

Slovenians in Australia.

Half to forget the wonderings and pain,
Half to remember the days that have gone by,
And dream and dream that I am home again

Flecker

After the WWII Europeans became restless; many became displaced; many wanted to get away from poverty, suffering, broken relationship, family pressures and politics. We wanted to be somewhere else doing something else perhaps even with someone else. Most of us knew someone in America or someone receiving parcels from America. Most began searching for America which to this day remains the symbol of freedom, fairness, prosperity and justice.

Little did we know that we will help create a new America in a little known Australia. As a younger sister to America, Australia eventually became home to young ambitious visionaries from every country in the world. Most were rejected at home but many became the corner stones of this new America.

In the communist countries we learned that in the “rotten west” they use and abuse workers but despite this the West remained a beacon on the hill and people risked lives to escape communist oppression.

Most Slovenian refugees in the 50s and 60s registered to migrate to Canada or America because these were better known and closer to home but it was easier to get to Australia.

After the war Australia with six million people had to populate or perish. Australian economy rode on the sheep's back; it exported wool and meat. Young skilled workers were needed to develop Australian resources.

Slovenians were among the first non English speaking migrants welcomed to Australia. Australian government subsidised the travel expenses for most of us because Australia needed us.

Most of us felt indebted to our home country for educating us and we paid back in a small way by sending money to our families at home

Australians were bewildered by the influx of people they did not understand; they tried to ‘civilise’ us so we would be more like them. The teachers even advised migrants to forget their customs and speak English for the sake of their children. New Australians would do anything for the sake of their children. They came to Australia to give their children a better future. Some struggled and spoke English at home but most insisted that their children learn Slovenian from them. They believed that their children would benefit from being bilingual. Children quickly learned English and became interpreters, negotiators, representatives and agents to their parents.

Assimilation is a natural process in a melting pot of cultures but Australians wanted to speed the process by assimilation policy; they felt that the nation could not function if people spoke different languages, worshipped and celebrated in their own traditions.

The assimilation policy led to integration, mainstreaming and at the beginning of the twenty first century multi-culture became a fact of life.

Australian ethnic mix became slightly fractured by the influx of every new nationality, race or religion. Australians became uncertain and fearful because they did not know what to expect from these newcomers, however, as soon as migrants accepted general Australian value

system and learned a bit of English there was little prejudice and discrimination. Gradually Australians even accepted many of our customs, our food and fashions.

Slovenians quickly proved ourselves as trustworthy, hard-working and capable; Australians readily accepted us as workers and friends. Most of us did not like being called Yugoslavs because most hated being called Yugoslavs at home. Yugoslav embassy considered us dissidents; they intimidated us if we wanted to visit Slovenia. Some Slovenians obeyed and followed embassy's orders while many club leaders rebelled and demanded democratic freedoms. Some wanted to please both masters but predictably that pleased no one.

Even some Australians considered us political trouble makers if we tried to explain that although we came from Yugoslavia we were Slovenians. We successfully shed the Yugoslav label when Slovenia became independent; we were finally allowed to present ourselves with pride in our origins.

The independence movement against the common Yugoslav enemy united Australian Slovenians; for a moment we forgot well entrenched animosities and rivalries and carried our flag for the good of Slovenia.

Non English migrants needed a place where they could feel at home and teach their children the language and traditions of their home country; where they could celebrate, socialise and exchange news. Ethnic clubs blossomed in every Australian city during the 60s and 70s. Members of ethnic clubs usually had little in common apart from speaking the same language but despite our differences we forged relationships that lasted a lifetime.

Slovenians are really much like everybody else; they are more or less smart, more or less tolerant, more or less generous, more or less wealthy and educated; more or less brave. Our various characteristics are just more obvious because there are less of us; we have to socialise on the basis of our common nationality and not according to our interests or abilities.

In Slovenian clubs we found people we could love, admire, adore, hate, despise, envy, annoy and spite. One can not feel this spectrum of emotions for a foreigner. We shared memories of places and people nobody else in Australia was even aware of. We enjoyed the same music and books and food.

Most Slovenians were brought up with conflicting ideologies; we followed Christian values at home while at school we were indoctrinated by communist ideals. In communist Yugoslavia it wasn't healthy or safe to discuss either politics or religion.

Catholic Church was always a great unifying force for Slovenians in Australia.

Although most of us worship the same God and follow the teachings of Jesus, our understanding of God's plan and his requirements differ as much as our recipes for our common national cuisine; our beliefs range from totally literary strictly devoted to very casual; even some who don't believe in God come to church to hear Slovenian mass and see Slovenian faces. This diversity has provided a strong dynamic for our social life.

What people believe seems more important than any universal truth. Our beliefs are as unpredictable as are our ways of presenting them so most feel that it is best to keep our relationship with the Almighty private.

It is less offensive to rave about fashion or sport or beer or houses or music or weather.

Most of the first generation Australian Slovenians remained church going Catholics who do not try to force their beliefs on each other. The few who joined other Christian groups like

Jehovah witnesses, Seven day Adventists or Born again Christians, are more determined to bring the light of their beliefs into the lives of others.

