

Australian Slovenians

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Cilka Zagar as the writer/editor of this book is not responsible for the opinions expressed by the story tellers.

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Cilka Zagar

About The Story Tellers

Thirty five story tellers in this book describe events from their individual perspectives but each story adds to the mosaic that became a picture of who we are as Slovenian minority in Australia. The stories represent a cross section of Australian Slovenians from labourers, miners, builders, carers, teachers, business people, artists, and writers.

Most story-tellers were marked by the events of WWII. Our childhood experiences define us. Most of us have also been subjects of post war communist indoctrination. We have a saying; "What little Johnny learns big John believes."

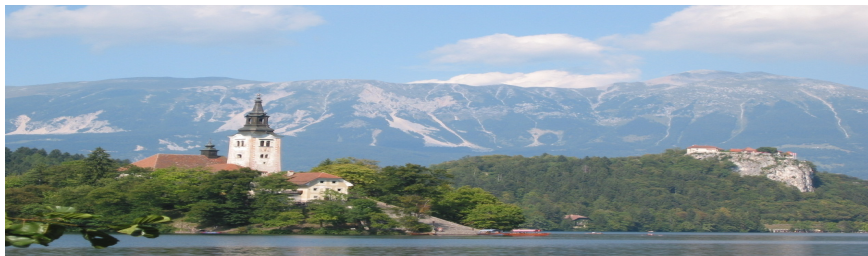
On our arrival to Australia in our twenties and thirties we were pushed to the bottom rung of Australian society so we had to walk and talk fast to get ourselves to the top of the ladder. We had sibling rivalries, peer competitions and leadership battles as we fought for the recognition of our talents and skills. The relentless competitiveness sometimes made us obsessed with achievement and wealth; we wanted to impress the people that did not like us enough; we also wanted to prove that we were better than those we didn't like. Sometimes we did more, to prove what we were capable of, than we did to satisfy our own needs.

Our leaders often polarised us with constant lobbying for their noble causes but most of us were satisfied with simple comforts and good company. Being neutral though was often a lonely existence. Despite our differences we searched for each other so we could remember together growing up in our homeland Slovenia.

The story tellers may not agree with each other but by reading these stories we may understand each other better. I certainly better understand how our diverse attitudes and views were formed. Sometimes we focused on each other's flaws so much that we did not see how really wonderful we all are. After listening to their tales I liked the story tellers better. I hope you will too. Knowing one better really means liking one better.

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead, who never to himself has said: This is my own, my native land! Whose heart has never within him burned as home his footsteps he hath turned from wandering on a foreign strand.

Sir Walter Scott



Slovenia

Slovenia with the capital Ljubljana is half the size of Tasmania and has a population of two million; it borders on Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia. Slovenian territory decreased in size through the centuries from 70 000 square kilometres to 20 000. Slovenia lies on the border of the East and West so after both world wars the Western countries chopped and annexed portions of Slovenia in order to push the communists further towards the East. Many Slovenians now live in the neighbouring countries as ethnic minorities

The highest mountain, Triglav (2863m), is a part of the Julian Alps. Many rivers flow from the mountains down through the forests into the fertile valleys. The Slovenian Adriatic coast has a mild Mediterranean climate and wonderful beaches for holidaymakers. Tourism is a major source of income.

Slovenia is one of the oldest yet one of the youngest countries in Europe. The original Central European settlers, Veneti or Wendi, were the ancestors of Slovenians.

Carantania was Slovenian first independent state in the eighth century. Later Slovenian territory became a part of Germanic political formations.

In 1918, Austrian-Hungarian Empire disintegrated, and Slovenia became a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians which was renamed Yugoslavia in 1929.

Slovenians were governed by foreign powers through centuries but they never surrendered their dream of independence which became realised in 1991; Slovenia joined the EU in 2004 and accepted the Euro currency from 1 January 2007.

Slovenians are predominantly Roman Catholics. Education is considered very important and illiteracy is almost unknown. They write in Latin script and have one of the highest rates per capita of book sales. The Brižinski records written in Slovenian are Europe's oldest functional document in a still living language.

Slovenians can be found on every continent. It has been reported that about one quarter of Slovenians live outside Slovenian borders. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, most Slovenians immigrated to Americas. After WWII, many fled from the Communist regime and some started a new life in Australia, where about 30,000 Slovenians live in 2007.

Australian politician Al Grassby said about Slovenia in 1985:

Slovenians over 1000 years of history were able to distinguish between language, culture and heritage and common citizenship. Like the majestic Triglav Mountain Slovenian people have seen

many empires come and go from Rome, Austria, Hungary and Third Reich but they preserved their heritage which shines as brightly today as the moon reflected in what I regard as a pearl of Europe, Bled.

Cilka Zagar

Cilka Zagar's Historical Perspective

Slovenians have always been the pawns in the struggle for domination by superpowers. Our own struggle was of little consequence. For centuries we were forced into submission and perhaps in the process we, as a people, lost some self-confidence.

Slovenian historian Bucar recently said: 'Slovenians have created their own history but it is other peoples who wrote about it; those for whom the very existence of Slovenia and Slovenians was an impediment to achievement of their imperial aims.'

Although Slovenia was always coveted by its neighbours; the rest of the world barely knows that we exist; let alone care about our fate.

Slovenians resisted Germanic oppression for centuries but that was also the time of perhaps unwilling but natural, mutual assimilation of Slovenian and Germanic cultures.

After WWI Slovenian leaders, happy to get rid of Germanic yoke, decided to join in the kingdom of Slovenians, Serbs and Croats; which was later renamed Yugoslavia.

Many Slovenians regretted this decision; many felt that Yugoslavs dominated and oppressed Slovenians even more than Austrians did. The Germanic system felt more familiar to them than Yugoslav; it also seemed more progressive; older people talked about good old times under Franc Joseph and Maria Theresa.

It is interesting that even most Slovenians from Primorska region, who always rebelled against Italian oppression, were disappointed when they became a part of communist Yugoslavia.

Southern Yugoslav nations spent centuries under Turks and they also assimilated their culture with Turks. The only tie between Slovenians and other Yugoslavs was Slavic origin.

After the WWI people told horror stories of Russian revolution. They heard of murders and starvation; the church also warned against Godless communism.

Hitler was reported as saying: The efficiency of the truly national leader consists primarily in preventing the division of the attention of the people and always concentrating it on the common enemy.

Slovenians like many other small nations had no leader that would unite them.

I am convinced that all Slovenians wished only the best for Slovenia. Although all Slovenians resisted the invader, they allowed themselves to be fractured by foreign political, ideological, economic and regional interests. Their common enemy also succeeded in creating mutual hatred among these groups of Slovenians.

The principal goal of the legitimate Slovenian government was to survive the war. They considered it suicidal for a nation of one million people to openly oppose the mighty invaders.

The aim of communists was a revolutionary takeover; Stalin wanted to dominate the world as much as Hitler. Some Slovenians were terrorised into compliance by Hitler and some by Stalin although the wellbeing of Slovenians meant nothing to either dictator.

Slovenian communists instructed by the Soviets used the chaotic war situation for the communist revolution. They ordered that the only legitimate resistance group was under their leadership.

Communist leader Edvard Kardelj issued a public manifesto threatening to liquidate all who resisted the communist party leadership.

Communists killed thousands of prominent Slovenian civilians who were suspected of opposing communist leadership. The murders created the feeling of fear and insecurity. That was the reason

some Slovenians later turned to Italian and German authorities for protection. They were in charge and there was nobody else to maintain law and order at the time.

At the end of the war Stalin bargained with Churchill for the spoils of the war; Slovenia and Slovenians being on the border between communism and capitalism, became the bargaining chips.

Yugoslav historians compared Slovenian Home guards with quislings in western European countries but no western nation faced two evils: communist bloody revolution and Nazism-fascism.

Yugoslav communists knew that only a small minority of Slovenians would support them in any democratic elections after the war; their only option was terror and dictatorship. By killing the opposition they scared the rest of the nation into compliance. So far nobody was punished for these crimes, nobody was even accused of them, nobody admitted them, nobody regretted them, nobody apologised for them. The wounds of the nation still fester to this day. One survivor of the massacre at the Kocevski Rog mass graveyard told me how in the last dying hours Home guards prayed for themselves and for those who knew not what they were doing.

Communists convinced the new generation of Slovenians that unity and brotherhood with other Yugoslav nations was essential. Unity made it easier for the regime to rule. As the most progressive republic, Slovenia had to contribute heavily for the development of southern Yugoslav republics.

One Slovenian historian recently wrote that Slovenians would no longer exist if Hitler won the war.

People live and die; friends become enemies and enemies become friends; systems change, beliefs evolve. Slovenians follow the changing winds of international politics and try to find the best way to survive and prosper. Stalin and Hitler were only men with a given number of years. Since their death we have been friends and enemies with Russians and with Germans. We no longer blame Germany for producing Hitler or Russia for producing Stalin. After the communist revolution Slovenia followed Russia in nationalisation of private property to please Stalin. Now they are privatising state property because they want to be acceptable to the West.

Looking back it is easier to see right and wrong; who we should have obeyed and what we should have done and believed; however, when life and death decisions had to be made Slovenians had no hindsight; their leaders had to decide between good and evil according to their consciences. What can one choose when given a choice between two evils? When one is placed between a rock and a hard place? What should Slovenian leaders have decided during WWII when the pressures of the East and the West were upon them? Should they have gone with Godless Bolshevism or with barbaric Nazism? Should they have tried to save the nation or sacrifice it in the fight against evil? They had to decide which evil was the greater; what was possible, practical and convenient at that moment. Sometimes in saving lives they may have sacrificed principles.

With the hindsight how would I decide?

Paradise lost

According to the Bible God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge but the serpent told them that eating this forbidden fruit would make them be like God. Adam and Eve ate the fruit and their eyes opened; they knew good and evil. God banished them and their descendants to the life outside the paradise. Ever since their descendants longed for the paradise lost.

Most migrants rebelled and reached for the forbidden and unattainable; now we are torn between what we left behind and what is in front of us; we long for home, for the paradise we escaped from.

Does the serpent live in every paradise? Is life only a desire to be like God? Do we all want to be God? Does a desire to create keep us alive?

Thomas Aquinas once said: There is no everlasting happiness on Earth; we long for the desired and then fear losing it.

I sometimes wonder what God's intentions and requirements really are for the paradise we call Slovenia. I believe however that it is essential for the success of Slovenian nation that we think well about ourselves and about each other. We have to look to a brilliant future and learn from the mistakes of the past.

Cilka Zagar

Half to forget the wonderings and pain,



*Half to remember the days that have gone by,
And dream and dream that I am home again.
Flecker*

Slovenians in Australia

It has been reported that the great post WWII migration scheme brought 3.5 million migrants to Australia and this gave Australia a whole new look with 140 nationalities, 90 languages and 80 religions. Although Slovenians were always keenly conscious of their Slovenian identity they were not well known in Australia because they were hidden under the labels: Austrian, Italian and mostly Yugoslav until Slovenia became independent in 1991.

During the 1970s the policy of multicultural provided for all Australians to have a voice and many migrants were encouraged to speak up. Slovenians began to publish their writings and speak on ethnic radios. We appreciated the freedom of expression.

Few non English speaking migrants came to Australia before the 1940s. After WWII Europeans became restless; many became displaced; many wanted to get away from destruction, poverty, broken relationships, family pressures, and political oppression. We wanted to be somewhere else, doing something else perhaps even with someone else. Most of us knew someone in America or someone receiving parcels from America. Most began searching for America which to this day remains the symbol of freedom, fairness, prosperity and justice. People sometimes complain that America is corrupt but the poor and oppressed from all over the world still dream of living in America.

Little did we know that we will help create a new America in a little known Australia. As a younger sister to America, Australia eventually became a home to young ambitious visionaries from every country in the world. Most were rejected at home but many became the corner stones of this new America.

In the communist countries we learned that in the 'rotten' west they use and abuse workers but despite this the West remained a beacon on the hill and people risked lives to escape communist oppression.

Most Slovenian political refugees during the 1940s moved to South America; during the 1950s and 60s many registered to migrate to Canada or America because these countries were better known and closer to home; but it became easier to go to Australia.

After the war Australia with six million people had to populate or perish. Australian economy rode on the sheep's back; they exportated wool and meat. Young skilled workers were needed to develop Australian resources.

Slovenians were among the first non English speaking migrants welcomed to Australia. Australian government subsidised the travel for most of us because Australia needed us.

Many migrants born during twenties and thirties had their education and training disrupted during WWII. Some Slovenians had to change their language to German or Italian during WWII. Necessity really became their mother of invention; it became their motivation and education. They learned how to succeed; they improvised and picked up knowledge as they progressed. Most started as labourers on the farms or in the factories but many of them became successful business people. When the Snowy Mountains scheme began many Slovenians spent some years doing the dangerous and hard work tunnelling underground but they earned good money and they saved and invested in their homes and businesses.

Some Slovenians never became fluent in English, some were never fluent in Slovenian but we sharpened our wits, developed our particular skills and improved our education. We needed to redefine ourselves by our work, be it in building, mining, writing, art or politics.

Most of us felt indebted to our home country for bringing us up and educating us; we paid this back in a small way by sending money to our families at home and by supporting Slovenian charities.

Australians were bewildered by the influx of people they did not understand; they tried to 'civilise' us so we would be more like them. At the beginning the teachers even advised migrants to forget their customs and to speak English for the sake of their children. New Australians would do anything for the sake of their children. They came to Australia to give their children a better future. Some Slovenians struggled and spoke English at home but most insisted that their children speak Slovenian with them. They believed that their children would benefit from being bilingual. Children quickly learned English and became interpreters, negotiators, representatives and agents to their parents.

Assimilation is a natural process in a melting pot of cultures but Australians wanted to speed the process through the assimilation policy; they felt that the nation would function more smoothly if people spoke the same language, worshipped and celebrated in a common Australian tradition. We were all part of the process that kept on removing disadvantage, prejudice and discrimination with the aim of creating a fair harmonious multicultural Australia.

Australian ethnic mix became slightly fractured by the influx of every new nationality, race or religion. Australians became uncertain and fearful because they did not know what to expect from the new coming strangers; however, as soon as migrants accepted general Australian values and learned a bit of English there was little prejudice and discrimination. Gradually Australians even accepted many of our customs, our food and fashions.

Slovenians quickly proved ourselves as trustworthy, hard-working and capable; Australians readily accepted us as workers and friends. Most of us did not like being called Yugoslavs because most hated being called Yugoslavs at home.

Yugoslav embassy considered us dissidents; they intimidated us if we wanted to visit Slovenia. Some Slovenians obeyed and followed embassy's orders while many rebelled and demanded democratic freedoms. Some wanted to please both masters but predictably that pleased no one. Australians did not want to know that we are Slovenians either; Yugoslavia was our country of origin and we had to wear the label: Yugoslav. We successfully shed this label when Slovenia became independent; we were finally allowed to present ourselves with pride in our origins.

The independence movement against the common Yugoslav enemy united Australian Slovenians in 1991; for a moment we forgot well entrenched animosities and rivalries and carried our flag for the good of Slovenia.

Slovenians grew up with acute awareness that as members of a small nation in a precarious position we have to prove ourselves every step of the way. We could never afford to take anything for granted. We became self-reliant in life's obstacle race and we almost welcomed the chance to prove ourselves again in the obstacle race of becoming successful Australians. We provided well for our families, we learnt to make do with little, we are experts at earning and saving but spending often seems like undoing our achievements. As soon as we stopped to climb up we become scared that we would fall behind. We had needs, wishes and plans to fulfil and we did it. We wanted our children to have a better future; we secured a better future for them but now we often feel that we cheated them by overcoming the challenges; maybe we took the wind from under their wings. Our children have greater opportunities; they do not have to push the boundaries because we removed the obstacles of their race. Maybe the necessity really is the driving force. Maybe our children are less driven than we were. Maybe we are a little sad to see them bored. Did we unintentionally rob them of a challenge?

Non English migrants needed a place where they could feel at home and teach their children the language and traditions of their home country; where they could celebrate, socialise and exchange news. Ethnic clubs blossomed in every Australian city during the 1960s and 70s.

