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## Aldona Krutulis

Milena Vico

University of Notre Dame Australia, Milena.Vico1@nd.edu.au

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ABSTRACT: "If we send them away to their death, our conscience will torture us until the day we die." Juozas Audejus, Vilnius, (Lithuania), 1943.

World War II ended 65 years ago, but political, economic and social consequences are still felt throughout the Western World. At personal levels, those consequences are demonstrated through individual narratives. The generation of people from the Baltic States, who grew up and suffered the turmoil of WWII, is passing. It is timely and imperative to record their pre-war childhood with values instilled by their parents and how those values have shaped their lives in carrying them through those turbulent years and beyond.

I followed the pathway of the young Aldona Krutulius, nee Audejus, born in Kaunas, Lithuania on 4th July, 1922. At the age of twenty-two, and alone, Aldona fled her country to the West, to avoid the advancing Russian Army. She married in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, gave birth to a daughter, Danute, and then in 1950, resettled in Perth, Western Australia. Cast alone from kith, kin and culture, her circumstances forced choices, created opportunities and closed doors. Aldona's story documents religious and moral values instilled by her parents, and what motivated her to overcome adversities that transformed an ordinary life into one of remarkable achievement. Her attitude to the less-fortunate can be characterised by the words; duty, responsibility, self-sacrifice and respect for humanity. Those values are illustrated by the way in which, together with her family, they rescued Jews who, during the Nazi Occupation of Vilnius, were hunted and persecuted. In 1970, recognised for her act of humanity and unselfishness, Aldona was awarded the Yad Vashem Medal and Certificate of Honour. She always helped people: whether footslogging alongside Italian war prisoners to whom she gave food; or as a domestic worker at Wanslea - Home for Children of Sick Mothers; or as an interpreter for patients at Royal Perth Hospital. She also gave clothing to the poor and food to the hungry. She continually practised those values until her death at the age of 86, in Perth, Western Australia. From an outsider's perspective, Aldona's life seems harsh but her character shone through distressful times. In this paper, the life story shared with us has been told by Aldona with corroboration by her daughter, Danute. It gives insight into lives of ordinary people with moral values which overcome boundaries of nationality, religion and social fabric.

Aldona Krutulius, nee Audejus, was born in Kaunas, Lithuania on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1922 into a wealthy middle class family.

Her father, Jouzas Audejus was a lawyer. Her mother, Anna-Marjia, was of Polish-French descent, brought up according to Catholic religious values and traditions. She was an accomplished piano player. Eduardas, Aldona's only brother, had a weak constitution but this did not prevent him from studies and playing music. They attended the Šiauliai Catholic Primary School, which was

within walking distance from their home. After primary school, for only two years Eduardas attended “Aušrai Gimnazija” (high school) for boys in *Laisvės Alėja*, opposite the post office building. He was then tutored at home due to his illness. Aldona also attended “Aušrai Gimnazija” (high school) for girls. Her high school was situated opposite the Presidentura in Vilnius Gatvė. After school time was mainly occupied doing homework until dinner. At night their father would entertain the children reading stories in Russian, Polish and Lithuanian. Often Aldona would fall asleep and was carried to bed. Her mother would play the piano and both parents would sing mainly Russian songs. Eduardas played the guitar and his favourite song was a ballad about Napoleon’s exile to the island of St Helene. Aldona was the only one in the family who never learnt to play music. Their childhood was influenced by their maternal grandmother’s connection to France and their father’s Lithuanian culture. Lithuanian, Polish and Russian were the spoken languages in the family; music was integral as both parents played musical instruments. In a cosmopolitan atmosphere both children grew up in a quiet and protected environment.

Aldona’s recollection of the celebration of *Kučios* (the Christmas Eve meal) to which were invited their parents’ friends; Russian-Jewish lawyers and Polish teachers, and where the conversation was usually in Russian, gives an insight into the environment of the two children’s upbringing.

They were not allowed to go out alone or play with other children. Ona, the maid would always escort them. Of Kaunas, the young girl remembered clearly her neighbourhood, her home, the seemingly long walks to school, and Sunday walks along *Laisvės Alėja*, a long clean and neat boulevard bordered on both sides by old houses and linden trees. Friends and neighbours, artisans and vendors (the latter mainly Jewish) could always be seen there.

