families. The Soviets promised these people repatriation but instead sent them further east on cattle trains to gulags and labour camps, where many died from hunger and disease.

Those of us who chose to work - once the authorities were satisfied that we were not spies or capitalist reactionaries - were issued documents and screened, then we too were put on cattle trains, about 40 to 50 in a carriage. All we were told was that my uncle Jack and his family would be transported to Central Asia (they ended up in Alma Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan)

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and the other two families would go in a different transport further east into Siberia. Our voyage took six weeks during the coldest time of winter in Russia. We were ill prepared for the conditions.

And so we rode the Trans-Siberian railway all the way to Pietrovsk, way past Lake Baikal, the largest freshwater lake in the world. I remember nothing pleasant about those six weeks. Hunger, cold and dirt dominated our life in the cattle wagons and by the time we reached our destination we were riddled with lice. Lice in the hair as well as in every seam of our clothing. By the end of the journey most of us had lost half our body weight.

I have one happy memory of that time. Halfway to our destination, in Novosibirsk (New Siberia), we were taken to a bath-house. A makeshift wall separated the men and women. No showers, no bathtubs, but taps - taps with boiling hot water and taps for cold water. Each person was given a round basin, soap and ushered into a big room with rows of benches. I was with my mother and a room full of naked women, enjoying every minute of it. Hot water, steam, what a delight! Our clothes were taken from us to be fumigated. But the lice survived, or their eggs did, and once we were back on the train they returned to haunt us.

Finally we reached Pietrovsk and processing number two. The reception at the railway station was resplendent: a band played the Internationale and men and women dressed in uniforms addressed us through an interpreter saying that we had reached the Communist Paradise. Our passports were checked, we were handed money and driven to barracks built of wood with a passage in the middle and rooms on either side. The toilets were holes in the ground. No toilet paper, no taps, no running water. But each family was given a room and for the first week or so we were allotted a person to help us settle in. The rooms were furnished with one or two wooden beds, straw mattresses, blankets, a table and chairs and a stove to cook on, which wasn't bad.

They were hard years, the six years in Siberia. We suffered cold and hunger but no more than the local population. In that respect we were equals. Because my father was a tailor we lived in comparative luxury. High-ranking officials came to him to have their clothes made or altered and in exchange gave us food and coal for heating. Then my father contracted tuberculosis. As all doctors served at the front and medication was in short supply, he died, aged 35. I drove the horse-drawn carriage at his funeral, which was held on November 7, 1943, the day the rest of the country celebrated the Bolshevik Revolution. My mother, at 38, was left with four young boys, no resources and no income. In those years our neighbours and friends had hardly anything to spare. For us it was the worst time.

In June, 1943, I left school and applied for work. (In Pietrovsk I failed the exams in year 3 in primary school, my mind being occupied with my father's health. This was the end of my formal education.) I was under the legal age to be working, but the director had compassion and took me on as a tailor's apprentice. I have many memories from that period, not all bad.

In 1946 we were finally allowed to return to Poland. Again we were processed. Our passports were taken away and we were issued with travel documents to last us until we crossed the border into Poland. This journey also took six weeks, but although we were still travelling in cattle wagons, it was late spring and we had better food and clothing.

But the train that carried us into Poland also carried hundreds of Poles who fled Poland at the same time as us. We should have known that the hatred of Catholics towards Jews in Poland had not changed. As soon as we crossed the border our carriages were pelted with stones. Then, shortly after we returned to Kalisz, more than 40 Jewish people were killed and many others badly injured in a pogrom in Kielce about 200 kilometres away. Again, we were on the run.

We could not leave Communist Poland legally, but we learnt of a smuggling ring that for money smuggled

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people out of Poland. We were taken clandestinely into Czechoslovakia and from there to the American zone in Bavaria. Finally we reached a town, Hoff an der Saale, where there was a displaced persons camp run by the United Nations. With no documents to prove our identities, we were again processed, issued with temporary UN ID cards, checked and rechecked, X-rayed, immunised, fingerprinted, given some clothing, food and a room to live in. I worked in the camp's UNRA office and I also took this opportunity to learn German, a bit of English and piano. For two years we tried without success to get travel documents to go to another country. The best we could get was a transit visa to Paris.

It was 1948. Paris was beautiful. The people were kind and helpful. If only we could have made our permanent homes there, but no such luck. We were processed again and issued temporary work permits, no more.

Luckily, we were eligible for entry visas to Australia, its large post-war immigration program having just begun.

My memories of Paris are vivid. I spent most of my spare time with a crowd of young people. We holidayed on the Riviera and the Atlantic ocean beaches. It was a joyful time. It didn't matter that in those four years the four of us (apart from my brother Michael, who was in a sanatorium) had to live in a room not bigger than a small kitchen.

It took us six weeks to travel from Genoa to Melbourne on the ship Ravello. No luxury, but plenty of spaghetti and fun. On arrival in Fremantle we were boarded by immigration officials and again went through the old procedure: more questions, IDs and screenings. But we had arrived in a country in which all 16 of us would live, and in which all of us will probably die.

The five adults who came to Australia have died, and my brother Sol died after a heart bypass operation in 1990, aged almost 62. The cousins all married pretty quickly and are all grandparents now. Every child and grandchild in the family is engaged in productive

activity: teachers and students, employers and employees. Among the cousins are a lawyer, a psychologist, two amateur stage actors and even an aeroplane pilot. We are always in touch with one another and whenever there is a special occasion, engagement, wedding, new birth, we are there en masse.

I have two delightful, married children and seven special grandchildren. I worked as a tailor, then a shoe manufacturer, then in 1978 my wife Yvonne and I opened a bookshop, Shelling's Books, in High Street, Armadale. This was a proud achievement for me.

Did we make the right decision to migrate to Australia? I have no doubt that all my family would say, resoundingly, Yes! And I am sure I speak for all of us in expressing our gratitude to the Australian people for the opportunity we were given to share their country, our country, Australia.