

Immigration, Australia style by Beulah Gross

Forty plus years ago, after a whirlwind look-see visit to Australia, we decided to emigrate here with our two children from South Africa. In six hectic months we obtained police and health clearances; had interviews with the Australian Consul in Pretoria; sold the house, the medical practice and my car, booked our passage to Sydney on the Lloyd Triestino luxury liner, the *Galileo*; tearfully found homes for the dog and cat, sent our household goods on ahead and sold our house.

We knew our main 'lift' wouldn't arrive in Australia for some months after we did and were extremely grateful for the small space in *Galileo's* hold that we, as immigrants, were allowed. We carefully sorted and packed enough clothing, linen and household goods for our immediate needs once we arrived as well as Richard's medical equipment. We sent these boxes, our second 'lift' to Cape Town to await us on the docks. After some heated bargaining and payment of a substantial sum, we were also allocated deck space for the car we were taking with us.



We bid sad farewells to friends and family and set off on the 1600 km drive from Johannesburg to Cape Town. We looked forward to the long cruise to Sydney, hoping it would ease the break from our old life to the new. It would be a holiday-cum-transition period we desperately needed.

We wanted to show the children as much of the country we were leaving so during the week-long drive to Cape Town we visited historic places such as Kimberley and its Big Hole and Oudtshoorn, both of which had family connections. We also made farewell visits to family in other towns en route.

In Cape Town we moved in with Richard's aunt, somehow squeezing ourselves and our substantial amount of luggage into her tiny flat. Richard, methodical and careful as always, confirmed our passage, ensured that our accompanying baggage had arrived safely and arranged to deliver the car to the docks a few days before the *Galileo* was due to load cargo. We then spent several glorious days sightseeing, visiting more family and generally enjoying ourselves. It was all exciting and we congratulated ourselves on organising things so well but our euphoria ended abruptly.

There we were, Richard and I, chatting happily as we headed for the docks to leave the car. The car radio played softly, barely intruding on our consciousness. Suddenly, the word *Galileo* screamed out at us.

‘The Italian liner, *Galileo*, due to arrive in Cape Town tomorrow, yesterday struck a rock on the west coast of Africa when it approached too close to the shore. The passengers have been put ashore on the Canary Islands to await the *Galileo*’s sister ship, the *Michelangelo* and the *Galileo* is returning to Italy for repairs.’

‘Can’t be true,’ Richard gasped, fiddling with the radio dials to find another news report. ‘Must be a hoax.’

‘Look, there’s a telephone box. Let’s phone the agents,’ I cried.

We screeched to a stop and tried to get through to the Lloyd Triestina office but the line was busy.

‘It’s no use. We’d better go there,’ said Richard, so off we raced, breaking all traffic rules.

Judging by the crowd it seemed that everyone in Cape Town had reservations on the ill-fated *Galileo*. The office staff had barricaded themselves in and were ignoring as best they could the irate yells and furious banging on the glass doors which looked as if they would give way at any time. Luckily for the staff, the doors held.

The mob, about 300 strong and bordering on hysteria, comprised English migrants who were, for some mysterious reason, going to Australia via South Africa; Australian globe-trotters whose visas had almost expired; holiday makers of various nationalities who’d booked a luxury cruise – and us. Everyone wanted to know how and when they were going to get to Australia and everyone was convinced their need was the greatest.

Squashed and jostled, Richard and I remained in the crowd for about half an hour. When the office staff turned their backs and calmly began to eat their lunch, we knew it was futile to remain. Clearly, we’d have to make our own arrangements.

We knew we’d have to return to Johannesburg because Jan Smuts Airport was the only one in South Africa servicing overseas flights but there was no transport of any sort available to get us there because it was late December, the main holiday period. In between calls to the railways, bus companies, airlines, consulates and friends in Sydney plus anyone else we could think of, we tried in vain to get hold of the Lloyd Triestino office. The line was permanently engaged – or off the hook.

During the next few days, we went there once or twice a day but the crowds seemed larger and noisier so we didn’t stay. There was no other ship available and no one anywhere knew when the *Michelangelo* was due or whether she’d be going to Sydney. Things looked desperate and we began to think we’d made a mistake. Perhaps we weren’t meant to leave South Africa; perhaps we should cancel everything and stay in the country of our birth.

Then we were offered a single air ticket. Richard could go on his own to fulfil his business commitments and the rest of us would follow as soon as possible. He was all set to go when something made him look at our immigration documents again and there it was. To comply with Australian regulations, we had to enter the country as a family. Sadly, Richard gave up his precious ticket.

Then, at last, someone answered the phone at the Lloyd Triestino office. They had done us proud. Arrangements had been made with Qantas and one, perhaps two, Boeing 707 planes would arrive in Cape Town soon. 'Soon', we were told cheerfully, was anything between one day and two weeks. As each plane could carry 137 passengers and as there were at least 500 people after them, seats would be allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis.

