

# “I’m going to Australia”

## by Herman van Haren

### Script

The Commission thanks Herman van Haren for sharing his personal story of migration to Australia, which has been provided for use during the *Readers’ Theatre* stage of this activity.

#### Readers’ key

- Reader 1 – Herman van Haren, the central character
- Reader 2 – Narrator and Moeder van Haren (Herman’s mother)
- Reader 3 – Narrator and Vader van Haren (Herman’s father)
- Reader 4 – Narrator, Philips man, Australian official and waitress
- Reader 5 – Narrator, Vader Hendriks (Herman’s father-in-law) and an Australian
- Reader 6 – Narrator and Opoe (Herman’s grandmother)
- Reader 7 – Narrator, air steward and Australian official

“I’m going to Australia,” I announced to my parents.

“God Heer Jesus!” exclaimed my mother, as she crossed (blessed) herself.

My father was more perceptive, “What is Vader Hendriks up to?”

I was only 19 years old and it was 1953. I was already married to Joke Hendriks and Ellen, our first daughter, was five months old. Vader Hendriks had in fact decided to migrate to Australia over a card game with old Vader Kirkels, the father of one of his sons-in-law. Their plan was to make their fortune by establishing a chicken farm in Australia.

In the Netherlands at the time, migration was encouraged because the Dutch Government was concerned about a post-war population explosion. Canada, New Zealand and Australia were inviting migrants. Canada was closest and most popular but when they said no more, many travelled to New Zealand.

It was attractive to Nederlanders because of a connection by name to a province of the Netherlands called Zeeland (land by the sea). Australia was appealing because the basic wage was higher at £10–£15 and they had a 40 hour working week. The Netherlands still had a 48 hour week. The Hendriks settled on Australia and I had married into the decision.

I was working for Philips at the time and my supervisor told me, “Don’t go. We need you here. We have plenty of work for you.” But I thought I knew better.

“It will be good for you, young man,” was Vader Hendriks’ way of persuading me to go. His plan was for all of his eight children and their families to go. Only one stayed behind but another returned to the Netherlands later.

When I told my Grandmother, Opoe, I told her confidently, “I’m only going for five to ten years.” She said, “You can’t do that to your mother.”

But I stressed, “I’ll be back.” She lived for 10 more years and I never did get back for her. It was going to be 19 years before I returned.

My mother did take it very badly. She had lost one child when he was only a baby and she did not want to lose another, even if it was an adult child. “I don’t think I will come to the airport,” she decided. It would be too much for her. When we called in to say goodbye, I remember my mother, my sisters Rina and Joke, and my brother Theo, lined up in the hallway. Theo, who was only 10, started to scream at the thought of losing his older brother, the one he idolised. When I looked into my mother’s eyes, I realised the pain I was causing my family in leaving them.

My father sat next to me on the train from Eindhoven to Amsterdam. As we travelled he said, "I'm afraid this will be the last time that I will see you and Joke and Elleke." The stress was very great and much later I heard that he had a kidney attack on the journey home.

But we were full of our adventure and the excitement of our first plane flight soon dominated our thoughts. When we travelled to Australia, we flew rather than sailed. It was like a holiday as we flew for three to four hours per day due to fuel restrictions and stayed in hotels at night in cities like Rome, Damascus, Karachi, Calcutta and Singapore. Luckily we were sponsored migrants; we were assessed before we left the Netherlands and the trip, well nearly all of it, was paid for by the Dutch Government.



We left Amsterdam for Rome on Tuesday, 5 May 1953, the day before I turned 20 years of age. It was a Dutch chartered plane with 80–90 migrants on board. The first leg of the journey was very eventful as the plane was struck by lightning. The plane took a dive and everyone seemed to be vomiting into the little bags, but not me! The hostess tried to calm us down, "Don't worry, the captain has everything under control." As I watched Ellen's basket swinging from side to side above us, I wasn't feeling too confident.

In Rome we stayed in a hotel near the Citadel Vaticano. We walked around St Peter's and later toured past the Colosseum. Even from the bus I could see they were idiotic drivers in Italy! The next day we travelled from Rome to Damascus, Thursday was Damascus to Karachi, Friday was Karachi to Calcutta and Saturday Calcutta to Singapore. We stayed in Singapore for two nights and got to see more of the sights. On Monday we travelled from Singapore to Fremantle with a fuelling stop in Jakarta.

The plane was full of Dutch migrants and we made many friends. One couple offered to look after Ellen to give us a break. I will always remember the woman as she spoke fluent Haarlem slang and I didn't realise at first that she was in fact English and had married a Dutch sailor. The giveaway was that she didn't always use the correct form of *het* and *de*, the definite article. I also remember walking to the cockpit of the plane and listening to an Australian news broadcast on the radio. It made me feel confident about landing as I thought, "I can understand Australian."

When we landed in Fremantle, we were taken by bus to some Nissan huts or at least some kind of migrant centre. It was May and although the days seemed very hot, it was quite cold at night. The huts were warm and comfortable but we knew our holiday was over – we weren't in a hotel! Nevertheless, we had our own private room and a communal bathroom.

The next day some Australian officials approached me, "Are you Herman van Haren?" I nodded. "Are you a fitter and turner?" I nodded. "We have a job for you here."

Finally, I spoke (I had learned some English at school and had been studying before I left). "No, I have family in Wollongong, near Sydney, and that's where we're going."

"Well, we will only pay your fare to the first place you can land and that's Melbourne. You will be on your own from Melbourne. You would do better to stay here where you can be sure of work."

