

Maureen, you came from Sri Lanka?

Yes. I was born on 1st November 1934 (All Saints Day) in Colombo. We married in November 1955 in Colombo. And we migrated to Australia on 25th August, 1968.

What was your life like in Sri Lanka?

Very good, because we were very comfortable. We were, I would say, middle class, or upper middle class, because I was an executive in the central bank, earning very good wages. My husband was an executive in a commercial establishment, he was like a secretary there. We had two children. My daughter was at the Methodist College, which was a very prominent private girl's school in Colombo. My son was at St Thomas's College, a private boy's school, which was like Scotch College here. We were very comfortable. We had our own home, two servants, and transport. My husband and I both played a lot of sport back there.

But things were getting a bit rough, as the government brought in, after we got independence, gradually brought in this beginner (rule?). It became a republic later on, after we came here, but they started phasing in this Sinhalese only, because it was a predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist country, and they wanted to make Sinhalese, which was national language, for us to work in Sinhalese, which was almost impossible for us to do because Sinhalese was not my mother tongue. English was my mother tongue.

And they made it most difficult for us because they took away Saturdays and Sundays, and because it was a predominantly Buddhist country, they made us work on Saturday and Sunday and they had what they called the coiya (?) day, the face of the moon, and the pre-coiya (?) day. For about one year they did that.

Was it weekly?

Sometimes it was weekly and sometimes different, because the moon is not going to come once in seven days; it comes when it is ready. So sometimes we had to work 8 days at a stretch and sometimes 7 days at a stretch.

And were the schools the same

Yes.

So at least the whole family was off at the same time?

Yes. We were told you can take special time off to go to church, what they called 'short leave', But the Christians were very resilient. We were told by the church - they were so devout, so strong - that they said, "Don't do that. Don't give them a chance to say that we gave you special dispensation". They changed the times of the services to suit us, in the morning before we went to work, and because we worked in the city we used to have church in the Fort, in the centre of the city, an old English church built in part of the port where ships used to come in, called St Peter's. We used to go at

Lunchtime and if we couldn't, we could go home and have a service at about 6.30 or 7 in the evening.

Then they found, after about a year, that they were falling so far behind, because they were closed for two days of the week for trade, and the rest of the world was closed for two days, so they had only three days left. Trade was going down to rock bottom, so they had to change it, and brought back the Saturday and Sunday. A lot of the Sri Lankans that are here forget that.

They said, "You have to work in the national language," which was very hard for me. I could read and write but not as well, because it was just a joke, a gimmick, for us. We learnt it as a second language.

And before that my parents and my brothers and sisters were already in Australia, and they kept saying, "You are the only one there. Why don't you come over?" But we didn't want to because up to that stage we were paddling along. But then things started to get bad and I decided to retire. I retired under "non-proficiency in the official language" and they gave us an incentive, they added 5 years to your service, so I took the chance and we put in our papers and we were, of course, passed. They (Australia) gave us one year in which to come so we waited till almost August. So we sold our house and finalised everything and came here on 25th August, 1968.

Were you not allowed to take money out of Sri Lanka?

No. We had a fair bit of assets there in that we sold our house, and we had some money left after we paid off the bank loan. And I, being a bank employee, had a provident fund as well as a pension scheme. My husband had a providence fund and life insurance policies. And we had a lot of assets that we sold - our furniture, our motorcycle, because at that time things were at a premium. They were queuing outside. My husband put one advertisement in the paper for his motorcycle, and about 12 people came to see it. And there was a chap who took it even on condition that my husband can use it until one week before he leaves - so much in demand. Fridge and everything.

You didn't bring stuff with you here?

No, only furniture. Because that was the only thing I wanted. They let us bring only 150 lbs and 75 lbs each for the two children. And we had to lock up our money in what they called a "frozen non-resident blocked account" there. After we got citizenship they sent it to us in instalments, which was useless - we got £100 a month, which was nothing. Anyhow we got it. It as very difficult for us, being used to have everything, and coming here and having to manage. Fortunately my father had a big house, which he and a group of friends had formed a company and bought - a house at 26 Seymour Ave, Armadale - a huge big Victorian mansion. And we lived there until we got this block of land in November 1968 (3 months later). In my whole life I had never paid rent. Because my parents had their own home, and when we got married we lived with my parents, then the bank gave us a loan and we bought our own home and we lived there. So I never paid rent because in my mind it was dead money.

