

Bosnia

Bosnia with the population of four and a half million is in the middle of the Balkan Peninsula. People speak Serbo-Croatian.

Catholic Bosnians are now called Bosnian Croats and those of eastern Orthodox background identify themselves as Bosnian Serbs.

Almost half of Bosnians are the descendants of Christian Bosnians who accepted Islam during Turkish occupation.

Steve Aračić

I was born on a small farm in Bosnia & Herzegovina in the former Yugoslavia. I was the middle child in a family of eight. We were very poor, especially during the war. It was more important to feed the soldiers than the children. Many times we went to bed on a pallet of straw with our stomachs rumbling from hunger.

A bomb raid destroyed our school so my older brothers and sisters never went to school. They had to work on the farm and my father taught them to read and write. He was a self-educated man but never went to school either. My education was delayed until the ripe old age of nine, when the school was rebuilt. I loved school but learning was difficult as I was also expected to help on the farm. Pepa (my father) wanted me to be a farmer so to him going to school past the age of fourteen was a waste of time. To my bitter disappointment my artistic talents were not encouraged nor was homework, especially when chores had to be done.

We grew vegetables and a variety of crops in Krajina. Our hand woven garments were made with superb dexterity and pride by my mother and sisters. We sang folk songs dressed in native costumes, danced the kolo to lively music, told jokes and laughed a lot. However life of poverty on the farm was not for me.

One day I helped Pepa to plough the field. I had a row with him over his treatment of my favourite horses. I ran away from home. I was only fourteen years old at the time.

I sought work on farms for little or no money, just for a good meal and a pallet of straw to sleep on. I made it to the 'Plavi Plemen' foundry at Slavenska Pozega in Croatia where my brother Ivan worked. I became an apprentice fitter and turner. I worked night shift so that I could put myself through high school. I obtained my school certificate but found no suitable job.

The prospects of achieving success in my country looked grim. The country was recovering from the affects of war. The government did not allow people to visit the West let alone migrate. Without the passport or visa I had no option but to escape across the border.

I went towards the Austrian-Italian border. They caught me and threw me into jail. I finally made it across the border to Italy. My Guardian angel must have protected me, as I was fortunate to wake up in hospital in Trieste.

My head was bandaged, I had a bullet wound in my side and I suffered from amnesia. But I was alive! When I had recovered they took me to 'Numero Uno' refugee camp, San Saba in Trieste and under stringent investigation. I had a hard time convincing Interpol that I was who I said I was. I was transported by train to Bari.

Some of the refugees told me that you could never be sure of your destination and that you could end up in your own country. Imagine our relief when the train branched off to Bari instead of Sezana and back to the former Yugoslavia.

There were hundreds of refugees at the camp in Bari, a huge city surrounded by sea.

Interpol questioned me for a month until they decided that I was neither a spy nor a threat to the country. They granted me political asylum.

They told me that there was a three years waiting period to get accepted in America or Canada. Austria was out of the question unless you had a guarantor. One day out of the blue we heard that single people could immigrate to Australia. Jobs were available!

I jumped at the chance and was first in line to fill out the forms.

I signed up for an English language course and was later transported with a group to Genoa where we boarded an Italian passenger ship 'Aurelia' bound for Australia. We had English lessons and I made good friends on the twenty-eight days sea voyage.

Australia and Australians did not disappoint me. After I arrived at Bonegilla refugee camp on the 21st July 1959, it only took me two weeks to find work in Sydney as a cabinet-maker.

I endeavoured to mix with Australians so that I could learn English. I went to dance halls and clubs of many nationalities where I could chat with English speaking girls. In 1962 I found employment in the tunnels on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. My job was to check leaks and change six-inch diameter blow pipes for clearing the rock rubble. I heard of two horrific injuries and the death of a worker two weeks earlier in the same tunnel. That shocked me so I quit my job at the end of the shift.

I found safer work in the kitchen in Khancoban. I washed dishes, cleaned pots and pans, and helped the cook prepare meals for the men who worked in the tunnels. It was like heaven on Earth working at Broken Back Camp, situated on a flat top hill surrounded by majestic towering mountains.