At sixteen years of age Aldona was a happy adolescent, unaware of what was happening in her country and in the world. She did not read newspapers or listen to the radio; politics was not one of her interests. She heard from her parents' conversations that there were deprived people who complained about their meagre circumstances but she did not know any of them personally or how difficult their lives were. Poverty was not perceived by her, neither did she discern between social classes. However, she knew that city dwellers were often more educated; multilingual, received higher wages and usually had smaller families, whereas country folk did not have the same opportunities for higher education and kept large families. It was only after a trip in the country that she realized there were also differences among farmers. Some farmers maintained higher standards whilst others were slovenly. This was evident from the appearance of their surroundings.

One day Aldona and her family visited some country cousins when she noticed an old run down farm. Out of curiosity, she asked her father the reason for the farm's obvious poor condition to which he explained: "Aldutė, not all people are the same. Some do not take any pride in their belongings but we cannot judge them." At that time she was too young to understand and preferred not to ask further questions.

Aldona's mother, Anna-Marjia was quite religious, as were the majority of Catholic Lithuanians who attended church on Sundays, Holy Days of Obligation and for religious festivals. From her childhood she remembered children attended church with their parents, prayed before meals and before going to bed. Often her mother would invite the local clergy to dinner, and to spend some time with the family.

Tragedy struck the Audejus family with the premature death of the son Eduardas at only eighteen years of age and of Anna-Marjia one year later.

In 1939 Jouzas was transferred to Vilnius to work at the Passport Registration Office. Aldona attended the faculty of Economics at the Vilnius University. Ona the housekeeper went with them to Vilnius where they lived in Aušros Vartų Gatvė n.19 flat 9, a street in the heart of the old city. That year, Jouzas came down with a serious infection that threatened his life. His friend Abram Dimitrovsky affectionately called Abrasha, (a Jewish Russian lawyer working with Jouzas) took him to a Jewish surgeon, Mr. Zarcen, who operated on him then and there. A few days later his health was restored.

In 1940 in the early days of the first Russian occupation life went on as it was before. In the words of Aldona: “The Russians tried to impress us with a false sense of security. Some people were even given salary increases and better jobs”. However, prominent and wealthy citizens gradually disappeared to be replaced by communist party supporters. At night in trucks, “our people were forcibly removed for unknown destinations.”

In June 1941 mass deportations to Siberia commenced. Nikolai, a former high school friend of Jouzas, and member of the NKVD (Russian Secret Police) warned him that his name and that of each member of his family was on the list for deportation. Nikolai advised Jouzas to go into hiding at night. In Vokečių Gatvė the family found refuge at the Užbeck Guest House which was run by a Jewish acquaintance. They were certain that if discovered, Siberia would become their next destination, since he had been in the Lithuanian Army Reserve in 1938. Those who had been National Service volunteers were listed for automatic deportation.

In the same month German troops entered Lithuania, and remained in the country as the new occupying force for the following three years. The Audejus family did not hide anymore. Aldona was happy: “At last I could sleep in my bed.”

The Germans closed the University of Vilnius and so Aldona went to Szczecin (Stettin) in north-west Poland to attend a secretarial course; her aspiration to obtain a degree in Economics shattered. When she returned home she found a job at the Vilna Land Commissar. Later the German authorities requested her to work as an interpreter and translator in an office which issued transit permits. Jouzas was promoted as a celebrant in the Registry Office and continued to work as a judge in the Suradeckio Court.

The nature of Aldona's and her father's work made them aware of what was happening in the country under the German occupation. Their religious and moral values overcame nationality, religious boundaries and social fabric. Unlike so many others their values prevented them from being misled by the Nazi ideology. Aldona remembered that in an apartment above them lived a Polish man who very often had visitors, all of whom carried packages or boxes which were left behind. Their quiet meetings roused suspicions but the Audejus family just turned a blind eye to it and never reported what was happening to any authorities. One day, on her way home from work Aldona was approached by the Polish man. He asked her if she could possibly get him a transit permit to freely travel between Vilnius and Warsaw. The following day, she took a handful of those permits from her office and gave several to him. She did not want to know the purpose for the use of these permits. It could have been for the resistance or to help the Jews.

