

# The Search for a Home for Ola

By Helen Cohn

When Ola Cohn returned from studying in London, she immediately leased a studio at 9 Collins Street, Melbourne, where she could live, work and exhibit. There, with the help of her sister Franziska, her mother's odd job man and occasionally artist friends, she set about cleaning, white washing walls and unpacking works completed in England. The sturdy crates used for freighting sculptures such as Mother Earth, Comedy and Head of a Virgin were carefully pulled apart and the nails removed. From this sturdy material the odd job man set about making pedestals, benches and other studio furniture.

For the first two years Ola signed an annual lease for her studio home. She felt secure and continued to pay the rent in advance after the term of the second year of the lease elapsed. Shortly, she was given notice to quit, a major calamity as she had such heavy and awkward stuff to move.

Ola hunted Melbourne for a suitable place to live and work, extending the search to Brighton, Toorak and Glenferrie, but to no avail. She had previously inspected a very agreeable studio at 46 George Street, East Melbourne, but had rejected it as the building was not large enough in which to both live and work. Being so perilously close to the end of her tenure, Ola paid the rent in advance.

Next she found accommodation for herself. It was a loft over the mews, behind a large old house in George Street. The carriers were ordered for the following week.

During the period when Ola was packing and setting up her new premises, she was offered a number of commissions, the most important being the two figures for the portico of the new Royal Hobart Hospital. The studio was so small that Ola had the stones cut, so that she could carve the eight portions, which later would be joined on the hospital building.

Ola saw that if she were to take on commissions for large statues, she would just have to buy larger premises or find suitable land on which to build. Ola walked East Melbourne searching for land, but the only vacant land belonged to the Victorian Railways and that was only available on a 99 year lease.

One day, Ola had noticed an old livery stables hung with notices announcing 'Cars for Hire'. Seeing no-one about, she walked past the accumulated rubbish and tangle of weeds in the "paddock" to view the cobbled courtyard and shabby brick building.

Returning to her work in the studio Ola put aside ideas of a move until one day her friend, artist Madge Freeman, rushed into the studio announcing that she had found just the place to buy. Bubbling with excitement Madge described her find. Ola soon realised



**The author and her brother at Ola's Home c. 1942.**  
**Photo: ©Beatrice H. Cohn. Bruinier Collection**

that Madge had discovered the old livery stables. Not wishing to dampen Madge's enthusiasm, Ola put down her tools and went to inspect the property.

The two boldly walked into the courtyard. Madge tugged at the cord which operated a bell high on the wall. A man stepped out onto the landing. Old enquired whether he wanted to sell the property, but he stated that he was just a tenant and provided the landlady's address.

Ola was very busy at that time, so let the matter rest, until a man posing as an agent, offered to help her, she found the man unreliable, making her position complicated and upsetting, so she dropped all thought of the

purchase. Ola continued to inspect properties which were offered, none of which was suitable.

Six weeks after she had decided not to buy the livery stables and to be content with her current arrangements, Ola had an allegorical dream, very clear and vivid, like a double parable. Interpreting her remarkable dream, Ola saw quite clearly that she should again enter into negotiations. She felt that through the endeavours of her grandfather and his brothers, that she would be able to supply security and allow her ship to come home. She felt she was "guided by the guardian of her soul".

**Continued on page six**

Ola decided to deal directly with the owner. She made an appointment to inspect the property the next morning. Arriving early, she was first shown the upstairs of the "L" shaped building. The South wing consisted of living quarters, and the East wing was a large loft, which had been crudely divided into bedrooms. It was very untidy and smelt very stale.

Stepping out onto the dilapidated landing, Ola had a birds' eye view of the courtyard packed with cars, each dripping grease onto the cobblestones. The partly roofed area was hung with sacks in an endeavour to catch the drips of recent rain.

The stable doors were battered and broken and inside the mess was appalling. The accumulated rubbish of years was thrown on the floors, in mangers and over the stalls' partitions. The adjoining coach-house was enclosed by two heavy doors big enough to allow a coach to be driven from the street at the rear, through to the courtyard. These doors grated sadly when moved. The doors allowed a small beam of light on the wood-blocked floor. Everything was covered by dust. Swallows had built a nest on the wall near the light. The activity of the birds in that dingy place, as they flew in and out to feed their hungry brood, caused Ola to smile.

Stepping through a door at the dim end of the carriage house, Ola was confronted by a disgusting sight. In one old stall stood a decrepit bed with filthy bedding. Ragged clothing was draped over the stall partition and broken troughs. In the remaining stall, even more rubbish was stacked. The

whole area stank of urine and it was pretty plain that the area had been used as a lavatory, as well as a residence.

At first Ola thought the purchase would be unwise, but she conquered her feelings as she realized the great possibilities of the premises. She soon became its owner.

Ola named her property "Ola's Home", modeling two terra-cotta name panels, one inserted in the brickwork at the entry to the courtyard and one over the carriage doorway facing the back street, now Ola Cohn Place.

With the help of her friend Norman Davies, Ola purchased second-hand venetian blinds which they found a nightmare to paint. Blinds ready, they proceeded to upholster the furniture in the old loft, ready for moving day.

Unfortunately Ola told her landlord that she had purchased a property. Before she was ready, the studio had been re-let and the pressure was on her to move and for the builder to make her home habitable.

