

Polish Community Association in Geelong Inc.

Awards, Citations and Campaign Ribbons



Precedence of awards is from top to bottom, left to right

Top Row - American Campaign Medal - Europe, Africa, Middle East Campaign Medal - Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal
 Second Row - World War II Victory Medal - Navy Occupation Service Medal (with Asia class) - National Defence Service Medal
 Third Row - Korean Service Medal - United Nations Service Medal - Republic of Korea War Service Medal (retroactive)

USAT General M.B. Stewart



USAT General M.B. Stewart departing Bremerhaven, late 1940s early 50s.

70th Anniversary of the Arrival in Melbourne, Australia of the Szkuta Family

Laid down (date unknown) as a Maritime Commission type (C4-S-A1) hull, under Maritime Commission contract (MC hull 707) at Kaiser Shipbuilding Corp., Yard No. 3, Richmond, CA. Commissioned, 1 August 1945. Decommissioned, 23 May 1946. Struck from the Naval Register at San Francisco, CA. Decommissioned, 24 May 1946. Struck from the Naval Register (date unknown). Transferred to the Maritime Commission for use by the US Army Transportation Service. Commissioned, **USAT General M. B. Stewart**. Acquired by the US Navy, 1 March 1950.

Struck from the Naval Register again (date unknown). Sold in 1967 for commercial service, rebuilt as a cargo ship and renamed *Albany* entering service in 1968. In 1974 *Albany* was converted to a drilling barge and renamed *Albany Drilling*. *Albany Drilling* was broken up in July 1987

USAT General Stewart arrived from the Port of Naples, Italy, at Station Pier, Melbourne on 29th January 1950 with displaced people from Europe. Among these passengers were:

Adolf Szkuta, age 37

Aniela Szkuta, age 37

Józef Szkuta, age 10

Irena Szkuta, age 4

Henryk Szkuta, age 2

THE VOYAGE OF OUR LIVES

“Childhood Memories of our journey to Australia in 1950”

The family later settled in Geelong after living in Bonegilla for three months and



CITY OF GREATER
GEELONG

This project is supported by the City of Greater Geelong
 ‘Healthy and Connected Communities Grants Program’

Our five years as Displaced Persons ended in 1949 when Mum and Dad applied to migrate to Australia. Many countries answered the United Nations call to give millions of stranded refugees in Germany a new home. We had the option to return to Poland and live under the newly established Communist System or leave Europe altogether and settle in South America or Australia. Our parents, both thirty-seven years of age at the time, chose Australia as it was farthest away from the nightmare of war torn Europe. Little was known then about this distant land, so Mum and Dad reasoned that it was unlikely the country would ever get involved in war.



With only nine million inhabitants, Australia in the forties was hugely underpopulated, thus, the then Labor Government saw in the vast numbers of Europe's refugees a much needed labour force. Thus, a two-year work contract was introduced which all potential adult migrants were compelled to sign before their application was even considered. Before we were given the green light to emigrate, however, we were obliged to undertake physical, psychological as well as literacy and numeracy tests. Although we three children, the author eight years old, Irena four and Henry two years old were spared the last three tasks, our parents expected us to behave impeccably during the interview; we had to smile a great deal, to bow and curtsy, "Because the immigration officials", Mum reiterated, "held the keys to our destiny." We must have charmed the Australian authorities for they kept smiling benevolently from their elevated position as they contemplated our naïve performance. We passed the tests and the country we could call our own was soon to be our reward. Europe's refugees a much needed labour force.



All our worldly goods were packed into one large crate - pots, pans, cutlery, crockery, doonas, pillows, bed linen, a Bible and even a tin hip bath. Dad considered it of paramount importance to bring his carpentry tools for we expected to be "dropped off in the new 'Wild West' where we would be employed in clearing the land and building our new home in a forest away from civilization." We felt confident we were well qualified, fully prepared and enthusiastic enough to tackle any task.

The journey from Germany was long and at times tedious, from Reckenfeld to Minden, followed by a further two refugee camps where women and children were hosted in large, crowded dormitories filled to capacity with bunks of all shapes and sizes. Men were accommodated in separate lodgings but were allowed to visit their families in the dormitories during the day for a specified time. At night, loud groaning, anxious muttering and deep sighs would lull us to sleep. One afternoon, while playing in the dormitory, I saw a fully grown adult male "squashing" a breathless woman on one of the lower bunks. I was horrified! In my opinion, the woman had done nothing to deserve such maltreatment. I asked my mother to intervene, instead, she grabbed my hand and ushered me out of the dormitory. Her "lack of compassion" disappointed me.



