

My Slovenia, my Australia

by Albin Poršek

I was born on 9.2.20 on the outskirts of Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. The beautiful St Martin's mountain above my home is a pilgrimage and tourist destination.

Slovenia is the most beautiful country in the world and my birthplace is the jewel in its crown. It is close to mountain lakes Bled and Bohinj. Bled has a little fairy tale island with the church and a wishing well. I remember my home and the changing seasons that Slovenians celebrate.

The last time I was in Slovenia I walked with my father up St Martin Mountain. He showed me a place where in 1919 he picked blueberries with my mother in the forest. They were young lovers. My father was nineteen and mum was eighteen. They loved each other but dad's family did not want him to marry mum because his family was rich and mum came from a very poor family.

Mum's mother bought a little wooden cottage and a little paddock on which mum produced most of the food. She also had a smoke-room in which she smoked meat for the restaurants.

When I was about four, mum married a handsome man but he was poor and he came to live in mum's house.

I was a love child but neither my father nor my stepfather loved me.

The court ordered my father to pay child support for me and he hated me because of it. He turned away when I met him on the road.

I remember mum sending me to dad's butcher shop to buy meat. She hoped that he would give me some extra but he never did.

When I was about eight years old Dad married a rich girl and they had twin daughters. Dad then asked my mother to let me live with him but she did not let me.

My father was a butcher and his two daughters, my stepsisters, have a butchery shop each in Ljubljana.

Mum and my stepfather had eight more children and they worked hard to survive.

My stepfather became a Shire treasurer. He was considered a good, hard working and well-respected man. I felt that he disliked me because he hit me all the time. He never let me go anywhere or do the things I wanted. When he hit me at the age of fifteen, I grabbed him and pinned him on the ground. I did not hit him but I told him that this was the last time he would hit me. I was a tall strong boy by then. From then on he never touched me but he tormented me verbally. Mum tried to protect me and that annoyed him.

I finished primary school and three years of secondary school before I began my apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker.

I always wanted to become an artist. I painted church domes with the artist Zeleznik. I wanted to study with him but unfortunately Mum could not pay for me. I had to take an apprenticeship to become a carpenter-cabinet maker.

I am grateful to Ivan Cerne who was my boss and teacher. When I finished my apprenticeship I worked there for two years until the war changed everything.

Slovenians were split in three groups.

The old Slovenian leaders, the prosperous business people, the rich farmers and those influenced by the church were afraid of Russian communists who wanted to change the society. They hoped to survive the war and continue as they were. Most later supported Domobranci, which means home guards. They guarded their homes and their way of life.

Most poor factory and farm labourers welcomed the change. They had nothing to lose so they joined OF Liberation front, organised by Russian revolutionists, which promised to take from the rich and give to the poor.

We were a Catholic family and interested in survival rather than politics.

Italians occupied Ljubljana but northern outskirts where I lived came under Germany. My two sisters just finished primary school when Germans took them to Klagenfurt to become Hitler's Jugend. They worked in the kitchen of the army barracks.

I was very sick with pleurisy and a chest infection at the beginning of the war so I did not have to join the army. When I went back to work in 1943 partisans took me during the night. In the morning mum reported to the German police that partisans took me during a curfew. Germans caught the partisans. As a punishment two partisans came next morning and shot my mother in the kitchen in front of six of her children. My youngest sister was two years old.

The younger of the two partisans who shot my mother was my school friend and a boyfriend of my sister. Later he realised what he had done and he hung himself.

Germans sent me to Klagenfurt in Austria where my sisters worked in Hitler Jugend camp. I secretly returned to attend mum's funeral.

In Klagenfurt I got a job as a cabinet-maker in the same barracks as my two sisters. At the end of 1943 they sent me to the Russian Front. Grenades were falling all around me but young person gets used to everything. I was lucky. Once I picked a grenade that fell next to me but did not explode. I chucked it away. They were going to give me a bravery award for it.

In May 1945 I got civilian clothes from a farmer and tried to return to Austria. Russians captured me and put me into a solitary prison. After a week they let me out to work for them. I escaped to Austria and found work in Klagenfurt where I worked before.

I met Justine.

Justine escaped from Slovenia with her boyfriend who was a Home guard. The allies returned Home guards refugees to Yugoslavia where communists killed them.

Justine and I became friends and we got married in 1947.

Justine's sister Maria also escaped to Austria with her home guard boyfriend Vinko Ovijac. They managed to escape and migrate to Venezuela in 1948.

May 1945 was a miserable wet month. Twelve thousands Slovenians poured on the fields of Austria and surrendered to the Field Marshal Alexander along with thousands of other refugees. The world was tired of the war; they had to solve refugee problems quickly. Sending refugees home was practical and sensible as far as British were concerned but sending them to Tito was a death sentence for these anticommunists.

In 1947 Justine and I applied to immigrate to Australia. We learned English for 31 days on a ship. We signed the contract to work for two years wherever they sent us. I asked to work as a cabinet-maker and they sent me to Sydney.

I worked in the Burwood hostel where we lived. Justine worked in a hospital as a cleaner.