Members of ethnic clubs usually had little in common apart from speaking the same language but despite our differences we forged relationships that lasted a lifetime. We learned to choose from what was available. In Slovenian clubs we found people we could love, admire, adore, hate, despise, envy, annoy and spite. One can not feel this spectrum of emotions for a foreigner. We shared memories of places and people nobody else in Australia was even aware of. We enjoyed the same music and books and food.

Slovenians are really much like everybody else; they are more or less smart, more or less tolerant, more or less generous, more or less wealthy and educated; more or less brave. Our various characteristics are just more obvious because there are less of us; we socialise on the basis of our common nationality and not according to our interests or abilities. Despite our common characteristics, Slovenians are diverse, individualistic people.

The Catholic Church was always a great unifying force for Slovenians in Australia. Many found peace, hope, and refuge in troubled times through their Catholic faith. Within the Catholic Church we celebrated births and marriages and mourned our dead as part of a greater picture of life itself.

Although most of us worship the same God and follow the teachings of Jesus, our understanding of God's plan and his requirements differ as much as our recipes for our common national cuisine; our beliefs range from totally literary strictly devoted to very casual; even some who don't believe in God come to church to hear Slovenian mass and see Slovenian faces. This diversity has also provided a strong dynamic for our social life.

What people believe seems more important than any universal truth. Our beliefs are as unpredictable as are our ways of presenting them, so most feel that it is best to keep our relationship with the Almighty private. It is less offensive to rave about celebrities or sport or beer or houses or music or weather.

Most of the first generation Australian Slovenians remained church going Catholics who do not try to force their beliefs on each other. The few who joined other Christian groups like Jehovah witnesses, Seven day Adventists or Born again Christians, are more determined to bring the light of their beliefs into the lives of others.

The teachings of Jesus through whatever practice offered comfort, wisdom and spiritual wellbeing to most Slovenians. Like Mirko Cuderman explains: Families that pray together stay together.

Most Slovenians were brought up with conflicting ideologies; we followed Christian values at home while at school we were indoctrinated by communist ideals. In communist Yugoslavia it wasn't healthy or safe to discuss either politics or religion. Politics had to be left to politicians; we were not to meddle in something that was none of our business; ordinary citizens' duty was to follow the flag our leaders carried.

In Australia we are free to promote one or the other party; we exchange views without fear or favour; however it is not considered polite to talk about politics or religion at social gatherings simply because people believe differently. We know that Australian political parties favour different sections of population but they are united on important national issues.

It was easier for Slovenians who arrived in Australia as families because family members supported each other. Many young single men however, missed out on a Slovenian partner because few single Slovenian women came to Australia. These men either married foreigners or remained single; they had no one to remember their home and childhood with. Most eventually got used to their solitary existence. Some became disillusioned because they did not find what they were looking for; a few dulled their disenchantment with alcohol, some became grumpy, some even returned to Slovenia.

Although Slovenia became free and prosperous, returning to Slovenia is not an option for most of us because our children's home is in Australia and we want to provide new roots for them.

Most of our children married foreigners. They communicate in English with their partners and children but they practice Slovenian when communicating with their parents. This often causes resentment because their partners and children can not be a part of that communication. Our children often resented parents speaking Slovenian when their friends and partners were present. They also felt that we were somehow ignorant and inferior because we could not speak English well or spell the words we spoke. We told them that Australians were as foreign to us as we were to them; we told them that Slovenians are one of the world's most literate people but they took little notice at the time.

At home we learned the alphabet and joined the letters to read and write in the first year of school. Spelling was not even a subject. In Australia this was not all right. ALL RIGHT has five sounds and eight letters. You have to write mysterious letters you don't even hear.

Double o in blood does not sound the same as in floor or the moon or the book. Oo in mood sounds as ou in could and in wood would too. H is silent in honest but not in horrible. Dear customer does not mean the same as dear petrol or the deer in the forest.

The new rules defy logic but rules are rules. Some wondered if Australians invented these rules to confuse or punish us.

English settlers were bewildered and amazed how we, seemingly illiterate new Australians, prospered despite our apparent ignorance.

Eventually Australians realised that OVERSEAS does things differently. They eat garlic and kranski and pizza and salamis, dim Sims and spring rolls; they dance to foreign tunes, wear foreign fashions, ignore English rules of propriety; they hug and kiss and touch.

Eventually Australians extended their vocabulary to include pasta and pizza and Kranski and Vienna schnitzel, franks and hamburgers, spices and scents, Chinese meals, Vietnamese restaurants, and Lebanese bread.

In twenty first century the fact that migrants speak many languages is no longer a sign of shame or weakness. It no longer matters if one likes continental cuisine or Chinese meals. Being different is no longer a deterrent to success; continental even became a mark of distinction.

We had our confidence crushed on arrival to Australia. We became instantly illiterate and distinguishable only by the manual tasks we were assigned to do but we soon sharpened our ingenuity, resourcefulness, determination and intelligence to overcome our linguistic weaknesses. Despite being less able to demonstrate our skills and knowledge we remained determined to provide well for our families. We were good employees; many worked in building industry; some became excellent builders, some became miners, teachers, artists and politicians.

Gradually we re-established our personal and national identity. We know who we are and are proud of being as successful as we are in our national and individual endeavours. We gained acceptance and respect of the wider community. All Slovenians maintain their reputation as hard working, honest, fair and just people. We were also worthy ambassadors for Slovenia. We left a positive mark in every Australian city.

Being a member of a small country is a constant challenge; it made Slovenians even more determined to show personal merit in their achievements. They could not bank on historic or national achievements and trademarks, they were not connected to any powerful international organisation so they had to establish their personal reputations; often they had to prove themselves more capable than those who came recommended and had connections. Slovenians are not arrogant but glad to have the opportunity to demonstrate their intellect and strength.

Migrant children could not count on their relations smoothing their path in life; most never met a single relation until they went overseas. They too had to become self-reliant. They became public

servants and tradespeople and teachers, a few became politicians; some even became rich. Most of them, however, are just ordinary Australians.

Like most other ethnic minorities Slovenians travel long distances to visit each other. It is well known that visitors in a Slovenian home are offered food and drink. Most of the time they are offered a bed as well. And offered again. And again. Wherever Slovenians may live they urge visitors to partake of the best they have. We are proud of our homes, our hospitality and cuisine. Maybe our hospitality is the reminder that we were ourselves once hungry or homeless; perhaps we hope that what we do for the stranger we really do for Jesus himself.

Our homes stand out beautiful, well designed, clean and paid off in full. Most Slovenians grow some fruit and vegetables; almost everyone has a grape vine. Coming from the land we kept one finger in the soil; in our old age we returned to our traditional earthly roots so gardening provides a satisfying hobby for most.

Many Slovenians invested in a second home or bought shares in order to provide for their old age. Prudent, frugal and hard working we envisioned a better future in our retirement. Most were not aware that Australian government does not allow you to draw a pension if you can provide for yourself well enough. It seems a bit unfair that social security provides for those that do not provide for themselves but not for those that saved and invested. Very few Slovenians ever needed help from the government but most feel entitled to be a bit better off in their old age than those who never lifted a finger.

Slovenians at home are known as whingers but most of us find little to complain about in Australia. Most of us are enormously grateful for the opportunity to make a home in Australia; we appreciate the comfort and the freedom, the challenges and the fair go.

We learned and adopted the Australian saying: You can't have your cake and eat it. We like to return to Slovenia for holidays but our home is in Australia; we are a part of this young nation we helped to build. Most Slovenians in Australia developed and used their talents to the fullest and they became strong and confident Australians. Our children finally became proud of their heritage.

Like my friend Helene said: Australians are friendly and readily chat about the weather and about the place you came from but they quickly tire of people. Their instant friendship is not a lasting friendship. In Slovenia it takes longer before you can enter someone's home and life but when you have a friend you know that it is for keeps.

On a recent visit to Slovenia my son Marjan said to his father: I am so glad you insisted on me speaking Slovenian with you because now I can speak with all my relations; I can also understand bits of all Slavic languages.

Cilka Zagar

Ubi bene ibi patria

Joze Preseren

'Homeland is where it is good' I learned this Latin saying in high school but I did not understand it at the time. Did not Slovenian poet Zupancic try to convince us of the opposite: Homeland is one, given to everyone?

I trusted the Slovenian poet more so I stayed home in Slovenia. That does not mean that I do not like to travel to other countries.

During my high school and university years from 1955-70, quite a few of my acquaintances quietly disappeared from our small world Slovenia and we later learned that they went over the border. At the beginning they escaped illegally, later also with passports. I felt sad for everyone that left because their places at home were taken by others, especially by immigrants from other republics of former Yugoslavia.

I could not understand how one could leave his mother, father, sisters, brothers and friends to start somewhere else alone from nothing. Was it a desire to see the world or just a wish for a better life, or looking for something else? Was it a struggle for survival or an escape from ideological oppression?

I completed my studies and became a professor of Slavic languages but I did not seek employment in education. I liked journalism and research. By chance they offered me work at *Rodna gruda*, the monthly magazine for Slovenians abroad, which was published by SIM (Slovenska izseljenska Matica), at the time the only Slovenian organisation, authorised to have contacts with Slovenians outside our borders. I worked as an editor from 1965 to 2000. I always enjoyed my work and the decades passed too quickly.

SIM was a formal civil organization independent of the government although it could not exist without the financial help of the government. The members of SIM were returned emigrants, researchers of Slovenian migrations and cultural workers; among the members were also some diplomats and politicians.

We, the employees, received work programs and directions at the general meetings of SIM. The general directions for the program of work were very wide: foster contacts with Slovenian migrants and their families; encourage and stimulate the expressions of Slovenian culture and language in the new surroundings; encourage visits to Slovenia and inform about the events in Slovenia.

Politicians did not interfere with our work although we had to respect their restrictions. Co-operation was allowed only with migrants loyal to the political regime at home; this applied specially for the political migrants.

They told me that the magazine needed to be modernised and refreshed. Until then *Rodna Gruda* was mainly the voice of Slovenian emigrants who left before WWII; they expressed their homesickness and nostalgia in this monthly magazine.

My colleagues and I tried to bring the magazine closer to post WWII generation of migrants. We also made fresh initiatives: I was present when the idea of a modern summer school of Slovenian language was first established; I helped with the creation of a modern textbook Slovene by Direct Method; I helped to establish and became an editor of a modern magazine *Slovenia Quarterly* for the second generation of Slovenians abroad; we encouraged the establishment of Slovenian organizations wherever there was a larger group of Slovenians; we wrote about their lives and work and we published their stories.

Numerous ideas and plans kept me busy but I always had time to meet visitors who came home for holidays. They subscribed to our publications and many of them came to Slovenia to pay subscriptions in person, which gave me an opportunity to meet them and hear their story. I was

always happy to listen to these stories and visitors were glad to tell them. Migrants like to tell why they left their home; they also like to tell about their lives in their chosen country. I noticed that although most of these people did not have much formal education, they were nonetheless intelligent and knowledgeable. Rich life experiences gave them a wider view of the world.

One day a Slovenian from Alaska on an around the world trip came to my office with his Afro-American wife and said: It cost me 8000 dollars to come and pay my subscription.

During 1960s first brave groups of Australian Slovenians came for a visit. I welcomed quite a few of these chartered flights and so I met with them for the first time. After that SIM organised cultural group to perform for Slovenians in Australia. Slovenian Octet was among the first and their singing brought most Slovenians together in every Australian city. I heard that to one concert in Melbourne came 2000 enthusiastic Slovenians. Unfortunately I could not join these first groups but Rodna Gruda received many new subscribers after their tours.



Joze Preseren with Australian Slovenians holidaying in Slovenia: Marija, Jozica and Joze

I first came to Australia as a journalist with the group Ottavio Brajko in 1980. It was an exciting and interesting time for me and I met Slovenians in every Australian city.

In front of a Slovenian club in Eltham I took a photo of three friends who had memories of WWII: one was a partisan who later became a political prisoner in Goli Otok, one was a Cetnik, a member of regular Yugoslav army, and the third was a home guard from Primorska. Although they were on opposing sides during the war they had no problems being friends.

The cameraman travelling with us had a photo of a Slovenian from his village. He went to his

address; an Australian lady opened the door and identified the man as her husband; he came to the door but denied that he was who we were looking for. I will never know how that story ended.

During my stay in Melbourne I wished to visit a Slovenian religious centre in Kew, which was led by Fr. Bazilij Valentin. Fr Bazilij was also the editor of Slovenian magazine Misli. My Australian relation asked Fr Bazilij if he could bring me to visit him but Fr. Bazilij told him that he did not want to meet me. Since then he has become suspicious, even of my relation, who is a faithful church goer. I wasn't angry because I knew that this was all a misunderstanding.

I couldn't make contact with Fr Bazilij for a few more years. When I stopped receiving Misli I wrote to him suggesting that I send him Rodna Gruda in exchange for him sending me Misli. There was no answer. Someone sent me his editorial in which he acknowledged my letter but said that I should wait a bit longer.

During the days of our independence war in 1991 we had to cancel our scheduled meeting with Slovenian emigrants but in 1992 we had a really happy reunion in Dolenjske Toplice. This meeting started with the mass offered by the bishop of Ljubljana in the company of Slovenian emigrant priests; among them was Fr Bazilij from Australia. I met with him and he surprised me by saying that he would visit me in my office.

One afternoon he came with a bunch of Misli magazines. We had a very relaxed conversation; we did not dwell on the past because the present was too exciting at the time.

Fr Bazilij invited me to his place in Kew when I next visited Australia in 1993. He personally made coffee for me and even offered me accommodation. I am convinced that Fr Bazilij began to trust me and other visitors from Slovenia only since his own first visit to Slovenia after 50 years

As a journalist/writer I had close ties with Slovenian writers and journalists in Australia. As a result I helped to publish two books called *Australsko-slovenski zbornik*, which was a collection of articles and stories written by Slovenians in Australia. I learned much from this work. Later many more books of Slovenian Australians were published in Slovenia.

I am glad that I succeeded in finding a publisher for Cilka Zagar's novel *Barbara* which was the first novel of an Australian Slovenian published in Slovenia. Later I helped with the publications of autobiographic works of Ivan Lapuh and Ivanka Škof; I helped with finding funding for the second edition of Ivan Kopal's book about Slovenians who worked as builders on the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

I am especially happy that I was able to help prepare for publication and publish the memoirs written by my good friend Marijan Persic. He writes about those fateful times during WWII and about events after the war. Unfortunately Marijan did not live to see the book being published. His writing taught me much about the war and about our people, who were not defeated, but had to emigrate to save their lives.

They had suffered greatly before they found a promised land in Australia. Compelling and revealing memories make this a very interesting and informative book.

After the collapse of communism, Slovenia went through the process of democratization and establishment of independent Slovenia.

Many prominent Slovenian migrants in different countries criticised and blamed SIM and us, the writers and editors of its publications, for cooperating with the former communist regime.

We defended ourselves but even our former friends seemed to disappear. The voice of our opponents was louder. Their accusations included that we caused divisions in their communities, sabotaged and broke up their organisations and established new organisations; they said that we exported politics and so caused disunity; we were held responsible for the mistakes and actions of Yugoslav embassies.

Very few people admitted that: Who works also makes mistakes. In the case of SIM we tried to balance the positives with the negatives. I am saying that we worked to the best of our ability within our restrictions.

About Australian Slovenians I wish to say that we did not establish there any organisations; we helped everybody who asked for help; we followed with enthusiasm the economic and spiritual growth of Slovenian communities in Australia; we never conspired against them or encouraged disunity or hatreds. That is the truth as I know it.

In 1993 after many controversies I spoke with a prominent Slovenian in Canberra about these accusations and he said: If I remember all that SIM Slovenska izseljenska Matica did for us, from the organising a tour of Lojze Slak and his singers to the visit in 1972 of Slovenian Octet and other groups, which SIM sent us, I can not imagine where our associations would be without SIM, if they existed at all in Australia.. At least one recognition.

For me as a journalist it was very interesting to travel and meet Slovenians around the world. I had the opportunity to join the visiting cultural groups; that's how I visited most of European countries, USA, Canada, Argentina, Brazil and Australia. I had unforgettable meetings with our people from Perth to Brisbane, numerous talks, great hospitality everywhere. I attended Slovenian masses; I have even taken part in the grape harvest in Renmark in South Australia with my relation Milan Preseren; I visited and photographed most of Slovenian Association homes in Australia. I had no time to be a tourist and could not see other Australian attractions but I am proud that I met thousands of Slovenians and heard as many different stories; it is impossible to record them all.