Since there was no work for adults, no school for children and no money or facilities for shopping, cooking or entertaining, we did our best to fill our spare time as creatively as possible. We would walk to neighbouring huts to visit friends in their dormitories; we would listen to hair raising, often gruesome stories of loss and survival; in the evenings we would pray, sing hymns and patriotic songs and recite poetry. We had no reading material other than the Bible, an Elementary Polish Reader, a Prayer Book and a book of poems. On Sundays, the Polish Chaplain, who journeyed with his flock, celebrated Mass in a pokey little room which had been converted into an Ecumenical Chapel. The Sunday Eucharist so impressed two-year-old Henry that the family submitted to a repeat performance of this ritual quite frequently during the week. Adorned in a towel which served as a chasuble, the diminutive Father Henry would take us piously through parts of the Mass culminating in Communion which we received kneeling down. Finally, he would bless us with a “Dominus Vobis Cum” and the Mass would be over. We were very proud of this “saintly child” and Mum was convinced that one day he would fulfil her dream and he would become a priest. Months later when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would answer emphatically, “Pope.”

In December 1949, together with throngs of other refugees from Eastern Europe, we left the camp and boarded a long train, which would carry us through Austria and over the Alps to Southern Italy. As the train snaked its way slowly through the snow clad winter wonderland, we watched enchanted,



our faces pressed firmly against the windowpane as picturesque villages, slender steeples and ancient castles disappeared into the darkness below. Deep down in the valleys magic lights twinkled and winked at the cargo of destitute nomads taking their final leave of Europe, the horror of War and what remained of their shattered past. Full of courage, hope and expectation, we were propelled forward towards “the land flowing with milk and honey” – our “promised land.”

On arrival in Naples, we were saddened to witness the devastation the War had wrought on the people in this part of the world. Barefoot young boys, wearing only rags in the cold mid-winter, tried desperately to peddle little bags of peanuts and used clothing in order to survive. If only we were in the position to help!

At midnight, after a long immigration process, we carried our heavy stacks of allocated blankets up the marble staircase of a crumbling palazzo to another dormitory. Bagnoli was to be our home for a month. The atmosphere in this tiny village was electric with the approaching

Christmas Season of love and goodwill. We enjoyed our family walks and admired the decorations on trees in the streets; we tasted our first oranges and peanuts and even appreciated the macaroni served daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner in the enormous dining hall. Since the tab for our food, travel and lodging was picked up by the Australian Government and the United Nations Relief Organisation, we were hardly in a position to complain.

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USAT General M.B. Stewart



USAT *General M.B. Stewart* departing Bremerhaven, late 1940s early 50s.

Laid down (date unknown) as a Maritime Commission type (C4-S-A1) hull, under Maritime Commission contract (MC hull 707) at Kaiser Shipbuilding Corp., Yard No. 3, Richmond, CA. Launched, 15 October 1944. Commissioned **USS General M. B. Stewart (AP-140)**, 3 March 1945, at San Francisco, CA. Decommissioned, 24 May 1946. Struck from the Naval Register (date unknown). Transferred to the Maritime Commission for use by the US Army Transportation Service. Commissioned, **USAT General M. B. Stewart**. Re-acquired by the US Navy, 1 March 1950.

Struck from the Naval Register again (date unknown). Sold in 1967 for commercial service, rebuilt as a cargo ship and renamed **Albany** entering service in 1968. In 1974 **Albany** was converted to a drilling barge and renamed **Mission Viking**. Final Disposition, broken up in July 1987

USAT General Stewart arrived from the Port of Naples, Italy, at Station Pier, Melbourne on 29th January 1950 with displaced people from Europe. Among these passengers were:

Adolf Szkuta, age 37
Aniela Szkuta, age 37
Jadwiga Szkuta, age 8
Irena Szkuta, age 4
Henryk Szkuta, age 2

The family later settled in Geelong after living in Bonegilla for three months and Mildura for one year.