They had persuaded the Dutchman and his English wife to stay with the promise of a plumbing job. I was more assertive; I knew our passage had been booked to Melbourne and I still had our £50 landing money. Nevertheless, I started to look at the Australian coins I had. They were so strange – a shilling, guinea, half-penny. I tried to work out their value and knew we had to economise.

As we travelled to Melbourne by plane, I felt confident we would be okay. I thought, “I’ll get there, I’ve got £50 landing money and when we arrive in Melbourne, I’ll get a taxi from the airport in Essendon into town and pay for a hotel.”

I knew we had to go on no matter what they offered me. The idea was to go to the family who were already there and expecting us.

When we arrived in Melbourne, we walked down the steps of the plane. As I stood there with Joke and Elleke, I noticed some of the young people on board were running into the arms of husbands and lovers. Everyone seemed to be greeted by someone and we just stood there, alone and forlorn. For a fleeting moment, I missed my parents. Joke was experiencing the same emotions and started to cry. “Don’t worry, you will soon be with your sister.”

I knew I had to look for a taxi but two migration officials, a man and a woman, had spotted us and approached us.

“What’s the matter, luv? Don’t worry, we’ll put you up for the night.” They bundled us into a taxi.

“They told us in Perth that we would be on our own.”

“Of course we’ll look after you until you reach your destination. We know that you want to travel to your family.”

They organised a room at the hostel for us with communal dining and bathrooms. It was a small flat in a temporary building. There weren’t many people around at the time as it was a short-term receiving centre. I thought I was in Melbourne as I wasn’t aware of suburbs and so I don’t know where we were exactly. However, I remember going for a walk from the hostel and noticing the iron roofs and fibro and wooden houses. The only wooden houses I had ever seen in Eindhoven were the ones that had come from Sweden for temporary accommodation after the war.

After a few nights, we caught the train to Sydney. The train was booked and paid for by the migration officials, right through to Wollongong in NSW. We left Melbourne on Thursday, 14 May at 6:00pm and the train shovelled us to Albury where we changed trains because of the different railway gauge. The Victorian train seemed very modern compared to the NSW train with its old compartments and doors that wouldn’t quite close.

As the dawn broke, I became aware of what seemed to me at the time funny looking trees (gum trees) or “rare bomen”. They grew in clusters with so much land around them stripped and bare. It was so unlike the rich pastureland of the Netherlands with many poplars in thickly wooded areas.

The compartment encouraged you to look closely at your other travelling companions. There was one man, a Yugoslav, who stared straight ahead, not making any eye contact. He probably lacked confidence to speak English but it seemed to me he was temperamental and I felt a real negativity towards him. There was another migrant in the compartment, a Scotsman. He said a lot but I couldn’t understand a word he said, unlike an Australian next to me who started to converse with me.

“Have you heard of Menzies?”

“In the books I read, he is the head of government,” I replied.

He saw I was a migrant, particularly because I was speaking in broken English. I’m sure I attracted conversation because of my youth, my blonde curly hair and Elleke’s unique travelling basket. This Australian continued to tell me about Australian politics, particularly the different political parties of the Liberals, the DLP and Labor.

As the train chuffed on, I said to the Aussie, "I have to send a telegram. How do I do that?"

He told me where to go from Central Station in Sydney. We arrived in Sydney at 11:00am the next day. It was a Thursday. I walked out from the station thinking, "I wonder where Wim is?"

Wim was Joke's older brother by two years and he had been the first member of the Hendriks family to migrate to Australia. We thought he lived in Sydney not realising Rockdale, where he was, was quite a distance from Central. He had written to his parents saying he was working in an office when in fact he was washing spare parts in a garage. When the family wrote that we were coming, he actually wrote back, advising us not to come. Perhaps if he had told the truth about how hard it was for many migrants to get work, we may have reconsidered.

When I got to the post office I wrote out the telegram to Joke's sister and her husband, Nellie and Jan Kirkels. They had been the second members of the family to migrate and were expecting our telegram so they could meet us at Wollongong station. At first I wrote out the telegram in Dutch but the postmaster insisted that it had to be in English or it would not be transmitted. So I wrote it again.

It read:

JAN & NELLIE KIRKELS  
PURR PURR AVE, LAKE ILLAWARRA SOUTH VIA WOLLONGONG NSW  
I ARRIVE WOLLONGONG 1700 HOURS FRIDAY 15 MAY 53

HERMAN

After sending the telegram, we decided to have lunch in the railway restaurant at Central Station. On the menu they had sardines in tomato sauce, served with salad, which we ordered. When the time came to pay, I had to ask the waitress to explain what was written on the bill. She told me, "You owe six and thr'pence h'penny." This meant nothing to me, so I offered a handful of money.

We boarded a steam train to Wollongong at 3.15pm. We nearly choked when the train entered a tunnel through the mountains along the way. It was after five o'clock when we got there and Jan and Nellie Kirkels, their son Hans and Vader Kirkels were at the station to greet us. It was the first time they had seen Elleke and they were besotted by her.

All six of us then got on the old blue Dion's bus which was headed for Kiama via Port Kembla, Lake South and Shellharbour. Our destination was Lake South where Vader Kirkels, Jan and Nellie lived in a garage they had built themselves, as temporary accommodation while they built their house. They were using building materials they had brought with them on the boat from the Netherlands. We had finally arrived at our destination.

## Glossary of Dutch words

Haarlem slang	Local dialect of the people of the Haarlem area in the northern part of the Netherlands
Opoë	Great Grandmother
Vader	Father
God Heer Jesus!	God Lord Jesus!
Moeder	Mother
Rare Bomen	Strange trees