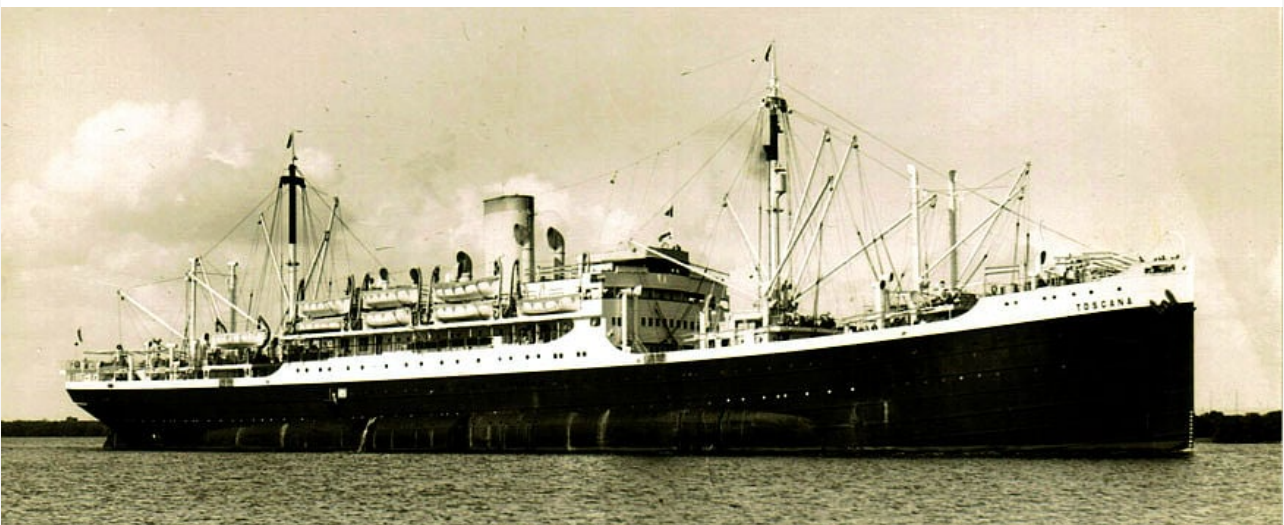


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## ARCHITECTURAL OBSERVATIONS

### Impressions



*Photo of MN Toscana*

On 26 May 1957, a perfectly still clear day, our ship the MN Toscana sailed into Sydney Harbour passing the heads just after 5am. Crowded together on the deck, waiting for the tugboat, we could see few signs of any familiar looking settlement on the slopes rising from the huge harbour. As we sailed further west, we passed the centre of the city, then sailed under the great arch of the Harbour Bridge, finally berthing in Pyrmont. The morning light was golden, the water calm, with no feeling that this was the beginning of winter. This, we thought, must be the end of the earth, probably a feeling familiar to the early settlers.

Strangely, there were few signs of life, as we knew it. We were full of hope and optimism, and a little apprehensive, after our orientation talks by the immigration officials warning us of the danger of contact with lethal creatures in Australia. We furtively ate the last bit of Hungarian salami on rosetta rolls taken from the dining room table, as we waited to disembark. This happened after endless formalities, and we stepped onto the timber wharf to face the uncertain life that awaited us in Sydney. It was 2 weeks before my 14th birthday.



*People on board MN Toscana*

How did I see Sydney in 1957? The most obvious impression was that the light was different. It was brighter and a little glary and the huge sky was an intense but pale blue. This was a time before air conditioning was affordable and the summer heat was relentless. There were few trees to shade the roads and footpaths and they melted in the heat. My foam rubber thongs (flip flops) got stuck in the tar, as I walked to the beach for respite from the heat. Sometimes people slept outside on terraces and in sleepouts. Apart from the physical environment, everyday life was subtly different. Targeted information, and direct support in any form for recent migrants was almost non-existent in 1957, and where it existed often misdirected. These migrants had little English to navigate the system, and this forced them to learn English and therefore encouraged assimilation. My uncle, Louis, who had come to Australia in 1951, managed to find to rent a small ground floor 2-bedroom apartment. A miracle, as at this time, there was a severe housing shortage. We shared this small flat with cousin Peter, his wife and child, who had left Hungary illegally at the end of 1956. The 2-storey block of 4 apartments was in Palmerston Avenue, Bronte. The landscape was a gully, lined with similar 2 storey interwar apartments, built I was told, to accommodate European migrants from Russia and China. The area was known as "Little Shanghai". There was hardly any mature vegetation in the street, parks or backyards so we could play games, soccer and cricket in the streets and on the sloping park in Blandford Street. Some of the migrant boys had names like Stanley or William that in retrospect I realised were anglicised Russian names. My name Gyula quickly became Julius, as we were determined to assimilate, to become Australians, at least superficially.



