

Here is a “good news” story about one refugee family from Cambodia who like so many others fled the horror of Pol Pot and his thugs and risked all to make their way to Australia. In spite of the initial difficulties of language and culture shock the family with admirable hard work, determination, sacrifice and local support settled into their new country. Alice relates that story.

## New Australians

Alice Pung; 20/9/08; Alice Pung is a Melbourne writer and lawyer. Her latest book is *Growing up Asian in Australia* (Black Inc), a collection of stories which she edited.

My story begins during an era when Australia welcomed even unborn refugees: my 22-year-old mother carried me from the Thai refugee camp on to the plane in her belly. She and my father had walked across three different countries by foot - Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand - to reach that camp. They slept on jungle floors close to the Killing Fields, so Mum probably dreamed of distant places where skulls did not dot the ground more commonly than flowers. I arrived in the Lucky Country, in utero, in 1980. The year I was born, prime minister Malcolm Fraser made a speech to the newly formed Institute of Multicultural Affairs, heralding an auspicious new era for my family's arrival: “Multiculturalism is about diversity, not division ... interaction not isolation.”

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During this time, SBS Television began full-time broadcasting, and our community of newly arrived Southeast Asian migrants settled into the Maribyrnong Midway Migrant Hostel. Survivors of the Killing Fields, like my father, were afraid of many things - escalators, people in uniform (including parking inspectors and meter checkers) and very loud noises. Not having the initial words to convey what they saw or felt, they stared with eyes wide open and mouths squeezed shut, and they laughed - the first time in a very long time - with mouths wide open and eyes squeezed shut. My father's world, less than two years previously, was one of dysentery, of death, of burying bloated starvation-corpses, of slave labour in failing fields. The ethnic Chinese, as my father was, were particular targets of racial violence. Our benign new world was based on multicultural acceptance “set within a framework of shared fundamental values”, following the abolition of the White Australia Policy and the introduction of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The Whitlam and Fraser governments realised that the previous postwar policy of effacing a person's history and former lives did not work. Prime minister Fraser noted that to “enforce

conformity holds high costs both for the individual and the society. It denies people their identity and self-esteem. It drives a wedge between children and their parents.” Upon our arrival, Australians encouraged my parents to teach us the native Teochew Chinese dialect. Dad named me Alice, because he thought this country was a wonderland. The only Australians my parents knew were kind - foremen who gave them jobs, migrant settlement services, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the church. My parents became citizens as soon as they could, in March 1984. In primary school, my teachers taught me about my background by reading us Allan Baillie’s book Little Brother, about a Cambodian refugee boy. We stood to attention at assembly as the Australian flag was raised. We memorised all the words to Advance Australia Fair, written more than a century ago by an immigrant to Australia, and believed them to be true: “For those who’ve come across the seas, we’ve boundless plains to share ... ” Many of us settled in the suburb where Romper Stomper was filmed, and started small businesses. Mum worked in the garage as an out-worker; dad sold small clocks and musical greeting cards. I watched over little siblings and cousins after school. We formed communities and filtered out the dangers. A decade later, Dad became a Retravisation franchisee, but Mum was still outworking and I was still minding the little ones. In my Catholic high school, teachers understood that most of the parents sent their children to the school by virtue of their backyard-garage sewing, their taxi-driving, their factory work. They understood that some kids came to school tired not because they had stayed up too late watching telly, but because they were putting buttons in small plastic bags. In 1997, Pauline declared we were stealing Australian jobs and forming ghettos, but that was also the year Dad created 40 new jobs with his business. It seemed that when we little migrants had grown up, we were back to being the Peril again. Realising how tenuous any “minority” position was, how easy to be loved one day and reviled the next, we tried harder. Dad’ started reading the newspapers in earnest because he now had more time and capacity. He began to admire John Howard’s family values, his views on assimilation. “You’re Australian kids now,” he told us. We desperately began to live the Great Australian Dream in a bigger house with entirely white walls. But a year later, Mum would not stop crying: she still could not understand our new language or participate in public life except as a supermarket shopper. The outside world had remained entirely alien to her - she had spent almost two decades working in a garage to send me to an exclusive private school in my high-school years,

where the greatest compliment I could receive from the white kids was, “You know, Alice, I sometimes forget that you are Asian.” I wondered what would happen if they remembered. A decade later, Howard’s government introduced the citizenship test. Excited, Dad downloaded the booklet to see if we could answer all the questions. The booklet told us that historically the Chinese were considered “foreign outcasts who lowered the dignity of all labour”.

We were stunned. It reminded me of words I’d read from our first prime minister, Edmund Barton: “The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman.” It reminded my father of the mood before the purges against the Chinese in Cambodia. And it reminded all of us that Mum still didn’t speak English. She’d fail that citizenship test. Poor Mum would never “assimilate”. Those two decades growing up under the era of multiculturalism made me aware that “assimilation” cannot be forced on an individual. Community organisations tried, as best as they could with their resources, to teach my mother English. Society encouraged and embraced my father’s enterprise. Most importantly, teachers made me realise that we were not the yellow peril, that we could be gold. The progressive policies of governments in the ’80s and early ’90s instilled in me a pride - instead of a rejection - in the histories of the two people who created me and carried me to this brave new world. What I once mistook as my parents’ fervent obedient patriotism for Australia is only, I realise now, an awed reverence for the place that adopted them. When they first arrived here, my parents felt that they had really landed in the Lucky Country.

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