The long awaited day of embarkation finally arrived. It took many hours to accommodate us and our crates on board, to allocate bunks and to inform us about meal-times and relevant rules and regulations. **General Stewart** (pictured above), an American Navy Ship retired from service, was employed to ferry migrants from Europe to Australia before it was finally relegated to the scrap metal heap. Our sleeping and living quarter was a dormitory accommodating at least three hundred women and children. The triple storey bunks were placed so closely together we used to shake hands with our

neighbours while lying down. We shared bathroom and toilet facilities, often queuing up for both. We were organised in three shifts for meals, which we ate in a huge dining hall/mess.

Husbands and single, adult males occupying the dorms in the bowels of the ship were instructed to meet their families on the deck only at designated times.



Late that night, we heard the haunting sound of the ship's horn and felt ourselves being slowly pulled away from the land of culture, poetry and music and heading south for the "bush." With the last lights of Naples dimmed against the shore, we entered the open waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The excitement, mixed with sadness and apprehension diminished when crowds of young and old scurried down to their dorms smitten with severe seasickness. Some, like Mum, rose from their bunks only in ports of call or when the sea was unusually calm. The following day the dining hall was deserted and those of us who were still standing had little inclination to eat; dormitories reverberated with groans as kind individuals administered pills to the worst afflicted.

Other than the two hours we spent daily with Dad on the deck, the three of us had to fend for ourselves. We were quite used to being left to our own devices and took the opportunity to investigate the nooks and crannies on our level: we swanned back and forth on the deck or slid down when the boat rolled; we swung on or hung from the deck rails upside down; we peered into the portholes curious to see what was behind the glass; we climbed tall stacks of coiled rope and jumped from dizzying heights; we sat on the edge of the deck swinging our legs over the churning water. I have no recollection of us ever engaging with other children during the voyage, we were either too absorbed in our activities to notice them or their mums were well enough to keep a tight rein on their movement in the dormitory. We, on the other hand, were the proverbial "free range kids."

There were times when the responsibility of looking after a couple of inquisitive, lively siblings proved a rather onerous one: balancing two trays with meals and drinks, mine and Henry's, on a rocking boat became a daily nightmare; the regular drill practice freaked Henry out each time the siren sounded. "I don't want to drown, I don't want to drown," he wailed as I tried to put on his tiny life jacket and then force him up on deck where the three of us would stand wondering what would happen to Mum when the ship went down.

One day our little brother climbed a ladder next to a tall boiler and froze in fear not knowing how to get down. Dressed in his double breasted coat – a donation from the Red Cross - he clung with all his might to the top rung like a chubby bug, waiting patiently for help. Feeling utterly incompetent, I tried desperately to attract the attention of some sympathetic adult who would end his misery and mine. A sailor spotted Henry's predicament, "cherry picked" him off the ladder and placed him in my arms.



The monotony of the grey Mediterranean Sea was relieved when we stopped at Port Said and from there inched our way through the still waters of the Suez Canal. Sand and more sand stretched as far

as the eye could see in all directions on both the African and Asian side of the narrow passage. The expansive desert, shimmering in all its golden glory, was punctuated by women covered from tip to toe in black, walking majestically beside their men who rode astride a donkey. The unfair arrangement seemed a little unusual at first until it dawned on me that the men and women “were taking turns to ride their beast of burden.” Lured by the Red Sea, even the most incapacitated emerged from their beds onto the deck in order to gaze upon the waters that parted so miraculously for Moses and his Israelites; it was such a disappointment, though, to discover that the sea was not at all red.

During our stop over at Aden, in the Republic of Yemen, we were mesmerised by the dark, slender men wearing turbans and colourful “towels” around their waists. They paddled up to our ship in their tiny boats, white teeth and eyeballs flashing against their dark skin as they tempted us with exotic produce we had not seen before. Goods were raised to the deck in baskets - like pulleys - while payment travelled down the same way. One young man moved about so vigorously that the towel he was wearing slid off leaving his sleek, brown anatomy totally exposed. Picking up his garment, “Ali Baba” smiled cheekily, unperturbed by his indiscretion while we applauded him enthusiastically for the free “peep show”.

On reaching the Arabian Sea and warmer climates, Irena decided she no longer had need of her grey fur coat and promptly disposed of it by throwing it overboard - being the ever practical individual she believed in travelling light. It was around this time that she turned five but since Mum and Dad were unavailable and we had little or no idea of time, the day came and went unnoticed and unmarked.



