

Croatia

Croatia lies along the Adriatic coast on the Balkan Peninsula. It has low-lying fertile Panonian Plain to the east and barren but beautiful Dinaric Alps along the Adriatic coast.

Croatia is rich in natural resources but tourism on the Dalmatian coast is one of its greatest assets.

Croats first moved into what is today's Croatia at the beginning of seventh century. King Tomislav united Croats during the eleventh century but for the next eight centuries other nations ruled over them.

Until the First World War Croatia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1918 the empire disintegrated and Croatia became a part of the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians. In 1928 the kingdom was renamed Yugoslavia.

Croatia developed along Germanic nations while southern Yugoslav republics lived under Turkish rule. Croatia is predominantly Catholic and has Latin script while southern republics have Cyrillic script; Serbia follows Serbian orthodox religion. In the southern parts of Yugoslavia were Muslims who were converted into Islam religion during Turkish occupation. During the Second World War there was a communist revolution in Yugoslavia.

People were ordered to forget their ethnic cultural and religious differences in order to build a strong brotherhood nation Yugoslavia. Communists began intensive indoctrination program to make people identify themselves only as Yugoslavs. The children learned at school to idolise worship and obey communist leaders. Any dissent or disagreement with the rulers was severely punished. People became afraid to think or speak or write. Communists told people how lucky they are to live in the land of freedom, brotherhood and equality but people felt unsafe, uncertain and unprotected. Tito ordered that all republics of Yugoslavia have to attain the same standard of living and lifestyle. The more advanced nations had to wait for other republics to catch up; they had to pay massive taxes to develop others.

Croatians were told that the capitalists in the rotten west exploit their workers. Despite fear and uncertainty many enterprising, ambitious Croats risked their lives to escape into the rotten west.

Communist party declared that private enterprise is a rotten branch on the healthy socialist tree. Private property was banned or at least discouraged. When everybody works hard to survive, there is no time to think and rebel.

Croatians felt exploited by the Yugoslav regime and wanted to become independent. Yugoslav constitution allowed the secession and disintegration so during 1991 Croatia proclaimed independence but Serbia sent Yugoslav army to attack Croatia with

the vengeance. The war lasted until 1995. Thousands of people were killed, homes were destroyed and ancient cultural monuments demolished.

There are an estimated 300 000 Australians of Croatian origin. Despite their non-English speaking background, they succeeded with hard work determination and perseverance. Croats are well represented in Australian sport, politics, art and business.

At present there are about three hundred Croats in Lightning Ridge. Most are men, pensioners and part time miners.

Gina

I was born as a first of three children on 21.12 38 in Zabreb. My father was working for the government as a spy. He provided well for us. We lived in a nice home.

My father was one of 13 children. His mother was a midwife. People from all over called her to help them with childbirth. She stayed in my heart as a nice person and I loved her.

I believe that mum and dad loved each other. Dad was rarely home but whenever he came they made another baby. My two younger sisters were born before he disappeared in 1945.

Dad joined the Ustashi Croatian army. He was a friend of the Ustashi leader Ante Pavelic. Dad's brother was Pavelic's body guard. He was also a writer of children's books. Ustashi were cooperating with Germans so Germans granted Croatia an independent state. Ustashi were fighting against communists but in the end communists won the war. Ustashi escaped but many were returned and were later killed by Yugoslav communists. We never knew how and where dad died.

I remember that mum was informed three times that dad was killed and each time she began wearing black to mourn him but every time he came back. The last time he came home at midnight; he knocked on the door but mum was too scared to open. It was the beginning of 1945 and partisans were getting closer. Ustashi were on the run. Dad called and I called out to dad. In the end mum opened. Dad looked drunk. He was in the uniform and had a machine gun and grenades around his waist. Mum asked him why he came; he put the family and himself in danger. He put down the gun and grenades and went to bed. Mum put the gun under the bed. There was a big noise outside so dad jumped up, kicked the door open and yelled out: surrender or I'll shoot. The cat miaowed. Dad got dressed then. He talked to himself saying that mum will get him arrested. As he was going mum told him never to return. We never heard from him again.