I was happy to hear success stories of Slovenian individuals and groups and I was sad when I heard of a few Slovenians who cut themselves away from Australian Slovenian community.

It became clearer and clearer to me why so many of our people chose Australia for their new homeland. I began to understand the old Latin saying: Homeland is where it is good. I would only add that it is good for people who can live with two homelands.

Jože Prešeren

Barbara Susa



Barbara Susa and Joze Preseren visiting Cilka Zagar in Ljubljana in 1996

Maybe it sounds incredulous but it is true! I am homesick for Australia. This wild beauty became a second home to my friends; Helena, Ivo, Romana, Frank, Cilka, Jože and Pavla. Their families welcomed me into their lives and now I miss them so I keep returning. For the last 20 years. I also miss the heart-warming laughter of Australian birds, hopping kangaroos disturbed by the noise of the train I travel on; I miss hot Australian sun that warms the bones stiff from cold Slovenian winters. Friendship is like a precious jewel; there are always two rubbing off each other to shine in all its beauty

It all started by a chance in January 1986; this chance ended up with two people in love becoming lifelong partners. One foggy morning my boyfriend Tadej, who has now been my husband of many years, asked me to come along mountain climbing in Australia.

As a newly qualified professor of Slovenian language I made preparations. I visited SIM the organisation linking Slovenians abroad; they gave me a book of Australian migrant writings (1985). I got the idea and a wish to research the new world of Slovenian literary expressions born under the Southern Cross.

I enrolled in the postgraduate study into Australian Slovenian Literature. I presented the only copy of my study to the late librarian Milena Brgoč in Melbourne, who was faithfully collecting material about Slovenians in Australia.

I published my research material in many articles and in a book: *Lipa šumi med evkalipti* and *Slovenska izseljenska književnost*. (Linden murmurs among the eucalyptus, Slovenian Migrant Literature. (Linden is a Slovenian national tree).

This book was the result of much writing but the ties weaved during the years of writing mean much more to me. It is a joy for me when one of ours succeeds and publishes a book in Slovenia. I am proud of Pavla who was accepted into the circle of Slovenian writers in Slovenia.

I even dare to say that in a small way I helped to bring Australian Slovenian writers' recognition also to Slovenia.

I am happy that I encouraged a director of Cankarjev dom to invite Sonja Leber and David Chesworth, famous for their sound installation during Olympic games in Sydney to Ljubljana's month of Australian culture. It was nice to step into the old part of Ljubljana (Šušterski most) embraced by 5000 human voices; it was nice to listen to David's group.

Connecting Slovenia to second and third generation of Slovenian migrants is the key to preservation of cultural and business ties.

The wealth and organisation of Slovenian Associations, this work of generous and capable Slovenians in Australia must not be destroyed. Veterans of Slovenian organisation are passing away; it is up to the young ones to take the burdens and the pleasures of their heritage.

Australian Slovenian community in 1986 was in the full bloom like a woman in her forties; now I believe it is time that this woman gets grandchildren.

And what remains until the end? Friendships and mature love. The kind that reaches to the grave.

You will be forever in my heart: Irena Birsa, Angelique Van de Laak, and Noela Favier. Melbourne and Ljubljana. Sun and Snow.

Jožica Marn Gerden



There are many facets to my very active life. I come from a large, loving family and I enjoyed many friendships in Slovenia. Perhaps I became an active community worker in Australia because here I found myself isolated and alone; I needed to create a new identity, friendships and support groups. I always enjoyed creative work; maybe I saved myself by painting pictures, writing stories, working with ceramics and restoration. Continuous study gave me ever greater understanding of self and others and life itself. I am keenly aware of Slovenian destiny and would like to rewrite its history as

it really was. Primarily I was and am a mother of four, a wife and a homemaker.

I was born in a turbulent spring of 1947 in Jezero near Trebnje in Slovenia as one of eight children to a subsistent farmer's family. Although the war finished and we were supposed to be liberated, I vividly remember the poverty, destruction and desolation that were part of my childhood. My parents had no income while expenses were enormous with eight children at school from the youngest starting primary to the older ones at university. We had to find our own ways to survive and progress. I finished Technical school of Economics which was equivalent to finishing high school but the study prepared us well for bookkeeping, accountancy and clerical work. I worked as a Forestry company accountant in Mokronog from 1967 till 1969.

One snowy winter afternoon I met my future husband Igor Gerden, an Australian Slovenian who came home on holidays; within a year we got married in Trebnje and we went back to Australia, thinking it would be just for two years. What an adventure, I thought. I will learn better English and see the world! Two years will soon pass...

In September 1969, newly married and pregnant, I left home and went with Igor on the ship Marconi for Australia. I was quite happy in Slovenia at the time but I fell in love and so left the country, which I never stopped loving as my first homeland. I was going to an unknown end of the world. The farewell was sad and the trip was unpleasant; I was sea sick most of the time and stayed in the cabin while my husband found some friends and played chess with them.

I often lay on my bed looking at the ceiling, crying and thinking: This was supposed to be my extended honeymoon and I feel so unhappy. I wished I could stop the ship and turn it back. Where am I going, why am I leaving my homeland, and my dear family that I love so much and already miss?

After four weeks we were greeted with a great dust storm above Australian shores. The land in Fremantle was grey brown and barren. The trip to Mildura was very long and boring. Our home was much worse than I expected, just a fruit pickers hut with no air conditioner and as hot as an oven. Not a single tree near the home and not a single flower in the garden.

Igor told me that I was lucky because a retired couple from Medzimirje lived next door. I went to see the old couple but they spoke a strange dialect that I found very hard to understand.



One day Igor brought me a bunch of colourful poppies that Australian neighbour gave him for me. The next day the woman greeted me in the shop but I could only say hello and thank you for the flowers. Oh how I wished I could have a longer conversation with another woman; I needed and wished to have a special friend of my age. All the neighbours were very friendly and supportive and I am forever grateful to them

This photo of my family is from my daughter Sibila's

for it. Soon I realized that my husband Igor is not Igor in Australia, everybody calls him Charles. He told me that he officially changed his name to Charles, as people were calling him "Ajgo" instead of Igor. Well, since then he's my prince Charles.

Another neighbour told Charles to take me to a doctor for a pregnancy check up. Charles spoke to the doctor, doctor's face seemed worried and my husband as an interpreter later explained that I had to watch my diet because I was gaining too much weight. I wondered how that was possible since I hardly ate anything, because the food seemed tasteless; I existed on fruit and water mainly.

The house was hot, but it wasn't worth installing a fan or air-conditioning because we were already building a new house for ourselves. But I was suffocating because of heat and pregnancy as I was growing enormous. Charles worked from five in the morning until ten at night. I felt painfully alone. The world seemed to stop still. When I was six months pregnant my doctor told me the good news: You are going to have twins! In early April, after a long and difficult labour, I held one pink and one blue bundle in my arms. Charles came with a bunch of petunias from the neighbour's garden; he was happy that babies were fine but he had to return to work. A lady next to me had a little girl and her room was full of flowers and visitors and cards. How I wanted to show my babies to my parents but I had no one to share my pride with! When I returned from the hospital, I noticed that mice and rats were visiting from the fruit block. I stuffed the gaps under the doors and kept watch over my babies. I was relieved and happy when we moved into our new house a few months later. Unfortunately we had no furniture and again it wasn't worth buying any, because we were going to put the house on the market and return to Slovenia. Charles promised that we will return in two years time and I kept reminding him of his promise.

I stopped breastfeeding my twins at three months and expected to return to normal life but all of a sudden morning sickness told me that I was again expecting.

When I came to hospital to deliver the baby the nurse told me that my doctor is away and hospital doctor will come in the morning. My neighbour came to be with me but as "she wasn't my mother or my husband" she was not allowed to see and comfort me. Nobody came to see me for twelve long hours. The nurse came in the morning as I was screaming with labour pains. A doctor came to cut the cord. I had another daughter which looked very tired.(who looked tired? The daughter?)

Back home I was alone again. Charles was busy building a new block of flats. Family expected a dinner; I fed and bathed the twins and the new baby; I did loads of washing and there was so much more work to do. Suddenly I felt very cold and weak; I was shaking uncontrollably when a neighbour came over and ordered me to bed.

It has been two years since I arrived to Australia and it was time to return home.

I noticed that an attractive young mum I met and befriended in the hospital had moved next door. We soon became good friends and she often took me with the babies for a picnic. This wonderful friend gave me the will and the strength to carry on. Her visits were something I always looked forward to and still do. She was/is a beautiful person and I so wanted to be like her. I started enjoying Australian life and my babies.

After a few months I discovered that I was pregnant again. Charles was proud but I was weary. How will I cope with four children under the age of three years?

My fourth baby boy was born on new Years Day and my doctor arranged for a painless delivery.

My four babies hardly ever went to sleep at the same time so I was exhausted most of the time. I became more and more homesick. I hadn't heard anyone speak Slovenian for five years. Finally we packed our trunks, rented a house and returned home.

My home was not as homely as I'd imagined. We were a family of six and there was no room in my home so we stayed with Charles' family. Living with mother-in-law didn't work out as she has never accepted me and accused me of impossible crimes. I couldn't cope any more, so I decided to move out, go back to work and put children in childcare. The morning I was ready to move, I was stunned to see that all four children were ill, they all had mumps.

I realised that my plans were wrong. I asked my husband that our family return to Australia as soon as possible.

My mama was sad but she said once again: Whatever is in God's plan, you have to accept it!

Disappointed we returned after one year to Australia for good.

My work in Australia as a volunteer

In Australia I never had a regular job. I helped my husband in his business but my main job was bringing up four children and providing a happy home for my family. When my children started school I went with them. I taught home economics in Primary school and assisted class teachers with reading groups. Children learned to read English with me and I practiced my conversational English with them.

I tried hard to re-establish myself in Australian society and become a good Australian. I chose to work as a volunteer in many community organisations. I worked for the blind, for the elderly migrants and for the sick. In 1985 I established a local volunteer Multicultural Women's Association and was the president for five years and then spent another five years as a treasurer.

This organisation offered help and moral support to women of many nationalities who settled in Australia. We ran a weekly Drop-in-centre, where we organised English lessons, art and craft courses, health seminars and meetings, where we discussed any problems we encountered, organised excursions and helped women to obtain driving licences.

I edited and published a multicultural 3-monthly newspaper Rainbow for five years; I was also a producer/presenter of a radio program for MCWA. Our organisation later developed into a branch of United Nation Association of Sunraysia, where men also could become members. Our work was presented on SBS TV film series Country Women in 1997.

I collected/compiled/edited and published migrant women's stories about their arrival to Australia. I added an extensive survey on migrant women in a book titled 'The Love That Brought Us Here'.

I was amongst first recruits to be named bi-lingual consultant with the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA). I was also a foundation member of Australian Non-English Speaking Women Background Association

(ANESBWA).

I studied Sociology and Fine Arts at La Trobe University by correspondence. Occasionally I worked with older Yugoslav migrants as interpreter and translator for health and social services and other government purposes.



Streams of tears is my painting representing my loneliness and homesickness.

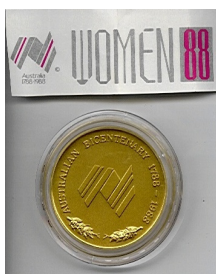
I worked as a volunteer producer/presenter of Slovenian community radio program from 1985–2000 on 3MA and FM Station in Mildura.

I was a treasurer of the Yugoslav club in Mildura for 3 years and also for 10 years a member of Ethnic Community Council of Sunraysia. I organised and helped with many cultural celebrations and have hosted many visiting Slovenian artists.

I always loved and enjoyed art and craft and restored many old church statues in Melbourne and Mildura. I exhibited my art work, oil paintings and aquarelle, and also received an award, a second prize for painting 'Flowers in aquarels' in Adelaide.

I wrote, presented and published many articles in Slovenian magazines and newspapers on various issues.

I was a board member for Loddon Malley Regional Council for Adults, Community and Further Education in Bendigo, and member management committee for the local adult educational council - Mildura And District Educational Council »MADEC«.



In 1988 I was nominated for Bi-centennial Australian Women of the Year and received one of the 200 medals WOMEN 88.

During the first five years I knew no other Slovenians so I soon befriended my neighbours as my new adopted family; they helped me to learn the language and the new way of life in Australia. This first contact was very precious to me, as I was terribly homesick for my own family, friends and my homeland for many years.

Later I found some Slovenian grapevine and citrus growers. We never had an official Slovenian club in Mildura, but we often met in each other houses, celebrating birthdays and had singing lessons. I presented Slovenian radio program for 15 years and also kept being in touch with all local Slovenians. We often organised Slovenian mass and concerts

for our Slovenian community by visiting choirs and artists and also for the multicultural community. We felt rejuvenated after every successful performance. I was happy to receive a medal of the blessed Slomsek from the bishop Kramberger from Maribor while attending a 50th year celebration of Slovenian Franciscan fathers in Australia.

I prepared Slovenian "SLOVENSKI ČAS" part of the Yugoslav radio program from 1985 until in 1990, when we changed the radio station and got an independent Slovenian timeslot. I prepared and presented radio program for fifteen years as a volunteer.

Slovenian community in Australia

Although I am far from Slovenia and from Australian Slovenian centres I keenly followed the events in Slovenia; I was specially enthusiastic about the Slovenian independence movement. During these exciting and traumatic times I needed a creative outlet for all my new emotions. I started painting. I was painting politics.

I was in contact with Slovenian religious centre in Melbourne and specially with late Fr. Bazilij who was the soul of Slovenian life in Australia. I started to cooperate with Slovenian National council in Melbourne and Slovenian World congress which promoted/supported the independence movement and democratisation process in Slovenia. I wrote numerous letters to Australian authorities lobbying for Slovenian independence.

I served as a member and secretary of Slovenian National council and as a secretary of the Australian Slovenian Conference, (a branch of Slovenian World Congress in Ljubljana) since 1997 until today. At the same time I am a management committee member of the Slovenian World Congress and was also elected as a vice president of SSK for 3 years, responsible for overseas countries. Slovenian world congress is the only organisation that includes all Slovenian emigrants around the world. It is wonderful to be in regular contact with prominent Slovenians all over the world.

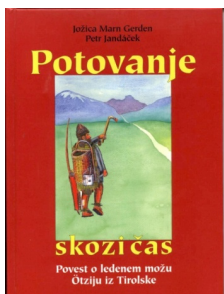
I am concerned about the lack of national awareness and pride among Slovenians. I believe we should first rewrite our history which is at present grossly misrepresented. Foreign historians wrote that we settled in Slovenian territory during 6-7th century while we have evidence even from pre Roman times that Slovenia was always in the heart of Europe and never a part of the Balkan

Peninsula. We are proud of our history and culture and it is our duty to acknowledge it and present it to the world with pride. It is now time to correct the mistakes and injustices of the past. We did not join Europe, we were the heart of Europe from the beginning.

I have translated from Slovenian into English and from English into Slovenian many articles and studies about our Venetic history. My speciality is research into Silesia's Sorbs or Wends, the carriers of the culture of Urn culture (the way of burial of ashes) which developed throughout middle Europe many millenniums ago. Ancestors of my Sunraysia Wendish friends migrated to Australia from Silesia and Upper and Lower Lusatia. I admire their descendants who are still very proud of their old Slavic culture and actively search for their roots.

In 2001 I participated in the international conference of Venetologist in Ljubljana with a study Veneti in Australia; and later in 2002 I presented a study Prvobitnost Venetov srednje Evrope - Veneti as Indigenous people in Central Europe.

I've translated Petr Jandacek cartoon story about Ötzi the iceman and expended the story with Slovenian legends that brings Otzi into Slovenian place and history.



Therefore, I am a co-author with Petr Jandacek of the children story book POTOVANJE SKOZI ČAS –Travelling through time - a story about Otzi the Iceman, who was of Venetic origin, therefore he is our earliest known ancestor. The book was published by Založba Jutro, Ljubljana, 2004.

I am the editor of the internet debating site VENETI-WENDS WINDISCHE – SLOVENIA: <http://forums.delphiforums.com/VENETI> .