The manageress of The Man from Snowy River Hotel at Perisher Valley, Kosciusko offered me a job as a barman. Who could refuse such an offer when it meant working behind the bar with a charming lady?

At the end of a snow season I quit my job and returned to Sydney. I got a job as a fitter and turner at Dunlop rubber and settled into the excitement of city life. I met and fell in love with a charming Irish girl. We married and moved to an apartment in Drummoyne to be near my work at Birkenhead Point.

One day while a work mate and I were window-shopping, we saw the most exquisite crystal gemstones that have coloured my life forever. When we asked what they were, the owner of the store, Mr Percy Marks, told us that they were crystal opals from Cobber Pedy and Andamooka in SA. When he saw our enthusiasm, he showed us a tray of sparkling gems from the vault and said: these are black opals from Lightning Ridge. Where is that? I asked. Oh it's only a day's journey to the far north-west corner of NSW! Not far from the Queensland border said Mr Percy Marks. Border I said perturbed! Do we have to cross it? Good heavens No! He replied. It's not the sort of border you have in Europe! Thank heavens, I replied with relief!

My mate and I were so inspired by the colourful black opals that we made our first trip to Lightning Ridge during the Xmas holidays of 1964. We were fortunate to gouge out a beautiful gem opal in a claim we pegged at Shallow Four-Mile. I was struck by opal fever. It didn't take long to convince my wife that we should venture to Lightning Ridge. .

It was 1965 and our son Paul was just two months old. We settled in our camp until we could move into town.

In 1967 I became a proud Aussie, I was naturalised in Walgett.

Our two daughters, Fiona and Shibaun were born in Lightning Ridge. In 1969 I invented a safety automatic hand brake for strollers and prams because I felt the current brakes were inadequate. This resulted in my appearance on the ABC Television Show 'The Inventors'. Very little was known about Lightning Ridge back then so a map was shown on TV. In my efforts to get safer stroller brakes on the market I decided to push the stroller 800 kilometres to Sydney in 1972, demonstrating my braking system. It failed to attract manufacturer's attention but the publicity put Lightning Ridge on the map! With my wife's help I published my first opal book, titled, 'Fortunes From The Lost Sea, in 1979,' It sold so well that we felt encouraged to update it in 1988 titled 'Fortunes In Australian Opals'. It too sold out.

Mary and I continued mining over the years, gouging out the odd gem opal. Our three children were educated at Lightning Ridge Primary School, and then Walgett High School.

Paul as IT Consultant, Fiona is a Practice Manager for a Legal Team, and Shibaun works for a Finance Company.

In 1993 my wife and I set out on the caravan trip of a lifetime. I was so determined to compile information for our best opal book ever. We took in all the major opal fields of Australia and some very isolated mines where only the individual miner or two worked. We did this trip many times over the years to research vital surface indications that would help miners determine possible opal bearing ground. Mary helped me compile the information, Paul helped with computer technology, Fiona did the typing, and Shibaun edited the manuscript. Our book Discover Opals Before & Beyond 2000 with Surface Indications was an instant success and sold out quickly. It contained over 500-colour photos, maps and diagrams. NO 1 copy was auctioned for \$1000 in the Bowling Club during the annual Opal & Gem Expo held in Lightning Ridge. Ten gilt edged books were sold to collectors instantly.

In 1999 we published an updated version Rediscovered Opals In Australia. I added hundreds more coloured photos, maps and diagrams. I learned to design the book on my own computer. I did all the pre-press work on my computer.

It features over 1200 photos that come alive with action!

My opal books brought pleasure to opal lovers of the world.

My latest book released in 2002 titled; 'DETERMINED' is a true story of my struggles for freedom in the former Yugoslavia. It tells about my troubled upbringing and the abuse I suffered from my alcoholic father. I nearly died escaping from the communist oppressed homeland.

I am happy that with my wife's help I wrote my beloved opal books. The latest 'Rediscover Opals In Australia' is classed by many as the encyclopaedia of the opal industry.