I loved my father and he loved me very much. That's the only real love I remember. He was handsome and he sang on the radio. He used to play cards and drank a fair bit. That's where he met my mother who was a waitress in a restaurant. Mum was quite pretty when she was young. She came to Zagreb as 13 years old to help the cook in the priest's kitchen. Her parents found a job for her so she had to leave school. Once a month her father came to take her pay. The cook scolded her father for not letting his daughter keep the money she earned. Later she found herself a waitressing job.

After the war the government threw us out of the house. We were Ustashi family and Ustashi were considered traitors. Mum found a little run down flat for us. She had to go to work. I was a baby sitter for my youngest sister since I was four. The middle sister went to mum's parents because there was no room for her in the flat.

I used to go for school holidays to mum's parents but they were busy and paid no attention to me.

I often wonder why my mother never showed any affection towards us children. She never listened to us or talked to us, never told us a story or praised us. I looked after my younger sisters and helped with housekeeping but she never once said that I was good.

When my sister was a few months old mum tried to smother her with the pillow. She left a pillow on top of her and went out but when she returned she found the pillow on the floor and the cat curled around the baby's head. Maybe mum suffered from post natal depression and never recovered. Maybe she never learned from her parents to show love. Maybe she was overworked.

I felt that mum never liked me or my sisters. My sisters and I never learned to be affectionate towards each other either.

I remember an incident when I was about five. Our neighbour had a pear tree. She told me not to take the two pears they were saving. One afternoon the neighbour came crying to mum. Why did your daughter take the pears? I told them that I didn't take them but they would not believe me. Mum took a knife and pushed me on the chair saying that she will kill me. She actually slightly stabbed me in the stomach before the neighbour pulled her away. I had a scar for years but the memory of it never faded. I was terrified.

After the war mum found a job in a storeroom of a huge government building. She wasn't educated but she must have been intelligent because she remembered every article in the storeroom. When a storeman died she became a store manager. The government built flats for the employees and she got a new flat.

I went to boarding school when I was eleven because I couldn't stand being at home. I finished four years primary and three years of high school. I started an apprenticeship to repair nylon stockings. I learned very fast and I earned good money working for a dressmaker who also did stocking repair. I had to save carefully. I still lived in the boarding house paying a nominal fee.

At the age of seventeen I escaped to Turkey without telling anyone. Two other girls and I knew a man who had a brother working on an old Turkish cargo ship. He told his brother when the ship will come to Rijeka port. We paid the duty guard to turn a blind eye. We put men's clothes on and swaggered like drunks. Someone called: stop. Another man said: they are only dirty Turks, let them go.

We boarded the ship during the night and hid on top of the coal underneath the deck. We were trembling as we heard the Yugoslav inspectors above checking the ship before departure.

They found us after a few hours and took us in the office for interrogation. An interpreter translated for us. The captain said that we were just half an hour in the international waters and that they will ring Rijeka police to pick us up. They would put us in jail. I told him that I am going to jump in the sea rather than be

sent back. I would have done so. My friends cried. The man who was with us was shaking uncontrollably. The captain slapped his brother really hard because he helped us. Both brothers were locked up on the ship.

The captain telegraphed Turkey and they told him to bring us over. We had a bath before they locked us in the room. The captain told us not to go out because he was responsible for our safety. We were young girls among the Turkish sailors.

On the fourth day the officers came to take us three girls on top of the ship. They showed us a Yugoslav ship in the distance and they told us that they will send us over. We cried. After six days we arrived to Istanbul and became celebrities. It was the first time that young girls would come there on their own. Hundreds of people came to meet us; they called our names and took our photos.

People looked poor and I wondered where we came. We were taken to the police station where they made beds for us. They asked us what we wanted to eat and soon the waiter brought whatever we ordered. We were questioned. We did not want to stay in Turkey. My dream was America because as children we received UNHCR parcels from America. A man took us to the shop and American council paid for our clothes and accessories. They put us in a hotel until they found accommodation for us. We just ordered whatever we wanted to eat. We were there for two weeks and our pictures were in the papers every day. We found accommodation and they gave us government benefit which was more than an average wage. We had a good life in Turkey.

There was no employment. We could find a little work in coffee shops but we were afraid to lose benefits.

I was there a year and a half hoping to go to America but they told me that it will take five years before I will be allowed to.

