

# Poul Tvede: A Brief Background of a Danish- Australian Migrant

Tvede, P. *Poul Tvede: A Brief Background of a Danish-Australian Migrant, v3.1.* (2020). As part of the series, "Stories from the Shed", Mount Gravatt Men's Shed.

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## Categories

# Life summary # Story-teller's cultural background: Danish-Australian

# Urban/Rural # Maritime # Recreation/Work # Military # Migrant # Ethnic

# Community # Humour # Adversity # Changes in career # Travel



This publication is from the series: '*Stories from the Shed*', as part of a project funded by the Mount Gravatt Men's Shed, and the *Queensland Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors*, via an Age-Friendly grant 2019-2020, and is aimed at developing connections between people and groups in the community.



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## Poul Tvede: a brief background of a Danish-Australian

I was christened as Poul Lomholt Tvede in Denmark in 1928. My father, Magnus Marinus Antonius (his father, a Catholic, liked the sound of those powerful Roman names) Lomholt Tvede, and was a tailor, and my mother, Anne-Marie (she preferred 'Kirsten') Tvede, lived in Husum, a district of Copenhagen, then later at Gladsaxe, near Copenhagen. I went to school there in Grade One and was there until Grade Six. I finished my seventh and final year of schooling in a Catholic school when we moved to Nørrebro, in Copenhagen.

I had two brothers, Knud and Kai, and a sister, Tove. The family was disrupted when my father, Magnus, found himself in love with another woman, Ingeborg, and moved out of the family home to set up house with Ingeborg. That caused a break with the church-folk, who did not support divorce. I then got a half-brother, Finn. As a result of the family break-up, we lived with my mother, and were very poor. I recall once having to hide from the milkman when he came for payment. Because of this, during school vacations I cut peat, used for heating and cooking in those days. I also worked doing deliveries and other work for the local bakery. This helped with the family income.



## Farmer and sailor

During the war years, under Nazi occupation, I was apprenticed as a farmer to help with the family income, but really wanted to go to sea, so, after the war, under-aged, I got my older brother to forge my mother's signature to get a passport and ran away to sea. I started on the oil-tanker, *Inge Mearsk*, as a cabin boy and cook's assistant, travelling routes around Venezuela, North Africa and the Middle East, then, to be closer to my family, moved to a Swedish-owned Baltic trading schooner in the summer season, and also an old Swedish freighter that was a real rust-bucket being renovated for registration and sale, during winter when the schooner was not sailing with seas being rougher and sometimes icing the rigging. A lot of our cargo was taken from East Germany to Sweden; coal briquettes that Germany was sending to Russia as part of war reparations. On eleven occasions we also found we had extra cargo, when Germans who worked around the wharves had hidden on board and emerged from below decks once we were out of Soviet waters to get off again in Sweden. So I guess you could say we were also people-smugglers.



I did my national service on a new torpedo patrol boat, *Bille*, as cook and helmsman. I can claim to have cooked for the King of Denmark, when he came on board as a naval officer for a meal. That new ship, when finally decommissioned and towed to the wreckers, sank in rough seas. I hope it was not due to a bullet hole accidentally made just above the waterline by a crew mate

playing with a pistol, and plugged with a hastily painted over wine cork for the duration of its service.

### ***Shore job***



After that, recently married to Gudrun, I got a shore trade as an industrial painter for Ford in Copenhagen, and lived in Valbygaardsvej, in an apartment block, where we had our two

children, our son, Kim, and then daughter, Lise. We lived in two apartments there, moving to a larger one on the third floor when children arrived.

Washing was dried on lines in the attic, and in cold weather one had to be careful not to crack sheets that might be frozen stiff. The building had a typical small convenience store attached, and Gudrun took a job there when the children were small and she could not work as a public service bookkeeper as she had before we started a family.

### ***Australia***

I was always keen to see the world, and wanting to get ahead in life, and that seemed difficult to do in Denmark after the war. I also liked warmer weather that I had become used to on the oil routes, so in 1956 we migrated to Australia, where had a number of jobs, like building caravans and transportables. I continued work, after a time, as an industrial painter.

One company I worked for had a contract to sand-blast and paint aqua-ammonia fertiliser tanks, commonly used in sugar-cane farming.

