

Slovak Republic

Slovak republic with the capital Bratislava is a mountainous country in the middle of Europe. Five million Slovaks are predominantly Catholic people.

As Austria Hungarian Empire disintegrated in 1918 many European countries became independent. Slovakia became a part of Czechoslovakia.

During the WWII Hitler invaded Sudetenland, which was part of Czechoslovakia but had predominantly German population.

When Germany attacked Russia, Stalin took the command of the resistance forces in all Eastern Europe. The ideology was that any amount of resistance engaged a part of German army.

Many heroic, patriotic, idealistic young people joined partisans because they felt that it was their duty to defend their country. The resistance against the German army was often suicidal especially for a small country like Slovakia. Many people died unnecessarily. The church at first led the resistance forces but when the Russian communists took the leadership the church turned against them. They realised that Russia used the chaotic situation of the war to spark the communist revolution.

Provoking Germans was one of the communist strategies to recruit people for their cause. Like most nations Slovakia became ideologically split into communists and anticommunists.

The collaboration with Axis powers occurred in all occupied nations; it was either voluntary or forced or both.

Slovak anticommunists announced Slovak's independence as a German protectorate on 14.4.39. Germans trained the Slovak army for the war against Poland and later Russia. They also had to fight Slovak partisans.

On 1.1.1993 Slovak republic peacefully seceded from Czech republic and became independent.

About ten thousands Slovaks live in Australia. Ten to twenty of them mine for opal in Lightning Ridge at any given time.

After the WWII communists in Czechoslovakia nationalised much of the land that belonged to the church and other large landowners. After Slovak independence the government returned this land to previous owners. Hapsburg aristocracy and the church became the main land holders again. The cream always rises to the top and the dirt settles at the bottom.

The leaders and the management in Slovakia are well paid but the labourers are still struggling. Since the independence the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. One wonders what people achieved. The workers are always in the front line fighting and dying for freedom and equality but in the peacetime they are at the bottom of the ladder. Generally people have a roof over their heads and food on the table.

Josef Belicka

I was born in Slovakia just before the WWII on 4.3.38. I have a younger brother and sister. My father was a musician and a cabinet-maker. We also had about ten hectares of land to produce our food.

My father was a partisan during the WWII. When partisans killed two German soldiers, Germans retaliated by killing forty seven Slovaks and buried them in a mass grave. My father was among them.

German retaliations made Slovaks afraid and many escaped into the mountains to join partisans. I have a vivid recollection of how the Germans burned the neighbouring village and how we ran into the mountains to escape.

My mother was also involved in the resistance movement and after the war was awarded the medal for bravery. She was a widow with three children under the age of seven. We were as poor as most people after the war.

Mum had a good education in the girl's Catholic school.

After the war mum became a party member so she had a better chance of getting a good job. At the beginning she believed in the ideas of communism which promised equality and fairness for all. Later she realised that most communist leaders were fighting for power and used that power for their personal benefit.

When I was about ten mum got married again. I call mum's second husband my second father because he was the best father I could have hoped for. You have to meet a person like him to know what I mean. In those days one had to be a special person to marry a woman with three little children. He was a model father and we wanted to be like him. He was very polite and patient. He loved gardening. I remember him storing his cactuses in the cellar during the winter.

My second father was a teacher before the war but later studied and got a degree in economics and became an economist.

Mum and my second father celebrated their fiftieth marriage anniversary last year.

I did not suffer much from the communist oppression but gradually I realised that communist economy was unworkable.

After eight years at school I went into the army academy for four years. I wanted to become a pilot. Everybody wanted to be a pilot. The army could not recruit enough volunteer officers for artillery, anti-aircraft and other activities. They recruited officers for those activities by the ballot. After three years of training to become a pilot I was picked for the anti-aircraft artillery. I didn't like that. I wanted to get out of the army but they wouldn't let me. If I were

dishonourably discharged from the army I would have no prospects for the future.

When my dream to become a pilot was crushed I had nothing to look forward to. I felt stuck in the army I did not like. That was the main reason why I escaped.

