

Helena Koning

My name is Helena Koning. At the age of fifteen I immigrated to Australia with my family. We arrived in Melbourne in November 1956 from Holland (assisted passage). My father, Roel Koning, wanted to come to Australia because he thought we would have a better life here, as Holland was still in many ways suffering deprivation after the war and occupation. Meat and fruit were a rarity in many households because of scarcity and price.

My father, who was a musician, was not acceptable to the Australian government unless he chose a different occupation. As he was a very clever man and did most of the cooking and sewing in our family, he set about becoming a chef and was accepted to migrate after he qualified.

I was extremely sad to leave Holland but the day come when we had to say goodbye and take the train to Rotterdam to board the ship *Zuiderkruis*.

The journey was, for all its sadness, a wonderful experience. Coming through the Panama Canal – seeing the beautiful jungle with native huts dotted here and there, still untouched and pristine in those days. It was such a memorable experience being able to wander around Tahiti seeing old women smoking fat cigars in their doorways and little children following us around was all very wonderful – nothing was commercial as I imagine it would all be today.

When we arrived in Melbourne we were taken to Bonegilla camp where my father was the chef for one year. We were then transferred to Wacol camp where was chef for another year. Both camps were fine with us children because you were never short of kids to play with or talk to.

Dad started early there and for a few months it was pretty good for us kids. We used to walk down to the river behind Wacol, crossing over the farms at the sanatorium. On the way we would take a watermelon (often we were chased by the farm workers) and take it to the river and leave it

WACOL REMEMBERED

Country of Birth: **The Netherlands**

Date of Arrival in Australia: **November 1957**



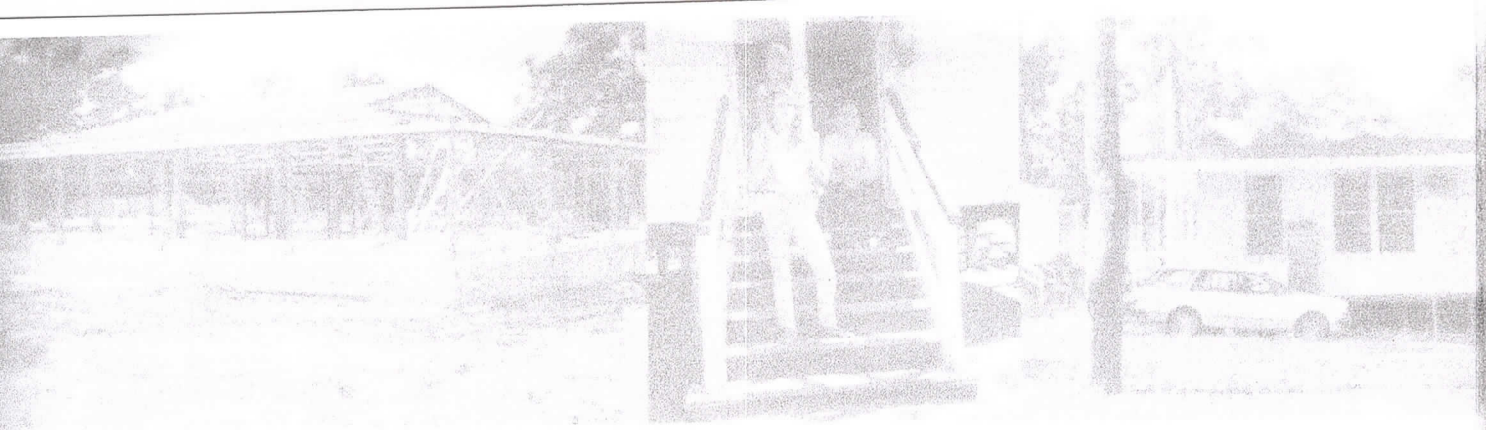
Helena Koning's family in staff hut

in the water until we all got thirsty. We would then smash it and share it with the other kids that we came with.

After a couple of months my brother who was thirteen years old had to go to school. I had to go to a live-in housemaid job for a family – people would come to Wacol camp to see if there was anyone of age to be a housemaid. My other sister who was fourteen went to work in a biscuit factory. My youngest sister and mother stayed at home.

In Wacol camp you ate in the big meal hall and occasionally saw a movie. The food was good because my father was an excellent chef. My mother was not happy, as it would be her second year in a camp with only a little hut to live in and nothing to do day after day for two years. I could not blame her – life in the camps was okay but very boring if you didn't work, however us kids all enjoyed camp life as you were never lonely or without playmates.

Going out of the camp showed the attitude of people toward foreigners. It wasn't good at all – especially against Italians and Greeks. It was better for us because you couldn't tell that we weren't Australian until we spoke. Most people thought migrants were stupid, dirty and useless because they were not Australian. People coped with it and made their lives here regardless. We, as adult



families separated by life, have all integrated and are Australian now.

My father who could only immigrate if he was not a musician became a musician again some years later and played in bands in Port Macquarie. He also taught music when he got older. When he died there was a small tribute in the local paper "A Goodbye to the Maestro", so his life ended the way it began – with music he loved.

We have fond memories of Wacol and also sad memories of friends made and friends lost – but Wacol camp gave us our starting point, it was our springboard into life in Australia.



Helena, Roel (father), Hettie (younger sister) in Wacol staff hut