

Vlado

I came from Slovenia to Australia as a teenager in 1956.

My father had a workshop making furniture. He employed 38 men. During the WWII he joined communist resistance force. After the war communists nationalised his workshop so he turned anticommunist. Mum was always very religious but dad turned to Catholic Church because he was disappointed with communism. My younger brother became a priest.

I left school so I could help dad in the workshop. He trained me to become a carpenter but I never passed any exams. Dad was very strict. When I was nineteen in 1956 I made a mistake and cut a door a bit short. Dad hit me with a plank. I told him that he hit me for the last time. My cousin worked in Austria. I went with her to her home near the Austrian border. From her home we could see the border guards playing soccer and so crossed to Austria unnoticed. We went to my uncle in Graz. He told me to go back home. My cousin and I hitch hiked to Salzburg. She went to work there and I reported to the authorities. They interrogated me and then put me into the refuge camp. Austrian farmers and builders came to the camp to look for workers and I went to work in the quarry. The owner of the quarry did not have any children and he wanted to adopt me. I decided to stay in Salzburg. At the time I met a friend who wanted me to go with him to Canada. I registered to go to Canada but I needed a guarantee of a job there. It was easier to get to Australia or Africa. We had to sign up for two years work in Australia because they sponsored us and paid our trip. We boarded the ship Toscana just before Christmas 56. It was full of European migrants. Many Hungarians fled the revolution; there were also Italians and Greeks and Jugoslavs.

We came to Melbourne and from there to Bonegilla migrant camp. Most Europeans did not like Australian food in the camp but I was not worried about the food because I found a girlfriend there.

After a fortnight I was sent to Melbourne Broadmeadow camp and worked there for 7 months. That was very unhappy time for me. The pay wasn't good and the camp life was lonely. I wanted to go back home. I cried for home. I was desperately homesick. My friend and I worked together and shared a room. We went to the authorities and told them that we wanted to go home. They told us that we must first repay the money for our trip to Australia. We had no money so we had to stay. They gave us a job in a factory making plywood. We worked a lot of overtime and earned much more money.

My friend was very clever and he later became a boss of this same factory employing 1500 women in Homebush. He drank a lot and had much trouble with women. He would get into fights and trouble with the police.

I met Toni who told us that one can earn better money in Sydney where they were building Waramanga dam. We worked there for 16 months. We cleared trees and burned them; these were beautiful thick perfect old trees but we just blasted and burned them.

There was a group of Polish political migrants who were in a position to find good employment for people. They recruited boys for work on Snowy Mountains Scheme. I went to work on Tumut 2 tunnel close to Cabramurra for 16 months.

As I came back to Sydney I met many Poles. Catholic Polish priests had a 40 room hostel next to the church. They offered free accommodation to Polish migrants who had nowhere else to live. There was a wonderful Polish kitchen underneath and a billiard room. We also had dances on special occasions.

I met Maria who came with her boyfriend. When her boyfriend went to work in Adelaide I found a room in the same building. Maria and I fell in love and moved in together.

I met Steve while I worked for Snowy Mountains Scheme. He went to Andamooka and brought some colourful rocks and said that they were worth thousands of pounds. That's how I was introduced to opal. My German friend Ray told me that I don't need to go to Andamooka because there was opal also in Lightning Ridge. We had no transport so we put together 56 pounds and bought an old car. Ray drove but he took the wrong turn and we ended in Nyngan. It was raining, the road was muddy and he hit a tree. I had bad cuts to my face and I lost 3 teeth. A farmer came along and took us to Coonamble. The car was not worth repairing so we left it there and took a taxi to Lightning Ridge.

We believed that Lightning Ridge was a town but there was nothing. The only shop and the only hotel were shut because it was Sunday and we could not buy anything. Harold Hodges took us in to camp at his tram motel. Ray found his friend and stayed with him but I stayed with Harold. Fred Reece used to come to do jobs for Herald and he said that he will show me where to find opal. I started mining in New town biscuit bend about four feet deep. I found some small stones and showed them around in the pub. Harold offered me eighty quit for them. Billy Francis said that it was a good price.

I returned to Sydney to fix my taxes. I met Joe and Ricky and John whom I knew from working on the Snowy Mountains scheme. Joe had a car so we all went to Lightning Ridge. In the pub there Herby Brown told us about Cocrain opal field where he found good traces. Ivan who was with me on a ship coming to Australia came in with Jim the opal buyer.

Joe, Ricky, John and I registered a claim each and began working as a sort of partnership. Joe did not want to pull the dirt out and he was ordering us around. He knew that we depended on him for transport because he had a car so he felt that he can boss us around. We worked like that for 14 days. John and I pulled the dirt out for each other on the hand windlass. There was a shallow level and we moved fast to make a connection and get some air. In the meantime Joe and Ricky moved with Mick Bower who found good opal.