### ***North Queensland***

#### *Get results and you can change normal working conditions*

I had a leading-hand job sandblasting and painting aqua-ammonia fertiliser tanks on rural properties and depots. This was a travelling job and followed the sugar cane fields and businesses up and down the coast of Queensland.

I quickly worked out that productive team relationships and management could be achieved by offering a free couple of beers for the end of the day. *“It’s incredible what men will do when they believe you are in it together and you are looking after them!”* When head office challenged my expenditure claims including free beer for the team, I was able to demonstrate the profits outweighed the costs. I also made sure that as far as the team was concerned, I was paying personally, and not the main office. The office was also concerned that other teams not learn of this accommodation in case it became a ‘perk’ rather than being efficient, so we continued doing it.

#### *Look after workmates who find better ways to do something*

One of the difficulties in sandblasting was having a supply of suitable sand. The company expected that this would be found locally and it was part of my job to do that. This often involved

paying someone at casual rates to shovel it out of freshwater streams, after getting all the approvals from councils and so on.

In the Cairns area, I employed an Aboriginal man to perform this task of digging and spreading the sand to dry. This enterprising bloke asked how much would be needed for the whole job and how long it should take, and then arranged a relative who drove a tipper-tray truck and end-loader to come and dig out the sand into the truck, which was then dumped while driving slowly so as to spread the sand out on the bitumen depot work area for drying.

A little later this man asked to attend to family business for a few days. I granted him leave on full pay and kept claiming his wages for him. When a manager from Brisbane came to visit and saw that a casual worker was being paid while not at work I was told that was not right and the worker should be sacked. I took the manager out and showed him the month's supply of sand drying which had been gathered in a few days. *"If you sack him, you'll need to get two new workers because I'll bloody-well go as well. I set this up and I can't go back on a promise made to a bloke I am responsible for."* No further questions were asked.

*If you won't do it, don't ask someone else to, and if it has to be done, get it done*

We were working around Innisfail, doing work and getting more work, when an extra bloke was sent up from Brisbane and said his job was to arrange work for the team. We had previously

managed our own work and could not see how it was efficient for us to carry a non-working team member, especially since this lazy bloke got up late, after spending a lot of time in the pub supposedly getting work, and often did not come to the work sites. This all came to a head when this 'supervisor' agreed to a job of removing a very large fig tree from a depot we were to work on in Innisfail. I looked at the job and asked why the job had not gone to a local tree-lopper. The depot manager said the local tree specialists had refused because of the danger of dropping the tree onto a shed and a fence. I asked the 'supervisor' who had agreed to the job how he intended the tree should be dropped. This involved getting up onto the branches to be cut and staying there while the tree branches fell along a line to avoid damaging anything.

This was clearly dangerous with lots of chances for a mistake. I told the 'supervisor', *"Since you arranged it and you want it done a particular way, then you can bloody-well go up the tree and do it. The rest of us will help by the clearing on the ground"*. He refused. We argued, and he reckoned that the company was now obliged to do the job because he had agreed to it. The 'bastard' then left the site.

I spoke with the depot manager and got the name of the tree-lopper that didn't want to do the work due to risks of damage. I rang this person and got him to the depot and asked him to explain how the tree should be removed if the risk of damage was covered. The tree-lopper explained what needed to be done. I then agreed to sub-contract the tree-lopper on the



understanding that if it went wrong, my company would cover the damage, but wanted a reduced price for that consideration. I held my breath, the tree was dropped, and no damage done.

*If people won't work with the team, move on, or get left behind.*

On return to the hotel we were staying at, I told the 'bastard' that the team was moving on to the next job, and that if he did not get up and be ready to leave with the team, we would not wait for him as we had done at other times. The next morning came; the bloke reckoned he had to have more time for packing and breakfast and did not show up, so I led the team out of town.

At the next job, I received a call from Brisbane asking why there had been a complaint made that we had left without one of the team. I told them the situation, and learned that the bloke left behind had been appointed to work with the team and help get work finished. He should have been working as a second leading-hand, assisting with getting new work as well, and not as a non-working supervisor. We never saw that bloke again.

Eventually, the business I was working for re-organised itself and the job we had been doing was to be contracted out. I was offered to take up the contract for doing this. I thought about it, and realised it was going to put me in a position of having to travel away from home a lot, and while I had been doing this, it had always been to make money so we could get ahead and the family more secure. I did not think it was fair for my family to



continue to always be away from home, so I looked for another job.

