

## The Story Behind the Painting in the Stairwell Esther Davies

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A stairwell in a busy school seems an unlikely home for a picture promoting the contribution of migrants and refugees to a post-war Australia.

At the centre of the large, 5x2.3-meter oil painting, a group of muscular young men raise the Australian flag in a scene reminiscent of Joe Rosenthal's iconic 1945 photograph Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima.



They are surrounded by images of industrious workers, plentiful produce and ships arriving in an unidentified harbour - all signalling a prosperous future for both migrants and Australia itself.

While the heritage-listed painting has been at Telopea Park School for more than 60 years, over time the story of the painting and the Latvian artists, father and son Verners and Girt Linde, was forgotten.

Before the Second World War, Verners Linde was an artist, designer and newspaper cartoonist of considerable standing. During the German occupation of Latvia 1941-44, he was interned in a slave labour camp for two and a half years, while his son Girt was conscripted into the German army.

After the retreat of the Germans and the arrival of the Russian army, Verners Linde was freed and returned to work as a newspaper cartoonist, but soon earned the ire of the Russians with a cartoon satirising their claims as liberators, and was forced to flee.

After years in displaced persons camps in Poland and Germany, he was accepted as a migrant to Australia. In April 1949, accompanied by his wife, his two sons Girt and Werner, and two other family members, he arrived in Fremantle on the SS Amarapoora, together with other displaced persons from eastern Europe.

Linde was undoubtedly relieved to be in Australia. His reply to the question on the Commonwealth of Australia - Incoming Passenger Card, "Proposed length of stay in Australia", was "For Ever". However, in an earlier question on the same form, his listed occupation as "Artist/Painter, Caricaturist, Advertisement" was crossed out and the word "Labourer" was scrawled across the line.

This proved ominous. Over the next 20 years, in spite of holding numerous exhibitions of his work, he never fully re-established his artistic career, and at different times worked as a cook and a house painter.

Later in 1949, in a migrant camp in Northam WA, Verners Linde read, in a now long-forgotten newspaper The New Australian, a request from the Department of Immigration for suggestions from newcomers for musical and arts presentations to be shown at the first of a series of citizenship conventions. After the submission of a small sketch, his proposal for a large mural was accepted, and he and his son Girt came to Canberra to work on the painting.

At the convention, a "New Australians' Arts Exhibition" was held in the rooms of the Canberra University College, in the Melbourne Building in Civic. According to ANU historian Nicholas Brown, these artworks "were taken to represent the contribution immigrants would make to Australia, and of the ways in which a bridge might be built between their pasts and their futures.

"Linde's subject matter, style, and the scale and strength of his painting, offer a bold statement of how this task was envisaged by a participant. I know of no other surviving work that so graphically conveys the meanings of 'citizenship' and the place of Canberra in representing it at that time."

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Sometime after the conclusion of the convention, the painting was moved to its present hanging space in Telopea Park School. The reasons for this choice of location are not clear, but probably relate to difficulties in finding a suitable location for such a large item. In the end, this proved to be a relatively safe environment, in spite of the

acquisitions of some suspicious accretions on the surface and an accumulation of rubbish behind it. It also survived water damage from a leaking roof and a suggestion, fortunately rejected, that some female figures should be added to counter the cast of apparently all male figures. In fact, Linde's wife Zigrida is actually present in the painting. Verners Linde and his son Girt are also prominent, with the latter being the central figure hoisting the Australian flag.

In 2013, the painting's fortunes changed. After years of research and good luck in finding Linde's younger son Werner, enough of the story was revealed to enable a successful application for an ACT Heritage Grant for its restoration and conservation.

In March, 2014, a plaque celebrating the work of the artists was unveiled by another artist, former Canberra Times cartoonist Geoff Pryor. Later that year, the school received a National Trust Award for a Significant Contribution to Heritage Conservation, citing "Cleaning and Restoration of the Telopea Park School Artwork by Kim Morris of Art and Archival, with historical research by Esther V. Davies." Since then, the story of the painting and the artists has been the focus for a naturalisation ceremony and also for the study of migration in the school curriculum.

For the artist and his family, migration was a mixed experience. Verners Linde, once described by a Latvian visitor as "an artiste, an aesthete", died in Adelaide in 1970. Some of his paintings survive in major collections around Australia and more have recently appeared in auctions in Europe. Girt Linde also died in the 1970s.

This painting and its theme of the benefits of migration has not only a local, but national significance in a time when issues concerning refugees and immigration and citizenship still dominate the news.

Esther Davies is vice-president of the Canberra and District Historical Society, and Telopea Park School's archivist.

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