LUDMILA PAVLOVA: NEEDLEWORK and MATHS TEACHER, 1959 - 1967

Introduction

I am of Russian background from Latvia. I was born in 1925 and spoke three language before the age of five. My mother was Russian, my father was Latvian, and we had a governess who was German, so I learnt to speak all three.

My late husband, Paul Pavlov, was born in 1924. My daughter Tania was born in Germany in 1948. There were many people in Displaced Person camps in Germany and other countries after the war who were looking to start a new life, and we were one of such families.

I had a brother and sister who immigrated to Australia before we did. My brother came to Perth and settled in Fremantle. My sister came out with her husband and lived in Sydney. So we also applied to come to Australia and my mother came with us, but by that stage my father had already passed away some years earlier.

My father died in Siberia. He was arrested on 14 June 1942 when the Russian army came in because the war had started in our area. The Germans came in on the 28 August, but it was too late for my father. We finally got a letter from him in a roundabout way, which indicated he knew we were safe. I didn't want to leave the country, because I wanted to be with my father.

We finally came to Australia because it was one of the few countries that took the whole family, where you didn't have to be split. If you went to Belgium or somewhere else the husband could go and the wife had to stay in the camp. We said no.

Arrival in Australia

We came to Australia in 1949 under as assisted migrants under the Displaced Persons scheme. Tania was born in Germany and she was only one year old on the ship coming out, so she learnt to walk like a sailor on the ship. We came through the migrant camps at Sydney and Bathurst. It was awful. In Bathurst we had barracks that were new constructions but they had this section of wall above the door and window levels that was just open wire mesh, because Australians were mad for fresh air. So am I - I sleep with an open window, summer and winter. But here it was so cold I had to dress young Tania underneath the bedclothes. Wherever you left a pot of water it was frozen in the morning; that is how cold it got.

From Bathurst we went to the camp in Greta, which is between Benalla and Wangaratta in Victoria. From there my husband was sent to work on the railways. All the people coming under the assisted passage schemes were under contract to work for a couple of years in places selected by the government. I wasn't under contract because I had to look after Tania, and they excused mothers who were responsible for young children. However, I soon discovered I had to find work so we could survive and try to improve our situation. Living was quite expensive and without both people working it was difficult to think of having another child or getting your own place. For instance, the places they offered as accommodation might be a caravan for £10 per week. That was exactly what you might get if both people worked, and we knew we couldn't make that much in those days.

We were not money orientated and couldn't make money. All we could do was work. We had to pay off everything on time payment. Even our miserable belongings that we'd packed from Europe went to Brazil, and we didn't get them back till four months later. We had to buy everything: sheets, blankets, etc. Everything was bought on time payment. They would always ask, "Have you got any credit?" We had credit everywhere.

Working in Factories

I started working in a factory, but I couldn't stand it. I didn't like Sydney at all. I came to Melbourne to visit my mother, who had remarried in Melbourne, and an opportunity arose so I started to work in a garment factory there. The second week that I worked there I earned £21 by doing piece work. That was very good money, especially for a women, as in those days a man working for the railways got five or six pounds a week and it was normal for women to be paid at a lower rate than men.

I wrote to my husband and said I wasn't going back to Sydney, so he had to think of a way to come and join me. He went to the Immigration Department and said he'd beaten up his wife and she'd left him and went to Melbourne. Now he wanted to reconcile and keep the family together but didn't know what to do about it. Our generation didn't split up; I think nowadays the kids are expecting too much. The Immigration Department let my husband come to Melbourne to join me. He worked another year in a fruit factory to finish his work contract, then they let him go.

So, the first part of our lives in Australia was working in factories. At first I didn't speak to people in English. I used to learn English in the state school in Latvia before the war, so I knew a few words and a little bit of grammar - which is out now, nobody learns any grammar - and that was about it.

The first place I worked at in Sydney employed about 25 or 30 women, and there was me. The boss asked what I would like to do, and I said machining. "Have you ever done it before?" "Not on an electric machine," I replied. He put me on the button hole machine, because that's completely repetitive but easy enough for a beginner. After a while I got sick of it and asked to do something else. So he put me on the button machine.

Interacting with People

The women around me tried to talk to me and I listened but I didn't say anything at first, because I was ashamed to open my mouth in case I made a mistake. After about three months I was more familiar with the language, so one day when the others were talking about me I said, "No, that's not right."