I knew that it was impossible to escape to Austria. All along the Austrian border was a double electric fence. The guards with dogs were patrolling the border 24 hours a day. Anyone caught even close to the border was arrested. An army officer caught escaping would be either shot or court marshalled.

I planned to go through Hungary to Yugoslavia and then either to Italy or Austria. I was twenty when I escaped in the late autumn of 58. I was the only Czechoslovak lucky enough to escape to the west that year.

When you are young you don't consider the consequences of your actions. My escape was a great tragedy for my family. My sister who was a university student and my brother who attended technical college were both temporarily expelled. My father lost his chance of promotion. My mother had a nervous breakdown.

They all eventually re-established themselves. They have a good life in Slovakia now. My sister is a Dean of the Banska Bystrica University.

I swam over the freezing river Danube during the night to get from Slovakia to Hungary. I walked hundreds of kilometres through Hungary towards Yugoslavia. I was starving but there was nothing left in the fields and most of the fruit was picked.

In Budapest a policeman asked for my ID. I tried to escape but he hit me and the ring on his finger cut my face open. I hit him back and kicked him in the stomach before I escaped.

I was careful not to get caught again.

I arrived to Yugoslavia exhausted and starved after seventeen days. In Novi Sad I stole a pushbike to make it easier to travel. I did not know that pushbikes were not allowed on the highway. The police waved me down and had to stop. The policeman stood between his motor bike and me. He asked for documents. I had a student ID so I gave him that. He realised that I was a foreigner. I was very scared. I thought that maybe I killed that policeman in Budapest and they were chasing me. I grabbed the motor bike and pushed it over the policeman and escaped into the cornfields. He shot after me but the bullet only wounded me superficially.

I took my shirt off because I was hot while riding the bike so the shirt was left on the pushbike. I was topless and freezing overnight.

The next day I came to the farm near the river. I was starving but there was nobody to ask for food. I found a beehive and pulled out the frame with honey when I heard someone say: put it back. I turned around and there was a girl with a shotgun. I was nervous and dropped the frame in. This made the bees nervous and they went for me. Luckily the riverbank was close so I dived in the water and swam across.

I kept walking until I got to Titova Korenica close to Bihac in Yugoslavia. I was starving and delirious when I walked through the village. As I came out of the village I found a plumb tree and climbed on it to get a few plums. Someone under the tree said: did you plant these plums. I looked down and it was a policeman. He asked for ID. I was at the breaking point physically and mentally so he took me to the police house where his wife prepared a meal for me. There was a big onion on the table and I ate it raw while I waited. I told them who I am and he told me that they had a search order for me. He looked at my shoes. The blood seeped through them from walking. He called a doctor and he cut the shoes off my bleeding feet before he bandaged them. The policeman took me to the refugee camp 15 kilometres from Karlovac. There were about twenty other refugees at the camp. I got a political asylum before Czech police found out where I was. Nobody in Slovakia knew how easy it was to get the political asylum in Yugoslavia. I could have walked into any police station and asked for it.

In the refugee camp I learned that Hungarian and other eastern European refugees often escaped to Yugoslavia to get political asylum. After Hungarian revolution there were over a hundred refugees living in those army barracks.

I was placed in the camp hospital and the doctor brought me chocolates to help me recover faster. I was about 72 kilograms when I left Slovakia and now I weighed 53.

The doctor invited me to go to go to the local cinema. Police thought that I was still too weak to escape so they did not escort me. I was still afraid that they would eventually take me back to Czechoslovakia where I would be court marshalled.

I met a Hungarian friend Josko in the refugee camp. He was on the death row for six months as a political prisoner in Hungary. He escaped during the Hungarian revolution. I made myself a compass which helped Josko and myself when we escaped and walked towards Trieste. We walked for two days and crossed the Yugoslav Italian border during the night.

The Italian police wanted to send us back but they realised that we were not Yugoslavs so they took us to the restaurant to feed us before they took us to the camp in Trieste.

From Latina emigration camp I wrote home so they knew where I was. The Czech police once tried to kidnap me in the camp because they suspected that I would give some army secrets away. I was scared all the time in Europe. I was sentenced to twenty years jail in my absence so I could not go home.