I decided to go to France but Croats caused some political trouble there at the time so they did not want me. They said you can go to Australia. I didn't want to go but I agreed. They bought me new clothes and sent me to the dentist. After a month on 2.5.1957 I was on the plane for Australia and arrived to Perth. A Croatian catholic priest and a nun were waiting for me. I stayed with them for two weeks. I could not eat the food but I just drank milk. A Croatian farmer came with his wife and they took me with them. I was there a few weeks until I became stronger.

There was no work in Perth so the government found me a job and a room in Paddington near Sydney. I worked in a thong factory for a month until I found a job in a Croatian coffee lounge making cappuccino. After six months there I met Mathew who escaped from Croatia. He had a brother in Perth.

I was crazy about Mathew. I couldn't see my life without him. He came to ask me for a dance in the Croatian club. I was in love. He was handsome and intelligent. I was blind to any faults or differences. He was well dressed and well groomed. He talked well and behaved like a real gentleman.

We got married after living together for six years. We have a daughter Mandy who was born in 1965.

We moved to Melbourne. Mathew was a technician and he opened a camera repair shop. He worked very long hours. I was home alone with Mandy so I tried to make our home perfect for him when he came home. After a couple of

years Mathew became sick with the brain tumour. He wasn't allowed to work for many months. He couldn't stand being without work. He worried about business and employees. We had to pay rent for the shop and make repayments on the house.

After three years in Melbourne we moved to Lightning Ridge. Mathew was in Lightning Ridge before so he knew about opal mining.

I got a block of land in a ballot. Toni Skoro made a room for us to move in. We sold the house, business and another block we had so we built the home in Lightning Ridge.

Mathew told me to look after our money because the doctor told him that his tumour may return.

Mathew learned to cut opal well and he became a very popular cutter. I began to buy small parcels of opal. Bruce brothers brought five little stones and I offered eight hundred dollars. They asked if it was standing offer and I said yes. I hoped they would not return but they did and I paid. Mathew comforted me saying that even if we lost we didn't lose everything. I went to Lenny Cram and he said that the sand on the back spoiled one stone. Mathew recut all the stones. Chaplain then bought one stone for nine hundred dollars. That gave me courage to start buying.

When Mandy was seven I went to visit mum. I had nothing to go home for really but I wanted to see mum. I always had mum on my mind. Maybe I wanted to make her love me. I cannot say that I ever loved my mum but at the same time I knew that she took care of us. We were never hungry and we had better clothes than other children. When I was little I always dreamed how I will run away and get rich to help my mother.

Mum loved my dad and then hated him for leaving her with three little children to look after.

Mandy and I flew to Rome but I could not make myself book a plane for Zagreb. It took me one week to decide if I really wanted to go home. I couldn't eat. I was choked. I couldn't make my mind. Mandy and I stayed in Trieste for a week feeding pigeons in the park before I gathered strength to make a decision to go home. On the border we heard Croatian language and it was lovely but it was very hard to face the past and the people from my past.

Mum and my sisters Violet and Georgia were happy to see me.

One day Violet was sitting in the kitchen smoking while mum talked to Georgia. I overheard Georgia crying and begging mum to tell her why she never loved her.

Mum was very cool and said: there is no room for you in my heart. There never was.

I didn't want to upset mum but I asked Violet what it was all about.

Violet said: You don't know mum, she is much worse than you remember.

We girls never learned from mum how to show affection for each other. I only saw my sister Georgia during school holidays because she always lived with our grandparents. She inherited their land and home but she divided it between her three sons. They are prosperous builders who subcontract big jobs to trade contractors.

Her sons demolished the old house and built a big modern home. Georgia lives in the big house but she has no pension and has to work on the land to survive.

Violet was married to a Serb reporter and they lived in Kosovo for thirty years. Her husband died just before the Kosovo war. Kosovo Muslims threw Violet out of her flat. She was found unconscious and they took her into the refugee camp and later to Serbia. She has a daughter and three grandchildren. I have been looking after them since the war in the 1990s. I sent them about twenty parcels of clothing.

I sent mum money regularly since I left home. She never asked for money but she always wrote how expensive everything was at home. She also wrote that my sisters were well off and did not need my help. She did not want me to send anything to them. She wanted me for herself. I became popular with her, I suppose, but I felt that I was buying her love. My sister said that mum loved me most but I think I bought her love with the money I sent her. I always wanted mum to be best dressed and looked after. She had more clothes than anyone around her. She went on sea holidays and had a good life. Mum died 16 years ago.