Marlborough Reserve  
25/10.22  
Blandford Avenue Bronte

*Bronte Palmerson Ave "Little Shanghai". The park now overgrown*

Economic migrants were finally allowed to come to Australia in the early 1950's, to help develop and populate this huge isolated island country. They came mainly from Southern Europe, and most had only attended primary school, few knew any English and found learning English difficult. As a result, they naturally sought out their original communities, for support and recreation. Soccer and social clubs generally took on this role. For Hungarians, many of Jewish background, no such support or institutions existed, so families tended to help each other, and assimilation became even more of a priority. Some continued to prefer living in apartments, often close to the synagogue.

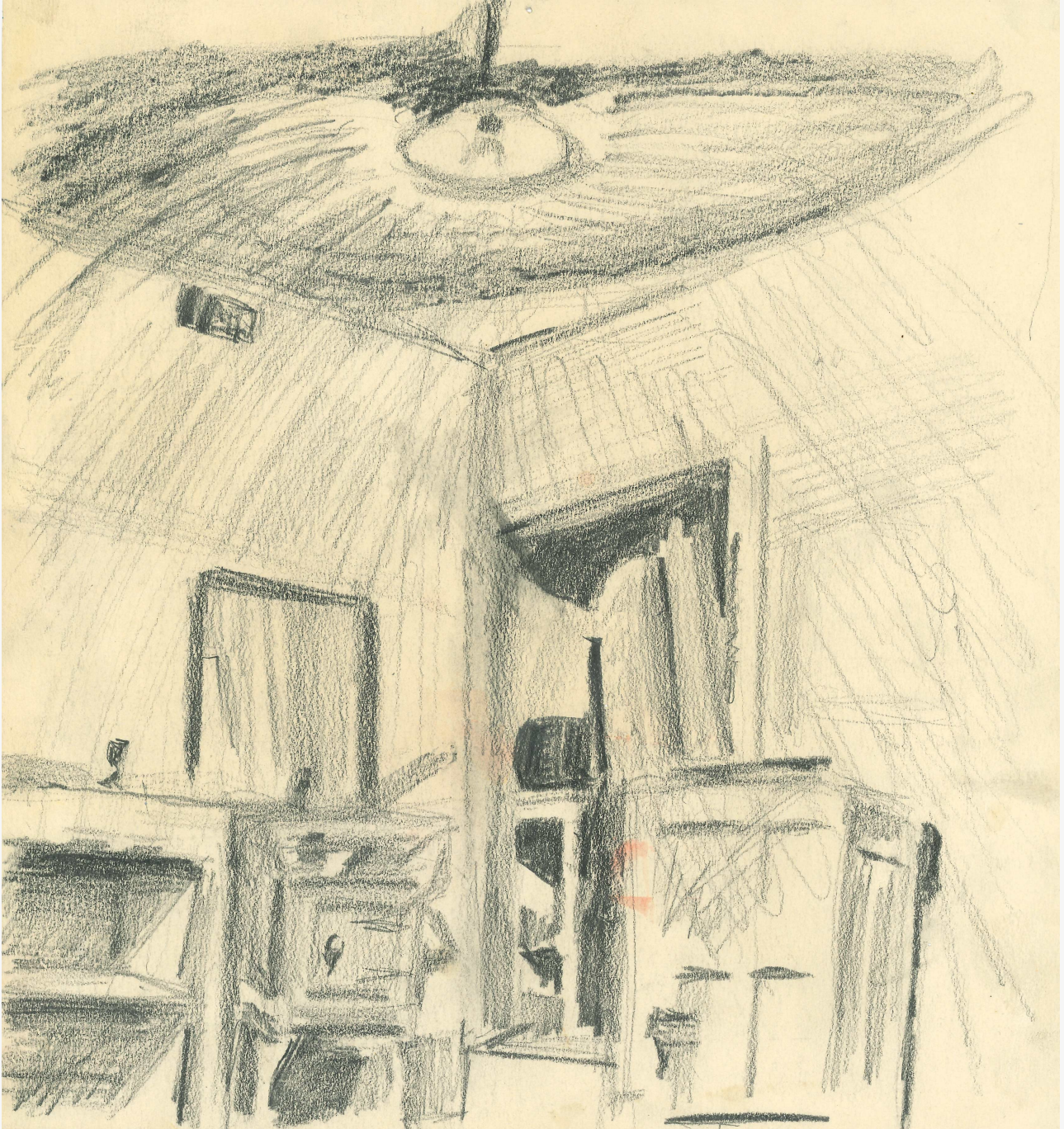
The bleak urban environment and the harsh reality of the bush, was reflected in a somewhat brutal ethos. Being good at sport was most admired. Academics and artists were not considered essential to life, and were generally regarded as "sissies". The urban environment superficially resembled the mother country except that everything apart from the sport fields were smaller in scale. The Victorian decorations on the buildings looked grotesque in the harsh light. Everything that was admired followed a British model including the names of cities, suburbs and streets.