MILDURA, CAPITAL OF SUNRAYSIA, VICTORIA

Mildura is the main town in the North West Victoria about 550 km from Melbourne; it has population of about 40 000. Mildura lies on the border of NSW, Victoria and South Australia. It lies on the longest Australian river Murray, which is irrigating citrus and grapevine fields and is a bloodline of Sunraysia.



Priest Stanko Kastelic harvesting at Tonc



Slovenian Club Mildura – this time at home of Golobič family

In nearby Wentworth is a junction of two of the biggest Australian rivers Darling and Murray.

The word Mildura means in Aboriginal language red soil - sore eyes. Along the river grows Mallee bush.

Sunraysia has the greatest number of sunny days a year. In Sunraysia there are large vineyards known for their high quality wine and dry fruit: raisins and sultanas.

Where there are vineyards there will surely be Slovenians. Many of our people are successful wine producers. During the harvest Slovenians 'tourists' often come for seasonal employment.

Strict Australian laws prohibit seasonal work for tourists but Slovenian students still often come asking for work.

SLOVENIANS IN MILDURA

11 Slovenian and some half Slovenian families live in Mildura: Marica Abramovič, Marija Horvat, Lojze Golobič,

Charles (Igor) and Jožica Gerden, Pepca and Janez Plut, Franc and Danica Štrubelj, Agata and Franc Tonc, Tilka and Lojze Žagar, Edi Žalec and Marija, Pavla and Stane Osolnik. Counting our descendants there would be around 70 Slovenians. We haven't got a Slovenian club but we still find a way of coming together for cultural and religious celebrations and for visiting performers that are usually enjoyed by the wider community as well.

Years ago we had an excellent Slovenian choir with a lead soprano singer Agatha Tonc. Unfortunately some of our singers moved into the city. Sadly some passed away and our choir misses them greatly.

PASTORAL CARE FOR SLOVENIANS IN MILDURA

Ever since I came to Australia I missed going to a regular Slovenian mass; I was especially homesick for those celebrations and festivities at Christmas, New Year and Easter. I missed Mary's May celebrations and All Soul's day. The seasons, the language and the traditions of celebrations are so different here and it was very difficult for me to get used to it. It is hard to imagine white Christmas at the temperature of 47C next to the plastic Christmas tree.



Above: Palm Sunday in Mildura 1998 with Father Janez Tretjak. After the mass we had an Annual general meeting of Australian Slovenian conference with participants from other cities around Australia.

I once asked Fr Bazilij to visit us on his way to Berri but he did not answer. He must have heard that I was participating in Yugoslav radio program and he assumed that Mildura Slovenians were favouring Yugoslav regime. When father Janez Tretjak OFM came to Australia, I asked him to look after Mildura Slovenians and he enthusiastically accepted the invitation. Since then he comes regularly from Adelaide.

Among many highly esteemed guests in my home were Cardinal Alojzij Ambrožič from Canada, bishop Kvas, arch-bishop Alojzij Uran, Bishop Metod Pirihi, bishop Franc Kramberger, provincial Mihael Vovk and Stane Zore, various Franciscan

priests among them father Bazilij, Tone Gorjup, Niko Žvokelj, Metod Ogorevc, Ciril Božič, Pater Valerijan Jenko, Filip Rupnik, Štefan Krampač, Stanko Kastelic, Jesuit Milan Bizant etc. We also had several visits with a full bus of Slovenian pensioners touring Sunraysia.

Despite the extra work I always enjoyed the visits which often ended with happy Slovenian singing.



Father Bazilij, Cardinal A. Ambrožič from Canada with Jožica Gerden

Father Janez Tretjak OFM is faithfully visiting Mildura twice a year and also when bringing guests from Slovenia. For every visit we prepare the mass in Sacred Heart church; beforehand we have a choir



Slovenian mass at 50th anniversary of Franciscans in Australia. With Bishop Kramberger.

practice. After the mass we meet at one or the other of Slovenian families; women prepare a festivity to celebrate so we all feel spiritually and physically rejuvenated.

SLOVENIAN CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN MILDURA



Tržaški octet-dinner at Gerden home after visiting the desert Lake Mungo.

Among the most successful guest performances were the visit of quartet Big Ben from Slovenia, the visit of a choir Jakob Gallus-Petelin from Celovec and the visit of Tržaški octet under Danilo



Choir Jakob Gallus Petelin led by Cvetko Falež. After the concert in Mildura's Catholic Church and later on visit at Horvat family farm

Čadež, singers Stajerskih 7 etc. Concerts were well attended by our local multicultural community of Sunraysia Our city specially remembers and appreciates our singing bishop Alojzij Uran.

Cvetko Falez



Cvetka in Cvetko in 1936

I treasure memories of growing up. Those first impressions of the world and the people are the source of great happiness for me. The land and the people of my youth formed my character; those early acquired attitudes guide my actions; they make it possible for me to make sacrifices for my homeland and my people. The love for the homeland and my people is also the source of pain because I had to leave all that behind when I came to Australia.

I was one of the twins born in Leskovec near Krško on 14 April 1931. My sister was named Cvetka and my name is Cvetko. Cvetka came to Australia with her family and unfortunately died at the age of 35. We grew up in a happy and prosperous family. Our father was a public servant, hard working and strict. Mother was thrilled with her first-born. She always showed off by dressing us in similar clothes.

She was kind but also strict. She was deeply religious and believed that her children would only grow up into good and honest human beings with strict catholic upbringing. No nonsense was tolerated and sometimes it was necessary to use a switch. She was a total believer in the old Slovenian proverb: "Šiba novo mašo poje". Translated it would say: the switch sings a new mass. It means that a switch helps one to become a priest; priest's first mass is always sung.

In my mother's family there were three girls and four boys of whom two became priests; the other two were total roughs; black sheep in the family. In fact mum always hoped I would become a priest. I was sorry I disappointed her.

On father's side of the family were twelve children, six boys and six girls. All the boys married but the girls all remained single. Three of them became nuns. Two of them died very young, afflicted by tuberculoses but the rest of them reached a great age. They were also very religious going to mass practically every day. Their parents were farmers, also religious; their grand father was known to have prayed the rosary wherever he was walking or guiding his stock. He was also known to have made a pilgrimage to Maria Zeel which was some 200 km away, mostly walking barefoot.

Something of that certainly rubbed off on me, even though I am convinced that I have a strong mind and I was not influenced by others. I was noticeably good in school at religious lessons. For the first holy communion I was the only one in class awarded an exceptionally pretty holly depiction of Jesus, different from the rest of the class. It appears that the religious teacher saw something in me, that I could not spot.

The period before the Second World War in Slovenia was the time of a real renaissance and full of cultural activities. The youth were engaged in singing and drama; they were performing on stage most weekends. Young people belonged to various groups and they wore their distinctive uniforms. They often paraded at masses especially on feast days. Young people were also very active in sport.



Kostanjevica with the castle in the foreground

When I was three years old my family moved from Leskovec to an old castle near Kostanjevica na Krki, an ex Benedictine monastery that was abandoned since Kaiser Franz Josef closed many monasteries in Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in late 17th Century. The castle was not on top of a hill like most castles in Slovenia but in a small circular valley sheltered by hills around it. Kostanjevica is an island, encircled by river Krka. On

slopes around the castle wine growers produce their famous *cviček*. The mountains Gorjanci are covered with forests. Every hill seems to have a church from which one could see the mosaic of fields around the villages.



Fruits of the Nursery with the Family and workers

My father managed the government nursery that supplied fruit trees and grape-vines to the farmers all over Slovenia. It was a government initiative to make the farmers self sufficient with all the produce and fruit was considered a vital part of the staple diet. The nursery employed local young men and women that often spoiled my sister and me. The main attraction was the orchard and especially the peach trees that produced enormous, beautiful, red peaches in summer.

The castle was a three story building constructed as a huge circle. In the courtyard was a linden tree and a bench around it. The cellar at that time did not hold as much attraction for me as it would today, but I remember an endless line of carts with horses and oxen that brought the grapes to the cellar in autumn. Inside the walls was a huge abandoned church and endless corridors. The castle housed families and offices. It was burned down by the partisans during the Second World War but it was gradually restored and is now a famous art gallery and a tourist attraction.

Near a castle was a stream with warm water which was a paradise for about fifteen of us children living in the castle. The water must have passed a volcanic crater where it warmed up and it never froze over. We often made fires and played games on the river bank; we also caught fish and barbecued them. On 5th of December for 'Miklavžev večer' St Nicholas eve, a huge contingent of angels and devils with St Nicholas arrived at the castle. We believed that the angels came from heaven, and the devil from hell. St. Nicholas' visits are imprinted in my memory with awe, pleasure, fear, prayer and excitement.

'Pustni torek' a Shrove Tuesday masquerade was another exciting time for children during snow covered winters. Beautifully decorated masks entered the courtyard and were rewarded by adults. We spent hours and hours on the toboggan slope; up and down, and up and down, and backside over head until we got really cold and with frost bitten fingers could stand it no longer. In summer we played in lush flowery grass paddocks.

Before I started school mum taught me a poem which I recited at a Mother's Day celebration and for it received my first packet of lollies. I had to repeat the poem for everyone that would listen and on every occasion that presented itself. I became a real celebrity.

My parents came from near Maribor. On rare occasions we returned to their home 150 km away to see our grandparents; the trips were unforgettable and we began to long to travel to those distant places.

Trappistine monastery in Reichenburg was a castle where mum's brother Pepi was preparing for priesthood. We loved to visit him because people there spoiled us with goodies, big plates of fried eggs and real, really delicious chocolate. We had to hire a horse drawn cart from one of the farmers for the visit. One morning we were all ready and dressed very early in the morning expecting the horse drawn carriage to pick us up. We saw it coming but even though we called out the lady travelled on without taking any notice. We were so miserable that the sadness remained in my memory to this day.

At the age of six my sister Cvetka and I started school in Kostanjevica. In the meantime my father bought a farm in his birth place in Orehova vas. My childhood ended because on the farm there was so much to do. This was the time before the agricultural revolution reached Slovenian farmers. Everything had to be done by hand from planting the crops to making hay, to trashing the wheat, digging up the potatoes, picking the beans, apples and grapes. The tasks were endless. Tractors and other farm machinery came after I left home.

I had to graze cows on narrow grass lanes between the fields. Sometimes there would be three cows abreast held together with a chain around their necks; if I had four of them they would be two and two held together at the horns with a rope. All kind of crops were planted in the fields along the lane but the maize seemed most tempting to my cows. The cow knew that it will get a strong whack over the snout but still snapped at the succulent produce for which my father strongly reprimanded me. The maize once cut at the top did not recover.



The last Slovenian Class before the German invasion – Cvetko bottom row fifth from left

In summer we often went to pilgrim churches on hill tops; there were merry-go-rounds, amusement gadgets, stands loaded with sweets and toys. Mum prepared delicious foods for the occasion. Kolina, the yearly killing of the pig or pigs was a feast for the family because we prepared delicacies from the pig's meat.

At the beginning of WWII I was in year three of primary school. Our new German

teacher yelled at us endlessly as he tried to make us into instant Germans. One boy and his sister spoke German and were translating the teacher's German orders for the whole school. He wanted to implement a military regime with March ing and standing to attention. In time we spoke some sentences and sang German songs but had no idea what they meant.

After Germans invaded Slovenia Slovenian language and all cultural activities were forbidden. After the age of ten I missed out on Slovenian cultural activities. I still regret that. I was eagerly awaiting German defeat and prosperous old times to return. Local boys joined the partisans; at least some of them hoped that they were fighting the Germans and for a free Slovenia. In our region there was no other resistance; one had to either join the partisans or join the German military. Among the partisans were also my Uncle Victor and Cousin Ivan. Groups of these boys would come during the night to warm up and for a feed, even though at a big risk to those that extended them hospitality. During the next three years partisan activities became more sinister. The visiting boys brought news of the revolution and red bolshevism. The crude newspapers that they left only talked of Russian friendship and of the rotten old system that we were to be freed from. Nothing of good old days that I remembered was to return. The new revolution was to bring a completely new order.

For many the new order meant death. My parents seemed sad and deeply affected. People were disappearing and no one knew who was safe. People whispered of atrocities and no one knew what was happening. On one of the outings to Pohorje a group of pilgrims sensed a horrible smell; they had no idea what caused it; only now it was revealed that in 1945 after the WWII Slovenia was the largest killing field in Europe. At the time we were walking past one of these gruesome places. Is it possible that in my very own backyard there were thousands of people killed often by our own compatriots?

I was only fourteen years old then and not yet fully aware of the criminal involvement of the Yugoslav and Slovenian communist party; however I developed a dislike and even a hatred of communism.

The years during and after the war were traumatic but they also left unforgettably pleasant memories. Teenage years are naturally sprinkled with wonderful discoveries; I learned about the

birds and the bees and the romantic side of life. Grazing cows was no longer boring because I was day dreaming of better things and more exciting times. Our fields in Dravska dolina provided a picturesque setting for a young day dreamer. Pohorje Mountain and a lower range Haloze and Slovenske gorice encircled our valley. I began to dream about places beyond the mountain ranges; I began to dream of things beyond the next mountain range, of a place without communism.

Communist regime did not allow us to travel across the border so perhaps the forbidden fruit on the other side became even more tempting. If you were caught crossing the border you could face many years in prison or you could even be shot by a trigger happy guard. At the age of eighteen I escaped to Austria. I was sad because I did not know if and when I would be able to return. I did not want to leave my home but I felt compelled to escape from communism. The world was in front of me but it was unknown and uncertain. Armed with a few addresses of Slovenians abroad I began searching for people that also carried my dreams and the love for Slovenia. I was sad leaving my home; I was very happy with my destiny even though the communist regime depressed me enormously. At that time many young people were disappearing; one of them was my uncle. Somehow I was misled in believing that the West was eager to change the government of Yugoslavia. I was keen to join the forces that would liberate my country. At that stage I did not yet envisage an independent Slovenia. In an Austrian examination camp I was coached by a very sympathetic young man on how to join a group of fighters that were devoted to this purpose. This was the reason for my escape. I was warned by someone else to be aware of such plots, because the communist agents were trying to coach young people into a trap. I still went looking for the given connection. Somehow I did not find the address which probably saved my life. Eventually I realised that I was lucky to have missed the appointment. Even though I still longed to join a group that would give me a reason for leaving home I had to realise that there was no such organization. My fate was sealed and there was no way back. The communist regime was firmly entrenched and no one in the world was thinking of dislodging it. I was contemplating my future. All the bridges to my beloved home were destroyed. When would our country become like the democratic West or free Australia? I did not know that it would take sixty years or my whole lifetime.



On the way to Australia with the ship Castelbianco

I stayed in Austria with a kind aunt of our parish priest Jakob Vraber where I read a weekly newspaper 'Naš Tednik' printed in Celovec. That put me in touch with people who felt and thought as I did. The paper often published articles by people who fled Communism, who were persecuted, people who longed for a free and prosperous Slovenia. I learned that there was a camp near Beljak, where they stayed and I was determent to find them. I found the camp but it was deserted. On the walls were posters inviting people to emigrate to USA, Canada, Argentina and also

Australia. USA was my target, but I would have to wait five years and have a sponsor to be accepted. What would I do in the mean time? Argentina and Canada had a waiting period of two years. Australia was the last on my mind but I still filled out the application. It had no waiting period. Two months later I had a health check in Salzburg and from there I went to Aurich in Germany to a ship Castelbianco in Bremerhafen; I was on the way to Australia. On the boat I finally found about ten Slovenians: Milan Beribak from Maribor is the only person I am still in contact with.



Arrival at Bonegilla in December 1950

The journey to Melbourne lasted 30 days. The train trip from Melbourne to Bonegilla seemed to last an eternity. At the first and the only stop we were allowed to disembark and on the tables at the railway station were refreshments, but no one told us to have some. Eventually we ventured off the train and looked at the laid out tea pots and cups, milk and biscuits. The tea

was as black as coffee and had an unpleasant smell. The biscuits were very sweet and tasteless. We felt bewildered by the strangeness of the place we arrived at. It was Christmas but we barely noticed it.

After Christmas most were sent to their destinations. The friends I met on the ship left and I was on my own. I was picked up by a farmer and his wife. We drove for some time into a strange land and I had no idea where I was taken. We arrived at a farm, where I had to share a room with a Serb, Michael. Our work was herding and milking cows, something I was familiar with although I have never milked a cow before. Fortunately we used a machine. Total isolation from my people, the monotony and a strange environment were depressing. Michael and the farmer were my sole companions; I only saw the farmer's wife at meal times.

