

## *Russian Community of Dandenong*

Russians first settled in the Dandenong area in 1949 when, as displaced persons from Europe, they found work in the local factories. Others sent to the open cut coalmine in the Latrobe Valley were relocated to Dandenong after their two-year work contracts were completed. However, a visible Russian community appeared in Dandenong only with the arrival of the White Russians from China. Numbering more than two hundred families, these people were evicted from their homes in western China and Manchuria during the Cultural Revolution of 1960–65. The first family to arrive in 1960 was that of Philip and Maria Savenkov and their six children. The Savenkovs began sponsoring other families and soon families with up to fifteen children were arriving. Today there are some four thousand Russians living in the Greater Dandenong area.

In 1962 the Russian Orthodox Church extended its ministry to newly arrived Russian families. At first they were encouraged to attend services in the Melbourne parish, but gradually religious services were held in private houses. In 1964 land was bought in Morwell Avenue and in 1967 a hall was built to act as a church, community centre and parish school. The first parish priest was Fr Alexander Safronoff (1965–76) who was replaced by Fr Dimitry Simonow (1976–81). In 1979 the foundations were laid for the permanent church and by 1982 the Church of Our Lady's Dormition was ready for its official opening. In 1982 Fr Michael Protopopov was appointed rector of the parish and he continues to hold that position in 2001. The church received its consecration in 1986 and has been the centre of community life ever since.

In 1976 the parish bought land at the western end of Kirkham Road for a community centre. This was finally realised in 1998 and the building accommodates up to 500 people, sports activities and a parish school. Aged care facilities have also been built. In 1976, after a fire in Healesville, St John of Kronstadt–Russian Welfare Society, under the chairmanship of Mrs Anastasia Joukoff, relocated to Dandenong and built a hostel for the aged in Morwell Avenue. This was opened in 1977 and provided accommodation for 21 residents. By 1985 a nursing home had been constructed for up to 20 patients and in 1991, under the new chairman of the board of directors, Fr Michael Protopopov, this was extended to 30 beds with two pavilions to house another 22 low care residents. The following year the Russian Village was constructed in Conway Street providing a number of retirement units owned by the Russian Welfare Society. There are plans to extend the village by another thirteen units.

The Russian Welfare Society also caters for the needs of the community by providing a number of programs, including home and community care, social support for the elderly and isolated, Meals on Wheels, emergency accommodation and transportation, migrant settlement support, a Russian language library and the services of a Russian speaking registered migration agent. Furthermore, the Society auspices the Dandenong Russian Senior Citizens' Club, the Russian Women's Health Club and the Russian New Migrants' Club.

During the Centenary of Federation Year, the Russian community, with all its activities, has been an active and integral part of the vibrant community of Greater Dandenong.

as Local Preachers on trial. The decision was made to advertise church services weekly in local papers and on a slide at the local picture theatre for a 13 week trial. A resolution was forwarded from the Quarterly Meeting to the Bolte Government deploring the waste of life and property on our roads and recommending compulsory blood tests.

### **The Immigration Story.**

The story begins when the Rev. John Johnson spoke at the Men's Tea on the 'Bring out a Briton' program. As Lois Williams tells it, the Rev. Pearce Barber said to husband Allan, 'You might as well do this Allan' - so Allan did!

It wasn't long before Allan and Lois had formed a Church Immigration Committee. The first British families arrived in 1959. The Committee worked with the Australian Council of Churches and it wasn't long before the request was made to sponsor refugees from Europe. In these early days, about one family arrived every two months. The first refugees came from Yugoslavia.



Allan Williams meeting migrants at Station Pier in the early 1960s

While other 'Bring out a Briton Committees' purchased houses, Allan found it was better to rent through local real estate agents he knew and he gave a guarantee that rent would be paid. In the early days, families arrived at Station Pier, Port Melbourne together with all their luggage. They were picked up and driven to Dandenong. Frequently, interpreters were needed. The family would then be taken to their new home which was furnished by the Committee. Also there was enough food for several meals. The father was taken to find employment, while the children were enrolled at school. Lois says that we were lucky in Dandenong as there were a number of factories prepared to employ migrants — particularly G.M.H., Heinz, International Harvester and Bosch at Clayton. Crochery and furniture was given by Church people and others.

Storage became a problem. First it was stored in a large existing shed on the Williams' Greens Road farm — finally, it was a Nissan hut, purchased for the purpose, with a concrete floor put in by a Dutch man who had been assisted.

White Russians started arriving in 1961 and they were by far the largest group. In all 338 families were brought out and Lois said that 'I gave up counting after 2000' - that's a lot of people!! Families came from many different countries — Britain, Holland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Egypt, Albania, Lebanon, Armenia, Mauritius, Chile, Romania, France, Germany, Assyria, Bulgaria, China, Afghanistan, Spain, India and Greece.

As time went on, the Immigration Committee gradually changed and became all British migrants who wanted to give something back. Belle and Stan Porter, English migrants brought out under the church scheme, were the first caretakers to take up residence in the church cottage.

Initially the White Russians attended church in Collingwood, then they built their own church in Dandenong South. Lois and Allan attended countless White Russian Christmas celebrations spread over 3 days each January, weddings, baptisms and funerals. Nurses at the Dandenong and District Hospital gave Allan a strange look when he arrived at the maternity section to book in three pregnant women! Allan was asked to get some land for them at the Dandenong Cemetery, which he did. If there was a death within the Russian community, it was the Williams' home they rang, asking them to get in touch with the 'bureau' which was their name for the Funeral Director.