"But you said you couldn't speak English."

I said, "Then I couldn't, now I can."

One day a woman brought in a wallet that she'd found on the street; there was something written in either Jewish or Arabic script. She says to me. "What does it say?" I said I didn't know, because I didn't speak that language. “Oh, you came from Europe and you don't even know your own language?"

My husband worked in Pelaco at the time, cutting collars. They had these boys who were learning the trade and who'd ask him all these questions: "Where do you come from?" and so on. Paul used to answer them at first and then got sick and tired of it would say, "I am from Mars."

"And how is it on Mars?"
"Oh, beautiful, beautiful, marvellous."
"Then why don't you go back to Mars?"

I had a Yugoslav friend who would get questions like "Do you have cows in Yugoslavia?" She said, "No, the milk comes all the way from Australia." Or there was "Do you have Monday, Tuesday ..." You get sick of answering silly questions.

Settling in St Albans

We bought our home in Walmer Avenue in 1952. After many years of work we had a beautiful back yard and garden. In the 'sixties we had at least 473 different plants in that garden because I never bought the same thing twice. When my parents were living with us they were all for having vegetables. Poor Paul, he was digging the clay soil and by the time he'd finished a row he would have to take an axe to what he'd already started because the soil would set so hard sometimes. Remember the big drought before they built that big dam that would mean we would never have a shortage of water again? We'd be going out with buckets to rescue what we could.

Mrs Pavlova in her backyard garden.

There was a Polish man opposite us who established himself very well. Once he bought his first home he put in every penny he had into buying blocks of land around St Albans. He bought them for £25 each and then lived off the income from those blocks for the rest of his life. He still worked, but that property meant he lived comfortably. Not many had the opportunity to do that.

We had a couple of Australian families in the street with whom young Tania became acquainted and attached herself to Della and her siblings. She would play with them and sometimes go with them to Sunday school. At this stage Tania didn't speak any English. She'd come home and say: "I'm telling her and telling her but she's completely deaf, she didn't understand a word I said. I even screamed and she still didn't understand." Of course she was talking to them in Russian, of which they understood not a single word.

Learning English was a priority, but sometimes learning to live in Australia was really funny. When my parents were living in Coburg they went to school to learn English and were taught the proper way of pronouncing words like 'table', 'lady', and 'tape measure'. When they came to St Albans nobody spoke like that.

Daughter's Education

Three months after she went to school Tania was speaking English as if it were natural to her.

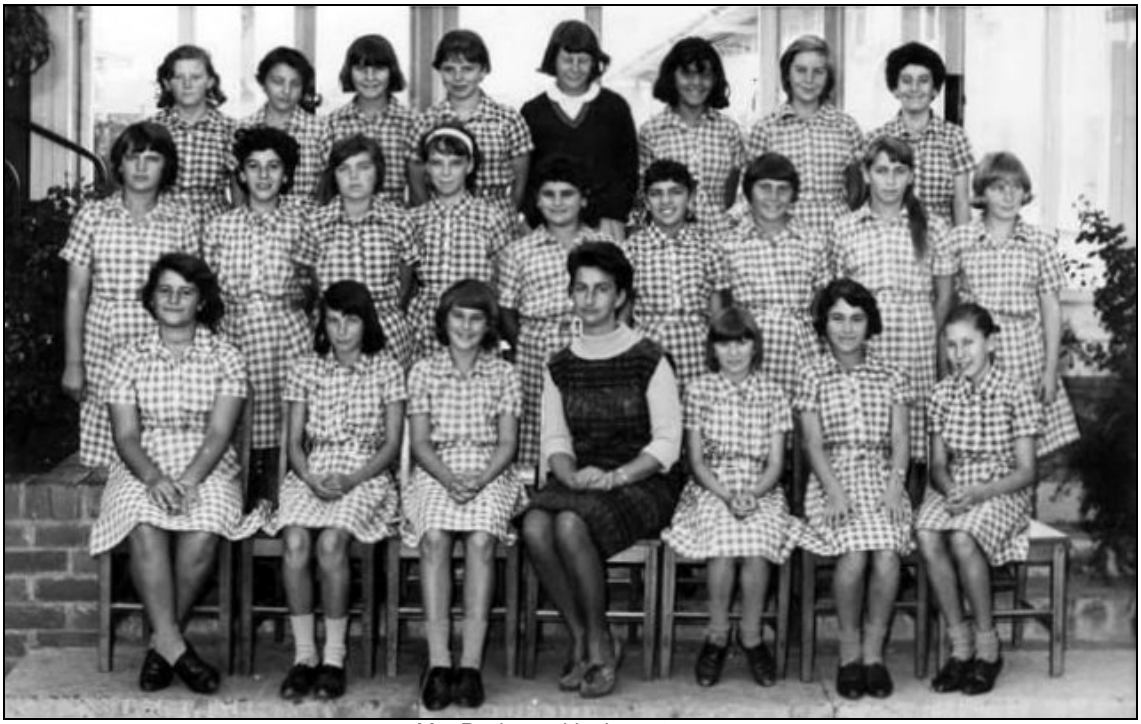
In second grade she had a Scot as the teacher. I used to get upset because they had geography or history lessons all they were learning about was Scottish food and Scottish castles and didn't know anything about Australia. In retrospect they were great teachers. The reason is, this was in 1954 and they were the post-WW2 teachers. I remember I had a blue with the teacher. He called me in and said: "Tania is not for the kindergarten class because she is more advanced that that. I'm transferring her to Grade 1." I said it was alright.