I had no money in the camp. I walked from the camp to Rome with other refugees so we could sell blood to Red Cross. We had no other way of getting spending money.

I was in Italy for ten months. From Latina we were transferred to Bari and from there to Trieste where our ship was waiting. On 10.10.59 the ship took us to Fremantle in Australia. We had especially good treatment because we were the last refugee-passengers who travelled by boat to Australia.

In Melbourne we had a choice to either go where they sent us or go on our own. I saved a bit of money in Italy so I chose to go to my friends in Adelaide.

I remember coming to Adelaide in the early morning. The lights over the still sleepy city were a welcome sight. I had to wait for my friends to pick me up after work in the afternoon. I walked around. Looking through the shop window I saw some beautiful coloured stones. I learned a bit of English in the army academy so I went in the shop to ask what the stones were. I met my first opals and fell in love with them at first sight.

Migrants had a choice to either work on a railway or on the road so I picked the railway near Woomera. Atomic tests in Woomera were a couple of years earlier and we were not allowed near the army base. Woomera is very close to opals but it took me three years before I actually went into opal mining in Andamooka.

In the railway work camp I met a Croatian John Hazic and we became lifelong friends. We decided to go crocodile hunting on the Mitchell River in Cape York. We shot and skinned crocodiles to sell the skins. We prepared about two thousand-pounds worth of skins. You could buy a house for that money then. We were going to sell the skins and go opal mining with the money but we got caught in a bush fire and lost everything. We had to jump into the river to save ourselves but we couldn't save our possessions. I broke three ribs escaping from the fire. We walked and hitchhiked to Cairns where we went sugar cane cutting.

My broken ribs made it hard for me to cut ten tons of sugarcane a day. We saved enough money to go to Townsville where we got a job in the meatworks.

During the first few years I often wished that I did not escape and that I could return home. Life was very difficult for young migrant boys. We had no social life, no romance, and no youth. We just worked. There were no girls of the same nationality to go out with and Australian girls snubbed the boys who spoke poor English. In those best years of our youth we felt very lonely and unwanted. Most boys met in the pubs because pubs were the only meeting places in Australia. We missed the rich festive cultural traditions of our home. We missed the seasons, the places, the people and the activities we used to enjoy at home.

Many European migrant men worked on the Snowy Mountains scheme, on the roads and railways and other bush projects. They had no social life apart from drinking in the pub. It was very depressing for young men.

Australians during the sixties looked down on non-English speaking European migrants. The language barrier was the cause of much misunderstanding. It was hard for the migrants to present their knowledge, their points of view and their feelings. Arguing in English led to much frustration and anger for non-English speaking migrants. Most felt misunderstood, patronised, belittled and even shamed just because their English was inadequate. There was also much resentment in the workplace towards migrant men because they worked better and harder.

Remembering the instances of hurtful prejudices would be like putting salt into the old wounds so I rather remember good times and friendships I made with Australians.

I worked in the printing factory in Melbourne for six months and during that time I went with a friend to the town hall. A lady teacher was teaching dancing. I learned dancing in the army. These days nobody dances like we used to. The lady asked me to help with teaching dancing and I was glad to volunteer. We became good friends.

Gradually I came to understand the attitudes of Australians and won their respect as well.

I never confront people or argue with them. I am a quiet, patient, and peaceful person. I negotiate and explain things rather than argue.

I remember my father reading to me the words of our writer Gerginsky: Cool head, warm heart and clean hands. This became my motto and it served me well.

I met my first wife Ivanka in Tamworth. Ivanka's father was a Croatian who came to Australia in 1918. He had his emigration papers approved by King George. Ivanka's mother was Scottish. Ivanka was born in Cairns but at the age of six her father sold his farm and they decided to return to Yugoslavia. Ivanka's mother did not like Yugoslavia so she returned to Australia with her two daughters. Ivanka stayed in Yugoslavia with her father. She could not speak English when she returned to Australia at the age of twenty-one.

Ivanka and I arrived in Andamooka on 1.10 1962. Andamooka had about five hundred people all involved in mining. There was one shop and many people lived underground. We lived in a tent.

Ivanka and I got married and Emil was born in Andamooka in April 1965.

