

Jože Žagar

I was born in Slovenia on 12.2.29 as the second oldest of six children. My family was considered poor. Dad worked for the farmers, dug water wells and cleaned water reservoirs on railway stations. The work was not regular. I remember being hungry most of the time during winter. We ate twice a day. I remember how the children were rattling their spoons long before the corn meal was ready. Mum helped to feed the family by working for farmers.

We had to go to mass every morning during May and at least every Sunday at other times. I was freezing cold one morning as I went to mass until a miracle happened. I found one-hundred dinar note in the snow. I ran home to give it to mum. She went to the parish priest and handed the note to him so he could announce from the pulpit and return the money to the rightful owner. The priest said to mum: Nobody needs this money more than you do. The person who lost hundred dinars probably has more money than you do. I am not going to announce it. If someone tells me that he lost it, we will give it back. If not you go and buy food for the children. He was a good priest. Nobody claimed the money and mum bought about one hundred kilos of corn for it. I felt like a hero because I helped the family survive on sauerkraut and cornmeal that winter. As soon as the snow began to melt mum began sowing the vegetables in our garden. This garden was the main source of our food and Mum was an excellent cook. For Sunday lunch she bought a quarter of a kilo of meat and some bones. There was also a piece of liver. She made a soup and cut the meat for seven of us. We all looked forward to this special Sunday dinner. We each got carefully measured piece of meat and liver. There were also fresh salads and roast potatoes and apple souse.

In spring we picked young dandelions and lamb's lettuce on the roadsides and fields. People used these first greens for a salad. We picked a lot and my sister went from house to house to sell it. She was so excited when she sold everything that she forgot her money and her bag somewhere as she ran home to tell mum. We never forgot to tease her about it.

We had a goat. I had to graze it from sunrise until I had to go to school at eight in the morning and again after school until dusk. The goat was a very precious source of milk for the family. It was also the most wicked and stubborn animal I ever saw. If I took my eye from her for a minute she would escape into someone's field and ate cabbages and other vegetables. I was forever in trouble because of it.

In spring the goat had a kid and we sold it to buy the necessary provisions like cheaper beef meat, oil and salt and clothes. The young goat's meat was considered a delicacy. The owners of the leather factory had a permanent order for the kid. After we sold the kid the goat gave us up to seven litres of milk a day and we exchanged this milk for double the amount of cow's milk. People believed that goat's milk was a remedy for those suffering from tuberculosis.

Every spring we bought a piglet so mum could fatten it. We killed it before Christmas. Every piece of meat was carefully preserved to last through the year. The fat was reduced into lard. The meat we smoked. We made excellent blood wurst and kranskies and salamis.

Even the head was cut into pieces and they were cooked later with barley. Before the war the church had great power and many people went to church only because they were afraid. My father only went to church at Christmas and Easter to please my mother who was a pious Catholic. We had Scripture twice a week. One of the priests called a whole line of students to him every morning and he hit them with the stick. If he broke a stick on you, you had to bring a new stick for the next Scripture lesson. All the children were scared of that priest. He was leaning back on his chair and enjoyed it. He never hit the rich kids but some poor ones were up every lesson. The priest had a huge dog and they said that the dog keeps the beggars away. I was scared of that dog as well.

Once someone said that I destroyed a bird nest but it wasn't true. The priest pulled the short hair on the side of my head. He dropped the chunks of hair on the floor and kept pulling. My head swayed from left to right and I could only see the lines in front of me. I didn't dare tell my parents about the priest but my father noticed a bold patch on my head and I had to tell him. He went to the priest and told him: If you ever touch my son again I will smash your face and your house. The priest never hit me after that.

Dad became an alcoholic; he was drunk one night in 1940 coming home from work. He passed the hall where Sokol sports club had a social. He called out: heil communism. Everything became quiet. In the forest a few boys caught up with him and wanted to fight him. He turned around and put his hand into the pocket. Come, boys, come here, he invited them with the other hand. He has a pistol, someone said. They quickly moved back.

I don't know if Dad was boasting or if the story was true but a couple of weeks later the police arrested him. Dad told them that he made a mistake. Instead of saying heil Sokol he said heil communism.

We just settled into our home when Germans invaded Slovenia in 1941 and began transporting Slovenians. Priests, teachers and communists were the first to go. They inspected every student, they measured our faces and wrote down the colour of our eyes. We were told that fair-haired, blue eyed people were allowed to stay. It also helped if your name sounded German.