Aldona and Jouzas provided not only transit permits and false documents and kept Jewish friends in their own apartment in hiding for months; but with extra food ration cards they took food to people in the Ghettos. Although their fear was constant their religious faith and sense of humanity prevailed.

Persecution of the Jews took place immediately after the Germans entered Lithuania. In Vilnius some of the local people and Nazis in a few days rounded

up all Jewish citizens and forcibly relocated them into two ghettos. One was close to the university and another larger one in an area behind Aušros Vartu Gatvė, where the Audejus lived. Aldona saw on more than one occasion Germans taking Jews into and out the ghettos; women, children, the infirm and the elderly. In August 1943, the Nazis began liquidating all the people in the ghettos. One evening, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1943, she was a bystander of a distressful scene.

That evening I was prevented from crossing the road to go home because of a procession of Jews that from the Large Ghetto in Vokečių Gatvė was going to Subačiaus Gatvė. They walked slowly. Their faces were pale. Lithuanian and German armed guards escorted them. There were women with children and elderly. When they disappeared from our sight we were allowed to cross the street. I was sickened and upset. I recognised familiar faces, but there was nothing I could do. I knew that they were going to be shot. Why? Why little children, they were so innocent.

When she arrived home, Jouzas told her what was happening inside their apartment. "For God's sake, and for our own sake, be silent and do not trust even your best friends". His friend, Abram Dzimitrovski, his wife Cilė, and his sister Olga, were sitting in the living room. Aldona was happy to see them. After greeting them, she turned on the radio as if it was a "normal situation." At dinner time they all sat around the table and then Abram, and the two women explained how they escaped from the Ghetto. They had climbed onto the Ghetto roof and jumped onto the balcony of an adjacent dilapidated building, then jumped again down onto the street. Abram pretended to be drunk while both women, one each side of him, assisted him to Audejus' home.

They didn't know where else to go to ask for help. Jouzas told his family, "If I had turned them away, my conscience would have tortured me until my death." Hours later, another two Jewish friends arrived. This time it was Abel Fromtchik who formerly worked with Jouzas, and his wife Rachel. Both

frightened and exhausted. They escaped from the Ghetto by jumping from a second floor window when they heard a Nazi shouting, "*Schnell! Schnell! Raus! Raus!*" (Quick! Quick! Move! Move!). Rachel had wrapped herself in a shawl because, although she had ripped the yellow Star of David from her coat, the shape of it was still visible. The Nazis constantly surrounded buildings searching for escaped Jews. But they never found the "Five Audejus" Jews. They remained safe and sound with the family, until the Germans withdrew from Lithuania.

Apprehension and anxiety were always there. The Nazis did not differentiate between escapees and their good Samaritans. If discovered both parties were immediately shot, serving as examples to would-be saviours. During the day, the guests sat reading, playing chess or cards, knitting or helping with house chores. Whenever there was a knock on the door or the dog barked, they retreated to the cellar. The living room floor became their bed every night.

Aldona had fond memories of those evenings when they sat together, playing cards or just talking and telling stories. Olga, who was a talented musician, entertained them by playing the piano. The war and its dangers were for a time forgotten. Often she would take Cilè and Olga for night time walks.

They were terrified about venturing into the streets during the Nazi occupation, but I persuaded them of their need for exercise and fresh air. I recall their trembling and shaking and their clutching hands on my arms whenever we faced oncoming German soldiers, but I would continue chatting and laughing to distract attention.

Working for the Germans, she was entitled to special food ration cards that she used to get extra provisions to share with their guests. However, despite the "specialness", the food shortage started to become critical. Ona used the transit permits which Aldona provided, to go to rural areas to obtain food in exchange of coffee and cigarettes. She wore voluminous skirts to conceal smoked meats



and sausages suspended from a string around her waist. Even her jacket bulged with food. She was pregnant so her size didn't raise any suspicion.

