

Marta's Journey

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This article relates the immigration experience of a young Chilean woman, Marta 'F' in 1970. It illustrates how the Australian government's policy of 'assimilation'¹, in force until the early 1970s² and the current policy of 'multiculturalism'³ have both failed to fully satisfy this immigrant's desire for acceptance and to allow her to feel at home in her adopted country. An interview with the immigrant reveals that government policy has not been wholly implemented by the community because many Australians of British descent have been reluctant to fully accept newly-arrived 'non-British' nationalities into their midst. In the 1970s, British hegemony was still pronounced in Australia.

Australia became an immigrant destination in 1788 when a group of British colonies was formed between 1788 and 1836.⁴ Between 1788 and when convict transportation finally ceased in 1868⁵ the majority of immigrants were forced to migrate. 160,000 convicts were transported to Australia between 1788 and 1868 and most were English.⁶ A pattern of 'Britishness' with all its nuances throughout our social, economic and political institutions was thus established and is still deeply influential. Although thought unremarkable and unconsciously practised by those whose descent is British – this 'Britishness' is highly visible and is an awkward barrier for those newcomers of other than British descent.

In early colonial Australia, it was unusual for immigrants to come to Australia from outside the 'white' British Empire, but many could not afford the costs of migrating to Australia. Assisted passages systems were devised from 1831. Assisted immigration built the Australian population in nearly all years between 1831 and 1982. In keeping with the concept of 'A new Britannia' (Australia and New Zealand are the two 'most British' societies in the world outside Britain) assisted passages were normally unavailable except for British subjects.⁷ The Australian population was thus planned and engineered to a greater extent than is true for almost anywhere else. The plan was for Australia to remain British, to increase the manual labour force, to redress the gender imbalance and to keep Australia 'white'⁸. British subjects had virtually free access to Australia until 1983.⁹ Marta 'F', of Polish and Lithuanian parents, was born in Britain, so she had a British passport.¹⁰ She was one of the 2,000 Chilean arrivals to Australia between 1970 and 1973. Most were educated, literate and wealthy.¹¹ Marta was educated and literate but by no means wealthy.

To place the above figure of 2,000 arrivals in context, the Chili-born community in Australia was only 90 in the 1901 Census. There was no significant intake of Chilean migrants to Australia until the late 1960s. By 1971, the Chili-born community in Australia had increased to 3,760 people.

There were several contributing factors that influenced Marta's decision to migrate to Australia in 1970 when she was 23 years: Her parents had met some Australians working in Chili; her elder brother had had a 'disastrous experience' in North America some years earlier; she was disappointed in her course at the

¹ J Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: the story of Australian Immigration*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p22. " 'Assimilation' is a disputed term. To many it meant the disappearance of any characteristics which marked off individuals from each other ... 'Assimilation' would be complete when nobody noticed the newcomer.

² *ibid*, p22.

³ *ibid*, pp41-43. The Whitlam government officially ended White Australia and gave its support to the concept of multiculturalism, however, it was the Fraser government, 1975-83 which is best remembered for its humane approach to refugees and its creation of the institutions of multiculturalism.

ibid, p29 'The multicultural society was here ... before either the policy or the lobby. By 1970, 20 per cent of Australians had been born overseas and that proportion increased slowly over the next thirty years to reach almost 25 per cent by 2000. Within that total ... the British-born numbers rose only by 25,000 between 1971 and 1996.'

⁴ J Jupp, *Immigration*, Sydney University Press, 1991, p1.

⁵ *ibid*, p3.

⁶ *ibid*, p4.

⁷ J Jupp, 2002, *op.cit.* pp5, 17.

⁸ *ibid*, pp17, 18.

⁹ *ibid*, p15.

¹⁰ Interview with Marta 'F', 18 April 2003.

¹¹ *Multicultural Australia - The Chili-born community* jointly produced by Multicultural Affairs Branch and the Statistics section of DIMIA and the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing, p1.

