

## **Australia – A new life (1954)**

**By Tessa Quinlan**

Brigitte looked back, as the morning sunrise filled the busy city of Bremen in warm light. It was a cool, autumn morning and a slight wind assisted the Skaubryn southward. Albertina wrapped a warm capable hand around her sister's shoulders. "I will miss it too," she whispered. The soft, lullaby of her sister's voice made Brigitte relax. She turned away from the port of Bremen into Albertina's warm petticoats and drank the sweet smelling scent of lavender that her sister always carried with her, reminiscing on the sweet memories of last night. She could remember the familiar, faint clicking of needles and the smooth lullaby of music from Albertina's violin as it filled the living room with appeasing sound. Brigitte and Mutti sat in front of the hearth knitting socks and warm, woolen jumpers for their long journey to Australia. Karlheinz, Brigitte's five-year-old brother sat on the floor gazing at the frolicking flames in the fireplace – thinking about the times that lay ahead. Siegfred, Karlheinz's older brother sat at the kitchen table reading his book - Grimm's Fairytales. Brigitte could remember the high pitched whistle of her Papa as he made his way down the stairs...How she would miss those dear, old times in her warm, comfortable home.

"We had best go see Mutti," said Albertina sensibly. Brigitte glanced, over her shoulder at the city she had lived in for as long as she could remember. The tall buildings and houses glowed as the warm sunlight glinted in the cool, morning air. Brigitte glanced at her sister's pale, white skin. Their eyes met, conversing. Each already possessing a dear longing of their old home.

Brigitte followed Albertina's lengthy strides along the ship's smooth, wooden deck to the cabins below. She could smell the fresh and salty taste of the ocean as it sprayed over the planks of the boat and splashed lightly onto the tips of her shoes. She watched as the waves grew higher and higher, crashing down suddenly into the surrounding ocean. Sea spray billowed up into her face, cooling and refreshing her. Things seemed much clearer to her. She could imagine the wild lands of Australia filled with animals. She closed her eyes and pictured her and her family gathered in a new land. A strange land. Her new home...

That night Brigitte lay awake on her hard, wooden berth. She thought of Bremen. All the good times she had once spent there. She longed for her warm, fluffy eiderdown and her own comfortable bed clothes. She closed her eyes and drifted into unconsciousness.

Brigitte was woken from her dreams by a sudden lurch beneath her, throwing her out of her warm bunk and onto the cold, hard wooden planks beneath. Feeling ill, she stumbled blindly up off the floor, and out onto the decks as the ship rocked again.

Out in the open air, Brigitte's eyes were stung with a bitter cold breeze, whipping at her hair and face. She was blinded for a second as beam of iridescent light struck the sea. Then the surrounding ocean was engulfed in darkness. She waited. Thunder clapped, menacingly. The wind howled again, pushing hard against her – a challenging call. She felt the need to spew. Her body was drenched in icy water as a large wave smashed against the ship. Brigitte yelped as her body was tossed unwillingly over the main balustrade - saved only by a thin, rusty rail. She clung on with all her might, screaming as loud as she possibly could.

Holding on for what seemed like years, brisk footsteps finally approached and a strong, capable arm grabbed onto her wrist, hauling her back onto the deck. She lay, panting.

“What ya doing down there, ya poor lass, ya could’ve drowned!”

A thin man glared down at her. His face was in need of a good shave. His blue eyes stared deep into hers.

“Ich...Ich, danke,” was all she could stammer.

“I know what ya need”. The man’s face broke into a compassionate smile. “You need a nice cup o’ hot chocolate.”

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Brigitte’s family had spent weeks on the ship journeying to Australia and now they had finally arrived. It was a warm, sunny, January morning as the ship finally came to a halt at the Port of Melbourne. Brigitte stood on the boat, staring out at the country that would soon be her new home. She turned around and smiled up at her Papa. Her Papa returned her gesture and together, Brigitte led her family onto the soil of Australia.

Their relief of having completed their long travel to a new home was short lived as the family was quickly ushered on towards what would prove to be another long and tedious journey.

Brigitte arrived at the Melbourne train station, sweaty, tired and disheartened. She trudged dismally next to her sister, groaning with the heavy weight of the air around her.

A long, red train rattled slowly up the tracks, shaking slightly. Brigitte covered her ears as the train braked, letting out a sharp, ear-splitting squeal.