By July 1944, the Germans hastily retreated since the Russians were advancing. Vilnius was bombed night after night. During one of these air raids, the apartment residents had gone into the cellars but the dog, Mirka, frightened by the noises and vibrations, had escaped onto the street. Aldona, regardless of the danger, chased Mirka. She reached her pet and carried it through streets of screaming people, fires, and dust, to eventually return to her place to find the main gate was locked. She slumped against it, holding Mirka close to her and waited for the following morning. The next day she was reprimanded by Ona for what she did but "I would have done it regardless" were the words answered to her step-mother which showed the strength of character of the young girl.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1944, the Germans left Vilnius. At her office employees were ordered to destroy all paper work. The Lithuanian supervisor advised his staff to write transit permits for themselves. Aldona did this, but also wrote permits for each one of her family members, for their Jewish friends, and some extra ones for people who perhaps, she thought, might need them.

In Vilnius, in those days the population went berserk. Law and order was non-existent. Abandoned factories and shops were looted. People knew that if they didn't take what they could now, the Russians would. Aldona went to a nearby soap factory just to see what was happening. She almost choked on the soap powder swirling everywhere and the scent was overpowering. She constantly sneezed and could hardly breathe. Nevertheless, she went home to fetch a pillowcase and returned to fill it with soap powder. In a bedding factory she witnessed a comical situation. Two women were fighting over a pillow. At one time they were tugging at each end when suddenly the pillow ripped apart and feathers flew everywhere. She just stood there and laughed.

It was Aldona's 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1944, when she decided to leave Vilnius. There was no future for her with the advancing Russians about to invade Lithuania again. Her father was on his cousin's farm near Kaunas. Ona was pregnant at home looking after the house and their Jewish friends. In a small wooden case given to her by Rachel (the wife of Abel Fromtchik), she packed a few personal items; some photographs, her skating boots and her mother's jewellery. She also took with her a drawstring pouch that Rachel made for her to put some money in and to hang around her neck.

The train from Vilnius went to Gardinas (Grodno), a town on the border of Lithuania and Poland, thus forever separating Aldona from her family, friends, city and country. On foot she walked in the direction of Bialystok. Her journey through Poland to reach Germany which lasted several months had started with unequal measures of kindness and cruelty. Through Poland and Germany Aldona was daily confronted by challenging situations.

Far from kith, kin and culture and facing circumstances that forced choices, created opportunities and closed doors, she continued to live according to her family's values. She felt a commitment "to help the less fortunate in a period in which most people only cared for themselves in order to survive."

There were a few hamlets along the road and she met a kind farmer on a horse-drawn cart, who, with his family asked her to join them. They were going to Warsaw. The following day, before reaching Warsaw, Aldona changed her mind, and this time by a truck she decided to go to Lodz, that had been spared from bombing. Near the city of Lodz with other refugees she followed a row of Italian and Russian prisoners of war escorted by German soldiers who were too tired and too disinterested to prevent them from walking alongside the prisoners. **Once she had joined the column** Aldona passed to the nearest man the entire contents of the sack that she always carried on her shoulders. **and**

which The sack contained several loaves of bread, speck, (smoked fatty bacon) and some fruit, all of which was taken from deserted farmhouses along the road. These men thanked her making the sign of the cross. She also felt also compassion for the German guards who that could have been of the same age as her brother. On another occasion she encountered a small group of exhausted Norwegian prisoners with only one weary German guard who was too involved in his own thoughts to realize that a young girl was passing to the nearest prisoner some bread and sausages. Perhaps he saw her but he was not interested in taking any action against her.

Once in Lodz, Aldona with the other refugees was sent to a camp by the German authorities. Here she worked in the infirmary of the camp as an interpreter. She spent each day with an elderly Russian doctor, Nadezhda Osipova. With the bit of money she had remaining from her journey she would buy food for the Italian and Russian prisoners who were also detained in the camp. Whenever the prisoners came to the clinic, they knew that there was “a window from where they could obtain food.”

Autumn was nearly over and winter was approaching bringing cold and damp conditions and Aldona did not have any clothes for that season. The old lady doctor told her to “steal” the blanket which she had chosen for her. Aldona remembered: “It was soft and new.” From the blanket the Russian prisoners made a coat for her in recognition of the help she had given to them. Aldona remained in this camp for about six months. When the air raids started she left. Before leaving she went to the cellar of the camp to take some food. She was lucky because the other women in the meantime were put into open trucks by the Germans and sent to an unknown destination. The people in charge of the camp had gone and some of the Russian and Italian prisoners left behind ran into the nearby forest. Alone again she decided to walk about thirty kilometres each day because she wanted to reach Germany as soon as possible.