Station Pier - 1950

One evening, during our daily ablutions in the communal bathroom, a young woman planted herself in front of our shower recess and proceeded to dry her voluptuous nakedness unashamedly before our very eyes. Finding the lady’s full frontal utterly sinful, my sister threw a handful of water at the offending nude. Outraged, the infuriated female slapped Irena hard on her bottom and dashed out of the bathroom to complain to the ship’s authorities. I froze in my tracks terrified that my little sister would be thrown into a dungeon, or worse, tossed overboard

for the heinous crime she had perpetrated. Anxiously we raced back to the dorm and I persuaded the culprit to climb to the top bunk and hide under the bed clothes. To my horror, the enraged female appeared charging in our direction, followed closely by a crowd of incensed supporters. I held my breath when they halted below our refuge. The expression on the “important man’s” face leading the pack mellowed when the irate female pointed to a demure golden-haired five-year-old gazing innocently down at him from her perch. He instructed Irena not to splash people with water again and we both nodded obligingly. The crowd turned and disappeared out of sight behind a row of bunks. To my great relief, Irena was saved!

Our last port of call was Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where our eyes feasted upon a people whose appearance and culture was again vastly different from our own and reminiscent of the colourful pages from the story of Sinbad the Sailor. While the rest of the journey over the Indian Ocean proved long and uneventful,



Station Pier - 2006



The Three Immigrants, 60 years later at Station Pier - 2010

crossing the Equator was marked with the traditional celebrations on the deck. We, however, were more interested in swinging from the deck rails and missed this ritual entirely.

Remnant, our first glimpse of the Great Southern Land and the English Speaking World was greeted with loud cheers and great jubilation but our joy was short lived once we sailed into the open Southern Ocean, across the Great Australian Bight; decks were deserted, dining halls empty and even the toughest in our midst was forced to succumb to nature's fury.

Flickering lights in the distance, some days

later, announced that we were approaching our final destination. After a journey of twenty-six days we arrived at Station Pier, Melbourne, in the heat of summer, just before midnight on 29th January, 1950. Our excitement reached fever pitch as we gazed upon the beaming lighthouse and the skyline of Port Melbourne. Early next morning, after yet more processing, passengers who were joining friends or family rushed down the gangway to greet them while the rest of us were ushered onto a train bound for Bonegilla Migrant Holding Centre on the River Murray. Still smarting from years of painful experiences of betrayal, loss and deprivation, we were relieved to find that peace, order and tranquillity prevailed in our new homeland. Officials treated us with politeness and respect. No one "barked" orders at us or was impatient when we were unable to communicate. Those with whom we came in contact appeared genuinely pleased to help us. During our eight hour trip across Victoria, the train stopped at a hotel so we could eat a three course meal at charming little round tables; we could hardly believe our good fortune!

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GENERAL M. B. STEWART

(Passenger Reg.)

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Migrations Act.

Form No. 2
(Mandatory)

PASSENGER LIST - INCOMING PASSENGERS.

Return of Passengers Brought to the Port of _____ from Places Outside Australia.
(To be furnished in duplicate.)

Note - 1st Class, 2nd Class, and 3rd Class Passengers are to be entered in separate groups.

Name of Ship	Official Number	For Port of Registry (if Shipping Code)	Master's Name	Tonnage - (if Gross or Net)	Date of Arrival	Origin
U.S.A.T. General M.B. STEWART		(a) Washington D.C. (b) U.S. ARMY	C. F. J. GUTHRIE	12249 11, 000	1950 Jan. 29	From NAPLES To MELBOURNE

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NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF PASSENGERS.

No.	Name	Description	Age	Sex	Mar.	Rel.	Remarks
41	Koplin	Kryzina	housewife	F	27	M	A
42	Koplin	Teresa	child	F	3	S	A
43	Koplin	Jerry	child	M	2	S	A
44	Konaleska	Cygnost	farmer	M	45	M	A
45	Michalski	Marianna	housewife	F	27	M	A
46	Michalski	Teresa	child	F	2	S	A
47	Kodlinski	Franciszek	farmer	M	28	M	A
48	Kodlinski	Kulana	housewife	F	33	M	A
49	Kodlinski	Stanislaw	child	M	3	S	A
50	Kodlinski	Jan-Franciska	child	F	2	S	A
51	Nowak	Stanislaw	auto-mechanic	M	25	M	A
52	Nowak	Miguelina	housewife	F	20	M	A
53	Nowak	Zofia	child	F	3	S	A
54	Nowak	Christyna	child	F	2	S	A
55	Podolski	Stanislaw	farmer	M	27	M	A
56	Podolski	Zenonia	housewife	F	24	M	A
57	Podolski	Irena	child	F	2	S	A
58	Podolski	Stanislaw	farmer	M	37	M	A
59	Podolski	Adelina	housewife	F	37	M	A
60	Podolski	Jadwiga	child	F	4	S	A
61	Podolski	Irena	child	F	4	S	A
62	Podolski	Henryk	child	M	2	S	A
63	Podolski	Karlina	musician leader	M	34	M	A

* By Permanent Residence to be understood residence for a year or more.