### ***Queensland Fire Service***

After a number of different jobs on industrial sites around Brisbane, which included, amongst other things, painting the big fuel tanks at Eagle Farm, where I designed a more efficient rig for the job, and also being one of the first painters in Queensland to use an airless spray gun, at the Gladstone alumina refinery when it was being built by the American companies, I took a job as a maintenance painter with the *Queensland Fire Service*.

QFS workshops were at Eagle Farm. I replaced a team of three painters, and quickly learned that I needed to work a bit more slowly, and also, since they were very fair employers, I worked out some efficiencies, like carrying supplies and going directly to the day's work site at a Fire Station somewhere, rather than going first to the workshops, loading up, and travelling from there. It worked well.

We eventually were a team of two, but then dropped to just me until I started to have health issues that were at first diagnosed as asthma, but later changed to asbestosis. Fire stations had a lot of asbestos in them. I realised I was going to have to leave the job. The Brigade service were very good, and invited me to take every bit of leave available to me before I was medically retired at age sixty-four, This was a year earlier than I would otherwise have retired.

## ***Post-retirement***

With time on my hands, and always having enjoyed working with my hands, I had earlier bought a benchtop wood lathe and made a number of turned pieces. With retirement, that ramped up and I got a bigger lathe. Eventually, a group of us formed what became the *Woodturners Association*. When that changed direction and focussed mainly on teaching beginners and selling turners' work, a small group of us then formed *The Wood Artisans Guild*. It included more than simply turners, and we focussed on sharing advanced skills and grading each other's work.

A highlight when in the Guild was sharing experiences with the Russian traditional carvers during *Expo-88* in Brisbane. When we had them to our place for an Aussie barbeque, they turned up with their 'minders', who looked like they would be most comfortable in trench-coats and fedora hats. With little common language, we still enjoyed a good social event and sharing our crafts. We still have some of that Russian limewood work displayed at home. I smile to think of how that all happened.

My wife, Gudrun, always a knitter, took up spinning, then weaving, and then dying, starting with raw wool or cotton and taking it through to homespun threads that were sometimes dyed using various natural chemicals from bark and leaves and other stuff, and that were then woven into various items. My contribution to this was learning how to make upright spinning wheels which then supplied a number of spinners. Then we experimented with turning packing crates into looms, and that

also took off. We had quite a little cottage industry going. Staying within taxation limits was what kept us in check.

All this craft work enabled us to fund a couple of trips to visit family in Denmark, but one trip I did alone. Gudrun could not quite see the pleasure in starting in five centimetres of a late snowfall to explore my country of birth by bicycle, staying at hostels along the way. In all, I cycled around 1500 kilometres. Not bad for a country that is only 300 kilometres from east to west and also north to south, and that includes the waterways between the main islands. It was a wonderful sense of peace and freedom. While Gudrun and I had done a cycling camping holiday in Denmark in our youth, the war years had travel severely restricted by the occupying Nazis, so I did get to see parts of the country that I had never visited before. It was very peaceful in the countryside, but I did discover that, while Denmark is a country flattened by ice-age glaciers, it has a lot of undulating land, and some of that led to long gradual slopes. Good to coast down, but a real haul to pedal up, especially if the wind, which was usually always present, was against you.

I had also taken up lawn-bowling and became a coach in the sport. While coaching beginners was an accepted role for a coach, I set a cat-amongst-the-pigeons when I suggested that coaches could also help select competition teams. That seemed to upset some selectors who wanted no limits on who they could choose for their teams. I had to put my sense of justice on the shelf, and accept that the club would likely continue to have less-than-ideal results.

When the Mount Gravatt Men's Shed opened, I quickly became a member, helping with the painting of the building, and then became a coach for the workshop's wood-turning. Later I helped introduce indoor bowls. The painting classes were a new experience for me, and the heart-fit sessions came along when I could benefit from the exercises.

I find the Shed an enjoyable place with a wide range of backgrounds, skills and abilities. I sometimes think that collective experience could do a better job of running the country than some of the people doing the job at the moment, if only we had the energy we had when younger.



2735 words –Poul Tvede (MGMS member 121)

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