

A snapshot of my mother's life around the period of 1965 to 1973 - Adriana Konidaris.

(A talk by Adriana at Glen Eira Historical Society's 50th anniversary celebrations held on Sunday 29th May 2022 at the Murrumbeena Bowls Club.)

A brief history first -

My mother was born Diamanto Kappou in the Peloponnesian mountains.

Like many of Australia's migrants, she arrived from Greece in 1963 docking at Station Pier, Port Melbourne on the Ship *Patris*, after a 4-week journey.

Her Cruise Ship berthed at 1am and when she disembarked there was no one there to pick her up. The distant relatives, family who had sponsored her, never turned up.

Some friends she had made on the long voyage over offered to take her to Russell Street, Melbourne, in the early hours of the morning to what was to become her new address. Her hosts were annoyed that she had woken them at 2am and hadn't organised to arrive at a more convenient time!

Her cousin's wife, Sophia, decided that *Diamanto* was not at all a socially palatable name for her new life in Anglo-Melbourne. So my mother was rebranded, remarketed and given her adopted English derivative name, finessed from Diamanto to Diamond to a Jewel, to Julia.

Nice. Easy. Short. Inoffensive. Quite English.

In those days, jobs were a plenty, signs were up everywhere, and you could walk in and out of a job the same day; days long before cover letters and resumes.

My mother had a few jobs including washing dishes at an Exhibition St Café, cutting fabric for patterns in a factory on Bridge Rd, Richmond and working for Vulcan Heating & Gas company in Mt Waverley.

In 1965 she moved to East Bentleigh, renting a room with a Greek and Swiss family.

She landed a job at global tobacco giant Wills, at Virginia Park, on East Boundary Rd, a short walk from her new home in Parkmore Road, East Bentleigh.

At her job interview a tall German supervisor asked her, "What sport do you play?" Her mind was blank; in post war Greek village life recreational sport was unheard of. She recalled the Australian Open that was on, "Tennis", she said. "How lovely" her supervisor replied, "You're hired".

Wills History

WD & HO Wills was a British tobacco manufacturing company formed in Bristol, England.

Henry Overton Wills I (1761 – 1826) was the British merchant who founded the firm which eventually became one of the largest tobacco companies in late 19th-century Britain, and later became the largest constituent part of Imperial Tobacco.

It was the first British company to mass-produce cigarettes.

Wills himself (like my mother) is said to have been a non-smoker, despite the fact that he is regarded as one of the founders of the British tobacco industry.

In 1913 WD & HO Wills (Australia) Ltd began manufacturing tobacco products at Raleigh Park in Kensington, Sydney.

In 1945 an estate of 16 acres was purchased in East Bentleigh, with a further 22 acres purchased later and the Virginia Park manufacturing branch was established.

The 1950s were to be one of the most successful decades in the company's history and it enjoyed a peak of 83 per cent market share in 1954.

But this was also a period of increased competition as Phillip Morris and Rothmans entered the Australian tobacco market.

Wills Tobacco were the manufacturers of well-known brands including Benson & Hedges and Stradbroke, which were the company's top-sellers and fastest-growing brands. They also manufactured Sterling and Escort (the top brand in South Australia) and Wills Super Mild.

My mother's role at Wills Tobacco factory was as a Machine Operator. She would operate a machine and monitor the cigarettes as they moved through the conveyor belt to be packed into cigarette packets, checking for quality defects, broken and odd-looking cigarettes and picking them up off the conveyor belt before they ruined someone's day for lack of smoking perfection!

It was microcosm of multicultural Australia, Sri Lankans, Germans, Anglo Australians and lots of people of Italian descent. The mother of Antony Catalano, renowned media entrepreneur and former Domain Magazine CEO, also worked alongside my mother on the production line. At that time interestingly, there were no workers of Asian descent in the mix.

My mother's personal experience was overwhelmingly positive. She tells me that she never heard a racist or derogatory word directed toward her.

The standard afternoon shift was 3pm – 11pm. The radio was always on, and the manufacturing plant abuzz with life; Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck played in the background and of course, The Beatles.

Listening to music and talking with co-workers was essentially how she and many other migrants got a better grasp of English. I thank Tom Jones and John Lennon for my mother's mastery of the English language!

There was a lovely factory canteen; the canteen did not sell food. The food was free. The bells would ring for smoko break, dinner and end of shift.

Dinner was always pea or pumpkin soup, mixed grill, mashed potato, broccoli and apple pie, ice-cream and jelly for dessert.

The Factory Supervisor would come around every day with a big book and arrange who was available to work overtime until 1am. The workers would all jostle and vie for a chance to take up additional overtime opportunities, so the Supervisor had to distribute turns evenly among the team.

Each week, once per week, the State Bank of Victoria would visit to offer a convenient service to collect deposits. They were very helpful indeed!

In 1968 my mother applied to Wills Tobacco for a financial home loan. The nice people at Wills approved a loan of \$80,000 at a 4% fixed interest rate per annum. This was kindly discounted from the prevailing Bank interest rates of the time of 8%.

My mother and father built a brand-new orange brick veneer house at 82 Tarnet Street, East Bentleigh.

Each month, when they had saved up enough money, my mother would go into the Factory Office and provide cash payments back to the person in charge. He would vehemently object, "Please take this money and go and buy another house!"

The loan was repaid after 3 years. Imagine such a scenario today, quite extraordinary given the financial arrangements of our times in 2022.

My mother said her clothes and hair would always stink of cigarettes, and they would change their uniforms daily to get the stench out.

As far as she recalls they were all union members. However, there was no industrial angst at all; no rousing union speeches, no strikes. It was a peaceful, cooperative and fun place of work.

The evening Shift Bell would ring at 11pm and they were all sent home in a taxi every evening, 5 nights per week. The taxi would do the rounds dropping groups of workers home.

East Bentleigh was a quiet place indeed. On the weekends my mother would catch the North Road bus to Brighton Beach, walk to the Market Gardens in East Bentleigh and go to the Olympic Memorial Swimming Pool (now GESAC). It was there she learnt to swim by studying the local children closely.

Although Bentleigh was not the place of chic cafes you find today it was a place of fine clothing boutiques for Mens and Ladies wear and Shoe stores that sold footwear with the highest quality leather and designs to parallel those of the streets of Melbourne City itself. There was Centre Arcade and Hoyts Cinema both unique and splendid Art Deco gems that we would frequent, there was something very special about it.

Times were however slowing changing. My mother resigned from Will's in 1973 to have her first child and focus on family life.

By 1972, increased competition meant that Wills market share had slipped to 39%. By the time tobacco advertising was banned on Australian radio and television in 1976, Wills' market share had fallen a further 6% to 33%.

In 1985 Wills combined the separate factory operations in Sydney and in Melbourne into one site at Pagewood, Sydney which took on the name Virginia Park. In 1989 WD & HO Wills (Australia) became a subsidiary of the British American Tobacco Industries group of companies.

Today, Virginia Park is now the site of the new McKinnon Secondary College campus (Years 8 & 9).

My mother remembers her time at Wills fondly; they were some of the best days of her life.

Postscript: Parkmore Rd, East Bentleigh where my mother lived, was also home to two other new Australians, Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, former Soviet diplomats and spies who defected to Australia in 1954.