The universities aimed for high standards but the staff were often imported, often not successful in the UK, and many looked down on the so-called local colonials. Australia was, in 1957, a rather stunted imitation of the mother country. There was no intellectual and artistic history and no admired proud learning institutions, housed in ancient buildings. It was hard for a migrant to define the characteristics that were "Australian" and hence difficult to subtly fit in. Nevertheless, after 2 years I was given a "Certificate of Naturalisation" with a picture of the Queen, and a dedicated copy of the St James' bible. I thought that the motto of Sydney University at the time, did in fact reflect the reality. "Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato", meaning "the same learning under new stars".



*Ocean St Apartments. Many Jewish migrants felt at home -- Adjacent to the Synagogue in these apartments*

We left behind a familiar city, Budapest, where buildings recalled memories, events, some good some of hidden horror. We abandoned a genteel apartment, in a prestigious neighbourhood. The paintings, valuable furniture and carpets all reverted to the state. We had been comfortable in a society, that admired cultural achievement, and had, even in spite of censorship, a thriving cultural life.



*10 Spicer St. My room with sink and cooker*

When Christmas 1957 arrived, we had to move from the apartment to make way for my godfather. We purchased a cheap run-down terrace house in Woollahra, where the streetscape with its mature trees seemed familiar. Our new house, was a humble 1888 dwelling, which had been converted into a number of rented rooms, a sort of mini boarding house, in the midst of the housing crisis. The floors were covered in patterned linoleum, with the boards at the edges painted black, the profile of the boards clearly visible. We were surprised that beds and threadbare blankets were left behind. Woollahra had been a smart 19th century neighbourhood but had gone to seed by the 1950's. In the main street, there were at least four grocery stores that gave weekly credit and stocked the bare minimum of groceries and vegetables. The butcher shop, Churchills, sold beef, lamb, the occasional rabbit, very little pork or veal, that was our usual staple meat. The cuts were unfamiliar, the meat not lovingly cut, rather brutally portioned with a bandsaw, and we needed to wash off the bone dust before cooking. The size of the fruit and vegetables were more prized than the flavour and there was little choice.



*Bronte Beach. Trees in the gully*

Australia was isolated, with sport the real connection to the rest of the world after the recent wars, a lot of it heard on radio. Great sporting achievements were admired. However, the alliances that followed the war confirmed Australia's place in the world order, and ensured its sense of belonging to a larger whole. Many memorials to the fallen, mostly of a pattern, reminded us of the sacrifices made, and the RSL clubs offered mateship to the returned.