Determination and kindness of heart were the characteristics of this young woman.

One afternoon , walking on a narrow track beside a forest to her surprise she saw a bicycle leaning against a tree. As no one answered to her calls, she took the bicycle which made her travelling much easier until the front wheel kept swerving from left to right. Finally she realised that the tyre was punctured so she placed it beside a tree for someone else. This was “my punishment for stealing” she thought.

Aldona did not fear the unknown for she believed in God and in the kindness of human beings. Her journey remained vivid in her memory.

What I saw during my journey was like watching a film. One could see open fields, farms, forests. I saw deserted villages, farms, wounded people, dead animals, bombardments, explosion and fires. For me this was a normal daily occurrence. All around me was the life of war. Strangely I felt nothing, I had no fear. I wanted to survive. I was in God’s hand. I believed that this could not last forever. One day everything would be over and I could have a normal life.

After few days, with other refugees met along the road, Aldona reached the town of Kalisz (Poland). She was without identification documents. She was warned by other refugees that there was a German checkpoint but she did not take any notice. At Kalisz, it seemed as though she was caught in a stampede. A myriad of people were being jostled and rounded up like cattle by both German soldiers and civilians to be reorganized into rows before being herded into the police building, and then into a huge chamber which had five tables at one end. At each table two officials were seated. It was the very first time that Aldona started to be worried but she could not escape. She found herself standing in front of a policeman. She could not answer this imposing man who had such a strong hard voice. She was tired and started crying. A younger policeman left his seat, felt some compassion and led her to some benches.

Then he went into another room and returned with a cup of coffee and a thin slice of bread. Aldona quietened down, and after that felt ready for questioning. She told her story, and he made notes. By the end of that interrogation, her hand trembled so much that she could hardly sign her declaration. After that ordeal she felt quite relieved. She had obtained the permit she needed and was told to report to the *Burgermeister* (lord mayor) of every town, if she stayed there. She felt that God did not abandon her. “While I was there I prayed to God with all my heart.”

While in Germany, she worked as a farm hand in return for food and lodging and quickly learned how to milk cows without getting her feet trampled under hoof. She felt safe with these country folk. Food was not abundant but she never went hungry.

Near the town of Potsdam, she was working for a farmer’s pregnant wife who decided to go suddenly into labour with her fourth child. Her husband was in town and there were only two adolescent boys on the farm. One boy was Estonian, who also spoke Russian, and the other boy was Polish. Aldona was the only German speaking farm-hand, so the labouring woman told her to prepare for the birth. In Polish and Russian she had to translate the instructions to the boys. The birth fortunately was fast and without complications.

On another farm at Braunschweig, where she had the intention to stay only for a couple of nights, the owners were an elderly couple who had lost their only daughter. Because of their sorrow, Aldona decided to remain longer to help and to comfort them. They didn’t want her to leave.

In Kalten Kirschen village the people were friendly and nice. The *Bergermeister* sent Aldona to help in a farm for a *Frau* (woman) that was very generous and gave her a very good gift, a pair of shoes. They were not new but more decent than the ones that she was wearing. One afternoon, from the window they saw

approaching from the fields, four German soldiers. Quickly, all food was removed from the table and hidden except the bread and the coffee. Aldona remembered what the *Frau* told the soldiers: “We don’t have anything. What you see is all we have.” She was surprised because they had plenty food and these soldiers were Germans. One of them then said:

I remember in Šiauliai in Lithuania, a farmer’s wife gave us so much to eat and before we left she made us take some food. She blessed us. She also had a son fighting in the war and hoped that God’s helps him to find a good person when in difficulties.

On Sunday when the *Frau* was at church, six German soldiers came. This time Aldona went to the cellar and filled a sack with food and told them to drink as much milk as they wanted. When they left, she topped up the milk level with water. The *Frau* ‘deserved’ it.

Aldona’s journey seemed endless but it was **also** rich with funny stories. In all the tragedies caused by war, there were moments of humour-relief for tired spirits. She remembered several incidents which created lightness during those difficult days.