We found some opals and bought a boat to start commercial mackerel fishing in Townsville. We sold to the fish board and local shops. After awhile we decided to go back to opals. On our way to Andamooka we stopped in

Lightning Ridge in 1966. That was the end of the story for us. When Ivanka saw the trees and the water in Lightning Ridge she decided to stay. I was attracted to opal mining and the quality of opal here.

We build a camp on Canfells. We just spread a canvas roof over some branches and camped there until we were flooded out and had to move to Telephone line.

Our daughter Olinka was born and we were a happy family. Ivanka and I promised ourselves to work until both of our children had a house of their own.

I learned opal cutting from Clark who was the oldest opal cutter in Andamooka. I carried my portable cutting machine with me.

I also started mining with a German Henry whom I knew from Andamooka. We found some opal. I cut it and showed it to the buyers. They asked who cut the stones and I thought that they were badly cut because nobody wanted to buy them. I didn't know that they were of inferior quality. Finally Fred, the Canadian buyer, said: I will buy these opals if you tell me who cut them. I told him that I did it and he told me that I am wasting my time mining and should start cutting professionally. And I did.

I cut opals ever since. I still enjoy cutting specially when there is a nice stone to be uncovered and shaped. People come when they have a problem with the stone and the cutting requires a lot of thinking and planning. People also come for advice on how to cut the difficult precious stones.

Once a man brought a 200 carats polished opal to sell to me but I had no market for a large stone of poor quality like that. He took it to Hong Kong but could not sell it either. On the way to Australia he showed it to a Japanese dealer. He unwrapped it and it fell to the floor. It chipped in one corner. Inside was a beautiful red gem opal. The man brought it to me then to recut the stone. It was a precious stone worth lots of money. It often happened with Glengarry opal that under the greyish exterior hides a brilliant gem colour opal.

As a cutter I had to value opal and the buyers came to inquire about opal and buy from me. I met Bob Hiho and we started buying opal together. I knew Sherman from Andamooka and I met his sons in Lightning Ridge. We became close associates. I first went to Hong Kong and it took me a couple of trips to make contacts. I tried Europe and Asia but it was best in Asia, Hong Kong, Thailand and later Japan.

I was never lucky in opal mining. I made money on cutting and buying but I spent it on mining.

We tried our luck with Queensland boulder opal in 1974. We took the bulldozer and all the machinery to Queensland. The flood caught us. We were stuck for a month until a police plane rescued us.

We left the machinery in the water. After six months we recovered it but the

bulldozer was rusty and damaged. I sold it but I lost much money. We never recovered.

Open cut mining is very expensive. You uncover the level and then pick the boulders and crush them with 35 pounds hammers. When you find colour you cut it with the saw. We had a generator for electricity.

I went to sell opal in Hong Kong in 1980. I came back and when I returned my wife took me to the airport and said that she has a birthday present for me. I saw this little plane, a little Cessna C 150, parked there. She bought me a plane from Leni Cram as my 43rd birthday present. She never told me how much she paid. I didn't know what to say, she knew that I always wanted to fly so she made my dream come through.

Finally in 1982 I made my pilot's licence in Mudgee.

I flew with Leni Cram around Lightning Ridge even before I got my licence but my first solo flight was to Walgett. It took me another year before I dared go to Sydney. As soon as I got my licence Ivanka came flying with me. There wasn't enough room for the whole family so I sold the plane after two years and bought a four-seater plane, which I still have. Flying offered me the adventurous freedom and fun; travelling by plane was also more economical and relaxing.

I flew all over Australia with my family. It was cheaper than driving a car. There are only landing fees of about ten dollars and the insurance is \$1500 a year. A plane like that in good condition costs about sixty thousand.

Ivanka and I achieved what we wanted to achieve. Our children had jobs and homes. The business started to go well, our children became independent and we could have enjoyed ourselves.

In 1989 I became annoyed with the bleeding mole on my back. I had it checked and the doctor discovered that I had a melanoma. I went to Sydney to have it operated. The doctor said that I was lucky because he cut it out before it became metastatic and the cancer spread.