Tell me about buying the land.

We wanted to get in the Box Hill-Ringwood area, because when we were looking for a house, we could have got a house in Noble Park for about \$4000 at that stage. But my husband, he said, "No, we don't want to go to Noble Park". So we wanted this area because I had my two brothers who were already in Box Hill and Doncaster and my parents lived with one of my brothers in Box Hill before they moved to Armadale.

So the family was sort of geared to this area?

I had two brothers in Heathmont. So we liked this area. So on a Saturday and a Sunday my brothers used to come to Armadale and our job was to go looking for houses, as we thought like everybody else we had to buy a house. But we couldn't get what we wanted, because we wanted 4 bedrooms because my parents were going to stay with me. And I had two children, a boy and a girl, so we wanted 4 bedrooms. And all the houses we saw in those days were just three bedrooms. And one bedroom was fairly large and the others were like little pigeon pots. Coming from an area which had such big bedrooms and from Armadale, a Victorian mansion, the bedrooms were huge. We thought, "Where are we going to put all this furniture?" And one day, we had gone to see this house in Ringwood, behind the MacRobertson's factory. My father was with us and he had taken his chequebook. We went down and looked at the house because it had three bedrooms and a dining room with expanding doors, where you could maybe close it and put a bed there for my son. But my youngest brother is a plumber, and he went into the ceiling and he said, "They have electric hot water and the hot water tank is just resting on one two-by-two." And he said you have 3 people going to work and two to school and it will run out of hot water very soon. We took a friend of ours who was a draftsman, and he said "No." We were very disappointed. We told the estate agent we would let him know. We came back, and passing the school we saw this big sign, "Land for Sale". So we swung the cars around. And it amazed us because there were only about 4 houses down the street. All the rest was not even fenced. It had been rezoned. So we went to see how far the station was, and it was walking distance. And he showed us the ground plan and we chose this block of land because the others backed the park, and this block and the next block were the biggest on the estate, just by about 2 feet or something. So we chose this. We paid a cheque for \$40 which was 1% the value of the land. Our solicitor said it was clear-cut. By January tradesmen started. We had a few sketches, but we changed it - room for my parents with access to kitchen and bathroom, and if we had visitors, my parents would still have their privacy. And if the kids made a noise my parents were back there. It was finished in about middle of December, but we waited till early January to move.

The kids were going to Spring Rd Primary in Malvern. My son was 5 1/2 and my daughter was 11. My daughter got a scholarship to go to MacRobertsons but we refused it. The headmaster was furious - he was a Sri Lankan. Too far from Mitcham. She went into high school and my son to the Primary school at Mitcham. My daughter is an Accountant and my son did Architecture. In 1970 when they started going to school there were no other coloured children. My daughter was very timid when she came and they thought she wasn't proficient in English. She went for one week to special teacher for English, and the teacher said she didn't need it!

Many people here wouldn't know that people from Sri Lanka could be English-speaking.

Yes. As soon as my husband came here he joined the Post Office, and was working as a mail sorter. Then he applied to the Commonwealth Public Service and he got called up to the Law Department as a clerical assistant. They kept asking him, "Where did you learn to speak?" His spelling was so good. They go into the courts and my husband typed and didn't make mistakes. There was a job as a reporter in Canberra. All the judges knew him by name

You mentioned being coloured a number of times. Could you explain about your racial origins.

My grandfather's father was an Englishman who came to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to open up the coffee plantations. His name was Mortimer. In Ceylon they have the Planter's Association. We had a completely European background. My eldest brother was the first to immigrate to Australia in the 1950s, the white Australia Policy was in force, and he had to prove, with birth certificates and the rest of it, his genealogy, for four generations - that we were of European strain. At first I used to get very infuriated because you would meet people in the street or even when I was working ... And I would do the crosswords. They would say, "Have you finished?" I would say "Yes". They would say, "What did you get for 13 across?"