In 1955 Justine and I guaranteed to give Justine's sister Marija and her husband Vinko a job and accommodation so they were allowed to come to Australia.

In two years we saved enough to buy an old house and we were very happy. I learned enough English to open a workshop with a wonderful friend from Africa. We worked together until he died five years later. After his death I expanded my factory and eventually employed eleven people making occasional furniture. I worked very hard as a manager of the factory. I delivered furniture to the shops like David Jones and Mayer's. The lifting of the furniture was hard and I damaged my back.

I had to sell the factory and I opened the furniture shop in the hope that the work will not be as hard. I had to deliver things and I could not do the heavy lifting. I also had a second hand shop, which I had to sell in 1975. My wife ran a furniture shop with other employees.

In my spare time I did inlay pictures in wood. I still have some beautiful works.

At that time I visited a Slovenian friend Joe Vrtacnik in hospital. He damaged his back while opal mining and could not walk. When he was released from the hospital I drove him to Lightning Ridge.

Vrtacnik married an Aboriginal girl and sort of became part of the Aboriginal community. I lost touch with him later.

Bore bath helped my back. I went twice a day to soak in the hot water. For a few years I travelled to Sydney for therapy and back again into the bore bath.

Lightning Ridge became more and more attractive. Looking for precious gems seemed exciting. I also liked the easygoing, friendly, honest miners. I returned to Sydney but the dream of the colourful gem and colourful life did not go away. I built a portable camp in Sydney and brought it to the Ridge. It was an escape from the pressures of my business and from hard work that aggravated my pain.

I finally sold my furniture shop and the land in the Blue Mountains during the nineties. I was happy to get rid of the worry and the problems. I built a house in Lightning Ridge and my wife moved up to be with me.

My health was not good. My wife also became ill and she died in 1998. I only own the house I live in now but even that is too much to take care of most of the time.

Soon after we came to Sydney I met other Slovenians and we talked about building a Slovenian club where we could meet and celebrate and have a Slovenian school. While I was off work with my bad back I searched around for a suitable land and found it. We collected donations from Slovenians and bought the land.

We built our Triglav club with voluntary labour at weekends. We elected the committee and the president. There were twelve of us permanent trustees, foundation members, to see that everything was running well. We opened the charitable organisation Triglav Community Centre so we did not have to pay tax if there were any profits from the club activities.

Soon after Slovenian priests Bazilij and Valerian began to organise the building of the religious centre in Maryland and later Slovenian clubs grew in every larger city of Australia.

Some Slovenians co-operated with the Yugoslav embassy while others congregated around the church.

Those that resisted the embassy were interrogated when they came begging for visas to go home.

As the foundation member of Triglav and its trusty I continued to work for Triglav but I watched out for any impropriety from the embassy. They offered the club many things in order to keep us friendly. They brought artists and books and music from Slovenia but in exchange they demanded to be our guests so they could keep an eye on us.

In 1980 I returned to Slovenia with Justine for the first time since 1943.

Dad's daughter invited us to stay with her and my father was there. At the age of sixty I spoke to my father for the first time. I saw Slovenia and my many relations for the first time after thirty-seven years. Since then I keep in touch with my relations.

Dad told me that he loved mum and that he was sorry that he did not marry her. He was also sorry that he ignored me when I was a boy.

Dad was born in 1900 and died in 1983. He was always a serious, businessman. People respected him and his family. His daughters helped him in the shop and later each of them opened their own shops.

There was poverty and misery when I left Slovenia but now Slovenians live comfortably. I could have had my own business and prosper there with them in Slovenia.

I am much like my father. I had little time for socialising. My business success gave me much satisfaction.

Mum was a happy, outgoing person. She was an honest, hardworking woman and people respected and liked her. Mum was not interested in making money.

Australia offered opportunity to migrants to make something out of their lives. The bank offered me as much money as I needed to open my business and I never had money problems.

Australia became my home. I like the warm climate and friendly people. I became especially attracted to Lightning Ridge. The bore bath was good for my back, bush life offered freedom from pressures of the city life, people are friendly, and looking for opal gave me hope. Unfortunately my wife did not find happiness in Lightning Ridge. She missed her Sydney friends and city life. There are about a dozen Slovenians in the Ridge but they come from different backgrounds and don't mix well.

I am not a regular churchgoer but I have been doing the BBQ for every church function during the last twenty years. Sisters and the priests have been good to me.

I haven't been well since my wife died but there are many people who look out for me.

I am happy that Slovenia became independent. I am grateful to Slovenians who stayed home and made the independence and democracy possible. I believe that Slovenians are more united and kind to each other now than ever before.

Slovenians were under German rule for centuries. Now they are eager to get back with Germans into European Union. I suppose it is good for Slovenia to be in the company of the European nations but it makes one wonder. Why did

Slovenians fight for independence for centuries? All our poets and writers and artist and politicians dreamed about the happy future when we will be our own masters. Now, however, only ten years after we became independent, we want to become a part of The European Union. The wars and poverty and struggle seemed meaningful as long as there was hope and faith that one day Slovenians will rule Slovenia. It seems like we are trowing away what our ancestors died for.