My relationship with Mathew deteriorated when we came to Lightning Ridge. We became reasonably successful and prosperous compared to a lot of poor migrant miners but I began to see a side of Mathew I never knew before. He came from a very poor family of nine. When we had nothing we had dreams and we were happy but when we had no more money problems he changed. Even when he had a business in Melbourne he began to pretend that he was better than other people. He especially liked to show off in front of poor people. He loved good food and he never missed to boast about the food he ate and the drinks he bought. I was often embarrassed by his boasting and sometimes I kicked him under the table but he just asked why I was kicking him.

He got worse when we came to Lightning Ridge. He liked to make himself bigger than people around him. He had a need to impress others. When people came with bits of opal they found to barely survive he liked to boast about good things he had. In those days most miners lived under the tent without government support.

Little things he said and did got on my nerves. When the first astronauts landed on the moon he started to read about it and he always tried to make himself look smarter than people around him. He told me that I was not educated and that our people were from the dark ages and had no intelligence. He was sweet to their faces but denigrated them behind their backs. He said that we must look for a better class of people and distance ourselves from the poor people. I began to dislike him. I didn't like the two faced person he became. His brother Peter has the same tendency to make himself bigger than he is. Maybe this trait runs in the family. They were dreamers who needed to be bigger than people around them.

Mathew also expected too much from me; I felt overworked and underappreciated.

Mathew and I had separate finances. He was happy about that. He went on holidays to Croatia and bought a car for his brother in Croatia. He went to Croatia many times. I bought myself a new car instead. I also had a veranda built and put concrete around the house.

Mathew loved his daughter Mandy. He spoiled her and I objected. When I told her to eat, he told her that she does not have to if she does not like it. Mandy looked at him for support when I demanded that she does something. She would not swallow food so we had her tonsils removed to eat better.

I became frustrated and shouted but he told Mandy that she does not have to listen to me. Mathew loved children, he loved to play with them. Mandy's friends loved him. To me he seemed childish but maybe he never had childhood games and wanted to enjoy them with his daughter. He wanted more children but I wasn't keen.

Mathew and I did well in business together but we began to live separate lives. I got a block of land, had a flat built and left Mathew. He told me to take everything we had but leave Mandy with him. I told him that Mandy can see him every day but she had to live with me. He wanted me to come back and remain friends. When I left we often met in the pub for lunch. There was Toni who played in the band and he asked me out. Mathew became jealous and wanted me back. Toni wanted me to go with him to America. Mathew told Toni that I am a lesbian and he told me that Toni is a homosexual.

I met Veselko and we lived together for awhile. He got married to a woman from Croatia but after she arrived to Australia they separated and she returned to Yugoslavia. I found Veselko an opal claim in Glengarry. I bought him a generator and he worked.

One day a man came looking for him. He said that he was a debt collector. I said that nobody died because I understood that he was a death collector. He said that he came to take Veselko's car. I gave Veselko a massage and I paid his debt. I told him that it was a loan and he said that he will repay me double. After two weeks the finance company came for the debt he had for bringing his wife from Croatia. I lend him more money but soon he found ten thousand dollars in the claim and he paid all his debts.

Mathew went to Croatia and brought back a new wife Sonja. I had problems with Mathew and his new wife Sonja. Mathew was nice to me when we met on our own but when he was with Sonja he turned his head away. He spread dirty rumours about me.

I sold the house and went to Cobber Peddy with Veselko. Mandy stayed with Sonja and Mathew until I settled and bought a house in Cobber Peddy. I stayed two and a half years. I bought cutting machines and I began to buy rough opal. I leased a shop. The previous owner taught me about the business. I bought the settings/findings in a lapidary shop. I learned to set stones. I bought cheap stones in rough, then cut and set them for tourists. I was on a good spot and thousands of tourists came to buy cheap souvenirs. They were selling like hot cakes. I learned to make initials with opal chips in cheap settings.

I worked seven days a week twelve hours a day.
When I sold everything in Copper Peddy I bought a town house in Surfers
paradise and brought my mum for holidays. She was very happy.

I wasn't happy in relationships. I can't imagine myself living with a man again.
I am very happy on my own now.

Poems by Maria Sostarec

Lightning Ridge

On the sunburnt dusty roads
of the town called Lightning Ridge
All are welcome poor and rich.

