



Rabbi Avrohom Gutnick and his wife Malkie with children Rochel Leah, Nechama Dina and Peretz: They were introduced by a shadchan, or go-between, and would like their children to follow the same process. Picture: PAUL HUTTON

A MARRIAGE IS ARRANGED

They are the perfect match; a couple carefully chosen for each other by

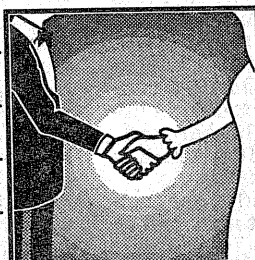
relatives and friends; a couple who often

may meet only a handful of times before

they become man and wife. In Australia

hundreds of couples still willingly enter into an arranged

marriage. BERWYN LEWIS reports



NOT all marriages are made in Heaven — some need a little help from family, relatives, friends, rabbis, priests, ministers ... and the corporation.

In Japan today the ancient tradition of *omiai*, an arranged meeting between a couple with marriage in mind, is still a popular and common way for people to meet. It is also used to tighten management relationships in the corporation — marrying someone recommended by the boss earns special credit privileges.

In Pakistan, the world's first woman Prime Minister of a Muslim country, Benazir Bhutto, was a willing party to an arranged marriage when, in 1987, it was decided that Bhutto, then 34, should marry Asif Zardari, a polo-playing, feudal landlord from Sind.

"It was the hardest decision of my life," says Bhutto, who had met Zardari only a few times before their wedding.

In Australia, the arranged marriage, with introductions and consent by both partners, is still common practice among members of the Hindu, Muslim, Filipino and orthodox Jewish Lubavitch and Yeshiva communities.

Young people brought up amid the freedom and individuality of modern Australian society still willingly choose to follow tradition and marry someone they may have only met a few times — someone chosen for them by parents or relatives.

It is hard to establish firm figures about arranged marriages; a sense of privacy rather than secrecy surrounds them. Often we were told that in some communities "many" young people were happy to enter into an arranged marriage.

But a sample of interviews with 50 Turkish couples in Melbourne, conducted by the Australian Institute of Marriage Studies, found that more than half the sample would expect to choose a marriage partner for their children.

Information provided to the institute by the Lebanese community in Australia reveals that marriages were generally arranged, and "unsuitable" marriages rarely occurred. If an unsuitable match seemed likely, parents and family usually intervened to prevent the marriage.

Arranged marriages among Muslim communities are still preferred, even though changes have occurred and there is more flexibility, particularly among the middle class.

According to Philip Dart, executive officer of the Australian Council of Marriage Counselling Organisations, evidence suggests that arranged marriages are quite successful.

"A fair bit of wisdom resides in parents who get involved in arranged marriages in that they select people who share similar values and expectations about life, goals and aspirations. For this reason, they have quite a lot going for them from the start," he says.

"Parents or relatives involved in arranged marriages can often anticipate and see problem areas that the couple don't."

"The difficulty in selecting our own partners is that we don't understand ourselves or the other person well enough so we see only what we want to see. We turn a blind eye to the irritations."

"We need to understand that the arranged marriage is a normal procedure for people who come from cultures in which there's a higher ratio of marriages surviving than in Australia."

Like all stereotypes, the concept of the arranged marriage conjures up a misleading image — two unwilling strangers meeting minutes before their betrothal, forced into a marriage by tyrannical parents.

But in Australia the arranged marriage has many different interpretations and has to be looked at in a social context.

It operates in communities where the family unit is valued and the concept of

the individual is different, if not secondary. There is not a strong notion of individualism although individual feelings are taken into account.

Most arranged marriages are based on decisions determined by family interaction and knowledge, which many consider a more sound approach than decisions based on a romantic or individualistic notion.

However, researchers into migrant issues agree that even the institution of arranged marriage has conceded to the idea of romance and courtship. In even the most conservative circles, the arranged marriage in Australia now has a "romantic phase" built into the negotiations so the two people can get to know each other.

Australian-born, often highly educated and professionally trained people with an independent outlook on life agree to arranged marriages because often it's what they want. There is an attachment to traditional values.

For many migrants, the match-making process provides a more reliable form of sorting through people than the random approach. There is also a conformity to socially approved behaviour within the migrant group.