Ola was ready when at 6.30 am. On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1937 the carrier arrived to collect her goods. There was no difficulty, because the furniture all fitted into one van, but it took four vans to shift the contents of her studio. Moving the sections of the Hobart Hospital figures was the most critical, as the corners should not be damaged. Instead of watching and directing, Ola worked with the removalists. At 4.30 when they left, she was exhausted.

***To be continued in next issue.***

*By Helen Cohn*

*(continued from March issue)*

Friends, who had helped with a 'moving day, then went to bring Ola's pets to their new home. Magpie Margu was disgruntled at being caged under the stairs. Ginger ran under Ola's bed and stayed there. Only the fish, released into their new aquarium, were unconcerned.

After her friends left, Ola had just started to run a bath, when Bess Voice arrived with a bunch of flowers and steak for tea. Leaving Bess to cope in the kitchen, Ola soaked and emerged clean and pink, only to hear that Daryl Lindsay and Norman Davies were downstairs inspecting the premises. Hurriedly Ola unpacked clean clothes, but was unable to find her comb and face powder. Greeting her visitors, Ola found such enthusiastic approval of her property, that she did not have the heart to tell them that she had not eaten since 6.00 am. When they left, Bess and Ola sat down to steak and tomatoes, the first meal in her new home.

As the Hobart Hospital figures were overdue, Ola did not dare delay, she could not afford daylight hours for settling in. At night she gradually unpacked and set up her home. The studio eventually took shape. Ola had been forced to move in before the builder had completed the reconstruction.

Many visitors arrived when she was still unprepared. Madge Freeman, Alma Roach, both painters and Mr. Pitt, the

Chief Public Librarian all called before the floor boards had been laid in the coach house. They had to step over and around the planks and lumber. It was pleasing to receive the visitors, but not at all comfortable. The visitors did not seem to be concerned, after a 'Cook's Tour', they left, just to be replaced by other callers.

Franziska, Ola's younger sister, a Landscape Gardener, designed and supervised the garden. The accumulated rubbish, horse yards and overgrown weeds cleared, the area was first trenched and the area for a sunken lawn dug out. Unfortunately, when it rained, the hole filled with water which could not be drained. The garden was Italianate in style, relating to the Mediterranean style of the building and reminiscent of many they had admired during their continental tour. Roman cypress were featured and specially grafted Lombardy poplars masked the plain brick wall of the neighbour. It was a low maintenance garden with a birdbath, fishpond and stone bench seat. The garden was organically grown and fertilized with seaweed gathered from bayside beaches.

After Franziska, who lived with her mother Sarah Helen at Black Rock, died on March 24<sup>b</sup>, 1939, it was impossible to hire support staff due to wartime restrictions. So Sarah Helen took up residence with Ola, bringing her beautiful antique furniture and household treasures with her. Ola vacated her front bedroom to establish a haven for her mother, with a view of the garden and the park across the road.

One Sunday morning, after enjoying breakfast in her room, Sarah Helen finished her cigarette, stubbed it in the ashtray and threw the butt into the wastepaper basket. Off she went to wash the dishes as a surprise for Ola. It certainly was a surprise when Ola's tenant rushed in to report that the house was on fire. Shortly sixteen handsome firemen charged up the stairs their brass helmets gleaming. Soon the fire was extinguished. Ola inspected the damage, while Sarah Helen likened the men to knights of old, admiring their shining helmets. Ola was finally thanking the firemen, when the ceiling burst into flames.

Early in 1953, after many years of lumping heavy rocks and bags of plaster and clay, Ola suffered from severed back problems requiring bed rest. During this time her friend, widower John Green, looked after her. John, H.J. Green, the retired Government Printer, many years before, had almost daily taken his cut lunch into the Fitzroy Gardens to watch Ola carve the Fairies' Tree and to converse with her. They had remained firm friends. Ola and John were married in a private ceremony on May **6th, 1953**.

Ola's long narrow bedroom could not accommodate the double bed and extra furniture, so the weather board extension to the front was added. This is a very unusual construction, necessary because the existing front wall is free standing, not load bearing. It enclosed the courtyard and hid the downstairs toilet which was originally serviced by a nightman. The arch of the small door to the street is still evident.

On May 5 1957, John Green died. Ola continued to undertake commissions and produce inspirational works of art. She worked on the committees of her charities, also promoted and encouraged artists' groups and women artists.

Ola had been persuaded to leave her studio home at 41-43 Gipps Street, East Melbourne to the CAE as a centre for the study and appreciation of art. She was assured that there would always be adequate funds for proper maintenance and upkeep.

On December 23rd, 1964, Ola arrived at Cowes for her annual holiday. Feeling unwell, she was rushed to hospital where she died. With the property she left many of her own works, her collection of works by members of MSWSPS, the tools and furnishings of her studio and personal items. At Ola's request, her ashes were buried at the foot of Mother Earth. Where she wanted to be, with her beloved pets.

#### References:

Cohn, Ola, *Me in the Making*. Unpublished autobiography, La Trobe Library collection

Cohn, Helen, *My Beloved Aunt: a biography of Ola Cohn*

Cohn, Alan A., Cohn, Jack M., Cohn, Lawrence J., *Tablets of Memory*. Antelope Press.

Cohn Family's oral tradition.