Every locality had playing fields, the reliably good weather allowed outdoor sports to flourish, the beach was a rite of passage, and a chance to display physique. Grey itchy school uniforms, light blue shirts and universally black shoes or after school thongs, freckled faces and red hair are lasting memories.

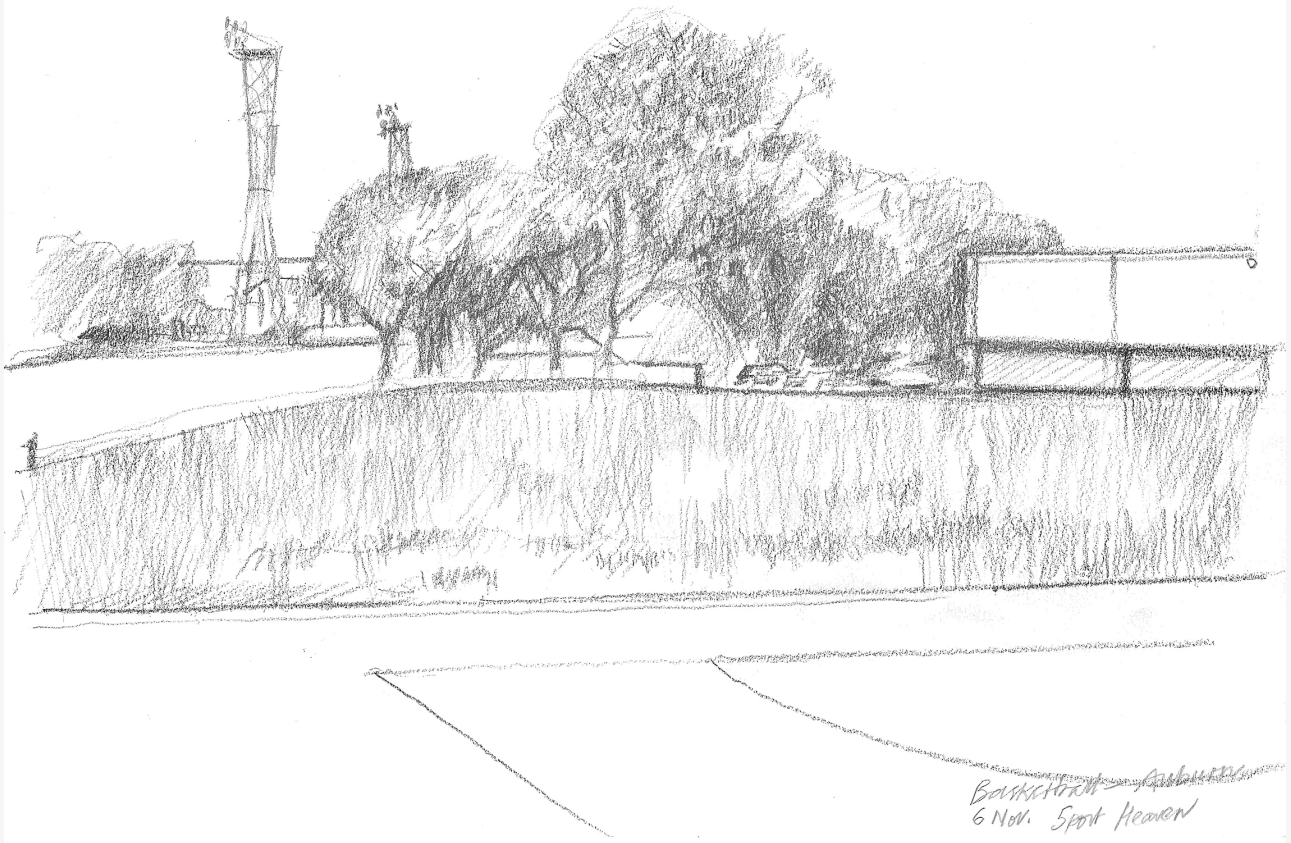
Partaking in art or intellectual pursuits, was disparaged and was seen as effeminate. This perception made the artists of the time determinedly resilient, heroic, and essential. Beneath this gruff exterior, admiration of sporting prowess and disregard for the finer things in life, most people were kind and caring. This was extended to us. It was not all right to put your arm around someone, instead you gently mocked them with good natured banter to show you cared and small acts of kindness were common. The beach, favoured by immigrants, was Bronte. It was accessible by tram, and had shaded playing fields and dense vegetation in the gully behind, in contrast to Bondi's barren kilometre of sand, without shade. The brown skinned man at Bondi in his cave under the promenade, applied coconut spray for a small fee to many lean bodies, 40,000 in a day the record, before they lay and cooked in the sun to an even brown. The frustrated young migrants in the gully behind Bronte Beach, played soccer, showing off their olive-skinned bodies, but without attracting the local girls.