The lifestyle is a paradise
Freedom from sundown to sunrise.
Even the birds know your name
And seasons are always the same.

A place of unusual people
from all over the world
people with get rich quick plans
feel at home
they are not alone
everybody is different here
Only the smile is the same
And the good day mate
Shines on every face.

I am Aussie

As an Aussie I will pass
Playing footy on the grass
Singing happily along
I play to honour Wollongong.

Driving Holden red and white
to work I go early and bright
Working from nine to five
Returning to my loving wife.

From day to day
My days almost gone
I became an Aussie
I have done what had to be done.

Croatian Embassy in Canberra

At the end of the world in Canberra city
United and proud Croats build their embassy
We conquered pain we overcame fear
Now we celebrate our victory here.

United we Joed brother to brother
With hard work we strengthen each other.

Fulfilling the dream of centuries many
Brick by brick we build our embassy.
This first Croatian embassy
Carries the flag of our unity
For freedom and democracy
For our homeland and our destiny.

The magnificent Croatian Embassy in Canberra is the only embassy in the world built solely by voluntary migrant labour and donations. Australian Croats proudly call it their own.

Maria Sostarec

I was born in Croatia in 1947. My father did the maintenance of the central heating in the hospital. Mum worked as a cook in a restaurant.

I have seven brothers and one sister in Croatia. I was a keen sports girl and received trophies for long distance running. I hoped to become a sport's teacher. I was always a good reader and writer.

I finished eight years of primary school and then I had to go to work. After work I attended evening technical college to study economics and administration.

I met my husband at the dance. He was a very handsome man and a good dancer. I knew him for about a year before we got married.

When our son was about two we got the passport for Austria. In Austria we got brochures telling us about a good living in Australia. We went to the Australian Embassy and applied to immigrate to Australia.

My first impression was that Australia was very large and different. I liked the warm weather, I learned to like the food and the way of life. I love Australia but part of my heart remains with my people in Croatia. I miss my family and friends and my countryside.

After my children started school I enrolled in TAFE to study English. I soon got a job in a Retirement home.

I liked to write poetry and prose since childhood. In Australia I published poems and stories in Croatian papers.

I was active in our Croatian community in Wollongong. In 1992 I began broadcasting Croatian Radio program in Wollongong. In 1993 I joined other Croatian ladies and we sewed and knitted garments for Croatia's war orphans. In 1994 I visited Croatia and took with me presents for the orphaned children.

I was a member of Illawarra migrant resource Centre and Illawarra Ethnic Council. In 1995 The Committee of the Healthy Town of Illawarra helped me to publish a book of poems 'Under the southern sun' in English and Croatian. In 1996 I joined the representatives of other ethnic committees and we created an Information program sponsored by Department of immigration. I helped prepare the program in Croatian for ABC and 2 VOX radio programs.

In 1998 I entered a poetry competition in Zagreb and was awarded fourth place. I also received compliments for my literary work.

I believe in God and justice. I am very careful not to offend anyone.

I hope my children will be hard working and honest people. I have always been community minded because I wanted to become a part of community. In Lightning Ridge I became a member of Trans-cultural community. I also began broadcasting Croatian program on the local radio. I made friends through my TAFE studies. I take people as they are regardless of their religion or colour or race or gender.

Drago Jurisek

I was born on 28 October 1932 in Velika Mlaka near Zagreb in Croatia.

Dad's father was 25 years old when he was killed during the First World War. Dad's mother was a washerwoman. They did not let her keep the child with her so she left her son in the presbytery where he grew up to look after the pigs and cattle.

From that presbytery Dad was called into the army. He had an operation for stomach ulcer at the age of twenty-three. When he came from the hospital the neighbours welcomed him home with a glass of brandy. He drank it, felt sick and died.

I was a year old and his only child. Mum and I lived with mum's mother.

Mum's mother was a very strong and influential woman in our family. She was one of twelve Brozevic children. My grandfather Lackovic worked in America. He injured his leg and when he got some money he returned home and married my grandmother. They had one child, my mother, before he died. Grandmother and her one-year-old daughter were left with Lackovic family. They treated her badly so she left and took care of an invalid Janko Hrvoje. When Janko died he left her his little house and some land. That was our home.

Four years after dad died mum married his friend Ivan. He came to live with us. My grandmother told him that he has to take special care of me. Ivan and mum had two daughters. Maria lives in Canada and Mila in Croatia. I think my stepfather liked me better than his own daughters.