The teachings of Jesus through whatever practice offered some comfort, wisdom and spiritual wellbeing to most Slovenians. Like Mirko Cuderman explains: "Families that pray together stay together".

At home we learned that it isn't healthy to discuss politics; politics had to be left to politicians; ordinary citizens' duty was to follow the flag our leaders carried; we were not to meddle in something that was none of our business.

In Australia we feel free to promote one or the other party; we exchange views without fear or favour. We all know that all political parties look after our national interests as well as after their friends and families. Different parties favour different sections of population but they are united on important national issues.

It was easier for Slovenians who arrived as families because family members were a support for each other. Many young single men however, missed out on a Slovenian partner because few single Slovenian women came to Australia. These men either married foreigners or remained single; they had no one to remember their home and childhood with. Most eventually got used to their solitary existence. Some became disillusioned because they did not find what they were looking for; a few dull their disenchantment with alcohol, some became grumpy, some even returned to Slovenia.

Although Slovenia became free and prosperous returning to Slovenia is not an option for most of us because our children's home is in Australia and we want to provide new roots for them.

Most of our children married foreigners. They communicate in English with their partners and children but they practice Slovenian when communicating with their parents. This often causes resentment because their partners and children can not be a part of the communication. Our children often resented parents speaking Slovenian when their friends and partners were present. They also felt that we were somehow ignorant and inferior because we could not speak English well or spell the words we spoke. We told them that Australians were as foreign to us as we were to them; we told them that Slovenians are one of the world's most literate people but no one took any notice.

At home we learned the alphabet and joined the letters to read and write in the first year of school. Spelling was not even a subject. In Australia this was not all right. ALL RIGHT has five sounds and eight letters. You have to write mysterious letters you don't even hear.

Double o in blood is not the same as in floor or the moon or the book. Oo in mood sounds as ou in could and in wood would too. H is silent in honest but not in horrible. Dear customer does not mean the same as dear petrol or the deer in the forest.

The new rules defy logic but rules are rules. Some wondered if Australians invented these rules to confuse or punish us.

English settlers were bewildered and amazed how we, illiterate new Australians, prospered despite our apparent ignorance.

Eventually Australians realised that OVERSEAS does things differently. They eat garlic and pizza and salamis, dim Sims and spring rolls; they dance to foreign tunes, wear foreign fashions, ignore rules of propriety; they hug and kiss and touch.

Eventually Australians extended their vocabulary to include pasta and pizza and Kranski and Vienna schnitzel, franks and hamburgers, spices and scents, Chinese meals, Vietnamese restaurants, and Lebanese bread. Unfortunately, Kranski sausages don't taste as delicious as do in Slovenia, especially not since the manufacturer who stole the name Kransky started mixing cheese in. We try to tell them, that Australian Kransky are not Kransky sausages, but to no avail. Some other sausages from supermarket Corison started taste as Kransky should and we Slovenians feel quite betrayed....

In twenty first century the fact that migrants speak many languages is no longer a sign of shame or weakness. It no longer matters if they like continental cuisine or Chinese meals. Being different is no longer a deterrent to success; continental even became a mark of distinction

We had our confidence crushed on arrival to Australia. We became instantly illiterate and distinguishable only by the manual tasks we were assigned to do but we soon sharpened our ingenuity, resourcefulness determination and intelligence to overcome our linguistic obstacles. Despite being unable to demonstrate our skills and knowledge we remained determined to provide well for our families. We were good employees; many worked in building industry; some became excellent builders, some became miners, teachers and politicians.

Gradually we re-established our personal and national identity. We know who we are and are proud of being as successful as we are in our individual endeavours. We gained acceptance and respect of the wider community. All Slovenians maintain their reputation as hard working, honest, fair and just people. We were also worthy ambassadors for Slovenia. We left a positive mark in every Australian city.

Migrant children couldn't count on their relations smoothing their path in life; most never met a single relative until they went overseas. They too had to become self-reliant. They became public servants and tradespeople and teachers, a few became politicians; some even became rich. Most of them, however, are just ordinary Australians.

Our homes stand out beautiful, well designed, clean and paid off in full. Many invested in a second home or bought shares in order to provide for their old age. Prudent, frugal and hard working they envisioned a better future in their retirement. Most were not aware that Australian government does not allow you to draw a pension if you have private income. It seems a bit unfair that social security provides for those that do not provide for themselves but not for those that saved and invested. Very few Slovenians ever needed help from the government but most feel entitled to be a bit better off in their old age than those who never lifted a finger.

Slovenians at home are known as whingers but most of us find little to complain about in Australia. Most of us are enormously grateful for the opportunity to make a home in Australia; we appreciate the comfort and the freedom, the challenges and the "fair go".

We learned and adopted the Australian saying: "You can't have your cake and eat it". We like to return to Slovenia for holidays but our home is in Australia; we are a part of this young nation we helped to build.

Most Slovenians in Australia developed and used their talents to the fullest and they became strong and confident Australians. Our children finally became proud of their heritage. On a recent visit to Slovenia my son Marjan said to his father: "I am so glad you insisted on me speaking Slovenian with you because now I can speak with all my relations; I can also understand bits of all Slavic languages."

N.N.