There were a couple of suitcases on the shelves opposite my bed and I was told that they belonged to two Slovenians that worked there before me and left the farm without permission. This made me think. Why would anyone leave everything behind? My first month on the farm was coming to an end and there was still no pay. Eventually I was handed the pay for four weeks, which was 16 Guinness. Since we worked seven days a week, milking cows from morning till one o'clock and in the afternoon and evenings for three hours it seemed very little. I became annoyed and did not want to do everything I was told. When I once refused to do something Michael slapped my face. The farmer offered me some tea; I refused it but he forced me to say thank you. After this incident I decided to secretly leave the farm. When Michael left the room in the morning I jumped up, took my belongings and ran on to the road where I caught the morning school bus. I travelled back to Bonegilla, where I told the authorities how I was treated. They normally did not accept people returning to the camp but they accepted me. I asked for permission to go to Canberra where father Bachinskas, that I travelled with to Australia, has gone.

The trip to Canberra by train lasted most of the day and when everybody left I looked through the window and saw a sign saying Canberra. I thought it was the April 's fool joke, because it was the first of April 1951; there was no sign of a city. The place seemed deserted. I caught the only bus that went somewhere. It was Sunday afternoon so I travelled around and around until I was told to disembark. I had the address of Father Bachinskas who found me a job and my lodging in a hostel for men called Eastlake near the Government Printing Office where I was to start working. There

were no Slovenians and I made friends with George Hainod, a Hungarian, that had his wife and a family in another hostel in Cowra, some 200 miles away that he visited fortnightly. Slowly I settled in and made the hostel Riverside my home with a few photos on the walls. After some weeks I received an offer from Father Bachinskas to buy his bicycle. I had no money so I was paying it off over several weeks.

The mail to Europe in those days took four to six weeks. Everyday we used to check the mail-board near the hostel office. On Sundays Father Bachinskas had a mass at St. Teresa's Church in Causeway. I was again an altar boy like I was on the boat to Australia. In May, Public servant's hostel, Havelock House, was opened. People from Bonegilla were brought to work there and Father Bachinskask asked me to escort them to mass. They were migrant women; one of them was Ada Velan who later became my wife. Ada told me about two Slovenians who were sent to work on the railways. One of them, Ivan Urh, kept in touch with Ada's friend Vera Kos and he was coming to Canberra. I was eagerly awaiting his arrival.

A few months after meeting Ada we looked at a small not very expensive motorbike, Java. We decided to buy it but I did not



The First Day with Ada and other new arrivals



Java 250 cc in 1951

have enough money for the deposit let alone 240 pounds it cost. Ada graciously agreed to lend me 40 Pounds. I am not sure that this was such a good idea, for she still claims that I owe her this money although I think I repaid it many times over. I had a motorbike licence in Austria but I hardly knew how to ride it. After a few weeks I went to Marulan, the other side of Goulburn where Drago Gračner, my school-mate who travelled to Australia with Ada was supposed to be. When I got there the tent camp was deserted and I was told that he departed for Sydney. I could not locate Drago for more than ten years.

My next job was cleaning the yard in Mulwala House, a public servants' hostel in Reid. I was hoping to get a position in the kitchen, so I would be employed about the same hours as Ada. All the Bonegilla ladies working at the Havelock House were eventually sacked and sent to Sydney because they were not union members. Ada told them, that she had friends in Canberra and did not want to go to Sydney. She was then given a waitress position at Hotel Canberra. The unnecessary transfer of the girls to Sydney showed the utmost stupidity of the union official who only had to ask the girls to pay the membership and the matter would have been settled.

The unions at that time were very powerful and everyone had to be a member. The agreement with the government allowed only a basic wage that was the same for everyone in the same employment and was rather low. I started to look for additional work and finally found a builder, Karl Schreiner, who had a yard at the top of Lonsdale Street; his firm was the only firm working on Saturdays and he was employing labourers for two Pounds a day on Saturdays. Schreiner, a big and loud man, pointed at individuals and said: you, and you and you. In a little while he came out again and accepted a few more workers. Most of the time he employed us all, unless he remembered from before, that someone was rather awkward and lazy. I kept going to Schreiner on Saturdays for more than a year. Eventually I became a kitchen man in Havelock House.

George Haynod rented a house in Queanbeyan and brought his family from Cowra. Ada and I sometimes paid them a visit and picked up some advice. Soon we were convinced by George that we should buy a block of land in Queanbeyan and build a house. The motorbike was paid off and the land was only 200 pounds so we became the proud owners of a patch of bush outside Queanbeyan with nothing on it. In Queanbeyan we found Kavčić family and visited them; they told us about Stanko Pevc, who was working in the dining room at the Naval Station at Harman. I found him while he was clearing tables in the seamen's mess. We soon became good friends and I visited him often. Ada worked in Canberra Hotel and I was working in the kitchen at Havelock House when we married on Thursday 3rd of October 1952. The Taxi picked me up and then stopped at Hotel



The Wedding at the Cathedral in Manuka

Canberra for Ada. Taxi driver said: "If you only have one car you should at least sit in the front and the bride should sit at the back; that was to keep us separated until we were wed. The wedding at the Manuka cathedral was performed by father Bachinskas. My best man was Stanko Pevc and Ada's bridesmaid was Lina, her workmate. My room at Havelock House served as kitchen and dinning room for the wedding reception. Ada cooked the soup the day before and baked a couple of chickens in the morning; she added the trimmings later on a portable cooker. The cooks from Havelock House surprised us with a cake. This very nice and simple marriage lasted up til now which is 55 years and God willing will last for ever.

We started building the house and it turned out to be a mistake. Ada was pregnant and had to stop working; we had to find accommodation which was very hard to get. My wages were small and what I earned was spent on the new house, leaving us no money for bare necessities. Soon we were not welcome where we rented the room because the baby was on the way. After Cvetko's birth Ada just did not want to return from the hospital to the same place. The only alternative accommodation we

could find was an empty garage in Queanbeyan that had nothing but a wooden stove in the corner and an outside tap. The Tilta-door did not fit properly and the air inside was colder than outside. Behind the garage was another empty room and when winter came it was cold and getting colder. Never again were we so poor and never did I see anybody else in such a desperate plight as we were for Christmas 1952 and onwards in 1953. I had to look for more acceptable accommodation. Stanko helped us out with a two hundred dollars loan that tied us over a few months. I eventually found a room in Westlake in a wooden cottage that was just as cold as the garage in Queanbeyan. Those houses were originally built in Canberra for workers and have been demolished later for the embassy area. One of them was owned by Jack Smith, an old Australian tight as a shoe-string. He would not allow the radiator to be used and we had no money for wood in the kitchen stove that would not have warmed the baby in the bedroom anyway. Again we were in search for better accommodation. Almost by the end of winter we got a room from Ada's Polish friend Anna Musik in O'Connor. This change was worth more than a thousand dollars in the bank that we did not have anyway.

One Saturday at Schreiner's I saw a man that was in charge of a group that he took to a building site. I soon suspected that he could be Ivan Urh. I asked him where he was from. He replied with a question: 'Do you know where Ljubljana is?' I then replied: 'We can then speak Slovenian.' He did not seem as exited as I was but we did become life long friends.

About that time I had an unpleasant experience at Schreiner's. Most of the people that were employed there were from Eastern Europe and they spoke either a broken mixture of Slav languages or German, since all of them arrived through Germany or Austria. I vaguely remember a small lad of rather dark complexion who later on turned out to be a Slovenian, Lojze Risa. I did not come to know him at the time but years later he accused me in the Slovenian club that I did not want to speak Slovenian when we were at Schreinners. That was quite unfair because I was looking for Slovenians all the time. He simply did not appear to be Slovenian and he did not introduce himself. I must admit that I preferred to speak German which I spoke well rather than a Slav mixture that did not represent anybody. Months later Ada and I found Ludvig Kerec and his wife with two adolescent daughters and they were the only other Slovenians in Canberra and Queanbeyan I was able to locate.

With another child on the way and only on a motorbike Ada and I could not travel far. When John was born Ada nursed him between her and me and I had Cvetko sitting on the petrol tank in front of me. After a considerable time, with much sweat and toil, we have built a concrete deck over the garage in Queanbeyan. It was many months on the market and was finally sold pretty cheaply. Only then were we able to buy a Holden, model 1949 that cost us 790 pounds. I think that it was very expensive for a second-hand car, but cars then were very hard to get. For a new car it was necessary to wait for many months and even years. All in all we were finally able to travel more comfortably and especially much safer.

My restless spirit eventually landed me a job as a labourer with Jennings. Here I met several German carpenters that the firm recruited mainly in Bavaria because of the shortage of tradesman in Australia. I befriended several of them as they also lived isolated in hostels and I could easily converse with them. When they formed an association and later build a club-house I was keen to learn how it is done. I was very conscious that there were not enough Slovenians in Canberra to build a club but should the numbers eventually increase I wanted to know how to go about it.

We lived for about one year at Ainslie in a shed with Frank Ortner, who was also one of the German carpenters. After a wait of three years we finally received a government house to rent. The world and the life changed for us. We felt grateful; with new furniture bought on a deposit and with our own car we just felt on top of the world and finally Australia became our home. The children were quickly growing up. Cvetko went to St Brigid primary school; John followed soon after; Barbara and Vivien were born about that time to complete our family. Young families these days move into new houses fitted out with all the luxuries and comforts that we could not even dream about. Many modern appliances were not even available at that time and they would have been beyond our reach anyway.

Eventually we received Slovenian monthly magazine 'Misli' and our horizons widened. We learned more about Slovenian life in Australia. Misli were published in Sydney by two Franciscan Fathers that came from Lemont, USA. We did not meet the first two Fathers, who soon returned to America, but we heard more about Father Pivko who arrived later from China, where he worked as a missionary. After a few years he left the order and was replaced by Father Bernard Ambrožič also from United States. In Misli we read about Rev. Father Dr. Ivan Mikula who was stationed in Perth. He was expected to move to Sydney and attend to spiritual needs of Slovenians spread all over Eastern Australia.

One Saturday Ada and I went to a dance in Queanbeyan organized by the German Club. We were rather isolated but enjoyed the European atmosphere. During the evening we observed two couples that seemed familiar but we were too shy to approach them. They were Ana and Ferdo Strehar and Marija and Ivan Urbas who came for the dance from Cooma and we met sometimes later. We also met Father Mikula. He was always ready to seek out people that he could invite to his masses. At the dance he was looking for Austrians, since he was from Austria himself, or for any other Catholic that he could make contact with.

Father Mikula soon became our regular guest when in Canberra. When he arrived his first job was writing invitations for the mass that he would have in a day or two. He probably obtained the addresses from Father Bernard who used them for mailing Misli. Father Mikula collected addresses of anyone he met. When I came from work he asked me to take him around Canberra by car from one address to the other. Sometimes we would find people at home and we would be invited in but many times we had to leave the invitations in the letter-box. This is how I met most of the Slovenians in Canberra. Often we delivered letters at night. Originally Father Mikula came every month but later on he ventured out on longer trips, even up to Queensland, which made his visits less frequent. He organised a visit by Father Bernard Ambrožič from Sydney who came to celebrate his Golden ordination jubilee and I was Dr Mikula's main assistant. It was at St Patrick's in Braddon and at the time the biggest Slovenian gathering in Canberra.



The visit with Dr Mikula at Family Bresnik

Father Mikula introduced us to families Bresnik and Habor who were the parents of Jožica Bresnik. Frank Bresnik impressed us mostly with his impeccable writing and also with his painting skills. Frank is a big man and has a strong voice. He could be heard singing and praying out loud until sister Francka Žižek told him to pray in tune with others. He was employed as a waiter at Rex Motel in Dixon and as a hobby he was an amateur photographer in the shopping centres around Canberra. Frank was a well organised artistic person; he had a colourful display of drinks in his liquor cabinet at home. It seemed odd that even after several visits he would not offer us any of them. Eventually we realised

that the drinks were probably coloured water arranged in a rainbow of colours. A year or so after we met Bresniks they moved to a house in Campbell. On a visit with Urh we noticed that the family spoke German what was rather a surprise if not a shock. Bresniks eventually moved to a corner shop in Queanbeyan. This was a difficult financial decision for them so I advanced them a couple hundred dollars for our future purchases in their shop.

After my arrival in Canberra I contacted Mohorjeva družba in Celovec for the yearly issue of books with a Calender that they published. I offered to distribute them to Slovenians in the district. This gave me another opportunity to approach and meet Slovenians.

In Sydney, a new newspaper "Žar", was published by Ljenko Urbančič and Vlado Menart on behalf of a Slovenian organization. Ljenko and Vlado held positions of authority with the Snowy Mountains scheme; as a condition on which they employed Slovenian workers they demanded from Slovenian workers a donation of 10 Pounds for a future Slovenian organization. This contribution turned out to be for Žar. Some people greatly objected to this and called it exploitation, but this is always the case, when people have to contribute for anything.

At much the same time a political split developed in Slovenian Club Sydney between the supporters and opponents of the Communist regime in Slovenia. Eventually we heard that a new Club Triglav emerged. The arguing made Slovenians all over Australia apprehensive about all club activities.

While employed by Joe Larko Pty. Ltd in 1957 I injured my back and had to be operated on. I was declared unfit for work and was paid a weekly compensation, which was pretty low. After some months the insurance firm stopped paying me compensation. I had to do something else to feed the family. My only option was to start a gang of concreters that I could supervise but not work physically. Having an income stopped me getting compensation from the insurance company even though I had to put up with an injury for years. This was a blessing in disguise because I became a builder. With Joe Larko P/L I worked my way up to a position of a foreman and I was able to obtain a building licence; I began building houses and that greatly improved things for us.

About that time a big Ford station wagon stopped on our drive. Father Bernard Ambrožič and a new Franciscan friar were in the heavy loaded wagon. The newly arrived priest was Father Bazilij Valentin. He just came from Lemont, USA and was on his way to Melbourne to start a new Slovenian centre in Kew. In fact he was the initiator of the Slovenian centre in Kew with the church, the hall and the old people's home of Sister Romana. Fortunately we had some chickens in the yard and Ada made them a quick dinner. They had to leave just as quickly as they arrived.

In 1961 after I built and sold a few houses I began thinking of a holiday in Slovenia. My two sisters at home convinced me, that I had nothing to fear from the communists. Ada became pregnant so we had to postpone the visit for one year. We found out about the new ocean-liner called Canberra that was on its maiden voyage around the world. It was to depart from Southampton for Australia and return from Sydney on the 20 of May in 1962 and then travel past Wellington in New Zealand, to Honolulu and Los Angeles, through Panama Canal past Curacao and on to Southampton. This seemed a perfect schedule even though it was a little early for us. Ada was not enthusiastic about the travel but I booked the voyage just the same. I was able to arrange the transport for our new station wagon Holden, which would only cost as much as a passenger's ticket. Taking the car on the ship was the only way with a little baby. The children could travel for half fare and the baby

would be free of charge. We were eagerly awaiting the arrival of our fourth child. Vivien finally arrived on the 3rd of May 1962 and was christened by Father Mikula just a week before our departure for Slovenia. The trip was a delightful experience even though Ada is still complaining about it. We were all still reasonably young so my reunion with the family was a real pleasure.

On the return trip in 1963 my sister Maria obtained a Yugoslav passport to accompany us to Italy. I did not suspect that her intention was not to return to Slovenia. When I learned about it I decided to leave her temporarily with our cousin Stefan Falez in Rome. We did not find him home but fortunately I knew the Migration Officer at the Australian Embassy in Rome, Mr Brian Martin and his family. They were kind enough to take Maria in, at five in the morning, when we hurried on to catch the ship in Naples. Marija eventually made it to Hotel Bled, owned by Vinko Levstik in Rome, where she stayed until Mr Martin was able to arrange her passage to Australia. He often boasted that Marija was the 'fastest' migrant ever going to Australia, only made possible by him.