*Bondi Beach. No shade*

On our first Christmas day, our neighbours, who worked on the council garbage trucks, handed over the corrugated dividing fence a jug of beer to welcome the “new Australians.” The greengrocer gave us timber for the copper in the laundry, and the butcher, bones for soup, and later for the unwanted dog. Slowly we found our bearings, and some of the more superficial markers of our old life appeared, espresso coffee bars, and restaurants serving other than English or Chinese cuisine such as Alan’s Café. Most families ate at home, other than having a drink in the pub. A meal out was for special occasions. The pubs eventually opened up to women, outside of the ladies’ lounge, and opening hours were relaxed. As connections became affordable and faster to other parts of the world, more people travelled and slowly the cultural landscape changed. This was superficial at first, but later an intellectually based desire for a separate identity other than the British birthplace of many arose.

This is not in any way other than a recollection of one individual in a singular part of Sydney. Returning recently to the places I first knew, the change is fundamental. Little Shanghai has become genteel, houses have been extended, the little apartment blocks gentrified, cars line the streets and planting of trees and bushes have transformed the climate as well as softened the brutal brick aesthetic. Now there are so many trees there is nowhere to kick a ball, except in organised designated areas. Babies in smart prams are pushed uphill, to the children’s playground, with a shade structure and drinking fountains for the disabled. Little Shanghai has been listed by the local council as a Conservation Area, all in a lifetime and the hard, somewhat brutal, environment has been softened.



*Generous space set aside for sport*

What about the people? They I believe have grown more self-centred, and less caring at a personal level. The egalitarianism that was the popular creed has given way to a more materialistic society. Prosperity has ensured harmony between the many different races and religions, and only rarely has there been an outbreak of real friction. Gradually admiration for the mother country has waned, as the racial mix has altered. This has been helped along by the loss of British prestige and economic power, their courtship of a united Europe, and the influence of the USA. Australians realised that we could eventually forge a recognisable identity. Slowly, and encouraged by the government, a home-grown identity began to emerge, in comedy, film, and literature and no longer did only sport define us. First came the obvious discarding of the British BBC accent, and a sanitised version of vernacular the so called “educated Australian” accent became acceptable. There was a resurgence of the film industry, music, home grown drama and comedy, helped along by television, requiring local content.

Now there is less need to assimilate, learn language and customs, differences are celebrated, instead there is increasing pressure to somehow recast the country relying on the sensibilities of its first inhabitants. By now much of the arable land has been cleared, remaking the landscape. This is at odds with the ideal of being custodians rather than owners of this country. Australia has become a more materialistic society, still searching for a distinct identity, in the process having lost some of its unselfconscious compassion. The unacknowledged feelings of tenderness, disguised as “ribbing” survive amongst country folk, and in the city among the lowest ranking employees of municipal authorities, a sense of mateship survives.





*George Molnar illustrated John Pringle's "Australian Accent"*

It was John Pringle in his 1958 book the "Australian Accent", illustrated by George Molnar, that said:

"But most of all perhaps the Englishman misses the quiet and intimate conversation of friends while feeling too shy or reserved to take part in the boisterous interchange of pleasantries with which Australians express their genuine kindness and conceal their real feelings".

I quoted this, in my diary in 1959.

*Julius*

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1/88 Foveaux Street Surry Hills, Sydney  
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