I left the nobbies we found on the side of the row for a week. One day Less brought us some tobacco and as I rolled a cigarette he hit one large nobby we

had in a bucket with a pick. It showed beautiful red on black; over 100 carats of red in rough. We had that nobby in the bucket for a week but we didn't bother to snip it. The nobbies were scattered all around us. I showed a snipped piece of that nobby to the buyer and he gave me 250 quit for it. We then collected a bucket of nobbies and left it with the cutter. After he cut the stones he told me that in the future I should always stay with the cutter while he is cutting my stones. He priced the red stone at 3000 quit but said that I should ask for 5000. Three buyers came from Sydney especially for that 83 carat stone and we sold it for 3800 quit. The buyer said that we either take a house in Sydney or the money.

I went to Sydney and took two teenage girls with me because they had relations in Sydney. My girlfriend Maria heard about the girls so she left me. She was pregnant with my baby but she had an abortion. She returned to her boyfriend in Adelaide, They got married but she could have no more children. Eventually she divorced her husband. They spent all their savings on their bitter divorce. I haven't seen Maria now for 45 years. She rang me about ten years ago and would like to come back to me; I have also been divorced from my wife. Since then we talk regularly on the phone but I don't want her back. I want to remember her as she was forty five years ago when we were so young and so in love.

While in Sydney I bought a Buick convertible and enjoyed myself with my friends. Andrew and Joe, my friends from Sydney, came to Lightning Ridge for Christmas 67 when the sugar cane cutting season finished. At the time Ivan came from Andamooka and said: What are you doing here? I get 1000 quit per day in Andamooka.

John and I went to Andamooka and stayed there for 9 months. I spent the money I made in Lightning Ridge and made nothing in Andamooka. We went to Cobber Peddy. The roof of the mine collapsed on me there and I was unconscious for three days. They sent me into a home for disabled in Willaura for nine months because I was paralysed. Very gradually some feelings returned to my legs and hands and I came back to Lightning Ridge on crutches. Less took me to his home and his mother looked after me. One day I went on my crutches to three mile field; I left the crutches on top and went down the shaft on a rope with a screwdriver and a candle. I came up with 1500 quit of opal.

Less worked with me. When Less got married his father in law joined us but he was thieving all the time. If he couldn't steal the stone he would smash it. I told him that Less will kill him.

A lot of people cheated me but I still always came up on top.

As I came back to Lightning Ridge I met Suzi a very beautiful Aboriginal girl. Our son was born and we got married. Suzi's grandfather was one of the first settlers in Walgett area. He came from Scotland with his brother and they bought the land near Walgett. He had a large Aboriginal family and provided for them well. They are a well respected family.

Suzy's mother did not like white settlers. Once I brought my children to her and while outside I heard her say: the little white dog is outside. I took the children and looked after them myself.

The whole Suzy's family is bit like that, bossy and up themselves. They are lighter in colour and have blue eyes so they feel a bit superior to others. I was helping all of them all my life but nobody ever said thank you. I gave them money but they put it through poker machines and wanted more. They never learned to say thank you or sorry. They don't like white people but they all take and steal from them.

Suzy's father once buried the money I gave him but his son dug it out and put it through the poker machines. Suzy's mother was jealous if I made money and did not share with them.

I always looked after Suzy's relations; they still want me to share with them everything I have but they don't know how to manage money. They say that in their culture they share but they really only want to share what I made and not what they have. They stick together like Muslims against outsiders. I am an old man now but kids and relations are still looking to me for help.

Suzy left me but I still like to help her. She would like to come back but there is no way back for me. I still love her because she gave me three lovely children and we had a good marriage but I don't want her back.

I lived with Aborigines all my life. I like them but I never became one of them. They made me feel like an outsider.

I am happy that I have three lovely children and eight wonderful grandchildren to leave them everything I own.

Despite her family Suzy and I had good times together. We went dancing and socialising. Suzy sometimes came with me to check the tailings but she never came down the shaft to mine with me. Suzy took care of all the bills and administration. Our son Steve took over from her when she left. We are divorced now and she lives in Queensland. Maybe I should have gone with her but I like Lightning Ridge and I made money and friends here. I still have mining claims which I do not want to leave behind.

Our marriage has really fallen apart when Suzy's sister took Suzy to Sydney and introduced her to the cult Spiritual Australia. Suzy was going to 'church' for two years before I found out that this church had nothing to do with god or religion. It had to do only with money and sex. There are no prayers or religious ceremony.

A friend once said to me: If you don't want to pay taxes just get a few people together and organise a religion and you are free to collect tax-free money from them.

The groups of this cult meet all over Gold Coast. I told the police about their trickery but the police said that they know all about them but can't do anything because they are not breaking any laws. People join of their free will.

I attended one of the sessions with about fifty people. I told them that I am from Lightning Ridge and they told me that they have another lady from the Ridge in the group. That was my Suzy. They turned off all lights and made two circles. The outside circle pushed the inside circle towards the middle in the dark. The candle was lit and we were told to bring the money on the plate. I also attended one of the meditation meetings. They hypnotised me in the dark room. A man was holding my hand and the woman was massaging my head. I woke up tired and wet from sweat. I was confused, dizzy and changed. For a long time after I had weird dreams about this same naked woman standing over me. After this meditation we were to choose our partners. A woman came to me. I told her that I am married but she told me that it does not matter and I can stay with her. They try to destroy marriages. Suzy told me about her experiences through the meditation. She said: I flew out of my body and into the beautiful paradise. I can still see it and smell the flowers. I have to put the deposit on that paradise or somebody else will take it.

