Reading 4

A personal experience of the White Australia Policy - Lata Mayer

I was born in my maternal grandparents' home, a subject of British India.

The Second World War had just started and the British and Indians were fighting off the Japanese on the Eastern border of the country.

Later, when the war was at its worst, we were told to retreat into the foothills of the Himalayas where I remember going to the local English kindergarten. I learned to speak Hindustani, the local language, at the same time.

In 1945 my father was sent as an Indian diplomat to Washington DC in the United States, where I went to a French-medium school for one year. The family was then posted to London until I was thirteen where I went to an Anglican girls’ school. In 1953 we went back to Washington DC where I finished school and went on to university. There I studied history and French and met the man I was to marry.

My husband is a fourth generation American of German/English ancestry. After our marriage in 1963 I became an American citizen. In 1970 my husband was offered a job in Australia and we both applied for migrant visas for this country. He received his visa fairly efficiently from Australian authorities in New York but I was told that my ‘nationality’ was ‘a problem’ and that the Minister of Immigration had to approve of my application. So all my papers were sent to Australia. The process was long and slow. My visa arrived only days before our hoped-for departure. It had a ‘special condition’ which stated that it was only valid if I was accompanied by my husband. It was clear that the White Australia Policy was very much in force in 1970. Australia let me in because they wanted my husband more than they didn’t want me.

But in 1973 with the official end of the policy I was entitled to live here in my own name and now I am an Australian citizen.

Lata Mayer, personal account from The Federation Roadshow: A history, a mystery, a bird’s-eye view, Migration Museum, Adelaide, 2000