

THE FACE OF MANY NATIONS - Erika Berzins

First Published in Branching Out April 2007

Recently I was asked to participate in a *Harmony Day* morning tea to acknowledge the variety of cultures in our workplace, by providing a snack from the country of my ethnicity. In my usual satirical way, my reply was, "So, which one would you like, Latvian, Chinese, Scottish, Irish or Australian?" Boy did they get more than they bargained for. The answer was, "Latvian, because that is different!"

I was somewhat dismayed at the thought because I had no idea what Latvians ate for morning tea...and again I found myself exploring my United Nations make up and how much I don't know. Interestingly though, it is my adoptive father who is Latvian – the father who has been a part of my whole life, since the very earliest days of life.

Latvian culture did not feature much in daily life during my childhood, much to the horror of my Latvian grandparents. They looked down on my father for marrying an Aussie, and it caused much derision within our family. My grandparents' attitude to the mixing of Latvian and Australian blood always left me wondering what that meant for me. Did they think even less of me because I did not have any Latvian blood; that I was of no genetic connection to them or to Dad?

Even though Latvian cultural heritage was not part of daily life in our household, it wasn't until I was in my 30's that I was to realise that there was a divide between the knowledge of my older sister, my adoptive parents' biological daughter, and me. As I watched my father passing on Latvian books and knowledge to his part-Latvian grandchildren the gulf between our histories kept expanding. It was the first time I even knew that he had managed to bring anything with him when escaping Latvia and wondered why this had never been shared with me, despite my yearning to know more of his heritage. It was then that I was to realise that this had all been part of my sister's childhood, but was to remain hidden from me – yet another heart-wrenching lesson from adoption to come to terms with.

Similarly, my adoptive mother would never share with me her heritage, despite her own strong sense of history and connection to her ancestors. The historic and sentimental family heirlooms formed a part of her connection to my sister, but not to me. They were not to be left to me because in her words, "You are not blood". For me this accentuated the sense that I was not connected to the history, traditions and ancestry of my adoptive family, rather it emphasised the sense of being the

first of a line (of people). This contributed to the need to determine my own identity, and create a sense of continuity through the creation of a family of my own.

The Chinese part of my being has always been a focus for me during my life - partly from being the unknown heritage; partly from the attention of others during a childhood in very white-Australian dairy farming country; and partly because of my own family's musings on my Chinese traits. I always struggled with knowing what it is to be Chinese. My mother would make comments like, "That's the Chinese in you coming out." As a child with no exposure to Chinese people, their culture, traits or history, I had no idea what that meant. After many years of living in Sydney I can now understand those traits that can be attributed to my Chinese blood – the logical, analytical and pedantic ways of my being.

The visibility of my adoption and my Chinese heritage accentuated the differences I felt within the family and within the community. My adoptive status was very much public property and I faced unending questions from complete strangers, "How do you feel about being adopted?" "Do you feel different?" "Do you speak Chinese?"

Those differences served me well in coming to the realisation at an early age that I needed to define myself. That I was the only one who could determine my identity, who I am and values that are important to me. It wasn't until many years later, after reunion, that I understood my identity to be made up of so many different parts, influences and experiences of life. That discovery was quite liberating in spite of the many mysteries that still elude me around both my biological and adoptive heritage.

Despite this I still struggle with my racial identity – always feeling like I have a foot between two worlds. On meeting me most westerners think of me as white Australian. The Chinese on the other hand consider me to be a "half-cast" – a somewhat derogative term for mixed Chinese blood. In simple terms for the most part I consider myself to be Anglo-Chinese, in the absence of being able to define my ethnicity more succinctly.

One of the greatest outcomes of the reunions for me was for the first time gaining a sense of being part of a biological continuum; that I wasn't simply *born of a file*. That I have a connection not only to my birth parents but also to all the generations before them; that I am the product of many, many generations.

My adoptive name gave me a status – a position within my adoptive family, but it did not give me a sense of continuity or a sense of belonging to a bigger clan. My birth parents' names gave me a sense of heritage and, of being a descendant from a history of people, their characteristics, their idiosyncrasies and their genetics.

There are many losses with adoption and with transracial adoption – the loss of a familiarity and knowledge with my biological racial and cultural heritage, but I also lost a knowledge of the racial and cultural heritage of my adoptive family.