Three months later he called me again and said, "She's read all the books and I don't know what to do with her. She should go to Grade 2." I said, "She'll enter high school at the age of ten, and I don't want this. If you don't have the books in class you've got a library. Get the books she hasn't read."

Later, when I was teaching at the high school, we had a few girls in Form 1 who were younger than the others, like Catherine Schwab, who was two years younger than the other girls. They often didn't mix too well with the rest of the class because they were too young. I had suspected that might be the case and didn't want it to happen to Tania.

Working at St Albans High

In 1959 I went to St Albans High because I had heard that they were looking for teachers. I talked to Mr Barker and he said: "Needlework? Yes, we need a needlework teacher for sure." Needlework was my profession, because I had completed some courses in that field. He said: "Good. Come in tomorrow morning."



Mrs Pavlova with class, 1960s.

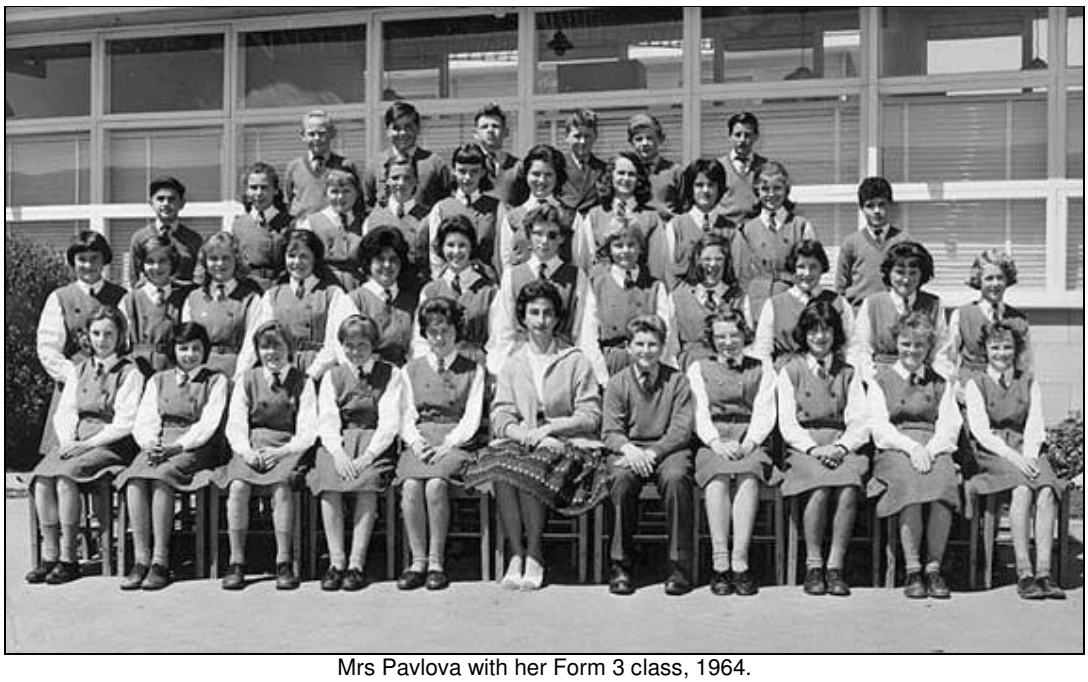
I went in the next day and he took me to the needlework class and he introduced me, saying I had them for four periods. Here I was thrown in the deep end. I was stunned. Then I started to talk about needlework and fashion. Somehow I got through that day and the kids were sitting there and watching me. They must have liked it, because after that we all started to work.

