

## Helvetians Down Under

Another article is ready for publication! This time we have interviewed Alice Tyabji, who has led a very varied and interesting life. She grew up in Switzerland, then moved to Bombay for nearly 50 years, and finally arrived in Sydney about 20 years ago. She celebrated her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday last months and is still very active and takes an interest in everything that is going on.

### Alice Tyabji-Gimmi



*Alice Tyabji in July 2006*

When Alice Gimmi was born in Zürich-Wipkingen on 5 September 1911, the fourth of five children of a "Tapezierer", nobody would have imagined that she would live her life on three continents. As a child, she attended primary and secondary schools in Zurich, later

learning dressmaking. A frail and pale teenager, Alice's mother found her a job in Arosa after she had completed her apprenticeship. "The mountain air will improve your health" she said. Alice returned to Zurich a year later, to be employed as a dressmaker by the fashion house, Grieder, and in 1933, she started her own dressmaking business. It was the same year that she met her husband.

Amin, who was originally from Bombay, had moved to Zurich to study at the university, where he acquired a doctorate in chemistry. He learnt to speak the Zürich dialect fluently, rejoicing in Zürich, university life, and his postgraduate research with Professors Karrer and Nägeli. When he was obliged to vacate his research post in 1935 to make way for new recruits, friends asked him to the annual university ball for a farewell. Since Amin had no partner to escort, a mutual friend suggested Alice. Though 24 years old, conventions of the times required

that Alice seek her father's permission to go out with a man, and Amin had to present himself for approval. Amin passed the test, though it was he, ironically, who ended up shocked because, being a Moslem, he quite disapproved of Alice enjoying wine during the evening. Such sensitivity did not prevent him inviting her to afternoon tea the next day, however, and Alice found the company charming.

They became engaged in January 1936, though not before Alice's father had checked Amin's background, first through business contacts in Winterthur and then by writing to the Swiss consulate in Bombay. The Consul, Mr Sonderegger, reported back that Amin's family was indeed well-established, well-educated and wealthy. He felt obliged to add, however, that he could never recommend that a young Swiss woman should come to live in Bombay. In two recent separate cases, he said, young Swiss women had returned to Switzerland after sad and difficult experiences as brides in India. Undeterred, Alice married Amin in a civil ceremony in Switzerland. No representative of Amin's side of the family or his circle of friends attended, though Alice cannot remember why. Later they would share a Moslem ceremony in London and yet another celebration in India with Amin's family. Amin found research work in a London hospital and Alice's daughter Ursula was born in 1937. Life was not always easy,

as there was a guardedness towards 'mixed marriages'.

Amin's mother was eager for her son to bring his wife and daughter to live in Bombay. He was her only child, and since her husband had died in a drowning accident, she was lonely. So, the young family sailed for Bombay in 1938, living in one of Amin's houses above the Bombelli's restaurant in Chowpatty, a seaside suburb of Bombay. Alice did not take to living by the sea, however, "I am not a water baby" she says. The climate was very humid and she did not like the restlessness of the sea.

Though mixed marriages were rare in those days, Alice was warmly received by her husband's extended family. Amin's father had 13 siblings, so there were plenty of aunts, uncles and cousins. When they arrived in Bombay, Alice remembers meeting Amin's father's oldest brother who, through his seniority, was the family patriarch. Amin was uncomfortable greeting him in the traditional Moslem style, preferring to offer the simple hand shake. Uncle Hussein turned his back in disgust. "If you have changed so much, I want nothing more to do with you," he said. But Alice stepped in and was able to smooth things over; and from the moment Uncle Hussein hugged her, she was accepted completely into the family and never felt that she was treated differently.

*Swiss Community Care Society - continued ...*

Amin was not a devout Moslem and Alice never converted. In fact, their first child, Ursula, was raised as a Christian. There was no escaping prejudice, however. During the war, Alice remembers going to a club for Europeans with a swimming pool. When it was realised that Ursula had an Indian father, Alice was asked never to bring her daughter again. "I have any number of stories that illustrate the trials of a 'mixed marriage,'" said Alice, "but they should be for a quite different interview!" Alice joined the Presbyterian Church after that, enjoying her time there, and becoming president of the women's group, which knitted handycrafts to raise funds at annual bazaars.

When her son Robert was born in 1943, Alice had achieved what was expected of any respectable Indian wife: she had produced an heir! This new status entitled Alice to a sari and gold bangles, finery her devoted husband was reluctant to provide, preferring her western clothes and jewellery. Meantime, the family moved into a bungalow with an enormous, beautiful garden, on the estate of Amin's forebears. Alice enjoyed entertaining in this splendid environment, though the life was very different to that which Alice had been accustomed as a child. Her upbringing had been quite humble and she now found herself mixing with wealthy, highly-educated people. (Most of Amin's father's brothers were judges.