As I returned from the hospital we checked the black mark on Ivanka's leg. She had no pain but sometimes she had a cramp. The mole looked much like the one on my back. The doctor discovered melanoma and unfortunately it was metastatic already and Ivanka could not be saved. It was a sad time for my family when Ivanka died in 1992.

The doctor told me to have regular checkups because the melanoma often spreads following the operation. If it does not spread during the first five years it is unlikely to return.

John Hazic came from Andamooka to Lightning Ridge and we became partners again. We were close friends and became neighbours until his fatal mining accident. He just sold a claim and went to check it out for the last time

when it caved in on him. The people in a camp nearby heard a generator running during the night and they alerted the police. They found him dead.

Rudi Marin also became my neighbour in Lightning Ridge. We first met when I was hunting crocodiles in the river and he was on salt-water crocodiles.

Lightning Ridge became the hometown for me and my children and Australia became my country.

I like the Australian freedom and relaxed lifestyle. When I arrived here I could find a job anywhere and move around and be whatever I wanted to be and work where I wanted without being afraid that I will be hungry, persecuted or prosecuted.

After the war such freedom was unimaginable in Slovakia. Many are worse off than they were under communism. Communism oppressed them but the present anarchy seems frightening to the vulnerable workers. Australia is a new country with young history and culture. European countries have much more connected societies, great traditions and many social and cultural activities. Slovaks these days still come to Australia but only because they like to travel and they have the opportunity to travel. They don't run away from poverty or oppression.

I know I will always be a foreigner in Australia but I lived an interesting, adventurous life. I have experienced and seen the world. Lightning Ridge was a friendly safe place until the nineties opal boom on Corcoran opal field. The publicity of easy money brought the criminals and other undesirables to opal fields. Everybody heard about the riches and the ratters became active. We rarely heard of someone going into another person's claim to dig his opal before but now the criminal gangs of ratters became well organised.

The town also became depressed because of vandalism. Most shops have steel bars on the windows and the place looks like a big jail. I believe that the unruly society started with the Vietnam War when the family values broke down. People don't care for each other and for the community as they used to. Many unemployed came. It is easier for strangers to disregard the local code of behaviour.

I got married to my second wife Eva in 95. Eva comes from the same town and we went to the same school. We also found out that our parents knew each other. It is good to have a partner with whom you can remember the places and the people. At least you are not a foreigner in your own home.

Eva is fourteen years younger. She started school when I joined the army but she had the same teacher I had.

I am looking forward to the happy times with Eva. I have a dream to travel with Eva around the world. I like to see her smile and be happy and hope that we will live in love forever.

People tell me that I am well known as the best opal cutter in the Ridge and a fair buyer. I earned a good reputation with careful work and honesty. I am well known and respected as an opal dealer by people of any nation.

My son and daughter are not interested in cutting. They both left Lightning Ridge. Emil lives on the Gold Coast. He obtained a BA from Armidale University but is now training to do landscaping. He loves to create gardens and has the artistic talent for it. He built a beautiful home in Lightning Ridge but he sold it and moved to the coast with his wife and his son.

Olinka is also on the Gold Coast working in an office.

I registered and drilled seven claims in Grawin. I was the first one on that field but I found nothing. Now I am mining at Wyoming field with my stepsons.

I used to read a book a day but now I have to save my eyesight for cutting. I like to go fishing. We rent a boat or fish from the reef. I like to play chess. I have no particular association with Slovaks but occasionally I visit Croatian or Serbian clubs. I had to learn Croatian while in Yugoslavia.

I like Australia and Australians. I have seen other countries and had opportunity to emigrate there but Australia offers freedom and the opportunities to explore and venture into different businesses more than other countries.

Most Europeans are used to hard work and good management so they prospered. It depends how hard one is willing to work and how one spends the money. People in the third world countries have no opportunity but in the developed country good workers can become reasonably rich.

People generally want peace but the politicians tell young idealists to fight for their country. I feel strongly that I am an Australian and if Australia was under threat I would fight for it with everything I got. I mine seven days a week. Working keeps me in good shape. I haven't found any opal for a long time but there is always hope. You have to be in it to win it.