I enjoyed swimming and fishing in river Sava. I played soccer with my friends but mum and stepfather always chased me to work in the fields. I finished primary school by the time war started and when I was sixteen I got a job as an assistant machinist in the factory Rade Koncar. After a year I got an apprenticeship in engineering.

The boss did not belt me but he was very strict. He chased me and I ran like a rabbit when I got in some mischief. I smoked and drank and chased girls, came late and tired to work; the boss yelled and threatened but I finished my apprenticeship and worked for a year before they took me into the army in 1952. Groups of us soldiers drove army trucks with supplies of food, ammunition and officers all over Slovenia as part of the training for the war.

The food was horrible and tasteless. Mostly it was cabbage; cabbage and cabbage with cornmeal or beans. On rare occasions we found a small piece of meat mixed with the cabbage or beans. There was never enough food.

We loved Tito's birthday because we got American Spam tins for dinner. We also had Truman's eggs for breakfast. They were American powdered eggs and Truman was American president sending Tito these food parcels. I suppose Americans wanted to keep Tito happy so he wouldn't go begging to Russia.

We were building brotherhood and unity for Tito's Yugoslavia so it was safer not to mention any nationality other than Yugoslav. Tito, half Slovenian half Croatian, believed that it was easier to rule united Yugoslavs rather than six warring nations.

The communist rulers made us believe that religion and nationality were harmful, shameful, old fashioned, outdated and dangerous. People gradually learned to be scared and ashamed of nationalism, religion and of parents who still practised religion and nationality.

Serbs were the most powerful and numerous nation in Yugoslavia and they tried to keep other nations obedient. Most of the officers in the army were Serbs. We knew who was who although we never spoke about it. You wouldn't dare discuss these things. Serbs were never intimately discussing their plans with Croats. Publicly we sang and danced to the unity and brotherhood but we whispered about Yugoslav dictatorship.

A Serb friend worked in Slovenia for twenty-five years. He married a Slovenian girl. When another Serb heard him speak Slovenian with his Slovenian family he declared that he should be shot for betraying his nation. He was supposed to change his Slovenian family into Serbs.

Nobody went to church while in the army. Many boys came from religious families but they would not dare go to church in the uniform. Everybody can identify a person in the uniform. A soldier had no permission to change into civilian clothes and nobody ever saw a soldier in the uniform go to church. Nobody told us directly that we must not go to church but they told us about reactionaries who went and of people who were backward and believed in God.

We had Sunday afternoons free but there was no church service in the afternoon anyway.

Students and other young people were invited to build the Brotherhood Road from the north to the south of Yugoslavia during their holidays. The government plan was to make young people of different nationalities mix, socialise, fall in love, make families and create Yugoslavs.

United, assimilated and intermarried these people would destroy the memory of the offending national identities.

Croatia and Serbia are two biggest rivals for power on the Balkan Peninsula.

Serbs and Croats were historic enemies but after the war they had to pretend that they forgot about the feuds of the past and about their differences.

Privately Serbs dreamed of greater Serbia. Privately Croats dreamed of independence.

Serbs are orthodox, they have Cyrillic script, and they have Turkish history because Turks ruled them for centuries. Croats are Catholics, they have Latin script and have been ruled by Germanic governments for centuries.

After the disintegration of Austrian Hungarian Empire the kingdom of Slovenians, Serbs and Croats was created in 1918.

In 1928 Serbs killed the Croatian leader of the party in the parliament. As a response to that killing Croatian Ante Pavelic and his colleagues emigrated to the West and organised an illegal group USTASI. They were Croatian elite volunteer army with special privileges much like SS in Hitler's Germany. Many Croats did not like USTASI.

Ustasi means people who stand up and resist. They were fighting against Serb domination and they killed Serb king Alexander while he was in Marseille.

When Hitler attacked Serbia, Ustashi made a deal with Hitler to create an independent Croatia.

Pavelic promised Italy Adriatic Coast and much of Croatian land went to Hitler's ally Hungary as payment for Hitler's protection of Croatia.

I suppose Pavelic tried to resist Hitler and Mussolini's demands but he needed their protection and arms to fight Serb Cetniki and partisans.