In those day you worked to a curriculum, which laid out what you had to do. I said to the girls: "You have to make an apron and hat that you will use in cooking classes, and once we've done that you'll do more. But you have to be good." From then on it picked up so well that in the second year we had a fashion parade. Everybody was really impressed with the girls' achievements and from then on we had a fashion parade every year. It was a big success.

The girls were good. We used to go shopping. I said, "If you want to make a dress or a skirt, you have to know what material you want and how to buy it." They would come with me to the dress material shops in St Albans and pick out their own materials. There were a number of shops by then and it was a practical educational exercise. It was also fun.

In 1959 the fourth form was the highest grade, so the school was still quite young. Naturally, the prefects were fourth formers and between them and the teachers they could manage the whole place quite well.

When Torpey arrived in 1962 he wanted me to teach maths. I said, "Yes, alright," because I used to be very good at maths, having finished high school with a very good maths result. That first year I only taught Form 1 for maths. We went by the book, the way it should be. I included some of my own experience, like asking questions and getting answers, setting problems, and so on. My maths students liked me, I think, even the ones who were struggling a bit, because there were some that said: "Mrs Pavlova, darling, I'm trying to understand." That's how it went.



Mrs Pavlova with her Form 3 class, 1964.

The second year I was given Form 2 for maths. The third year Torpey started talking to me about taking Form 3. I said: "Look, I am here as a needlework teacher. I couldn't care less about maths." My husband had patience with maths because that was his subject. Personally, I wasn't that interested in sitting there explaining to a child that fifteen divided by two is not going to be eight or seven or something.

Other Teachers

Generally, the students were very responsive to their teachers and to learning. When Tania was in third form Mr Barker said, "It is a privilege to teach the third form." That's how good the students were, but it was also because of the quality of the teaching.

Mr Hill was teaching science. Everybody liked Mr Hill.

Miss Taylor was a marvellous teacher and a marvellous disciplinarian. She was really good.

The other marvellous teacher was Miss Bowles, who took music classes. She would engage the class very successfully and you certainly had to like Peer Gynt. We always wondered how at the end of the year she could produce a choir that sang like angels.

Miss Bowles with her choir of senior students, 1963.

Alcorn was a good teacher. He would have made a good headmaster.

Mrs Sturesteps was a poor soul. She had finished studies in the faculty of history in Latvia, which included modern and ancient history. She complained that she knew all about the Greeks but never knew what kind of bread they ate in the morning, which is what the current books were writing about. Years later you thought of her with a smile. Underneath it all she was very kind.

Mrs Burden was from Malta; she was another very fine person.

Responsibility for Children

Nowadays they're asking the teachers to oversee each child individually because schools can be sued if anything adverse happens to the children. We used to take a group of students to the Melbourne Show every year with only two teachers. We would get them to the show and say: "Now you can go. Do whatever you like and be here at such-and-such an hour when we are going home." It was fine and they never got into trouble. Nothing happened to those kids ever.

It was a much more innocent time, but not entirely; you did hear of instances. When we were living in the Blue Mountains in the early 'fifties there was some talk of a paedophile out in

Springwood. One day Tania went missing. She was only two years old so everyone was worried. The whole town was looking for her. I was on the main road when I saw this bus coming and decided to stop it and see if she was there. The bus stopped, and there was my Tania sitting in the front with £5 in her hand. She was heading off on her own to buy a bicycle.