Marta's Journey

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Catholic University in Santiago because lectures suffered by having too much political discussion when she didn't understand and didn't want to become involved with; her parents were afraid that with the election of Salvador Allende, conditions in Chili could become 'difficult and ugly'.

Marta's parents suggested that since she had a British passport, she could immigrate to Australia and eventually sponsor their entry. Marta didn't want to leave her family but agreed that immigration was an opportunity to experience life in a new country. Because she was young, skilled, single, had a British passport and had studied English, she felt very welcome at the Australian Embassy in Santiago. The Embassy had been advertising for Chilean immigrants. Three weeks after making her decision to migrate, Marta had completed her medical examination and was ready to leave Chili.

Marta arrived in Sydney on a Saturday evening aboard a UTA flight. She was met by immigration officials. She knew no-one in Sydney. The YWCA and the Salvation Army hostel were suggested as being suitable accommodation. She chose the YWCA. Sydney was a much bigger city than she had expected and as she was driven into the city in a Commonwealth car, she thought she must be brave, that as her parents had lost everything during the Communist regime in Poland, it was her responsibility to take this opportunity in a new country and that later she might be able to sponsor them. When she arrived at the YWCA she was warmly welcomed. It was very clean and provided 3 meals a day. Some Australian food combinations surprised Marta, "having lettuce and a slice of orange and beetroot – for me, a salad is with dressing ... you eat it [the Australian salad] anyway, because you are hungry."

Marta shared a room with a very young Indian girl who could not speak any English. They communicated in sign language and by drawing pictures of their respective home countries. The other new arrivals were from Peru, and there were other Chileans. Marta couldn't remember if there were any newly-arrived Europeans.

The next day was a Sunday. One of the girls suggested that they go to Mass, to St Mary's Cathedral. On the way, Marta tried to buy a newspaper from a street stand, but couldn't understand the seller. This unnerved her, "I knew the English and the American accent, but this!!! I was standing there for 10 minutes trying to understand what he was saying."

Then, as she was approaching St Mary's, she fell on the kerb of the road. Apparently the kerbs in Sydney are much higher than those in Santiago. Marta bruised her knee badly. Her first full day in Sydney proved to be a painful learning experience.

Marta studied English for 6 years at High School in Chili. She also attended a bilingual secretarial school conducted by the British Institute in Santiago and in the evenings, English conversation classes at the American Institute. Marta was further exposed to the English language as her father subscribed to *Time* and *National Geographic* magazines. After arrival in Sydney, Marta had no formal English lessons. She attempted to learn 5 new English words every day choosing them at random from the dictionary.

Marta remembers two people coming to the YWCA to help find jobs for the South American girls. Factory work was suggested – packing ham. This didn't appeal to Marta. She decided she would try to find a job as a clerk-typist, if this failed she would reconsider the packing job.

She familiarized herself with the city streets, venturing a little further each day. The yellow and green double decker buses terrified her. Santiago had only single decker buses. Marta discovered the Commonwealth Bank in Market Street. There, to her relief, she found someone who spoke Polish. Mrs ZIELINSKI not only opened a bank account for Marta, but studied the 'Positions Vacant' column of the *Sydney Morning Herald* with her and helped arrange job interviews. Mrs ZIELINSKI was an immigration officer who worked in the bank. Marta started work as a clerk-typist for Prudential Insurance Corporation. The job was

Marta's Journey

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boring and repetitive but she decided to bear with it.¹² Now that she was earning, the YWCA encouraged her to find other accommodation to make way for new arrivals. Again, Mrs ZIELINSKI came to Marta's rescue. She suggested that Marta stay with her family at Roseville, which she did, for a few months. Marta worked extremely hard in those early days in Sydney. As well as her main job with Prudential Insurance, she was also employed as a babysitter, cleaner and laundry worker to earn extra money.