When she reached the town of Kalisz in Poland, sitting on top of the roof of a truck full of people including soldiers, she observed from her position a man in obvious pursuit of another. Perhaps he was a thief she thought? Then, she saw more people running in all different directions. At first she did not comprehend the reason for this chaos. It dawned on her when she heard the noise of advancing aeroplanes and from the distance, the sound of an explosion. Then one after another with no end! In seconds the truck was empty with only her left on the roof. It was too high for her to jump down. The heavy sheepskin coat she was wearing restricted her movements, **and** she could not bend to remove the straw overshoes she was wearing to protect herself from the cold, so climbing over the rear gate of the truck was almost impossible. In desperation, with all her strength, she gave a strong kick, first with one leg, then with the other and

those two straw boots flew into the air, and only then she was able to get down from the truck. After seeing her straw boots flying and somersaulting in the air, she could not stop laughing as if unaware of the inferno around her of noise, screams, falling bombs and explosions. “Now”, she thought, “This is the end”. She did not know why her feet carried her over the street towards three German soldiers who, with pointed fingers were following the bomber planes. They began running in one direction. She gave the chase; after all, she thought “soldiers know what to do in these circumstances.” They ran and threw themselves onto the ground and covered their heads. Aldona fell too, covering her head against the last soldier’s back. A few times they stood up and ran and fell, with Aldona doing likewise. At one time on the snow, they saw a pine coffin. One of the soldiers exclaimed: “*Donner Wetter! Der sarg ist schon bereit fur mich*”(Thunder weather! The coffin is ready for me!). Again they started running but this time one of them noticed this girl and asked why she was with them. They all started looking to each other and laughing. She had been thinking the same.

Leaving those soldiers she jumped into a ditch against the wall of a bombed house. She curled up and closed her eyes and wondered what she was going to do tomorrow. Still in that position, she became aware of a “presence”. Not lifting her head, but only opening her eyes to see a pair of thin legs and feet wearing home-made, felt slippers. She slowly lifted her gaze to see a long skirt, a dirty apron, thin cardigan and trembling hands praying over her. The woman’s head was uplifted, her eyes closed. A very tall, thin, elderly lady was fervently praying. Aldona crawled towards her hugged her thin legs and trembling with her head under the lady’s apron, heard her words, “Child pray! God will hear you” but she could only repeat “Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!

One morning trying to board an overcrowded train to reach Bavaria, Aldona with another young girl decided to climb into a coal wagon. At their destination,

they crawled out of the wagon and once on the ground they looked at each other and laughed hysterically. They both resembled black people but with shiny blue eyes and blond hair.

For brief moments, these occasional episodes gave comical relief to an otherwise painful and distressing war in which her life was constantly endangered.

It was 1945 when Aldona reached Munich. From there she went to Seligenstadt, a town on the river Main 25km south-east of Frankfurt, where there was a displaced persons (DPs) camp. After an interview and a medical check up, she was accepted. She thought it was very fortunate. Life there was good, after the tribulations of war. She did not have to worry anymore, everything was provided. She even started to attend English classes. Here, she met Bronislovas Vitkunas, a young Lithuanian man, and after few months they married. Later, a baby girl who she named Danutė was born.

As soon as the migration to Australia started, Bronislavas applied, and he was accepted. He migrated to Australia first, as was the common practice for the displaced people, in order to become employed before asking their wives and families to join them. Unfortunately, he found this an opportune time to desert his wife and their little girl of only ten months.

One of the adventures of Aldona was a romance with an U.S. army officer. The American military was in charge of the DPs camp and it wasn't long after Bronislavas migrated to Australia that she met him. They enjoyed each other's company, he taught Aldona to speak some English and he was very good and caring with the little Danute. This close friendship resulted in a romantic holiday in Neuschwanstein, an alpine area near Füssen in Bavaria. But after discovering he was married and had two little girls, Aldona had to make the painful decision to end the relationship. Her little daughter by then was happy to



have a “father” and for days missed him badly. He could not have been a better loving father figure. In the meantime, Aldona and Danute were transferred to another camp in Unterjettingen, in Bavaria. In 1950 they were accepted as a migrant to Australia because her estranged husband was already there. For Aldona, although her lone journey through Poland and Germany was fraught with unforeseen challenges and problems, it had opened her eyes and caused her to rapidly grow up. “Every new day was a new page of life filled with different experience, through sorrows and hard times, all those events strengthened me.”