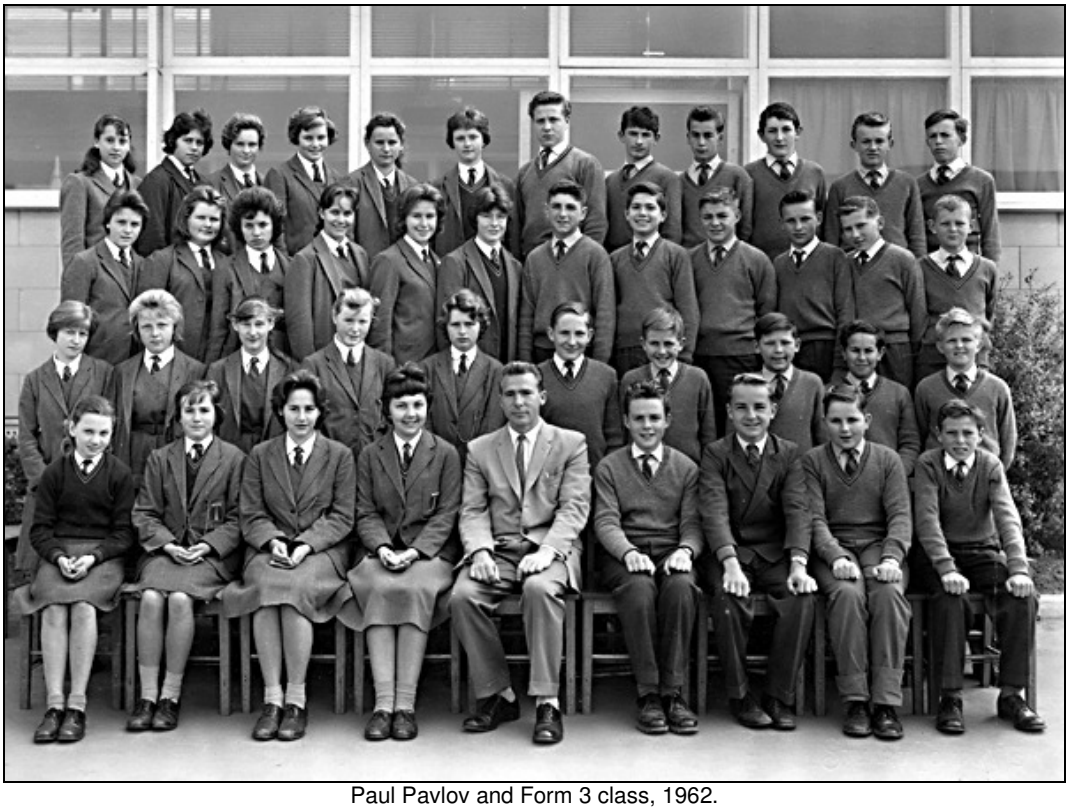
Leaving St Albans High

After about eight years at the school I had a big blue with Torpey and I left. In those days the Education Board would send you teachers by the number required, not necessarily by the expertise required. Our school needed two or three teachers, but they needed them in maths and science, but we'd get all needlework teachers, or something like that. I was given less and less needlework teaching and more and more maths. I finally said no: "That's enough, I'm leaving. I'm sick of not being a teacher but a nursemaid in particular, and a kitchen helper, things like that."

After that I went back to factory work and started earning money, because I could earn more money in the factory than as a teacher. I was at the school while Tania needed me, because we came home at the same time. When Tania went to University she took over the cooking so I could work.

Paul Pavlov

My husband, Paul Pavlov, started teaching at the High School in 1960. His specialty was teaching maths and he taught that exclusively.



Paul Pavlov and Form 3 class, 1962.

Paul taught at St Albans for a number of years and then went for a year to Broadmeadows, but he didn't like it there at all. Then he went to Sunshine and worked at St Johns College until he retired. He stopped work in 1983-84 after he had a heart attack. He was a very conscientious teacher. He only had the heart attack because he had a cold and then he contracted pleurisy, which he also had when he was young.

Paul was sick for ten years and died in 1995. He had a good rapport with students from St Albans High, some of whom he continued to coach in volley ball even after they'd left school, to the extent that about fifteen years ago [1990] we still used to meet a few of his former pupils at the hotel in Ballarat Road. They'd come to talk with us and discuss what was happening.

Current Situation

I am now 80 years old. My brother has died, my mother died, my stepfather died, and my husband died. Of the relatives still alive I have a sister, a daughter, and my grandchildren. I try to speak Russian with my grandchildren. When there are two together it's practically impossible, because kids become a unit together and develop other interests in life rather than being interested in what their parents or grandparents did in the deep, dark, olden days.

Australia is my home. I still have fond feelings towards Latvia, but altogether I wouldn't want to go back because we've grown apart so much. I haven't gone back to Latvia as I used to get so mad when the communists were there that I said if I went they would either throw me out or throw me in jail. Now it's even worse, because they don't even look after their pensioners at all. If I went there I would probably scream.

Ludmila Pavlov, 2005.