Moreover, Alice was required to learn little Hindi because the entire family spoke English.) To meet her considerable entertainment commitments, Alice managed the house with domestic help that included a cook, housekeepers, gardeners, a nanny for the children, and sundry other factotums.

Though Alice and her family were not directly affected by the Second World War in Bombay, there was no way to reach Switzerland. As soon as war ended, Alice and the children were able to travel, thanks to the help of a cousin. Ursula had contracted typhoid and was unable to shake off the fevers, so it was crucial to escape the tropics to convalesce. The family boarded a boat for England (and then travelled to Switzerland), which was crowded with soldiers, many of whom had Indian wives. (The wives were required to travel separately, however, because the different races were not permitted to mix in public!)

When Alice and Robert returned to India, they left Ursula behind to regain her health. She first attended a private boarding school in Adalboden and then lived with Alice's oldest sister, Hedwig. After five years, Ursula returned to Bombay, where she attended an English private school.

Alice cannot recall having been directly affected by the Indian/Pakistan Partition of 1947, which ripped those countries apart along sectarian lines, and with horrific violence. Though some of

*Swiss Community Care Society - continued ...*

the family moved to Moslem Pakistan, Amin chose to remain in India where he continued his research.

In the 1960s, Alice returned to Switzerland every summer season to help a friend of Amin's who ran a souvenir shop in Interlaken, a friend who had earlier saved Amin's life. Her daughter Ursula came to Australia in 1975, when a cousin (who married an Australian) suggested she come too. After some ten years, Ursula invited her parents to join her, and Alice and Amin arrived in 1985. They had sold their Bombay property because new land taxes had made property ownership prohibitively expensive. Yet when the time came to move on, they found that they were forbidden to bring money out of India. As a result, Ursula was obliged to sponsor them both. Making ends meet became a challenge, with Ursula working at the North Shore Hospital and Alice doing some ironing to supplement their income.



*Alice with family in 1914 - mother Hedwig, father Adolf, oldest sister Hedwig, second sister Klara and brother Döf (her youngest sister Bethli would only be born in 1919)*



*Alice and Amin celebrating their engagement in January 1936*

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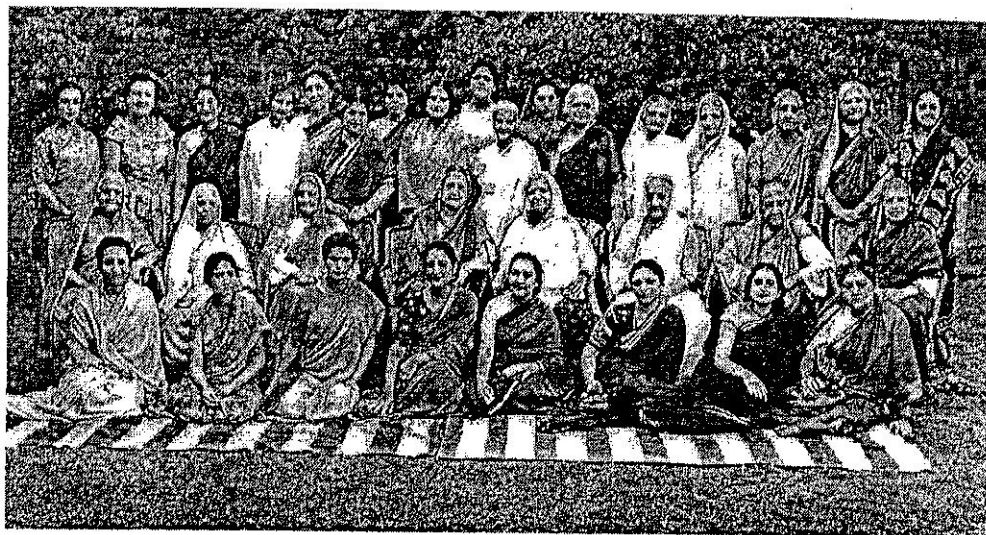
*Swiss Community Care Society - continued ...*

Alice lost Amin, who was nine years her senior, in 1994. She now lives with Ursula and remains remarkably active, travelling by public transport when she has the need. She plays Mahjong and scrabble at the Crows Nest Community Centre on Mondays and Tuesdays. On Thursdays, she meets with 25 ladies at the Church Hall in Chatswood. There they cut out stamps, pack them, and receive \$7/kg for charity. In the afternoon they knit and crochet for the Salvation Army.

Alice's daughter Ursula has two children and a grandchild. Her son

Robert lives in Malaysia, married to a Parsi Indian, having worked for UNICEF with postings in Delhi, Butan, Somalia, Jemen, Tanzania and Nepal. Robert has three sons, two of whom live in the US and one in England.

From humble beginnings in Nordstrasse Wipkingen/Zürich, Alice has lived a rich life of travel and exotic lifestyles. Yet she has never lost her instinctive sense of generosity and an inclination to share with the needy. Her church and community commitments keep her busy.



*Alice (back row, second from left) with female relatives at a "Ladies Function" in 1959*

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