The train was filled with the smell of sweat and dust. Voices called and chattered relentlessly around her. Brigitte longed for a cool breeze to blow the foul smell away and to refresh her mind. She sank onto the hard, wooden seat and leaned back. She wanted more than anything to sleep, however this red, rattling carriage would not cooperate with that.

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It had been seven hours of heat, boredom and noise. Brigitte peered out of the small, glass window. The chatter around her increased so that she could no longer hear her own thoughts. The train let out a deafening whistle, once again forcing her to cover her ears as the carriage screeched to a halt.

Brigitte led the way out of the claustrophobic cabin, keen to get out into the fresh, clean air. She walked (slightly unbalanced – with her legs stiff and weak from sitting in a cramped space for so long). Overwhelmed and tired, she stared out at the new land which would be

her home. The faint, unfamiliar but clear smell of Eucalyptus trickled into her nostrils, filling her with a twinkle of hope.

All of a sudden, people rushed around her. She was engulfed by the surge of the crowd and carried on towards a large platform. Beads of sweat formed on her head and trickled down her pale, white face. Parched and weary, she longed for something cool to quench her thirst.

Sticks and leaves crackled beneath her feet as she walked across the dirt pathway into the Bonegilla Migrant Centre, where they would be given food and a home. Her smiling face turned to one of disappointment as she saw the thin, iron shacks that would be their home. The hostels looked like soldiers lined up in uniform. They all looked the same, cold and unhomely. Just off the side of the path Brigitte saw a flicker of silver and grey movement in the shadows. She stopped and peered closer toward the cluster of trees standing tall and proud in the long, brown grass. In the faint light of the setting sun she could just make out the outline of a large, furry creature. Staring, she thought it looked extremely similar to an oversized rat. It had long, wiry whiskers and a large tail that seemed to support it as it bounded quickly over the hot, grassy plain surrounding it.

That night in her new home, Brigitte lay in the darkness, incapable of sleeping. She tossed and turned on the uncomfortable, wire bed which Mutti labelled as a 'farm gate'. With every move the bed creaked terribly. With so many people living in close quarters, the noise around her was one of a whining symphony. Outside loud rasping, chirps chorused without mercy – some type of insect, so she was told earlier by the hostel supervisor. She took a deep breath. Her nose was filled with the sickly smell of mutton which had permeated the walls and floors of the buildings.

The wind howled through the trees around her and a young baby cried mournfully a few doors down. Suddenly Brigitte heard a loud crack. Then another.....She rolled out of bed and trod sleepily to the window. Peering cautiously through the sheer curtains, she checked outside for signs of a storm. No flashes, no lightening. She ran to the side of her Papa's bed., shaking him into consciousness.

"Papa, what is the dreadful cracking noise. It is not lightning..."

"The iron walls are contracting as the temperature drops and it makes a noise as it shrinks," her Papa replied in a tired voice, he turned over in a hope to return to slumber.

Brigitte returned to her bed and, exhausted, finally fell asleep to the cracking of the iron, the howling wind, creaking beds, singing insects, and the cries of a tired baby.

In the morning, Brigitte trudged the 100 metres to the latrines. The open-pits stunk terribly, but that didn't worry her, she was more concerned about the spiders watching her from every corner. Looking around her she felt it was safe enough to enter the building. She screamed... A large black creature dropped from the iron roof, its back a bloody red. She ran out of the toilets, straight into a tall supervisor.

“Woah there young miss, what’s the matter with you then, eh?”

“A...A spider,” she replied staring innocently into his dark green eyes.

“Oh, you have to tough’n up here young missy. Spiders and snakes lurk everywhere in this place.” He turned on his heel, chuckling to himself.

She headed straight to the washrooms wondering why they called this place a welcoming centre. It didn’t seem very welcoming. She splashed her face with water, regretting her actions instantly as the freezing liquid hit her already cold skin. With no hot water to warm her up, she was reluctant to cleanse herself further. Feeling more alert, Brigitte strode back to the hostel and met Mutti and Albertina as they made their way to the mess hall. She told them of the spider and they shuddered.

The clanging of cutlery and the chatter of languages from many foreign countries could be heard throughout the hall. Brigitte waded along the bain-maries of food as jolly cooks splattered unrecognisable slops onto her empty plate. People continued to talk all around her but, unable to understand their incessant chatter and laughter, Brigitte felt isolated. She sat and finished her plate, which tasted about as good as it looked. Then she walked back to her family’s bungalow, shutting the door on these other strange people who shared her new home.

