“I still remember everything about my homeland, especially my very loving family. […] One of the hardest things for me about coming to Australia was that none of them followed me on the migration path and that I was left to do it on my own.”

The stories of…

Natasha Green and Marietta Mavrangelos

Tash (Natasha) left her home country of Ireland and moved to Australia in August last year when she was only 16 years old. She came with her parents, who decided to make Australia their new home in an effort to pursue better opportunities.

Originally from Greece, Marietta came to Australia in October 1956 at the age of 20. Marietta came for economic reasons, in search of a better life.

“At the time, it was after the war, and there was a lot of poverty. There was also a sense and idea that there was much to explore, and that if you took the path of migrating to another country, then you may have better opportunities. There was a sense of anticipation as well, particularly amongst young people. The expectation amongst many immigrants in Australia at that time was that they would be in the country for a year or two, or only for a limited period of time. But when I arrived in Australia, I found that it didn’t work out that way. Also, I realised that it wasn’t the way I had expected it to be. It was a shock because I hadn’t anticipated that I would encounter so many challenges.”

Do you want to share your experience or do you know someone who has an interesting story to tell, please contact the FECCA Office at admin@fecca.org.au or call (02) 6262 5755 for more information.
Tash has a lot of special memories from back home, and most of them are related to friend and family gatherings. She recalls one particularly humorous incident about time spent with her friends.

“I remember one day, we all went to the park. It was snowing heavily, and there were hundreds and hundreds of children on this massive oval. Everyone was having snowball fights. I remember seeing a giant snowman and that a boy ended up getting thrown on top of it! He collapsed on the ground in a pile of snow and started laughing! It was a great day and lots of fun. I guess I miss the snow and my friends a lot.”

Marietta also recalls happy and special memories from her home country.

“I still remember everything about my homeland, especially my very loving family. I come from a very large family—I had five sisters and two brothers, and we were very close. One of the hardest things for me about coming to Australia was that none of them followed me on the migration path and that I was left to do it on my own. The hardest thing was being away from them.”

“My first impressions of Australia were incredibly different from anything I’d ever known or imagined. Not knowing how to speak the language made my life extremely difficult. Even relatively simple tasks like going shopping became very difficult. I think that for new migrants, having a good command of English is very important for their initial settlement. I know that it had a great impact on me. I believe that the difficulties were made worse for me as a result of being away from my family and not knowing the language, and after three months in Australia, I ended up in hospital and stayed there for some time. So, I would say that my early years in Australia was very difficult indeed.”

For Tash, moving to Australia was a bit of a culture shock.

“The first thing that I realised while driving from the airport was that everything was so organised. We come from a little town which is almost like a village with not many houses, not many shops and you needed to drive for half an hour to get to the nearest town! When I got here, I saw all of these fast-food restaurants and shops. I found the way they were all lined up quite strange—and there were so many!”

“I also found settling in very hard at the beginning. I didn’t know anyone and I had to wait about six months before I was able to go to school. I was feeling very lonely all the time and I didn’t have much to do. As opposed to Marietta, I was able to speak the language, but despite that, I was still lonely because I wasn’t really able to go out, socialise, or do anything. We lived in this block of rental flats for the first couple of weeks and then we moved to a suburb that was far away from everything. If you didn’t know your way around, it was very difficult to get to places.”

“I think one of the happiest moments was finally getting a job in a restaurant. I think that was the happiest I had ever been, because it meant that I could finally talk to people and socialise! I am still at school and I work part-time, but it feels great to be able to get a bit of extra money and also to meet different people.”

For Marietta, the happiest and most fulfilling moments were when she had her children and, years later, grandchildren.

“After feeling very isolated and lonely at the beginning, I finally had a family here with me. Before, the only thing that was bringing me the same level of happiness was whenever I used to receive a letter from Greece, from a member of my family.”

“Another thing that was very important in my life and made me happy, particularly because I left my family behind, was that I came from an island in the Ionian seaport of Zakynthos, and there were a number of Zakynthians in Adelaide at the time who had all migrated simultaneously. We obviously connected, and we would all go to each other’s homes. The men would play guitar and the women would prepare food—there was a great sense of community and
friendship. We all lived closely together in what the government would now call an ‘ethnic ghetto’. But that ghetto helped us to avoid isolation and gave us an outlet and sense of belonging and community. We were all able to help each other because we all lived relatively close to each other."

“My mother also helped me a lot. She would always take me out of the house and we would go and buy cupcakes together. She spent a lot of time with me. She knew I was feeling down and I think that I couldn’t have coped without her. She was my support.”

“Another highlight of being in Australia that I probably only appreciated later on, was the benefit of living in a multicultural society. If someone would have told me in the 1950s and 1960s, when I was a new immigrant to this country, that my son would marry a Chinese girl I would never have ever believed them! And yet, my son has married a woman who I adore and I am delighted that my family has become bicultural instead of monocultural. That was one of the many lovely things about living in Australia and living in a multicultural society.”

Contrasted with Marietta’s recollections about her happiest moments, Tash believes that the most challenging aspects of the settlement process for her were through making friends and finding ways to spend her time.