It was appropriate that the work of Allan and Lois should be recognised. Allan was awarded an MBE, Lois was made a Paul Harris Fellow by the Dandenong Rotary Club and the Dandenong Russian Church presented them with a medal. This was aptly inscribed 'Presented to Allan and Lois Williams in gratitude for many years of Christian love and support to the Russian Community in Dandenong — 1991.'

**1959:** In 1959 a plaque was made with the names of ministers who had served over the last 100 years. Buses were run to the Billy Graham Campaign and the Quarterly Meeting reported that over 80 local commitment cards had been received from people who responded to the challenge to follow Christ. A senior Fellowship Group was formed.

**1960:** Strain on Government schools in 1960 was evident in the need for the Dandenong Girls' Secondary School to rent Hateley and Centenary Halls until new class rooms were built. The Jennings Hall was used for a number of years for matriculation examinations. The halls were used to billet 12 marching girls from Queensland following a request from the Heinz marching girls. With a report that all halls were fully taxed on Sunday mornings, it is not surprising that concern was expressed at the traffic congestion in Scott Street between 10.00 and 11am.

**1961:** The healthy state of church organisations in 1961 was shown in the following membership figures: Senior MYF 40; Junior MYF 70; Knights 25; Rays 45; YAMS 70; Mens Society 70; United Ladies Group 30; and WAOM 25. After a meeting in the Dandenong Town Hall a Chaplaincy Committee was formed. The Victorian Championships of Highland Dancing were held in the Jennings hall. Geoff Pentland wrote to the Trust suggesting the amplification of a chiming bells record before church services. He included a donation of 50 pounds and his suggestion was carried out in 1962 at a cost of approximately 160 pounds plus installation costs.

# VALE ALAN WILLIAMS

Ray Carter

*Alan Williams died on Wednesday 18th October after a lifetime of helping others, firstly helping migrants to settle in Dandenong, and more recently with the Dandenong Benevolent Society. Alan and his wife Lois were our special guests at our August meeting, talking about their role in settling refugee migrants in Dandenong, and we print a summary of their talk as a tribute to Alan's life.*

Alan and Lois were members of the Dandenong Methodist Church in 1959 when Reverend John Johnston tried to establish a scheme to help migrants, initially known as "bring out a Briton". The local church decided to play its part by helping to re-settle refugees. They thought that only a family or two would be involved. However, by the time the program had ended in 1981 when the Australian Council of Churches had disbanded, the "family or two" had exploded to 350 families settled in Dandenong. In all, a family had been settled each 14 days.

The group which was especially helped was known as "Elmorato"- a people who had battled against communism in Eastern Russia as best they could before finally deciding to leave Russia by crossing the Chinese border. There was no need to buy land- they simply settled. Everything was all right until China turned communist as well. The Chinese gave a temporary pardon in 1961- a ship was waiting- and the Elmorato came to Australia. Cholera broke out on the ship, and so the government took them to Bonegilla to regain their health before they were re-settled.

Assistance was needed in all aspects of life. Arrival and establishment in a country where you had no friends, the language was not known, and the culture very different, was an uphill battle. Alan met families at the wharf, found housing for them, helped them to set up their households, to find work, and to get their children into school. Alan and Lois were to become invaluable to these new arrivals at this time of great need, and in return were accepted as close friends and confidants by them.

Coming straight from a rural to a suburban society was a culture shock. Alan and Lois advised that customs common in rural China- such as disposing of household rubbish in your own back yard, and allowing domestic animals such as cows and poultry to run loose- had to be abandoned because these issues were attended to differently in suburban Australia.

Language was a major barrier- one girl worked at a Dandenong factory for two years before she was able to say the name of the factory. Alan and Lois had to learn some basic Russian to help communications which would have otherwise not been possible. For example, Lois often accompanied women when they went to hospital

for tests and repeated simple requests such as "breathe" and "stop breathing" in Russian.

The Russians often said that "life is so easy here", yet when someone died they did not call an undertaker, but asked Alan to arrange the funeral. Alan applied for a section of the Dandenong Cemetery to be reserved as a Russian Orthodox section. They did not believe in cremation.

Refugees from other places had similar problems, and brought some of their own as well. For example, "Miranda" was living as a nun in a convent in Jerusalem before coming to Australia with a young daughter. Alan had to sign a maintenance agreement.

The first Yugoslavian people to arrive here were a great lesson for Alan and Lois, because they assumed that all Yugoslavians were for Yugoslavia. When the next Yugoslavian family arrived, communication via an English/Yugoslavian dictionary was unsuccessful because the family couldn't read.

Personal and economic circumstances have changed dramatically for the refugees since those early arrivals. In the early days, a Jewish girl and a Romanian man arrived and wanted to be married as soon as possible. Their wedding was held at a house and three people brought a cake each for the reception. Weddings in houses and garages were very common at first, and were often extremely crowded. By contrast, they are lavish affairs today, with up to 8 bridesmaids, and the receptions often held in places such as the Springvale Town Hall.

These were just a few examples of the situations arising in a work which resulted in great friendships between the migrants and Alan and Lois, and bestowed such privileges such as the naming of children and invitations to weddings.

## FROM SEC TO UNITED ENERGY

The break-up and privatisation of the SEC has resulted in major changes to the face of electrical supply and maintenance in Dandenong. The SEC service depot in Railway Parade has been replaced by United Energy's Field and Technical Services Group at Abbots Road. The SEC administration building in Thomas Street has been replaced by a very much smaller building at the other end of Thomas Street (near Clow Street). By November, there was so little use of customer facilities, according to United Energy, that the facility for paying accounts in Dandenong is now closed.

The old SEC building is now used by the Victorian Department of Health and Community Services, which combines at a single site services which were previously available at several scattered sites around Dandenong.