Aldona left Bremerhaven in Germany on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1950 on the American warship, *The General Hersey*. The ship she remembered was not comfortable. Most of the people had to sleep in crowded cabins on bunks, and men and women were segregated. But she was lucky in that she was allocated a small cabin which she shared with her daughter Danute and another woman. Obviously there was no air conditioning and the hot weather during the night was unbearable, especially when they navigated through the Indian Ocean. She used to sleep on the deck even though it was not supposed to be allowed. The journey was long and at times boring, but people had to do some work on the ship in rosters. The men had to scrape the ship’s decks and walls and repaint them, while the women had to help with kitchen duties. There was also time for recreation, small parties, reading, and the men used to play cards. Aldona used to keep herself busy looking after Danute. She also tried to socialize with other Lithuanians and the time passed relatively quickly. On the ship, people spoke a variety of languages and the instructions were given mainly in German, a language known by the majority of the refugees.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, Aldona arrived in at the port of Fremantle in Western Australia. She was transported by train to the Immigration Accommodation Centre in Northam, a country town some 100km east of Perth. From there she went to Holden, a former army barracks just outside the town, which provided

accommodation for widows and single mothers. This would be her temporary home. Despite the unaccustomed heat, flies, huge bull ants, strange birds (kookaburras) and animals, the different food and language, she was happy and relieved to be in a safe haven with good prospects of starting a new life. After a few days she found a job which allowed her to earn two bob (shillings) for each basket of ironing done for the local doctor's wife. Aldona saved the money and when she had two or three pounds she used to go to the only general store in town and buy shoes and clothing for her daughter.

Graylands Migrant Hostel was her next destination. She stayed there for a short period before being billeted to live in the homes of wealthy families in exchange for domestic duties. She didn't particularly like this job but she found the time spent there to be an opportunity to improve her English. One home which she really liked was in a location overlooking the Swan River and the bushland of Kings Park. The owner of the property was in the Australian military. He was very kind, and would sometimes take Danutė for walks along the river and even enjoyed her company at breakfast, seating her at the table overlooking the river.

She stayed in this job for a year before she was employed to care for children at Wanslea Home for the Children of Sick Mothers in Cottesloe, a suburb near the beach. She lived with Danutė at the hostel and she enjoyed looking after the children in need of comfort and help.

In 1953 she was granted a divorce by proxy. Her husband could not be located in Australia because, as she found out later, he had changed his name and lived in Adelaide, South Australia. In 1954 she met and married Povilas Krutulis. Povilas was also a Lithuanian born in Suvalkija, a region in the south eastern part of the country. Twelve years older than Aldona, he was a quiet, well spoken, and knowledgeable person. He had obtained a degree in Agronomy at

the University of Kaunas, but became apathetic and unhappy when his degree was not recognised in Australia. Language difficulties prevented him from finding suitable employment. Another stab to his already battered ego occurred when, after years of enforced labouring in timber towns in the south-west, an unscrupulous real estate agent robbed him of his hard earned savings of about 200 pounds. He had planned to use it as a deposit on a home in Loch Street, Claremont WA. It was a traumatic time indeed for him, but he then obtained another labouring job with the Ford Motor Company in North Fremantle, WA. He relied on Aldona's strong will and help. She was the decision maker in the family but she was also a sensitive wife and loving mother. Working hard and saving almost all their wages, they were able to purchase a workman's weatherboard cottage in Claremont, a suburb of Perth. They were happy enough as they had started a new life and were able to give to young Danute a sense of stability.

Misfortune hit them when Povilas was laid off due to an economic downturn and it was very difficult for them. They still had to pay the mortgage, however they had an understanding bank manager who agreed to delay the repayments until Povilas found a new job. In the meantime Aldona worked extra-hours and found a second job. Life was not easy but she was the pillar of the family; strong and determined, even when her husband started drinking. Finally, Povilas found employment as a gardener at the Graylands Psychiatric Hospital. Life went back to normal. The family lived in Claremont for forty years, although later they had the cottage demolished and replaced by a small, modest brick and tile home on the same block. No more ups and downs, only work and enjoying the little daughter that was growing fast and now was attending school. In 1965, as a result of her acquired skills with languages, Aldona started to work as an interpreter and translator at Royal Perth Hospital. She held that position for

more than twenty years, doing what she really enjoyed the most, helping people in need.

