
Community voices – transcript – OH 18/4

Gertrud Wilkins

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Interviewer: Daniela Kautsky

Project: Lives of Older Women of Non-English Speaking Background and Their Adaption to and Contribution to Life in South Australia

Extract of an Oral History where she explains how she came to Australia as a refugee during World War II from England after fleeing Czechoslovakia in 1939.

So you always wanted to come to Australia. It wasn't safe to stay in England, or was it just your dream?

No, I always wanted to travel and when I was a very young girl I always resented the fact that I wasn't a boy, because as a boy I could have gone as sailor all round the world. I always felt very restricted in Europe wherever I was. I liked it but I felt always the world was much more interesting in other parts. So I could have stayed in England but I wanted to go somewhere else. I had applied to go to South America to join my sister and brother-in-law there, but by that time the South Americans were not interested in anyone who had no capital. You either had to be very specially - - - . Not even with professions that they wanted. It was really capital that they were looking for, and of course I didn't have any. So I thought a second best thing would be Australia.

I went to Australia House. They sent me a message to come to Australia House. It was very difficult sending messages, because during war time it could be intercepted. However, I met a very nice gentleman - very tall - who looked down on me and said, "Now look, you really want to go Australia?" Because we knew that the ships were going down, the bombs were falling. I said, "Yes, I do". "All right." So I got a message a little bit later to come to the wharfs over in Tilbury or somewhere, to join a ship. No name was given. That was the day before I was supposed to go down to the harbour. Then I got another message, very quickly after that, not to come. It happened three times. Three times I was advised to go down to the wharf - to the harbour - and three times it was cancelled. What I did find out much later, that neither of these ships I was supposed to go to Australia on, actually had returned. They had all been torpedoed by the magnetic mine. That was the time of the magnetic mine. I don't think anyone, anywhere, knew how many ships the British had lost.

So eventually, about two months later, I was called to Australia House again. They said, "Well look, there is no possibility of getting to Australia by boat, but you could go on a boat to New Zealand, and then find your own way across to Australia". I said, "All right".