The first visit in Slovenia in June 1962

Officer at the Australian Embassy in Rome, Mr Brian Martin and his family. They were kind enough to take Maria in, at five in the morning, when we hurried on to catch the ship in Naples. Marija eventually made it to Hotel Bled, owned by Vinko Levstik in Rome, where she stayed until Mr Martin was able to arrange her passage to Australia. He often boasted that Marija was the 'fastest' migrant ever going to Australia, only made possible by him.



Again together in Australia in 1965

On our return to Australia I began building again on my own; money was tight but things were improving until bankruptcy ceased to be a daily worry. After a few years the government in Canberra began to release the land in packages which made the blocks a little cheaper. I was afraid to go it on my own and I discussed the purchase with Rudi Kaltner. We agreed to buy a parcel of six blocks and share them. After talking to the solicitor, he suggested to make a partnership as every other option would be considerably more difficult. Transferring the land was against the law until the land was developed. So I became a partner in a building firm even though I was building before on my own for nearly ten years.

Sister Marija arrived in Canberra a few months after our return. Soon after sister Cvetka arrived with her four children and mum and dad arrived in early 1964.

A constant trickle of Slovenians to Canberra increased the size of the Slovenian community. Because Slovenians were good tradesmen many of them became employed in the building industry; several of them worked for our firm F & K Builders Pty Ltd. By then Slovenians gathered regularly for the monthly Slovenian masses read by Father Valerij Jenko, who was the new priest from USA in Sydney. I knew all Slovenians that came to mass but not those that stayed away.

One day in June of 1964 two strangers Vlado Skerbinšek and Miha Hočevar (now called Hovar) came up our driveway in Ainslie. They handed me a letter and explained that they are inviting people to a meeting to establish a Slovenian Association. I was flabbergasted because I was still convinced that we were too few to start an organization. Besides, I was hurt because I was not informed and included in the venture. I have so far put a lot of time into gathering, informing and organising Slovenians in Canberra and here I was approached by some people that did not even exist, as far as I was concerned. The meeting was called for the 25th of June 1964 in the Methodist Hall in Barton. Until then we met as a community several times in the catholic school or catholic hall and church and now a completely new location was found, one we had nothing to do with. Still I, my friends and relatives attended the meeting. I think that at the meeting the main table was occupied by Miha Hovar, Vlado Skerbinšek and someone else. How many people were present I do not know but Miha Hovar states there were 36 of us.

Even though minutes and records of the Association's activities were kept in the cupboards in the Club for over 30 years they were taken to the rubbish tip by late Miro Penca while he was president in the early eighties. This came to my notice when I asked Mrs Maria Valenci to look up some records, when she was president in 1998. She replied with a question: "What records? Miro Penca loaded them up on his pickup when he was president." Why? Who knows why he did it and if the Committee was in agreement with him? Was anyone jealous of the exceptionally good record and performance that the Slovenian Association of Canberra had or was someone ashamed of the role he played during our rivalries?

People that started the Slovenian Association in Canberra were Vlado Skerbinšek, Miha Hočevar, Adolf Rot, Ivan Kink, Ivan Telič, and possibly a few more. They regularly gathered for drinks in the hostel and discussed the formation of a club and evidently decided on the motion. Unfortunately I can shed no light on their activities as most of them were not known to me at the time. It also came to my notice much later that I was discussed and deemed unacceptable for president because of my religious beliefs.

On the day of the meeting Vlado Skerbinšek was confirmed as chairman of the meeting, but could not run it; in fact very few people knew how a meeting should be run. After some fruitless talk I moved that we form an association. When this was agreed to I again moved that a committee be elected. Skerbinšek, Ivan Urh and I, were proposed for the position of president. Vlado Skerbinšek was elected with Urh and me receiving the same number of votes. Again I proposed that Ivan Urh be vice president and Franc Bresnik be the secretary. Someone then recommended me for the treasurer's position. I do not recall the rest of the committee, except to say that Frank Hribar, Janez Tadini, Miha Hovar and Ivan Kink were members. We immediately decided to meet in a few days for the first committee meeting at Hribar's residence in Campbell.

The first meeting made no progress. We argued about everything and could not agree on anything. After proposing many motions I told the president that he has to have the motions discussed and either accept or reject them. He would not accept my advice. After a confrontation president Skerbinšek said that he is the president, like Tito, who makes the proposals and we must accept them. That was naturally too much to accept and a lot of arguing and even yelling took place. The president left the meeting. I immediately moved that Ivan Urh takes over the presidency and that we convene another meeting. I think that the next meeting was again held at Hribar's home and after that we tried to rotate them between committee members. We soon agreed on the basics of how to run the club. We discussed who would do what work and the amount charged for membership and how to collect it and how to organize the functions that were coming up. St. Nicholas function, the New Years dance and masked ball for Shrove Tuesday were our immediate concern. We also talked about the name and the registration as well as the constitution for the association. The meetings gave us a lot of work and also a lot of pleasure. Often we sat till the early hours of the morning being in no hurry to go home. Some wives were not too happy about this and Mrs Bresnik was the first one to insist that we hold the meetings at their home or in the little office next to their shop in Queanbeyan.

With December approaching I took on the organization of a traditional St. Nicholas. I got permission to use a classroom at St Patrick's school in Braddon; I was a close friend with parish priest Father Favier whom I often contacted for the use of the church for mass when Slovenian priests visited. There were not many children available at the time and I still know them all. It was Tabo and Nelka Kapič, Ingrid Urh, Andrej and Alenka Lavrenčič, Jožmarie, Franki and Michael Bresnik and Cvetki, Johny, Barbara and Vivien Falež. Those that were learning an instrument were asked to play it. Those that could not play were asked to learn a poem for Miklavž. The children dressed up as angels or devils with great enthusiasm and I acted as Miklavž. I have no doubt that most of you will think that that was no special feat, but everything had to be made, including the vestments for angels, devils and especially Miklavž with a mitre. Most of such performances are organised by several people that cooperate and join in. At that time I was on my own.

The organization of the New Year dance was again mainly in my hands, except the hire of the Tennis Hall in Manuka. It would be much easier if we shared the work. I had to hire the tables and chairs that had to be transported from Fyshwick. I took on the purchase of beer, vine and spirits from a pub in Queanbeyan where I also hired the glasses. I even arranged the paper table cloth for the tables and the flowers on the tables. The flowering peaches were still blooming white and red and I decided to stain some of them blue, so the flowers would represent the Slovenian flag on the tables. Ada still laughs at my painting of flowers. I asked the ladies for help in the kitchen and for food, which included bread, sausages, cabbage and strudel. Many other little things like knives, forks, plates and serviettes had to be taken care of. I was the fool who did it all. Frank Bresnik brought the lottery prices and somebody organised the musicians.

The evening started well enough but some time before midnight an argument started between young men. The argument changed to a fight and Miha Valenci immersed with a bloody face. His rival in love was a little stocky fellow who wanted to break up the dance, as often happens in Slovenia. I was concerned for our reputation. Liqueur licence was hard to get and if we wanted to continue with our activities we had to remain respectable. The majority of guests understood the consequences and eventually we were able to calm the situation. The licence expired at twelve o'clock and half an hour later everything had to be still and everyone gone home. This was not easy as many were in high spirits and intoxicated from alcohol and enthusiasm. We decided to lock up and return in the morning to clean up. Only a few of us turned up. Those that have been absent for the preparation were also missing for cleaning. One of the men complained because I collected the full bottles to return them for credit. He insisted that at a dance in Sydney they shared everything that was left over. I was concerned about the bank-balance; I also tried to avoid any opportunity for gossip that someone took more than they should. Such rumours were going around other Slovenian clubs.

With a few hundred dollars in the club's account I was eager to convince as many Slovenians as possible to join the Association. The Committee decided on an entry fee of ten pounds and a yearly

membership fee of the same amount. I approached as many Slovenians as possible to join. Those working for our firm had no chance to escape, especially when they collected their pay. In the first year we gathered approximately fifty to sixty members some of them being of other nationalities. Most of them were again those working for our firm, Rudi Kaltner being one of the first.

To boost our income we regularly organized dances for New Year, for Shrovetide, Easter Monday, Mothers Day, Annual Dance and Vine harvest. We also prepared children's concerts for Mother's Day and St Nicholas Day. We held one or two picnics a year. These activities went on for over six years before the club was completed; it took many hours and much energy of many people, especially while we had no premises and everything had to be arranged in rented halls or other clubs. I wish to express my gratitude to everyone that helped and sacrificed many hours in voluntary work. It would be impossible for me to recount how many hours and telephone calls and how many car trips it took to organise all these events. We did not all contribute equally. It might not be appropriate to say that my family contributed the most but then no one else has ever said it and even if it seems boastful it should be recorded for history's sake. Unfortunately some members hardly lifted a finger.

The organization was successfully run by Ivan Urh for two years while I was eagerly collecting the money. We banked proximately 1,500 pounds yearly. After the change of currency this was over six thousand dollars in the bank. These days it seems very little but weekly wage then was below one hundred dollars. Toward the end of 1967 Ivan Urh did not wish to continue as president and I was elected in his position.

At the beginning the committee kept in touch with members by an information sheet. It took almost four years for the first club bulletin to emerge. Frank Bresnik, as the secretary of the Association, seemed the most appropriate person to take on the position of the editor. He insisted that the bulletin be named 'Pavliha', named after a Slovenian humorous paper. Pavliha was perhaps appropriate for the content it produced even though I was never satisfied with the name. I must explain that Frank's Slovenian was not the best, nor was mine for that matter. Eventually I started to edit some articles until I became responsible for the bulletin. When we received the first sketches of the proposed club-house from the architect; the design was to portray Triglav the highest mountain in Slovenia. Frank produced a magnificent logo that we used for the heading of the new Clubs-bulletin. At the same time I was able to persuade the committee to name the bulletin Triglav. The bulletin was typed on a stencil and then copied by hand on a friend's machine that took me many hours. The modern copying machines were not available then.

We tried to make the organisation legal and incorporated. Our solicitor Fred Barker who also became a member gave me all the legal advice and instructions. We needed a set of rules that would be acceptable to the members and to the authorities. Since I was acquainted with the German Club's rules that were written in German and English I proposed to the committee that we translate them and adopt them. Once this was accepted I was given the privilege to translate them with the help of Olga Telič.

Eventually the rules were printed by Simon's Špacapan's printing firm in Melbourne. Frank Bresnik designed a nice front cover and eventually we were given a certificate that we were registered as the Slovenian Australian Association of Canberra Incorporated and so became a legal body that could trade, borrow money and apply for a building block.

During my presidency the rules had to be accepted by the membership at a half-yearly general meeting that was held in the German club Harmony at Narrabundah. The rules had a clause that the Association must not be political or religious and we all agreed on. The main objections came from Ivan Urbas, with the claim that we are aligning ourselves too closely to Germans by adopting the German Constitution. But the German club constitution was adopted from another ethnic club in the first place. Urbas further insisted that the Association should not allow membership to the clergy and that they should not be present at meetings of the Association. This was interesting because Father Mikula was present. Urbas had considerable support. I strongly objected and claimed that every Slovenian should be welcome otherwise we would have difficulty building the club-house and we would also have difficulty in keeping it functional after its completion. I concluded that I had no

interest in an Association that would exclude Slovenians for their religious beliefs and that I have no further interest in building a club-house that would oppress its own members. After a hectic argument I resigned as president and later submitted my reasons in writing. The presidency was temporally taken over by Ivan Urbas.

At the next yearly general meeting Ivan Urh again took on the presidency. As the building of the club was on the horizon a building committee was formed and I was elected president of it. The responsibility of this body, which was still part of the general committee, was to obtain a block of land, prepare the plans and arrange everything necessary for the building to commence. With Ivan Urh leading the Association I was hopeful that the ideological dispute with Urbas could be minimised. My personal endeavours were to contact individual firms and subcontractors to supply us with materials at a reduced price or carry out contracting at a low price or even next to no charge when we commence building. As an active builder I was able to negotiate with Builders Supply Co-Operative for all the building materials at a reduced price. Stegbar Windows offered a friendly price for all the windows and doors. P. C. Items and Tiles Company gave us a very good deal on tiles. In fact all the firms and subcontractors that F & K Builders used or traded with were very kind and willing to help with attractive prices.

The Committee decided to contact every known Slovenian in Canberra and Queanbeyan to become a member. The two Sečko brothers became members only a short time before. In pairs we visited other Slovenian families that were potential members. Frank Čulek and I visited most of our people. At the same time we asked them how much in money or voluntary labour would they be prepared to contribute when we commence building the club? All the pledges were recorded. Generally we were successful and received good cooperation. When we visited Bert Pribac, who moved from Melbourne only a year or so ago, we could not convince him to become a member. At the next committee meeting Frank Sečko told us to leave it to him. Indeed he was successful in a reasonably short time. Frank Sečko was a Lutheran and Pribac has changed from a catholic to a protestant only a few years ago. I believe that Frank's success was based on this common ground.

We continued with dances and cultural activities. I arranged the dances at different venues from O'Donnell Youth Centre to the Albert Hall and German Club. Someone else arranged a couple of dances at the Croatian Clubs in Deakin and O'Connor while I was absent. In 1970 Frank Sečko became the president and someone in the Croatian club called him a communist and it sparked a confrontation. I was not present but later I had to mediate by mail. Frank Sečko was apparently already known to the Croatians as a Yugoslav Communist.

Arranging the musicians for dances was often my responsibility. Preparing and cleaning of halls after the dances were supposed to be done by all committee members but few turned up. My family, Lojze Risa, Miha Valenci and Franc Čulek were faithful helpers. We also had to print and distribute entry tickets; we expected every committee member to sell at least ten tickets. Some sold them all, some sold a few, and a few returned them all, indicating that they were not even coming themselves. This was distressing to me, since I usually distributed thirty, forty and even fifty tickets and sometimes donated them so people would come.

By this time we were looking for an architect for the club. We approached a Slovenian draftsman but he demanded a fee of six hundred dollars which was not acceptable. Eventually I found a young Ukrainian architect that was prepared to draw the basic plans for 200 dollars. His first sketches were enthusiastically acceptable by everyone.

The Department of Capital Territory was the authority that granted the lease for the land but the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) was responsible for allotting the land; they would determine if we are worthy of it and if we could fulfil their requirements. My argument to them was that most of our members are good tradesmen employed in the building industry and would do everything on voluntary bases.

Once the plans were drawn and approved by the club committee and by the membership the plans were ready to be submitted to NCDC for a preliminary perusal. Only after a provisional approval was

I able to commence negotiating for a building site. No other person offered to be involved. I was at NCDC doorstep every few days with a new request or a new proposal.

The first building site was offered in Jamison at Belconnen that was at the time still undeveloped. I rejected it, because I wished to obtain a site in the centre of the city. I was asking for a site that is the City-Park today, so no wonder I was brushed of. I should explain that at that time the Association only had about 12,000 dollars and about one hundred members. With these resources we could hardly develop a prominent site in the centre of the city. I had to moderate my demands. The next offer was at the top of Narrabundah, at that time in a never land. Hindmarsh was only commenced. The following offer was at Mawson shopping centre. This site was certainly not suitable for the plans we had prepared. The block of land was in a row of clubs. Next offer was again in Narrabundah in the vicinity of the German club. This site would have certainly been rejected by people who objected to be close to Germans. Finally a site was available in Woden, the site that I immediately considered acceptable. Not that it was so obvious then. Just a few weeks earlier seven people drowned only a couple hundred meters away. The roads were still under construction and during a downpour several cars were washed away by the flood. The site was under water for a few days and I was not sure that the members would accept it. Yet the site for the club had several positive aspects. It was situated next to a sport oval and a parking area, very close to the proposed district town centre. It was nearly in the geographic centre of Canberra, with a direct route to Queanbeyan. It was a corner block that would perfectly suit the club design. For all these reasons I was happy for having rejected all the previous offers. My choice must have been good for no one ever complained about it.

Around July 1970 I submitted the plans for final approval and filled out the request for a building permit with all other required forms.

More or less straight after that Ada, the two girls and I departed for Slovenia for a three months holiday. I did not want the building project to be held up so I handed a folder to Frank Sečko, the then president, with copies of the plans, specification and all other relevant information and papers. He was himself a partner in ACT Builders Pty. Ltd. involved with many large projects, like government schools and similar. I asked Frank to commence building as soon as the plans were approved by the Department.