When I first came, I worked in the Reserve Bank because I had met the Governor when he came to Colombo, when he was part of the 7th SEANZ Conference (South East Asia, Australia and N.Z.), which they had in Colombo. And they held it at the Central Bank. I was the staff officer in charge of organising things like seating arrangements etc. I introduced myself and my boss said that I was coming to Australia. He said, "When you get to Australia you can come and see me. But I can tell you now, you will never get a job in the same capacity as you have here, because of your age". I was only 34 then. I had never worked anywhere else except in a bank. We came here end of August. I went into bank on 1st Sept, and I walked straight into a job. But I was not happy. I was there for about 10 months. I was in the cash - we

were using machines to count the notes that came back from circulation from the banks. We had to recount these notes, and take away all the defaced torn notes and replace them with new notes. I thought I would lose my mind because I was not using my brain at all. It was like a factory job. It was very monotonous. They had soft piped music and you would lose count of the notes. The girls used to do the notes and the men used to do the coins, which were heavier! I was there for 10 months and I saw this advertisement in the paper for a Share Clerk with Ansett. I had never done shares and I didn't know what a share certificate looked like. Well, I thought I would give it a go. I went for an interview and they said, "Yes". I remember well I started a week later and I was there for about 18 months. After nearly a year I asked for a day's leave to go to my daughter's school, and he said "No, because you have not been here a year. But if you want to you can take it and we will dock you a day's pay." When I went back they had docked me a day's pay, and I was so furious. I went into his room and said, "I was truthful with you and this is the result." I thought, "This is the end of it". I looked around for ... Petroleum ... cashier clerk, and they said, "Can you start tomorrow?". I said I would start the Monday after the Show (It was September). I

started as a Cashier Clerk and ended up as Chief Cashier. When it was taken over I

retired. They offered us compensation or a job in Sydney, but I didn't want to go to Sydney.

I didn't work for 6 1/2 years. I did everything that I wanted to do - tapestry, floral art, smocking, cake decorating - you name it, I did it. We travelled a lot, went overseas for 3 months.

Then I saw this notice in the local paper, by the State Bank calling for part-time tellers, so I applied. I told them I only wanted 3 days a week and I didn't want to go past Box Hill and Ringwood. There were many young ones applying. I think they wanted 75 tellers. That afternoon I got a call saying there was a job at Mitcham for four days a week. I worked there for five and a half years. I was very happy there. It was just like home away from home. We had a lot of older people in the area, and they trusted you. It was like a one-on-one contact. You knew them by name. You knew where they lived. I remember one man was blind, and you could feel trust. I meet some of them when I go up to the supermarket. They say, "Things aren't what they used to be", especially the old ladies. Because now they have to go down to Brentford Square. But most of them live down in Mitcham Road, where there are a lot of units. They used to come to the bank, get their pension, go to the grocer and the butcher and go back home. Now they have to get on a bus and go up there or to Mitcham, and everyone knows what they are doing because its not a personal thing and everyone is standing around.

You mentioned you did these courses. Were they local?

Yes, Most of them were at the Mitcham Community Centre. Later I went to other places. I did Cake Decorating with the Victorian Cake Decorating Association. I went to Vermont Floral Art for classes. Tapestry I do on my own. I played badminton for Box Hill and now I play for Thornburn Ladies. I also play with the Life Activities Club, which is local.

Yes. I had the beginning here.

My parents lived with me for about 10 years. Then they moved to a unit in Peel St. The owner had another house in Mitcham Rd and let them have it. My father used to tend to the chooks and the vegetable garden and they were very happy. My father died in 1981. The house was too big for my mother, and she got a unit in an old house which had been divided into 3 units, in Carrington Rd, Box Hill.

I used to go almost every day to the Mitcham house to see if they wanted anything. My mother used to go up the street everyday. She knew all the people in the neighbourhood. My father worked in the Board of Works and had to retire at 65, and for about 9 months they had no income, because the Social Security said they had not been here 10 years and were not entitled to it. It was very tough, and he was very independent, and he didn't want to depend on any of us, and it broke his spirits a lot. Then there was a friend of Dad's who worked for a solicitor, so she linked us with the Social Security and we had to go for lots of tests and they finally gave him an invalid pension. My father said, "I don't care what they call it". He had been paying taxes

and all of us had been paying taxes. We knew other people who had been here a shorter time, in two months they have got all the benefits. It still ranks you. You see we put two kids through University and didn't get one cent from the government. Others who could not prove their income used to get TAFE,

Church activities?