The Official list of Passengers sailing on board the US ship "General Stewart"

As we sped through the dry countryside so vastly different from that of Europe, we were enveloped by a sense of security, trust and fulfilment. How could we not be overcome with gratitude towards this parched and thirsty ancient land whose inhabitants welcomed us so warmly!



Edward (Ted)

Our youngest sibling, Edward (picture on the left), born in 1953 in Geelong - a True Blue - did not share the journey with us, although he lived through our Odyssey many times over, if only vicariously.

No account of this voyage would be complete if we failed to acknowledge the wisdom, courage and moral strength of our dear Mum and Dad, who, when taking the risk to leave Europe and venture into this unknown territory half a world away from their extended family, familiar language, culture and friends, had our future welfare foremost in their minds. For this, we are

and always will be grateful.

It is equally fitting to recognise the endless opportunities this country has offered us - to live in peace, free from fear, free from discrimination, free from prejudice and above all free to pursue any direction in life we cared to imagine.

In 2010, sixty years after our family of five first settled in this country, four generations of our family today have the good fortune to call Australia, HOME.



The Szkuta Family in the 1960's



**Members of the Szkuta family who arrived in
Australia in 1950 and the Family today:**

Adolf and Aniela Szkuta born in 1912; **Jadwiga** (1941); **Irena** (1945); **Henry** (1947)

The youngest son, grandchildren and great grandchildren were born in Geelong:

Edward Szkuta (1953) married **Patricia**, whose sons are Daniel and Simon

Gregory (1972); **Christopher** (1975); **Paul** (1978) (Irena and Wojtek Lata's sons)

Andrew (1970); **Christian** (1973) (Henry and Krystyna Szkuta's sons)

Seth (2002); **Oaklei** (2004) and **Sage** (2010) (Andrew and Monika Szkuta's children)

Taylor (2012) (Andrew Szkuta's and Joanne Stevenson's son)

Toninio (Croatia, 2000) **Rea** (2003) (Danijela Luketic's children)

Anya Aniela (2008); **Milana** (2015) (Christopher Lata's and Danijela Luketic's children)

We have every reason to celebrate this auspicious date – 29th January 2010

Jadwiga Szkuta

January 2010

(Since then, some photos in the Family Tree, below, were updated in March, 2021)

Szkuta Family Tree 1912 - 2020

Adolf
3/10/1912 - 2/10/1970



Aniela
15/12/1912 - 13/11/1999



Jadwiga
6/4/1941



Irena
6/1/1945



Wojciech (Wojtek)
9/7/1945



Melanie
14/6/1981



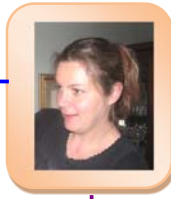
Paul
23/5/1978



Gregory
26/07/1972



Christopher
8/4/1975



Danijela
23/2/1977



Henry
12/7/1947



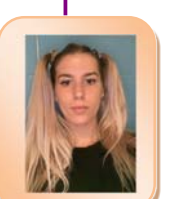
Krystyna
30/9/1947



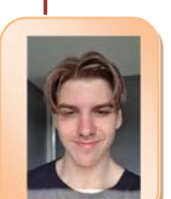
Anya
12/11/2008



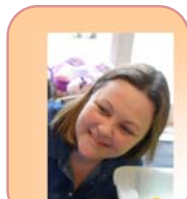
Milana
11/8/2015



Rea
5/4/2003



Tonino
30/6/2000



Joanne
6/4/1979



Andrew
29/8/1970



Christian
18/7/1973



Agnieszka
25/1/1985



Patricia
27/11/1954



Edward
6/4/1953



Taylor
4/3/2012



Seth
29/4/2002



Oaklei
15/7/2004



Sage
11/1/2010



Daniel
6/10/1975



Simon
3/9/1973