My father was taken first. After a few weeks the rest of the family were told to pack what we could carry to join Dad in Serbia. Serbs were very kind to us, the shopkeepers and other rich people paid for our keep. They gave us an old mud house with one big room and a little kitchen. We put straw on the floor and slept one next to the other, five children and our parents. Mum and some other women cooked for the new settlers in the school building. We came with tin cans to get the vegetable soup and corn porridge.

Partisans in Serbia made isolated attacks on Germans. If partisans killed one German soldier Germans killed one hundred Serb civilians. For one killed German officer they killed thousand local civilians. Serbs were terrified. They organised the night guard to patrol the railway. Every grown up had to do his duty to protect the railway for Germans.

The rich town's people paid dad to do the guard duty for them. Dad had no other income so he accepted. The job was very dangerous. If the partisans destroyed the rail Germans shot all the guards.

Dad worked in the German mines before the war so he spoke German. In 1943 Italy capitulated and Italian soldiers became German POW. In Palanka were army barracks with about 600 German and 200 Italian soldiers. Italians looked after the barracks and horses. In the afternoon they were allowed to come to town.

Once an Italian soldier offered dad some bridles, reins and chains. They had that stuff in the barracks.

Farmers brought their produce to sell on the market once a week. Dad offered them the horse gear Italian soldier brought to him and the farmer gave dad ten litres of wine. Horse gear and chains were valuable commodities during the war. So was the wine. When Italian soldiers came again dad served them wine and asked for more belts and chains and reins and bridles. Italian soldiers brought a lot of horse gear so dad sold it for wine to the farmers. First farmers brought bottles of wine then small barrels then bigger barrels. Once they brought a barrel that wouldn't go through the front door so they had to cut a bigger opening into the mud house.

Dad became well known and popular. He bought and sold wine. He tested the wine by putting a strip of newspaper in the glass of wine and the wine soaked the paper and the water ran out on the outside. He told producers that they put too much water in their wine. In that way he had to pay less. I don't know if that really showed that water was added but the farmers believed him.

About fifty regulars used to drink outside our house most evenings. They sang and made funny songs about the war. I remember them singing that Slavs will conquer Rome and Berlin. They told jokes and laughed and drank. About twenty Italians, even more Slovenians and sometimes even a few Germans came.

Someone must have told Germans about dad doing trade with horse gear and they came to search the house. They had an interpreter and he looked through the straw on the floor. This Serb interpreter saw the chains but quickly covered them up again. Maybe that's why dad always liked Serbs.

Dad was well informed about the politics and the war so men came to hear the news as well as to drink.

Dad bought tobacco in big packets and made smaller packets to sell to people who came to drink at our place. He sent me to get the big packets of tobacco from farmers. I also bought some for myself and sold it. I made quite a bit of money like that. When I had quite a good amount saved my father took my money to buy wine.

In Serbia people raced pigeons. One breed of pigeons raced in circles and people counted how many circles they made before they came down. Other sort flew high and did up to ten summersaults going down. At an arranged time on the Sunday morning the owners of the pigeons released their groups of up to five pigeons from their homes. Some stayed up in the air for up to 8 hours. The owners and the players placed bets on whose pigeons will stay longer in the air and make more summersaults. Some were caught and killed

by peregrine falcons. I let my pigeons circle up and when they came close to the ground I whistled to them to make them go up again.

I bought a pair of pigeons of really good breed. I mated them and they had young every two months. Once I sold a pair of young pigeons for two piglets. That was a lot. Usually I sold them for corn and wheat. One of the pigeons always came to sit on my head. Russians liked to give this pigeon wine to make it drunk.

A year before we returned home from Serbia I had about a dozen pairs of pigeons but someone came and stole them. The thief closed my pigeons at his place so they would not return to me. When they had young he let them out knowing that they will return to look after the babies. When I found the thief I told dad and he told the thief that he will report him to German police. The thief was scared of my father and he brought the pigeons and the money the pigeons earned for him.

Before I left Serbia I sold all but three pairs of pigeons. The three pairs I took with me to Slovenia, were later killed by peregrine falcons.