“My first impressions of Australia were incredibly different from anything I’d ever known or imagined. Not knowing how to speak the language made my life extremely difficult. Even relatively simple tasks like going shopping became really hard.”

“My mother and I were just staying in the house for days, just trying to find something to do. I think the worst thing was trying to get out of that isolation and bored state of mind that we were in. I remember that I was just staying in my room, staring at the ceiling because I was finding it hard to get out of that situation and find something to occupy myself with and also connect with the community. I love my mother a lot, and we are very close to each other, but because we stayed together in the house for a long time, there was this tension building up between us and we started to get angry at each other. We needed to get out and do something.”

“I found it hard enough to fit in, even without language barriers. I cannot even imagine what it would have been like not to speak the language or talk to people.”

In Marietta’s view, the most difficult aspect of settlement in Australia was through not knowing the language and not being able to communicate effectively.

“Particularly in the 1950s and the 1960s, the majority of migrants in Australia couldn’t speak English. I found it particularly difficult, for example, when dealing with hospitals and those sorts of settings where it can be very difficult if you are not able to speak the language.”

Tash believes that getting a job helped her most in her settlement process.

“This is because having a job facilitated an environment where I could interact with people, socialise and get out of isolation. My mother also helped me a lot. She would always take me out of the house and we would go and buy cupcakes together. She spent a lot of time with me. She knew I was feeling down and she was trying to get me out of that state. It made me feel so much better. I think I couldn’t have coped without her. She was my support. In general, it was very helpful to have my family around me and to know that I wasn’t going through it all on my own. It was comforting that we were all in it together and all felt the same way.”

Marietta says that her skills as a dressmaker helped her to overcome some of the challenges that she encountered in her settlement process.

“I was a completely self-taught dressmaker. I had some basic skills from back home, and I was able to further develop them here. That was enormously helpful for my family because, other than working in a factory, jobs were not readily available for those who didn’t speak English in those years. So, I focused on developing my skills as a dress-maker and seamstress and I managed to make a name for myself in the
The situation was very similar to Tash’s, because when I started my own job, it just gave me that sense of being more connected to the community and the ability to make a contribution."

In 1956, or in that era, my husband who was engaged mostly in factory work was making about 12 pounds a week. At the time, that money was sufficient to cover the rent and some food. But with the additional money that I was earning as a dressmaker, even if it was sometimes only an extra pound a week, it made a difference in actually being able to support the family and to put food on the table. Having that extra income meant a great deal to me."

What gives you hope and keeps you strong?

Tash’s philosophy has been to “think that all of this is just a mild bump in the road and to just keep going. Having my family next to me for support has also been important, knowing that we all go through challenges and can overcome them together. Everyone has something in their life that brings them down, but we all learn how to get over it.”

In Marietta’s view, she has derived happiness from being able to return to Greece on holiday on a regular basis. "I managed to save enough money to buy a little holiday house on my island in Greece which meant a great deal to me. When I was more fit, and before my vision started to deteriorate, I used to go there every two years. That brought me great joy. The feeling that I was working hard and I was able to go every two years to have a holiday and spend some time with my family was a great achievement."

“We all lived closely together in what the government would now call an ethnic ghetto. But that ghetto helped us avoid isolation and gave us an outlet and sense of belonging and community.”

“Of course, my children also brought me a lot of joy and I am very proud of them.”

“Now, I just want my family to be well and my grandchildren to do great in life. I also wish good health for everyone.”

Tash hopes that, in the future, she will be proud of who she is and for being in Australia. She says, “I don’t want to end up wishing that I would have changed anything. I just want to be happy with myself and my life here.”

Advice for other immigrant women

“I would probably tell other immigrant women to put themselves out there”, Tash said. “People won’t bite you, so you should feel safe and confident to interact and to have a conversation. Just look for things to do and don’t sit and wait for things to come to your doorstep—even if it is just something simple, like going for a walk down the road. A lot of people that I have known and currently know are mostly people who just stopped and talked to and coincidently connected with.”

“I do not think that there are many life lessons that I could pass on from my experience but if there is anything, I would say that it is better not to worry about tomorrow, or a week later or one year later, but to only worry about what is going on in the moment.”

Marietta believes that, “it is important to learn English and to speak the language. Equally important, don’t ever look back and cry like I did. Look forward and make the most of your life in your new country. Be positive and move on.”

“The advice that I give my daughter is about the importance of remaining close to her children and living a long, healthy and happy life for them as well as for herself. I remember that in moments of happiness, as well as through periods of sadness in my life, I always used to call out for my mother but she wasn’t there. I can’t emphasise enough how important it is for mothers and daughters to be close to each other in loving relationships and to remain healthy for each other. You can always have more friends, and of course, you have a relationship with your father, but being close to
your mother is important. It is a very special relationship that should be preserved."

“In terms of the advice that I would give to my two granddaughters, I would tell them that the most important thing is for them to get a really good education and to follow their dreams. When I came here, I left my parents, and my brothers and sisters behind, but I wasn’t really allowed or entitled to pursue my own dreams. I had to follow other people’s goals and I feel that has cost me greatly. Above all, I would advise following your dreams and making sure that you follow what you want to achieve and not what other people would want for you.”

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