After the army service from 1954 until 1957 I worked as a machinist in a toolmaking factory. In June 1957 I tried to escape over the Slovenian Alps into Austria. The border police caught me. I lied in court that I escaped because I had problems with my stepfather and that I had no accommodation and no job. I had no criminal record so they let me go with a two-year good behaviour bond. The authorities sent me to another factory and I started to work the next day. After nineteen days I escaped again. I knew a friend who worked with cattle transports to Germany. He cleaned the wagons and put lots of hay in the middle for cattle to eat on the way to Germany. He and I hid under that hay. Yugoslav and German inspectors checked the wagon before they sealed it. We travelled for twenty hours to Salzburg. When they opened the wagons on Sunday morning we were in Salzburg in Austria.

As we moved out of the wagons we saw people going to church clean and fresh while we smelled like cattle because we slept with cattle. The stationmaster yelled at us in German to go and report to the police.

My friend and I bribed the labourers who cleaned the wagons and they helped us back into the hay ready to go to Germany but the stationmaster called the police and they took us to a refugee camp.

Many refugees were returned to Yugoslavia in those days. I applied to go to Australia. In December 1957 I got a passport and they took a load of us illegal emigrants to Genoa to go to Australia on a ship Aurelia. There were about 1400 migrants mostly escapees from some misery or other.

I came to Australia in 1958. When I said that I am Croatian, Australians labelled me a terrorists and troublemaker.

When people from the former Yugoslavia arrived to Australia they wanted to tell the world what nationality they are but nobody wanted to hear that there were five distinctly different nations in the Yugoslav federation and that Yugoslav is neither a language nor a nation.

We had to remain Yugoslavs even though we escaped from Tito because we didn't want to be Yugoslavs. There were disputes everywhere if one of the migrants from Yugoslavia said that he is anything but Yugoslav. This was a great disappointment for most of us.

I arrived to Melbourne and from there to Bonegilla refugee camp.

From Bonegilla they sent me to pick grapes in Mildura. The farmer began calling me Charlie. Prince Charlie was an adorable little boy then so maybe Australians wanted us all to be Charlie, her Majesty's sons.

I did not speak English so the least I could do was be Charlie and make it easier for Australians to call me.

I met other Croatians in Mildura and as soon as I saved my first one hundred quit I discharged myself from the farmer and went with my new friends to Ingham in Queensland to cut sugar cane. This was the hardest job I have ever seen or done. They paid six shillings a ton but they kept sixpence a ton. At the end I got those sixpences because I survived the whole season. We made four to five tons each a day.

I moved to Wollongong and started working for BHP. After a year I went to Cooma to look for a job with the Snowy Mountains Scheme. I began by washing heavy machinery for Snowy Mountains Authority until in 1965 I got a job with Theese brothers building Tatangara Dam.

During our holidays my friends and I travelled to Sydney to spend what we saved on girls, cars and drink. I smoked heavily. I returned to Khancoban and stayed until 1968.

In Sydney I met a Croatian girl Lucy. We moved to Glen Iness. I worked there in Quick Freeze factory and Lucy worked as a waitress. We bought a house and later we bought another one. We both wanted to stop smoking and we stoped hundreds of times but we started again.

In 1972 we went to Lightning Ridge on holidays and met many Croatians. When we ran out of money we returned to Glen Inness and went potato picking for a month. I worked in the sun bent down from morning till night and all of a sudden I felt a terrible pain in my head.

When I was an 18 years old boy I played soccer and another player hit me on the head by accident. I had a tremendous headache. An x-ray of my head showed that there was a burst blood vessel and a tiny drop of blood was pressing on my brain. The doctor said that when the blood will dry the headache will stop. I was all right until Lucy and I went to pick those potatoes in Glen Iness.

The doctor told me that I had to have an operation or I would die. The operation was successful only the skull sunk on the side. I was very sick.

I made a bet with Lucy that I will stop smoking. She made an official contract to pay me one hundred-fifty dollars if I stopped for a year. She also tried to stop but couldn't so she tried to catch me smoking. She had spies where I worked and she engaged her friends to watch me and tempt me but I never touched another cigarette.

Lucy refused to pay. We argued. We argued a lot about other things as well and in 1978 we split up. We had many court battles to settle the property. We sold one house to pay the judiciary and we sold the other to split the money. The judge ordered Lucy to pay me out twenty five thousand dollars. She paid five years later. I think I won the bet though. I felt better not smoking and I saved money that way.