In 1957 after a thirteen year separation, through her father Jouzas' advertisement in the Sydney- based Lithuanian Newspaper *Mūsų Pastogė*, father and daughter were reunited, albeit only through correspondence. Aldona found out that her father had spent four years in exile in Siberia, that he was married to Ona and had a daughter Gražina. Their Jewish friends survived the war. Abel and Rachel Fromtchik had left Vilnius for Virbalis, a Lithuanian country town to be reunited with some relatives. Then, they went to Tel Aviv where Abel established a law practice. Abram and Cilė Dzimitovski had left Vilnius in April 1945 for Italy. In 1950, they migrated to Boston, USA, but they remain in contact with the Audejus family and visited them when they went once to Moscow. Abram's sister, Olga, stayed in Vilnius and lived with the Audejus family until her death in 1969. She worked as a librarian in the State Philharmonic library.

In 1972, Aldona's father passed away. For months she was inconsolable. However, time heals. So after a year of mourning she resurfaced even stronger. She continued to help the people in need **but** with a new vigour. To the poor and derelicts of the city she delivered food and distributed clothing and she worked as a volunteer in animal shelters. She regularly visited one of her old school teachers from Kaunas who had migrated to Perth, and lived until she was 90 year old even though she was affected by Alzheimer's disease.

Aldona returned to Lithuania for the first time in 1992, with her daughter. They spent most of the time in Kaunas. This visit was a sort of pilgrimage. She was eager to see her former home, school and church. She walked along *Laisvės Aleija*, as she used to do with her parents, and along rivers and parks.

Maybe it was because she visited Lithuania too soon after the Communist downfall that she formed negative impressions of the people there. To her there seemed to be an ambiguity and distaste for many aspects of the traditional Lithuanian lifestyle. The attitudes of most people reflected disrespect for anyone and everyone, avarice for anything western and a mistrust of each other. There was a lack of knowledge of Lithuanian customs and traditions, especially in the younger generation, which could be attributed to Soviet influences. She returned to Lithuania only twice.

It was enough for me. So much had changed. People's attitudes and behaviour convinced me that Lithuania was no longer the home I dreamed about. The past was gone and with it my father and everything which I held dear. My father was my only reason for keeping contact with my native country.

In 1997, Povilas and Aldona decided to sell their Claremont home and moved to Duncraig, a northern suburb of Perth, to be closer to her daughter who was married and had a family. Unfortunately, Aldona's happiness did not last long because Povilas passed away in 1999. She was alone again but her religious faith supported her. She considered herself still fortunate to have been able to live a full life and of being able to share with others the gifts that God gave to her: generosity and decency.

Although she lived some 57 years in Australia, deep in her heart she still felt a Lithuanian, with language, traditions, religion, values and beliefs instilled by her parents. She loved Russian culture and music. During an interview that took place in the year 2000 in Perth, Aldona stated: "Any time I want to be close to my father and family, I listen to Russian music, or I read a Russian book. Russia is not only "the Gulag and deportations" but also art and music that reaches your heart." As she got older, Aldona did not frequently attend the Lithuanian club and the Lithuanian church. She spent most of her time reading,

listening to music, gardening and doing needle work. When I asked her if she missed going to church she answered: “God is everywhere. You do not need to go to church to find him and pray. My house is my church. I light up a candle I kneel and I recite my prayers whenever I want. God is here. He helped me through life and when I was in danger he always showed me the right path to follow.”

Overall, Aldona's **life** from an outsider's perspective, seemed harsh, but her character shone through distressful times. Whether she helped people footslogging alongside war prisoners and giving them her food, or whether she was a domestic worker at Wanslea, or an interpreter for patients at Royal Perth Hospital, or giving clothing to the poor and food to hungry old men tramping the city streets.

In 1970, Aldona was recognised by the Jewish Nation and the Nations of the World, that she was a humane and righteous woman. She is a holder of the Yad Vashem Medal and Certificate of Honour for having helped to save the lives of five Lithuanian Jews. Her father and Ona were also honoured.

Aldona Ona Krutulis passed away on 18th August, 2008.