I am on the vestry in the church. I do the vestry and the flowers. I am President of the Mother's Union and Treasurer of the Box Hill Deanery Mother's Union. I am also the President of the Australian-Sri Lankan Welfare Guild, which has been in existence for 27 years. They are a Christian welfare group. I have just been elected as President for a third term. As part of my duties as President I am the coordinator for senior members' activities. We have an afternoon tea, a lunch in July, and at Christmas time we have a dinner. Each member of the committee has a portfolio. They like the communal feeling - Sri Lankan meals. There are Australians as well, because some are married to Sri Lankan.

Do you do anything to help Sri Lanka?

Yes, we do a fair bit. We sponsor a family there, because there is no welfare superstructure there. If you work in private enterprise you are left to your own resources. Very few people there own their own homes. My husband has two brothers there and they are struggling to exist. But what can you do?

We used to sponsor 2 or 3 children through World Vision, but much of it is taken up with administration, whereas with ours we know that at least 90% goes to the family we sponsor. Now we sponsor this family and in addition there are organisations that we sponsor. Like there is an organisation for the prevention of leprosy, and there is a man patient who we sponsor. During the tsunami, we sent money via the Salvation Army because they go directly to the people in need. There was an Anglican church in the eastern part of the island that was devastated and we gave money directly to that church.

Have you been back very often?

Five times I have been back. I last went in 2000.

How do you find it?

It is very sad. You stand in a queue, get on a crowded bus, stand in a queue. It is so disorderly and so disorganised and each man for himself. There is no fair play.

So you don't regret moving?

No, not at all.

You mentioned your husband had a brother.

Yes, two brothers. One is alright, he has some superannuation and he still has a part-time job with a solicitor. The solicitor is so dependent on him. They get by. His

other brother. He can't work as he's 70. He has two adult children. One is subject to epileptic fits and the other is downs syndrome. He had 5 children. Two of the daughters are married and live here, and send a lot back - \$300 or \$400 a month - otherwise they can't live - with the medicines, rent. There are no facilities for the downs syndrome. They tried to immigrate to Australia three or four times, but can't because of the disabilities. Yet we know friends with children who have similar disabilities who are here and are getting all the benefits.

Has the neighbourhood here in Micham changed much since you came here?

Not much really. Most of our neighbours have been here - they started building their houses. Their kids and our kids went to school together. We are a very lucky neighbourhood because there are a lot of handy people around. If you want anything you just ask Charles our neighbour. Most of the houses, the people have been here from the time we came here. The school being so close, my son and daughter used to come home for lunch, because when we first gave my son sandwiches, my mother found some chucked on the road, so we got permission for him to come home for lunch. My mother was always here, until the kids were grown up. With them used to come all their friends. Some of those friends are still friends with my son.

So you are really very well integrated into the community.

Yes.

And have your children settled in the area?

No. My daughter lives in Lilydale, and my son lives in Burwood. We see them a least once a week.

Have you become naturalised?

Oh, yes, we were naturalised within one year of coming here. We had virtually burned our boats. My parents were here before we were. I had no family back there at all, and there was nothing to go back to. Even when we go back, at the beginning we would feel homesick, we missed the friends and the lifestyle we used to have there. You don't have to phone ahead. But most of our friends are no longer there. Even the ones who are there, they can't afford to. On Saturday night we would go in groups of 20 to a nightclub. It was such a free lifestyle. Just clean fun, dance, jive, come home and next day go to church. Now it has changed. Few European background people left.

How did you find I here, having been used to having servants there?

In my case it was not hard because my parents were here. My mother had the evening meal ready. I never wanted for anything. In Colombo I never washed clothes, because we had servants. "Out of the kitchen" the servant used to say.

We have Sri Lankan food nearly always. On Saturday I cook 4 or 5 curries and keep them in the freezer.