I returned to Lightning Ridge.

I became known in Lightning Ridge as Charlie do winchy because I weld winches as electric hoists are called here. I sharpened picks and points but I got sick of it.

I am never short of friends; they come because they need me for some job or other. Friends also like to stay with me when I have a carton of stubbies or a cask of wine or a bottle of whisky. People tell me not to be so helpful but I can't help it. I often feel disappointed. Friends are hard to find when I need help.

I will be seventy if I live until my next birthday. I am still single. People promised me generous wedding gifts so I keep looking for a bride. She would have to be a very special person but should not think herself better than I am.

My home at three mile became a Lightning Ridge landmark. People live left and right from Charlie do winchy.

Recently I sold my home because I decided to return home to Croatia.

When I returned to my hometown I felt like I came to another planet. I have a house and some land there. My sister still lives there but I did not feel at home. Lightning Ridge became my home. I have no one in Australia but I got used to living on my own. Here I am with people who like me. I have no other home. Maybe other miners have no other home.

People in Croatia complain about being poor but they drive new cars, they eat good food and have good accommodation. They have easier life than I have on the field here. They have America at home now, but they still complain. They say that they have everything on credit. I don't know why they keep on complaining. We don't do that in Australia. Or maybe we do. Maybe we whinge all the time wherever we are.

While in Croatia I felt a lump growing in my stomach. I returned to Australia because in Croatia I have no medical insurance. Lightning Ridge doctor told me that I have cancer. I injured the heel of my foot a few years ago and it did not heal. When I went to the doctor he diagnosed melanoma. Now it spread through the lymph nodes into my blood stream and I have a growth in my stomach. I had chemotherapy to shrink the growth but it did not help. Every day I get weaker and skinnier.

Bowling club is renting me a room in town now and the manager of the club told me that he will organise someone to help me when the time comes. I would give anything to be healthy.

Jehovah witnesses took me to a herbalist and I bought lots of herb. They bring me books about healthy living, they read the Bible to me every day.

I made the will and left everything to my sister and my niece.

I know that I will die soon. Most of my friends are at the new Chum cemetery already. The rest have to wait their turn. We are all going to look for traces of opal while underground. Maybe in heaven there is a lot of opal. Maybe a big red on black is waiting for everyone who did not find one here.

My doctor told me that I have a little comfortable time left and then he will try to make the rest a little bit less uncomfortable.

I am really scared. I used to swear a lot but I don't swear any more. I want to ask God what I have done to deserve my miserable life. I believe that God is cruel. All my life I worked hard and helped everybody. I never cheated any one. Why is God punishing me? I lived in poverty and sickness and never had any luck. Now I am dying as a foreigner alone. I wake up scared many times every night.

I read about new medicines Meganin and Broccolin produced by some Croatians. I know that I am grasping for straws but I have nothing to lose since I can not take my money with me. This medicine cost me six hundred dollars a month.

I have been taking these medicines now for a month. My cancer is growing rapidly; I am getting skinnier and sicker every day. I threw the Meganin and Broccolin away.

I look like a skeleton. I wear a large shirt to hide my stomach, which is growing because the tumours are getting fatter. All I have now is this cancer baby growing inside me and whatever I eat is swallowed by it.

I am afraid that people will take advantage of my sickness so I don't tell them that I am dying.

I would give anything for one more day and I would do anything to be healthy again.

My doctor suggested that I talk to the one above.

I am only on casual terms with God but my sister Maria is totally involved in doing God's work. She keeps bringing groups of Canadian visitors on the pilgrimage in Medjigorje to pray to the Virgin Mary who appears there. Maria is praying for me. She writes and she rings. I wish she would let me die in peace.

I wonder why I became so popular during my sickness. There are visitors coming all day, every day. Jehovah Witnesses come to read the Bible for me and Catholic nuns come to visit. Friends tell me not to worry because God loves me.

I asked my friend Cilka why everybody is so nice to me and she said:

When people feel that they are losing something precious they begin to appreciate it more. We are scared to lose you.

Possessions mean nothing to me any more. I lent twelve thousand dollars to a friend Aldo. He promised to return the money in a month time. He is having a ball with my money. He probably prays that I will die soon.

I wish I respected and appreciated my health more when I had it. It is the only thing that really matters.

Drago died on 19.7.02