When we returned after three month nothing was done. Frank explained that the Department asked for the engineering calculations and because they did not exist, he had to go to his engineer to have them made. His engineer did not only make new calculations but he also designed a completely new steel structure. I asked Frank why he did not follow my instructions from the folder that I left him. He did not even remember the folder. It took a couple more months and a few telephone calls until the plans were approved and we were ready for building.

My sons Florian and John were my right hand from the first day after we begun building the clubhouse. They helped me with setting out the building and Joe Patafta dug out the trenches with his backhoe free of charge. The site had considerable amount of fill and the trenches had to go right through the fill to natural ground. In some places this was as deep as two meters but in some places it was just normal depth. Jože Penca helped us cleaning the trenches and several members helped with concreting. It was ready for the bricklayers early in December 1970.

In January 1971, Lojz Kavaš set the first bricks; he lifted one corner to give as an indication what it would look like. The corners were sloping inwards considerably and we had no indication how it would work or even look. The rest of bricklaying had to wait for the erection of timber frames and the erection of the steel construction that was done by a Slovenian steel manufacturer from Victoria. He has done a magnificent job at a reasonable price. He deserves our thanks.

The drainage was done by Miro Tenčič, an Istrian, free of charge. For this he later received an honorary membership. A few of us helped with minor tasks, but laying the pipes was all done by Miro.

At the time Canberra enjoyed full employment and many hours of overtime were available. Especially on Saturdays people were able to work for their bosses for nearly double the pay.

Everyone needs a rest so asking people to come and work on the club on Sundays, was not easy. Still, week after week I was on the phone asking and pleading with bricklayers and others to help. A few people came on Saturdays and my sons and I were always with them, Saturdays and Sundays throughout the year. During the week I was often preparing and arranging club matters leaving my partner Rudi to run our firm. The only compensation I could offer Rudi was a free honorary membership of the Slovenian Association. I have been later often criticized for offering an honorary membership to foreigners.

It was difficult to get bricklayers; making timber frames and placing joints to the flat roofs and setting up windows and door frames was done with relative ease while the bricklaying proceeded.

The roof was the most demanding work; we were very lucky that Miha Hovar and Adolf Rot undertook to cover the roof with ceiling panels, insulation and metal sheets. It took Adolf and Miha over a fortnight to complete the work and I was there at their side, helping where I could, every day. Franc Sabotič with his gang of concreters made the floor. A few doors had to be hanged to bring the building to a lock up stage. After concrete was cured we commenced with the parquetry.

At the yearly general meeting and the election of the new committee I became the president again, mainly in recognition for my efforts in building the clubhouse. Most members were very cooperative and helpful. At this meeting we decided to levy a minimum contribution on every Slovenian in Canberra, who wanted to become a member. Every male member would be asked to contribute forty hours of work or donate one hundred dollars. Slovenian females and all members of other nationalities were exempt from this levy. We sent a letter to all Slovenians informing them about this decision; we also asked them to let the Association know of any difficulties so they could be excused from the obligation. Many already contributed much more than the basic levy.

Soon after the letters were sent out the Committee received an angry two page letter from Bert Pribac. He attacked the committee that the club had no right to make such demands since it received the block of land free of charge. He wrote that this would prevent other Slovenians to become Foundation members if they come to Canberra later. This was illogical since Foundation members are always those that help to establish an Association. In conclusion Bert Pribac resigned from the Association and kept away for several years.

The building advanced but the money was running out. We banked with the Scottish-New Zealand Bank where we were promised a loan at the appropriate time. The time has now arrived and the manager told me that he can not assist us. This was a mean trick for we banked with the bank for over five years and I was a customer for many years myself. I closed my account and moved to the National Bank in Woden. The Association did likewise; we immediately applied for a loan of 40,000 dollars. The manager tried to increase the number of bank customers and wanted individual members to sign guaranties for the loan. A few of us signed.

Most of the carpentry, the kitchen and the bar were finished by members. Tiling in the bathrooms and plumbing was done by sub-contractors that worked for F. & K. Builders. Frank Bresnik's contribution was a mural Bled. Frank deserved and received a lot of recognition for his contribution. I loaned him a folder of an album that had a beautiful picture of Bled on it; I am still waiting to put my record back into that folder.

Marjan Koren and Roman Divjak did an enormous job of fitting the lights and other utensils primarily in the kitchen and the bar; electrical wiring was done earlier by Janez Penca and Nick Direw. Janez Černe looked after sound installations and special lighting. With so many Slovenian painters in Canberra one would have thought it would be easy but Polde Bajt and Tony Grijl did it nearly single-handed. I still wonder why some people have so much to give while others stand idly looking on and perhaps even criticise.

Around the time of the general meeting in 1971 Frank Bresnik returned from his trip to Slovenia. He announced that the ensemble Lojze Slak will come to Australia in the following year. This gave us great pleasure, since the club would be completed and we could make it a memorable occasion. He insisted that we call a meeting of the Slovenian clubs in Australia to discuss the tour and the preparation for it. I saw no difficulty with that and the Club and the Committee also approved of it. In

October 1971 the representatives of Slovenian associations arrived in Canberra for the meeting in our uncompleted clubhouse. Sydney was represented by Dušan Lajovic and Mr. Ovičaj; Melbourne was represented by Marjan Peršič and Mr. Česnik; Adelaide was represented by its president, whose name I do not know. Canberra was represented by Ivan Urh, Frank Bresnik and I. As we sat down for the meeting Lojze Košorok came with a friend uninvited and said that they represented Club Triglav from Sydney.

I was confirmed as chairman; we had two major items on the agenda. The first was the formation of a Federation of Slovenian Associations of Australia (Zveza slovenskih društev v Avstraliji -ZSDA) and the visit of Ensemble Slak. We were all in favour of a Slovenian Federation and I was elected president. Marjan Peršič said that Club Triglav is not a legitimate Association; since it is wholly owned and affiliated to a Pty. Ltd. Company that is owned by shareholders, who control the elections of the Triglav committee. The president, vice-president, secretary, vice-secretary, treasurer and vice-treasurer, in fact the majority of the committee is not elected but named by the Company. The question of Club Triglav was discussed at length and finally left to the new secretary of ZSDA, Marjan Peršič to enquire into the matter and report back at the following meeting. Marjan Peršič reported after several weeks that Triglav is not a legitimate Slovenian Association and was therefore not eligible to become a member of ZSDA.

At the meeting Frank Bresnik produced a letter informing us that Slovenska izseljenska Matica (Slovenian Emigrant Society) will bring the Ensemble Slak to Australia. With them would also be Matej Bor, who was a well known communist. Ivan Urh was sitting next to Frank and he noticed that the letter was addressed to: President Franc Bresnik. Frank was not the president.

Matica was established by ex-members of UDBA - Yugoslav interior police. Yugoslavia at the time strictly controlled its borders and only the most trusted communists were permitted to have contacts with emigrants and people outside the borders. After the war Tito said that anyone who escaped was a criminal. Matica now had to neutralise the escapees; they tried to bribe us with music and dance, "potica in klobase". We escaped their stick so they now offered us a carrot. All the presidents of Matica through the years, as far as I know, were UDBA members. For this reasons it was not logical to cooperate with them.

Father Bazilij Valentin from Melbourne warned us that Matica will try to infiltrate the Slovenian community in Australia. We realised that we would have to accept Matica's representatives if we wanted the performance of the Ensemble but we wanted Matica to stay in the background. We did not want to become a political football so the meeting decided that I as the president of the Federation convey this to the visitors at the airport in Sydney upon their arrival.

Bresnik was given the role of a coordinator. The guests were to travel around Australia by plane and a charge account for the tickets would be opened with Qantas. All the moneys received for their performances were to be paid into the "Slak Account" at the National Bank of Australia with co-signatories Bresnik and Falež. This money was to be used for the expenses incurred and the remaining funds were to go to the Ensemble at the conclusion of the tour. Qantas had a special deal that made every 16th ticket free of charge. There were 14 people in the entourage. Frank and I were 15 and 16 and so would travel with the visitors at no extra cost. All this was discussed and agreed on.

The time before Christmas was an opportunity for the Slovenian Club in Canberra to raise funds by hosting Christmas parties for other organizations. We still had to finish the landscaping and cleaning, putting up curtains and laying floor coverings. The kitchen was to be in the capable hands of Marija and Vinko Osolnik. The liquor licence was held by Frank Bresnik. The opening was fast approaching and the pressure on me was tremendous for I was never before in hospitality business. Buying tables and chairs, pots and pans, plates and cutlery, glasses and hundred and one thing, including the drinks for the bar was a big order. The liquor licence left it all to me.

On the 2nd of December 1971 we opened the doors; all those who helped bring the project to completion were present; the solicitor, the architect, the bank manager and a few public servants mixed with the tradesmen and our own faithful and helpful workers. In a short speech I thanked and

congratulated everybody for their generous help and tremendous achievement. We all enjoyed a generous banquet, lot of drinks and pleasant company.

The Association employed a barmaid from ten in the morning till six in the evening. From six to early hours in the mornings the committee members took over the bar as volunteers and the doors seldom closed before midnight. Business was pretty hectic and at the beginning the club was open seven days with a dance every Saturday and Sunday. Those that could not work in the bar were asked to be at the door to oversee the visitors. We were young and happy in each others company so most people were willing to pitch in.

Besides general management of the club my big duty was the security of the club. I was often thrown out of bed by the security men calling me to come and lock up a door or two. I did that for several years. The club had a mortgage but our debt did not include the purchase of freezers and beer installation, the furniture, the kitchen equipment and the bar supplies, that was all purchased with an overdraft. We were all happy including the bank that the trade went so well.

Slak Ensemble arrived in February. The club rented the main auditorium in Civic for the concert; advertisements were placed in the Canberra Times and on television. Tickets were sold. I called a meeting to discuss last minute concerns. We decided to billet the guests among club members and I accepted the president and the secretary of Matica.

Janez Penca who was a friend of Embassy's secretary asked about the tickets for the Yugoslav Embassy personnel. We decided to reserve a row of seats in the front of the theatre for them but they would have to purchase the tickets like everybody else. If Matica wanted to have them as guests they could refund them the money. The tickets were stored in a desk draw in the office for when they wanted to buy them.

I felt that as the president I had to welcome the Ensemble so I travelled to Sydney. Members of Club Triglav already arranged a large room for the reception. I made a short welcoming speech and added that ZSDA accepts Matica as our guests but we wished to focus on the Ensemble Slak. The president of Matica said in reply that Matica came for a visit and brought the Ensemble as a gift to Australian Slovenians. I expected Lojze Slak to reply but he retreated. We boarded the bus for Canberra where I asked Lojze Slak to plant a linden tree in front of the club. Almost immediately the whole entourage with a few club members led by Frank Bresnik boarded the bus and left for the Yugoslav Embassy. I was asked to join them but I declined. The musicians were very well received in the hired hall in Civic. In the third row were the people from the Embassy. I deposited the proceeds from the concert in the special bank account.

The following morning we all departed for Adelaide. The club was a wooden hall as often seen in Australia at that time. It was the first Slovenian building erected only a few months before the Club in Canberra. It was built with the legacy of a deceased Slovenian that left everything to the Adelaide Association. The club was filled to the brim and the people were hanging out the doors. People were jubilant and dancing went on late into the night. After the concert I was handed a check and promptly banked it while still in Adelaide.

The following morning we left for Geelong. Bresnik was in a joyous mood dominating the scene, quite happily responding to the title of president. I was chatting with some local people without being recognised either as the president of the Federation or the president of the Slovenian Club in Canberra. The people's main concern was the music and the musicians, who quickly made friends with the local girls.

In Melbourne the story was much the same. Ivo Leber was running the show and he brightened the visit with a few parties. Marjan Peršič was also very prominent with Mrs. Mesarič who soon after became Mrs. Peršič. The group stayed in Melbourne several days and we made excursions to different locations. On the way to Philip Island I was sitting on my own in the bus when Janez, one of the singers, joined me and said: "You seem a little lonesome." I said: "Yes." He continued: "So am I. They are all communists and we have nothing in common." Janez left the Ensemble some years later and I was able to find him near Škofja Loka, when I was in Slovenia in 1991 and we recalled the ups and downs of that visit.

We went on to Tasmania for one day only. There were only a couple of dozens of Slovenians. From Sydney I decided to return home. I was isolated and could not take it any more. The group continued to Brisbane and Mt. Isa. Mirko Cuderman, then president in Brisbane, told me that they approached him straight after arrival saying that there can only be streamers but no Slovenian flag. They knew that our Clubs, except Triglav, refused to have a communist star on the Slovenian flag.

When I returned to Canberra I checked on the tickets intended for the Embassy staff. There were neither tickets nor money in the drawer. At the following committee meeting I raised the question about them and eventually it was revealed that Janez Penca, who was the secretary of the Association, handed them to Embassy people free of charge. The committee in Canberra, at that time was stacked with Yugoslav sympathisers and no one was prepared to reprimand Penca for acting against the committee's decision.

The Slak tour was to end with a concert and a dance in the Canberra club. The club was fully booked and decorated for the occasion. Next day, on Sunday was a mass in the church close by and people were talking that the Slak's boys would sing for the occasion. Everyone was happy with the arrangements and eager for the guests to return. The bus pulled up pretty late and the guests already gathered for the dance. The president of Matica came straight to me and said angrily: "Ensemble Slak won't play tonight and they won't sing in the church tomorrow either." My reply was: "Why, what is wrong?" He continued: "We want the money that you collected from the concerts tonight." I replied: "You can't have it because I banked it as the committee decided." Some money was paid to Bresnik and he should have banked it as well, but he didn't as I have seen from the statements. I tried to find a compromise, for it would have really been a fiasco if we had to send the people home. I said: "If Bresnik is prepared to go to the bank on Monday and relieve me from my responsibilities I am prepared to let him manage the account." This then was sufficient and the musicians did not boycott the dance, however they did not sing in the church. Matica's people did not come to stay in our home for the last two days, as they did when they arrived, but rather lodged with Frank Sečko who was more in tune with their politics. First thing on Monday I contacted the bank and told the manager that I wish to transfer my responsibilities for the account to Frank Bresnik. I asked him to get a written statement from Frank that he accepts the responsibility and all the obligations regarding the account.

After a successful and pleasant last night the Ensemble departed and things went back to normal. The club was well patronised and the billiard tables were fully occupied most of the time. Among the regular players were a few people from the Yugoslav Embassy with their friends. Ludvik Kerec once remarked: With these people constantly in our club, the Croatians might throw a bomb at us. I approached Ladko Lazič who was one of the visitors and explained that the law only allows two visits per year to non-members. A few days later Lazič filled in an application form and paid the prescribed fee. I was later told that Lazič was a member of UDBA, attached to the Embassy to investigate and control the Croatians, who were apparently bombing Yugoslav venues. Co-signatories on the application form for membership were from club members Angel Jurišević and Milan Stanič. The application was accepted in the bar of the club and discussed at the monthly general meeting. Nobody objected to Lazič's membership so the secretary Janez Penca informed Lazič that he has been accepted as a member.

During the following weeks people voiced objections to Lazič's membership. They complained that Lazič was a representative of the communist regime we escaped from and that Lazič was in a position to grant or refuse visas to Slovenians when they applied to go home on holidays; Slovenian members of the club felt obliged to act subserviently and speak Serbo-Croatian with Lazič. Most Slovenians resented the fact that they would have to be dominated in Australia and in the club they built with their volunteer labour.

I explained that the next monthly meeting could reverse the decision, if the members so desired. That is what happened. The majority voted against Lazič's membership.



The Compare Mr Ivan Urh and official guest Senator Lajovic

The club was doing well holding dances every weekend. Individuals often organised parties that included other nationalities with a mixed and joyous patronage. Among new members was a Slovenian teacher, Alex Tuma that commenced a Slovenian class for children. Towards the middle of the year, the Association decided to have an official opening of the club with a ball which was an overwhelming success. Alex Tuma trained a choir from members of the club for the occasion. Father Bernard Ambrožič blessed the club. Ludvig Klakočar from Sydney came with his choir Škrjančki. Melbourne Ensemble, Drava entertained us. A young lady from Melbourne, Magda Mesarič, was the hostess. Our youth at that stage were still too young for this important occasion. The club was full to the brim with some 340 guests present. Among them were a few local dignitaries and representatives from all Slovenian organizations

The club's choir opened the festivities with the Slovenian and Australian anthem. My speech was well received and everyone performed magnificently. I can safely say, that the function was the best ever held in the Canberra club.