When we returned to Slovenia in 1945 I was sixteen. I was looking for an apprenticeship but there was nothing available. I found a job in the textile factory. I had to tie the ropes that ran around the pulleys under the machine. It was a very dirty, hard job. I had to be on my knees most of the time and my hands were blistered from pulling the ropes.

After about a year I got a place as an apprentice electrician with an Italian Slovenian who worked in the factory. He did not speak much Slovenian but he was a good teacher. I worked as an electrician for about a year before I enrolled in a college that would qualify me to become an independent contractor. About seventy of us started a two-year course but only twenty finished it. It was pretty hard. In the morning I went to school and in the afternoon I went to work. In 1952 I finished school and started to work until they called me into the army. I was in the army in Serbia from 1952 until 1954. When I returned from the army I started working as the manager of a government electrical company for about three years.

At the age of twenty-eight in 1957 I moved to Ljubljana and opened my own business. I employed other electricians and apprentices and we worked long hours. I never took a day off for the first two years. I bought a car. This was unforgivable while Shire officials were still on their bikes. I also bought a television which in those days meant that I was doing well.

The Shire council invited me to join the government owned co-op but I refused. They had to teach me a lesson. They arrested me in July 1962 to investigate how I made my income. An investigator escorted me to my customers to check my work and the bills they paid. He found nothing wrong and in desperation he told me: Please understand that I have to find something. He seemed a kindly old man and I began to understand that in communism it wasn't right for a private business to be more successful than the government sector. I felt that he was warning me that no matter what I did, they will have to destroy my business. After a month of investigation they could not find any impropriety so they told me that they had a right to hold me for nine months. If I wanted to pay bail they would investigate further while I was out. They wanted one million dinars bail. I told them that all my money

was tied in the business. They suggested I put in my car as a security and I did.

I came out of jail and began preparing for my escape. Marko was eighteen months old. We asked relations to look after him but we did not dare tell anyone that we were going to escape. We believed that it will be easy to claim Marko through the Red Cross once we were settled. If we could not get him through Red Cross we left money for the man who would smuggle him to Austria.

Cilka and I climbed over the mountain Olsava to Austria on the 13th of October of 62. As we came to Austria we met Francek and Paula, an Austrian Slovenian couple. We were scared that they would call the border police but instead they washed our clothes, gave us a bath , good food and a warm bed. We stopped there for a couple of weeks. Francek and Paula became our lifelong friends.

We hitch hiked to Salzburg. An American motor bike racer gave us a lift and said that he will wait for us on the German side of the border but we told him not to worry about it. We bypassed the border at midnight and Cilka fell into a creek. It was freezing and all her clothes were wet. In Germany we had to cross the bridge. I fell and tore my clothes and hurt my knee. We noticed a hay shack but it had no hay inside. We couldn't go to sleep because it was too cold. We went on the road again to hitch hike. The first car was a police car and it took us back to Austria. In Salzburg they questioned and photographed us before they put us into the jail.

After four days we were transported to Vienna refugee camp. Early every Monday and Thursday the man came into the dormitory and called out names of people that were returned to Yugoslavia. We were terrified as we listened for our name to come up.

The authorities informed us that we will have to get our son Marko before they would let us emigrate. My brother came from Germany and promised that he would contact the man who was to bring Marko. He took the money to pay the man but then he changed his mind and tried to do it himself. He was young and reckless and the border police caught him and put him in jail. The police also took Marko and kept him. Cilka's mum collected Marko after three weeks on the condition that she will not let him go with anybody.

In March 1963 I found a salesman in Graz who often travelled to Slovenia. Cilka wrote to her parents that we were returned to Slovenia and will come to collect Marko. The salesman posted the letter in Ljubljana and a few days later he collected Marko. He went to the doctor to prescribe sleeping pills and gave them to Marko. He took springs out of the back seat of his car and placed Marko inside the seat to take him over the border. We were waiting in Graz all night. Towards the morning we heard Marko's voice on the steps. It was the most exciting and happy time of our lives.

I worked in Vienna for two more months and on the 13th May 63 we boarded the plane for Sydney.

My first job in Australia was sugar cane cutting in Queensland. Later I worked in the Jindabyne-Island Bend Tunnel as part of the Snowy Mountains project.

From Jindabyne we moved to Canberra where I worked as an electrical contractor until we moved to Lightning Ridge in 1968. I became an opal miner.