The cult leaders knew that Suzy has a lot of money and they brainwashed her to give the money to them.

I told my children what their mother was doing and they said that I was crazy. We went together to visit Suzy. After dinner she told us that she is going to church. I told the children to go with her but they did not want to go. I wanted them to see for themselves what it is all about. They asked Suzy but she laughed saying: Vince has weird dreams.

Suzy was drinking more since we parted. The flagons made her go off. Our son said that mum is going mental. One day she trashed the house and had a fight with a neighbour over a high fence. Police took her to the mental hospital. She told the psychiatrist that her house was bugged and that people were spying on her. The doctor told her that she has nothing to hide and that nobody wanted to know anything about her. I told Suzy to tell the doctor about the cult and about those criminals that brainwashed her through hypnosis. People became depressed and suicidal after the meditation hypnosis. I found out by myself how they make you crazy. I signed the form saying that Suzy's family will be responsible for her wellbeing and they let her go.

Suzy found out that I went to the police and she blamed me for putting her into the hospital so I could sign her out to go with her family. She came with us and stayed with our daughter for awhile but the pull of the cult was stronger than her family. She left suddenly and joined them again.

Our children told their mother that she has to choose between them and the cult so she left the cult but our children were not strong enough to stand up to the cult and up to their mum. Our daughter Melanie was very upset but she could not stop her mum. Suzy told her: Poor Vince is dreaming.

I just spoke to Suzi's younger brother Jeff; he is about fifty and with all his education he does not seem to be getting anywhere. He is bludging for money all the time. He puts it through the poker machines. I can't understand how young people who are so smart and educated can't make a go of things. They are scared or something. My sons came with me to sell opal in America but they were reluctant to approach people. I think the new generation will never do as well as we migrants did.

Old people used to say that one generation builds the next one destroys and the next one begs. Maybe necessity really is a mother of invention.

We miners invented all the machinery we needed. We built camps out of nothing. We had no one to turn to, no relations, no connections, no education, no school friends no social security. We had to survive on our own and that made us strong.

Young ones don't look for opportunities, they just don't have a go. I don't know if they are plain lazy or just have no ambition. I keep on looking and asking. People can only say no or go away or leave me alone but there is always a chance that once in a while one will say yes and there comes your chance. The young ones just don't use common sense; they have no ideas or initiative.

Kids these days don't think about the rainy day or old age. They live comfortably because they know that the government will provide or that they will inherit from their parents. They enjoy their comfort. We wanted them to be comfortable. I suppose we robbed them of the incentive; we took away the challenge.

Kids have every opportunity while we had to make our own luck. We lived on challenge. Our life improved every day. We were on perpetual high from the day we were born. How can our children compete with that? We became addicted to success. Now it is hard for us to slow down and see it all wasted by our children and grandchildren.

We conquered all the mountains. We dreamed of the time when we will sit on top, enjoy the view, smell the roses and drink champagne. We sit on top of the mountain now and wonder if it was all worth it. Maybe we should have left some hills for our grandchildren. Climbing the mountain was more exciting than comfort and luxury. We were scratching for survival. We are still scratching.

Australian migrants had to be twice as good as those born here because we had an accent. We had to pay for acceptance. We paid and felt stronger. We had an incentive. I suppose we got hooked on getting rich. With nobody to rely on and nobody to interfere we became self reliant.

My son said that failing uni turned to be his best experience. He had to find a job and a place to live. He was thrown in at the deep end as they say here. Everything you do becomes everything you are. He eventually finished uni while he worked.

Maybe we should not blame the kids for being relaxed. We made it possible for them to be comfortable. Still I wish they had more of a go. You never know how strong you are until you test your strength. Every time you fail at something you learn something. You learn to cope. We ran an obstacle race but we jumped higher every time. You learn what you need to know. You

learn that it is easier to swim downstream, go with the wind, take risks and learn by mistakes. We are the war babies who really had to learn to use our wits.

My father used to say: Everybody is your competitor. I was just a boy then and did not understand what that meant.

I remember other lessons from home.

The world is not against you; everybody runs for himself. Look for the shortcuts. Plan strategies. Build reputation, bank on it. Don't lose your cool. Seek free advice; acknowledge other people's input, use expert information; weigh pros and cons, make notes, place yourself in diverse scenarios. Don't cross bridges before you see them. Don't burn your bridges. Be kind to yourself. Forgive yourself for making mistakes.

These lessons helped me when I had nobody else to guide me. I learned the strategies to manage life.

I asked my friend the other day:

How are you?

Like a dog without a chain, he said. Lucky you, I said.

Not really.

How is that?

A dog on the chain is fed and loved.

But you are free.

I can't eat freedom, he said. My friend never married, he has no responsibilities but he is not happy. As they say: You can't have your cake and eat it.