Richard and I foresaw another near riot in the middle of Cape Town so he rushed down early to the Lloyd Triestino office. Although amongst the first there, he waited for hours while the crowd grew. He reported later that, curiously, at this time when one would have expected near-violence, everyone was well-behaved, quiet and orderly. Lloyd Triestino employees, however, were not taking any chances and allowed only a few people in at a time to get their tickets.

Finally, Richard returned with a huge grin on his face, waving four tickets triumphantly.

'I've got them! We're leaving in two days!' he shouted happily and we all hugged one another. 'And, because it's such an unusual situation, they're allowing everyone double the usual baggage allowance and an extra cabin bag.'

So once again we sorted and repacked our possessions, trying to condense the necessities for a long cruise for four people into 40 kg each (more than generous but not nearly enough considering our needs for months after we arrived in Australia). We then had to arrange transport to Australia of the residue, the car and the goods sitting on the docks. This was our third 'lift'.

Back to Lloyd Triestino we trekked, prepared to do battle. But, once again, they were ready. They undertook to send everything to Australia at their expense (the least they could do in my opinion) as soon as possible. All we had to do was see that it was all on the docks, in a specified place at a specified time some weeks in the future. When we explained that we couldn't do this as we'd be in Australia in a day or two, as they well knew, they were charming but adamant. We had to arrange for our excess baggage and the car to be in the right place at the right time otherwise it would not leave South Africa.

We toyed with the idea of selling everything but our dear aunt came to the rescue; she would take care of everything. We were lucky but to this day I wonder who our fellow travellers managed. I hope they got off as lightly as we did.

The plane was crammed. Everyone wore as much clothing as they could and carried as much as possible. One young man clutched a surfboard, a couple had skis slung over their shoulders and we all kept tripping over one another but no one complained. We were, after all, on our way at last.

On take-off the plane seemed to stagger and groan under its excessive load and it lumbered on the runway for what seemed a very long time. Then, with a loud sigh, we were airborne.

The flight was uneventful, and unlike most other flights, very quiet. I suppose everyone was recovering from shock and sorting out their own future. The crew was superb – efficient, friendly and understanding. This was the first, possibly the only, international flight ever to leave from Cape Town for Australia.

We landed at Sydney Airport on 22 January, 1975, positive that our troubles were over. Little did we know.

The house Richard's colleague had arranged for us was owned by a tiny, fierce, ancient Irish woman. Unwillingly, she offered us one small bedroom for the four of us and made it clear she didn't like children. She informed me that I would not be allowed to cook unless I used my own utensils and then only at certain times. The final straw was when I discovered that the toilet was outside, a long, unlit, uneven path away in the backyard and used a pan system. We considered this barbaric so thanked her for her time, thanked the colleague for his efforts on our behalf and booked into the nearest cheap motel.

We stayed there, in one room, for about a week, eating into our meagre funds while we hunted for somewhere to live on a weekly lease. Luckily, we were in a holiday area and found a barely furnished house on the beachfront. This, and the sheets and towels the agent rented us, settled our shaken psyches and made life reasonably bearable. Sleeping on thin mattresses on the floor was an adventure.

We decided we liked the Central Coast and the medical practice offered Richard so began house-hunting, all the while waiting for news of our 'lifts'. Our aunt in Cape Town wrote that the car and cargo had been loaded onto a Brazilian freighter, the *Esqualinho*. We were told she would dock in Sydney in a few weeks but she took two months. We had hired a car, thinking it would only be



for a short time but eventually had to buy one as it was cheaper this way.

Eventually this cargo, minus the car, was off-loaded and stored in a bonded warehouse in the Rocks area of Sydney. With great difficulty we located it and tried to get some of it out of storage, especially Richard's medical equipment. We couldn't take it all because we were still in a rented house and didn't want to unpack and then repack more than necessary. It took almost a week and miles of red tape to 'liberate' what we wanted but we eventually did and drove back to our rented house, our small red station wagon loaded to the gills.

For no known reason, the *Esqualinho* off-loaded our car in Brisbane from where it was road-freighted back to Sydney and placed in another bonded warehouse. It took a week to find it and three frustrating trips to Sydney to 'liberate' her only to find that the battery had been replaced with a dead truck battery. The NRMA came to the rescue and eventually, after a long, long day buying batteries, having the lights altered to comply with Australian regulations and trying to register the car only to find the office closed, we drove home on our South African number plates, TO 7070.

On 3 April 1975 we moved into the house we'd bought and same day, by some miracle, both outstanding 'lifts' were delivered intact. The following day, the previous owners moved their possessions out.

About a year later a new patient attended the surgery. It didn't take us long to discover that he was the pilot who had flown THAT plane from Cape Town to Sydney. Somehow this made us feel that, finally, we had arrived in Australia.

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