“You talk about each other and your ideals — there is no small talk”

RABBI Avrohom Gutnick works at the Yeshiva Centre (a Jewish communal organisation and synagogue) at Bondi. Five years ago he was married to Malkie. She was 19, he was 21; they now have three children.

They were recommended and introduced to each other according to the conventions of Orthodox Jewry in which young people do not go out with each other for social reasons.

Instead, when they want to get married they are introduced by a go-between, a shadchan, who matches up couples. Although there is an intention of marriage, no one is pressured into it.

It is believed that this introduction process is more reliable because, with the aid of the shadchan, details are provided on background, common interests and goals.

Malkie Gutnick, a teacher born in Brooklyn, New York, met her future husband after he had completed studies in the United States. He knew Malkie's family, some of whom live in Melbourne.

When she came to Australia for a holiday, her sister, acting as her shadchan, suggested the couple go out together. You feel more comfortable using a shadchan because you can just tell the go-between how you feel about the person you meet," she says.

Usually a shadchan provides details that each would-be partner about the other. For Rabbi Gutnick, friends and Malkie's sister provided the information — and a photograph.

"I thought she looked all right," he says, in calculated understatement.

The advantages for both Malkie and Avrohom is that both already knew a lot about the other when they met. "Talking

to people who knew Malkie since she was a little girl told me what her character was like," he says. "I got to know her before going out. I was ready to get married and everything I found out seemed to be favourable."

That information conformed to the criteria he was looking for in order "to set up a good marriage".

He says: "You have religious and spiritual beliefs in common, your ideals and ways of wanting to bring up your children are the same. You have a mutual respect which develops into love."

"Given all that, there was a chance of building up a relationship and there had to be a feeling of liking each other, enjoying each other's company. And there had to be physical attraction."

"Out of discussions and going out with each other, we built up our love and affection for each other."

"With other people the process is mostly the other way round; they develop the romance and then try to develop the understanding."

For Malkie, a pre-arranged introduction and marriage ensured agreement on important issues.

"I have a lot of friends who aren't as religious as we are. In some cases, the wife wants another child but the husband doesn't, or the husband does and the wife wants to go back to her career. They haven't worked these things out."

"But with an arranged marriage, you don't go out to have a good time. You talk about each other and your ideals. There is no small talk. You're there for a purpose. When we went out, we talked a bit about the past, a bit of what we expect of the future and about children. We had a good time and had fun but we were serious and honest with each other."

She adds they did not fall in love at first sight, although she "liked him".

"Once I'd decided to go out, I knew it would lead to marriage. It wasn't for social reasons," she says.

With a chuckle, Rabbi Gutnick says: "Before I asked Malkie to marry me, there had to be a feeling of warmth and affection. I waited for a spark. It came about the eighth or ninth time."

Nevertheless, they admit they were very nervous when they met. For both it was a first date with a member of the opposite sex.

"There was a lot of coaxing and encouragement from the families," says the Rabbi.

"After I'd been out, I'd come home and think over what happened. I'd discuss it with my sister and her husband and they'd give advice," Malkie says.

Both are adamant they would want their children to meet through the same process.

"In Orthodox circles, when we go out it is for the sake of marriage. There is no frustration of going from one date to another," Gutnick says.

"We don't believe in having a girlfriend or boyfriend. It causes a lot of social pressure, unhappiness and distractions. It leads to things we don't see as the right thing," says his wife.

But, the Rabbi says, "We wouldn't force our children to go out with the right person. We'd try to influence them. We wouldn't want them running around. All my friends and family got engaged through pre-arranged marriages. It seems the most successful and fastest way of meeting the right person."

"If my daughter came home and said 'I've met a nice boy', I'd hope that because of the way she has been brought up she'd be looking for someone who shared the same religious environment her family had provided."

"If he were not religious I'd be heartbroken and devastated but I wouldn't disown her."

His wife is sure such a situation

Continued Weekend 4



Tillak 'Bobby' Prakash Dhari and his wife Ranjula: they exchanged pictures and notes on their family backgrounds before a meeting was set up. Picture: GEOFF BEATTY

“When we were alone I said do you want to marry me? If you have a boyfriend back in Fiji and you want to go back, I won't marry you. If you love someone there, that's cool. Tell me if you have a broken heart”