Positioned comfortably on the hard, wooden floorboards, Brigitte opened her most prized possession, a small dolls house, and began pulling some plain and simple furniture out of her trunk. The dolls house had been made by a kind-hearted man working on the outskirts of Bremen. He made an odd assortment of wooden things and gave Albertina and Brigitte this particular house as a gift to wish them well on their long journey to Australia. She dusted her hands over the small, wooden structure, breathing in the sweet smell of freshly carved wood. She smiled to herself, treasuring the moment as a part of her life back in Germany. Her thoughts were interrupted by a hushed whispering...

“This is nothing like what they promised us.”

“Is there no way of returning to Germany?”

“No. Even if there was, we have no hope there. The war left Germany in ruins and with jobs so scarce throughout Bremen, we will become too poor. There is no future for us there”.

Her parents continued their strained conversation for a short time before Brigitte crept into their room. Their distressed faces turned to ones of love and kindness.

“Come darling. Let us go and swim in the weir. After all, this place is named after the water that surrounds it, did you know that? Bonegilla – the Aboriginal word for big water.”

The lake (or weir as it was called by the locals) was a large mass of beautiful, blue water. Having spent the afternoon pleasantly wading in the shallow depths and floating on old car

tyres, Brigitte's delight was short lived as she suffered that evening with arms tinged bright red...aggravated and sore...burnt from the heat of the sun.

But this new country had not finished with its punishment of these newcomers. The next morning brought large, itchy welts across Brigitte's legs. Mosquitoes were not such a problem in her homeland.

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The days at the migrant camp were passed taking English classes and attending school. New friends were made and life at the migrant hostel became more familiar.

As the family began to adapt to their new surroundings, laughter slowly penetrated back into their lives. Her father was a constant source of joy. His spirit, love and good humour were treasured dearly.

One evening in Bonegilla, Brigitte and her family sat and watched Papa cut the oranges that he had bought from the market. Brigitte picked up a slice and brought it upward to her lips. Biting down on its soft flesh, her mouth was filled with a sour bitterness. She spat her mouthful out in disgust.

"It's grapefruit not orange," cried Albertina, her face scrunched up as the sour odour reached her nostrils.

Brigitte's Papa let out a laugh, "and to think I carried a whole box back for all of you."

"I guess we will be eating a lot of grapefruit," Mutti added cheerfully.

They laughed together then, and for many years to come, about Papa's many 'mix-ups', including the time when he had brought home jars of mustard, mistaking them for honey.

Brigitte's Papa was different to many of the men living at Bonegilla. He was always out talking to people, looking and shopping, while others sat at the doorstep of their hostels smoking, playing cards and waiting for work. He was particularly talented at trapping rabbits (much preferred to mutton) for dinner. Boiled mutton and veggies could not compare to a sweet and tender rabbit stew.

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Months had passed and Papa had found a small amount of work on farms in the area. They had a little bit of money and were hopeful of leaving the welcoming centre soon.

Brigitte entered the bungalow, tired and sweaty. She stared around her. Something felt wrong. Her eyes were drawn to an empty corner in the room. The wooden slats lay bare and dusty. Her dolls house... it was gone!

Brigitte felt as though she had lost a part of her heart. She had played with that dolls house for weeks on end. It was a reminder of her homeland and a precious, irreplaceable keepsake. Somebody had taken it and, all at once, she hated her new home more than ever before. She hated the food, the heat, the smells, the noise. She stared at the empty floorboards beside her bed. She knew now that she would be extremely lucky to find the dolls house again. Tears trickled slowly down her face. Her heart was filled with a pitiful despondency.

Papa entered the room, whistling merrily. He beamed at the family.

“I have a job! In Melbourne, at a factory! We will be leaving tomorrow”.

Mutti broke into a smile. Her cheeks flushed red and her eyes twinkled.

Brigitte thought of home. Her real home. She knew that she couldn't return to the war-torn city of Bremen, even if she could there was no chance she would be able to survive. She closed her eyes, 'my old home is gone now, but not forgotten, I have a new life and I will make the best of it.'

## **Acknowledgements**

Bonegilla Migrant Experience

Stories and experiences of my grandmother, Brigitte Goyal