Marta considers the advantages of living in Australia as: Australia has a stable political system, unlike South American countries 'where most of the governments and politics are very unsettled.' She also spoke positively about the Australian economy, job opportunities and government financial entitlements for the disadvantaged. Marta perceives the disadvantage of living in Australia as there being a lack of warmth in 'human relations'. She sees a chasm between native born Australians of British descent and the migrant population of other than British descent although she concedes that this has narrowed during the last 20 years. She attributes the tension between the two groups as being due to 'British' Australians' lack of knowledge of other cultures and 'British reserve'. In the early years after her arrival she was puzzled and hurt when she was told not to talk loudly on the bus and not to talk with her hands. 'You know, here we don't do that.' Marta said she always felt she had to suppress her liveliness.

She found life in her suburb (Rose Bay) unfriendly. It was many years before an Australian asked her to their house for a cup of tea and when she was finally invited to a barbecue she was surprised to find that she was expected to bring her own meat and alcohol. This is unheard of in Chili. It would be considered rude and inhospitable.

Marta has noticed a distinct improvement in Australian cultural life over the last 10 years. She finds that 'there's still that element of reserve even though there's also more openness and acceptance ... At the beginning it was a very narrow minded attitude of 'I don't want to try this', 'I don't want to listen to this' – now I can still speak with an accent, I can't get rid of it, but people are not constantly [saying] 'Where [do] you come from?' or pulling a funny face or looking at me in a different way.'

As Marta also stated: 'now you have foreign movies, foreign restaurants, music, festivals, but it has been a gradual process.'

Despite all Australian culture's shortcomings, did she, after 33 years, feel 'at home' in Australia? The answer was Yes.

Although Marta still has close relatives living in Chili who she visits every few years, she no longer feels any real connection to Chili – 'my connection to it is a distant memory.' When asked if she felt that she belonged in Australia, she answered 'definitely, definitely, over the years, slowly, slowly. It's not 100% there's still a longing perhaps, for my European connections – But every time I come back [to Australia] and I see the sea and the Harbour Bridge and those red ... roof tiles I say "Oh God, it's so good to be back."'¹³

Even though Marta declared that she felt very much at home in Australia now, it is suggested that she still has reservations. It is felt that her heart and spirit belong to Europe, not Chili, and not Australia. However, for practical, economic reasons it is best for her and her Australian-born son and daughter to remain in Australia.¹⁴ Marta has many friends. Most are Chilean or European immigrants like her, though she has several 'British' Australian born friends. Her Australian born friends have not shared her journey and, unlike the Australian born, she has not known the stability of being born, growing up and living all her adult life in the same culture. The Australian born of whatever background, but especially those of British background,

¹² It is interesting to note that the 1996 Census found that in Australia among Chilean-born people aged 15 years and over, the participation rate in the labour force was 66.9 per cent and the unemployment rate was 13.2 per cent. The corresponding rates in the total Australian population were 61.9 and 9.2 per cent respectively. *Multicultural Australia - The Chili-born community*, op.cit.p2.

¹³ Interview with Marta 'F', 18 April 2003.

¹⁴ Marta's husband, a fellow Chilean immigrant who she met and married in Sydney, sadly died in 2002.

Marta's Journey

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could do much more at community level to be more understanding towards newcomers. A happy, cohesive, co-operative society may only be achieved when Australians of Anglo-Celtic background become more genuinely accepting and less judgmental and suspicious of those of other than British background. Australia's geographical isolation from most of the rest of the world which has prevented the free interchange of different people, such as in Europe, combined with the still predominantly 'British' character of our major institutions have created this situation. Greater awareness and thoughtfulness of others' feelings in this context would help. In the same vein, it would help newcomers greatly if before arrival they could be better informed about Australia and of Australian cultural life in all its aspects including social practices and attitudes. This greater understanding between 'old' and 'new' Australians would certainly facilitate a happier immigrant settlement.

Bibliography

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