The account with Qantas for the tickets for Ensemble Slak was not paid and the reminders kept coming for months. With Bresnik's guarantee that he accepts the responsibility for the account the club kept forwarding the bills to him. Nothing happened until the club placed the matter into solicitor's hands. I do not know how Matica and Bresnik settled the account.

The atmosphere in the club generally was pleasant and cordial, even though two factions were clearly emerging: one was friendly towards communist Yugoslav regime and the other hated it.

I wrote to Vinag in Maribor to order Slovenian wines. It took several months before the wines arrived and the quality was exceptionally good. In the despatch were several boxes of selected archive wines that we did not really appreciate enough initially. The club sold a bottle for 7.00 dollars and that might have been a little steep at the time. When we realised how good it was it sold like hot cakes and all too soon it was all gone. I again ordered the same wine but added that we would like to have the bottles marked Slovenian wine; not Yugoslav. The next shipment was nowhere as good as the first.

Roughly at that time the then Minister of Justice, Senator Murphy made a political attack on ASIO (Australian Secret Intelligence Agency) and some Croatian Organizations. This became a big political affair. Senator Murphy was a member of the Labour Party that did not control the Senate. For this reason the Senate began to investigate Senator Murphy and the whole affair around ASIO.

On the day before a general meeting Mrs. Rafka Kobal approached me and complained that because the club was not friendly towards Yugoslav Embassy they made her wait for hours at the Embassy and then they said that if they can not patronise the club, they will not issue visas to Slovenia for Club members. I asked Mrs. Kobal to come to the meeting and tell us all about it. Rafka Kobal repeated her complaints to the meeting and again blamed the Association for Embassy's actions. I was pretty upset, because the Embassy interfered in Club's affairs; they tried to blackmail us into letting them control our rules and activities. I proposed to submit a report to the "Senate Select Committee for the rights of migrants" and lodge our complaint for the treatment we were receiving from the Embassy. The members approved and I made the complaint first in writing and later on at one of the sittings of the Committee. Needless to say, that it was all in vain; nothing actually changed.

Shortly before the next annual general meeting the Yugoslav ambassador invited several prominent members of the Slovenia Association, friendly to the Embassy, for drinks. Among the invited were Franc Sečko, Franc Bresnik, Janez Penca, Angel Juriševič and others. I only know about this meeting because the story was recounted among members in the club. The ambassador apparently welcomed them and urged them to take control and make the Association cooperate with the Yugoslav embassy and the Yugoslav regime. Frank Bresnik also addressed the meeting and urged them to dismiss the present committee at the next general meeting.

On the day of the meeting of the Association almost everyone was in attendance. I addressed the meeting and said that others had a meeting at the Yugoslav embassy only a few days ago, but we came together to our club to choose our leaders. I spoke about my work and countless services I was able to offer over the years. In return for my efforts I only received criticism and condemnation from pro Yugoslav members. I declared my intention to stand for president with the proviso, that I select my own committee, because it was impossible to work in an atmosphere of criticism and innuendo. At the same time I invited Franc Sečko to stand against me with the same conditions. After the count of the votes Sečko received 24 votes and I received 59. I expected that the huge difference in the votes would be decisive enough to stop the division but the rumours and innuendos went on.

In the following months Jože Žagar told me that his friend in Slovenia, Franc Kunaver, was singing in a quartet, Savski val. They were very eager to come to Australia. We soon decided to sponsor them. It took several months and a lot of good will. On the last day, when they were all packed, ready to come, they still had no visas and tickets. In fact they only received them in Vienna on the way to the airport. With the four singers came also a musical trio and an entertainer-comedian. I contacted all Slovenian organizations with an offer for a concert. Jože Žagar, Jaka Kapelj and I loaded the whole group with our wives into three cars and drove to Lightning Ridge, Brisbane, Sydney and Wollongong.

All the clubs, except Club Triglav accepted the offer. Triglav members always cooperated closely with Wollongong and all of them came to the Wollongong concert. As soon as we arrived I was confronted by a group of Triglav members, most prominent among them being Jože Čuješ. The performers went to the stage as we became embroiled in politics. I mentioned that communism was threatening the whole world including Slovenia. Čuješ then asked: "What about the Pope?" I replied that I wasn't aware that the Pope had armies. Eventually I retreated and kept to myself while the performers socialised. It was generally agreed that all the door-takings go to the performers, but Triglav and Wollongong club would have none of that. They gave what they thought was right.

After the tour that lasted a couple of weeks we returned to Canberra and the group continued to Adelaide and Melbourne on their own. When they returned I hoped that the income would be sufficient to cover the costs. I guaranteed them an income of ten thousand dollars to cover their costs and we had to cover the costs in Australia. We just made it and we were all happy to say to them: "Good bye." That was not the end of the problems for the guests from Slovenia. Their leader, Franci Kunaver, told me that they were ostracised and lost opportunities to perform back home.

The ideological differences were becoming more obvious at the meetings of the Canberra Association. I was strongly opposing any association with the communist regime back home and the Yugoslav Embassy; I always received a strong backing from the majority of the members. Our stand was considered treason by Yugoslav regime and it was strongly opposed by those wanting cooperation with Matica.

Matica gained big influence with its monthly "Rodna gruda" magazine. It was generally reported that Matica urged their supporters to take over the leadership of the associations or failing that they form parallel associations. I was strongly criticized by my opponents for inviting to one of the meetings of the Association people who were not of Slovenian origin but have greatly contributed to the club, sometimes much more than some of our own people. Only three or four came but that was enough for them to accuse me of fraud, and these accusations dragged on forever. It seemed quite just to my opponents to have people from other Yugoslav nationalities participate as full members, among them Drago Rudman and Milan Stanič.

The following year my wife Ada and I prepared to go overseas when Polde Bajt took on the presidency. Because of my opposition to Yugoslav influence in the club I was afraid to go to Slovenia. We decided instead on a world trip to visit Slovenian communities in Argentina, USA and Canada, returning through Europe and Hong Kong.

The Slovenian community in Argentina consists predominantly of people who escaped when communists assumed power after the war. After Slovenian independence these people became known in Slovenia as the "Argentinean miracle". They are a well run community; they have a well organised Slovenian education system and the children of third and fourth generation still speak fluent Slovenian, know Slovenian history and culture. They have religious centres, singing and drama groups. They published many Slovenian books; they dispatch several newspapers to Slovenians all over the world. I was receiving their paper Svobodna Slovenija – Liberated Slovenia and it convinced me that it would be worth paying them a visit.

Just as we settled into the hotel in Buenos Aires we were told that president Peron died. Everything from restaurants to shops closed down. Fortunately we had the address of professor Baraga who showed us the main phases of Slovenian life in Buenos Aires before we were able to catch the first flight to the USA.

Ada and I stopped at Cleveland in Ohio and Lemont in Illinois that also have significant Slovenian communities. We dropped in at Disneyland and other world known places like, San Francisco, Washington, New York, Vancouver and Toronto. Once in Europe we stopped in Koroška from where I contacted my relatives and friends in Slovenia. My uncle Albert came from Radmirje and my school-friend Slavko Godec with his wife came from Hotinja vas. This was very pleasant but it was nothing like going home. In fact this was the real taste of my 21 years long ostracism for opposing the regime.

When we returned to Canberra the club was in a state of euphoria. A singing group Minors hosted by Australian Franciscans arrived from Slovenia. This group of young friars was very popular and they visited all Slovenian organizations in Australia. Their performance in Canberra was the last before their return to Slovenia. We were able to take them on a tour of our farm we still had between Bredbo and Jerangle and show them how the rabbits plagued Australia. To exterminate them we went shooting at night with a spotlight; they never saw anything like that before. Their performance in Canberra was very well received. I received a big tribute from one of the performers with these words: "I must compliment you on your behaviour. I did not hear from you one negative word about others, even though others had a lot to say about you." Rumours and innuendo were rampant by now. I was accused of associating with fascists and Nazis because I visited Argentinean Slovenians who were predominantly anti-communists.

Stanko Ozimič was very active for several years and he commenced the Slovenian school that was abandoned by Alex Tuma soon after the Official opening of the Club. Ozimic was very successful with teaching children Slovenian songs. He is still very well remembered by his students. He also became the Public Relation Officer of the Association. He approached me one day and told me that someone from Australian Foreign Affairs asked him if the Association would host the Slovenian Octet that would be brought to Australia by Qantas on its inaugural flight to Belgrade. I said: Certainly Stan, the Federation of Slovenian Associations so far hosted three groups, Ensemble Slak, Savski Val and Minors and is perfectly willing and able to undertake the task. Stanko advised his contact at the Foreign Affairs and the gentlemen promised he would contact him again soon. After nearly a week Stanko rang this gentleman but he said: "I am sorry but the matter was taken out of my hands.

Bert Pribac then came to the club with a two page long letter signed by him and Franc Bresnik. They claimed that they have been approached to host the Slovenian Octet on a tour of Australia. This was a bit much to take from a person that resigned from the club to avoid contributing to it; a person who refused to make any kind of contribution either by money or labour; a person who strongly criticized the club and kept away for over four years while other tours have taken place; this person was now offering the Association something that was rightfully ours.

It was obvious to everyone that the Yugoslav Embassy gave Pribac and Bresnik the right to meddle in the affairs of Slovenian Federation. Slovenian Octet and Slovenian songs are our heritage and should not be exploited by Yugoslav politics. We immediately called a meeting of the Association that condemned the offer of Embassy's agents. It was also decided to write to the Foreign Affairs and to Slovenian Associations in Australia asking them to support us in boycotting the Embassy's agents. Foreign Affairs did not respond and neither did the Slovenian Associations. It was devastating to see that the Canberra Association was let down by all Slovenian organizations. Even Father Bazilij Valentin in Melbourne, who at the time of Slak's tour strongly objected to communist political infiltration, accepted the imposed conditions from Pribac and Bresnik. The Slovenian Association of Canberra was denied the concert, because it would not accept communist agents as coordinators for the tour. The concert was held in the Canberra theatre without the participation of the Slovenian Association.

We were devastated but not beaten. The Slovenian Octet is one of the most accomplished Slovenian Ensembles recognised the world over. We were ostracised because we would not dance to the tunes of the Yugoslav communist regime. The interference of Yugoslav Embassy was unjustified also because the Octet was coming to Australia at the expense of the Australian taxpayers. Qantas was after all an Australian government owned airline, and not the property of Yugoslavia. Our committee decided to welcome the Octet by a letter that the secretary handed to them at the airport. In it we expressed our sorrow that we were denied the opportunity to welcome them in our club and told them that we would be happy to meet them should they give us the opportunity? They came to the club, unfortunately unannounced, when none of the leading members was present.

The atmosphere in the club worsened. The general patronage fell; the dances were not attended or held every weekend anymore. That affected the income. At times individuals were heckled or not spoken to. On one occasion a group, led by Franc Sečko, came from another club rather late in a rumbustious mood. They seemed intoxicated. The then president Polde Bajt who was working in the bar was collecting the empty glasses. Franc Sečko grabbed Polde by the neck. The tray with the glasses fell to the floor and the glasses broke. The incident was discussed at the committee meeting and Franc was sent a letter of reprimand with a bill of about ten dollars for the glasses.

The rumours attributed to Franc Bresnik began to circulate in the club that the letter club's secretary handed to the Octet at the airport was humiliating and denigrating the Octet. The committee wrote to Bresnik asking him to produce the letter. He did not. Instead of paying for the glasses Sečko verbally abused me and my mother with common Yugoslav swear words in the presence of other members. After several months Bresnik and Sečko were invited to a general meeting to clear the matter. The meeting was very noisy and abusive. Bresnik did not produce the 'our so called poisoned letter' nor would Sečko pay for the broken glasses. They were both offensive attacking the committee and they were expelled from the club by the majority of the members.

Bert Pribac immediately came to their defence. He gave the Club an ultimatum to reverse the decision on Bresnik's and Sečko's expulsion or they would establish a rival Slovenian club. The committee decided to ignore him. Within a few weeks we heard that a new organization called 'Karantanija' was formed and promptly held a dance in some community hall. The Yugoslav ambassador was the honorary guest and most of his staff was present.

After the Australian election in 1975 the Labour government offered an opportunity to ethnic communities in 1976 to have radio programmes in our own languages. Marjan Kovač who was the Vice-president of the Ethnic Community Council of ACT, informed me of the possibility on 2XX. This was a small AM station that was once a student radio but was now taken over by extreme leftist groups including homosexuals and lesbians. The government paid the station 20.00 dollars for every half an hour of ethnic broadcasting on air. I soon brokered a deal with 2XX to start broadcasting every Thursday night at seven but I then found that Pribac already had his foot in the door. We would have to alternate with Karantanija and our programs would be fortnightly. For the first program I asked the then Slovenian Senator Misha Lajovic to open our half-hour, which was prepared on tape.

From day one our club was attacked by Karantanija's speakers. In reply we ridiculed their unsubstantiated statements. This squabbling was naturally not permitted. Karantanija complained to the station, saying that we were attacking them, whereas the opposite was true. Our arguments went on for months and required a lot of translating. We proved that it was Karantanija that made the attacks on our Association by branding us fascists and reactionaries. Because we committed no offence we continued broadcasting and so did Karantanija. They had friends in the station.

All the groups that had their broadcasts on radio formed an organization called Ethnic Community Broadcasting Council and I was elected president. It was difficult to defend myself and the Association from all the accusations that Pribac made. One of their complaints was that people who helped to build the club were banned for life, which was not true. The rules of the Association state that anyone, expelled from the Association could reapply in twelve months. Whether they chose to ignore this option is hard to say, but it seems that they wanted to force the Association to admit that it was in the wrong. The club was equally hard-headed and the confrontation continued. Other members of Karantanija also attacked the Association on radio but Albin Grmek and Alojz Kavaš were expelled for their excesses. I lead the Ethnic Community Council for three years but because of Pribac's constant hostility and attacks I eventually abandoned the position.

General meetings of the Association were battlegrounds where people showed their real characters. Most of the ugly slander was done behind the scenes but at the meetings people exposed themselves and have shown their capabilities and their real values. I have a few tapes of the meetings and I must say that it is depressing and reviling to listen to them. One such meeting was soon after I returned from the trip to Argentina and America. Slovenian Association of Melbourne had a festivity for the completion of their club-house. Our Association was also invited and members joined the bus trip to Melbourne. I think that the Club even subsidised the fare. Just before our departure I completed the bulletin Triglav that had a couple of contentious articles. One of them was about Slovenians in Argentina, about their successful community life and devotion to Slovenia. The other article discussed Arch-bishop of Ljubljana, Mns. Gregorij Rožman who is wrongly considered by the communists to have been a traitor to Slovenia during the war. The trip to Melbourne was pleasant without any confrontation. I might mention that members who were considered as the opposition were dubiously absent even though, I think, Franc Bresnik was present. It might warrant saying that this was at the time of Polde's Bajt's presidency.

After our return a lot of activity took place and I soon found out, that the president was asked to call a general meeting because members were critical of the committee, which was supposedly dominated by me and that I have published Triglav without the supervision of the Committee and that Zveza slovenskih društev (ZSDA) of which I was president was somehow to blame. The group that demanded a meeting had to be at least fifteen members strong, according to the Club rules. The fifteen signatures were obtained and the meeting was called. The meeting started noisily and everyone was full of anticipation. It would be difficult to recollect everything that happened but it is important to stress that the people that signed the petition signed a rather vague complaint. Namely that the Committee was complaining about the Committee. Even that seems a more specific complaint than what was formulated in the petition.

Since I was the person directly attacked I took on the confrontation with the people that signed the petition; among them were many Committee members. I have put the question to them: "How can a group of people that was in the Committee complain about itself? If I was too influential why has the Committee not stopped me, since they had the majority on it?" The second fault with the petition was that it was poorly drafted and people were asked to sign it without really knowing what the reasons for the meeting were. After a brutal and offensive argument for several hours I finally formulated the complaints that have become obvious from the arguments and should have been included on the petition. I state them from memory:

The influence on the president Polde Bajt by Falež is unacceptable;

The writing in Triglav should be supervised and not left to Falež;

The Slovenian Association of Canberra should withdraw from ZSDA.

The three matters were discussed and none of them was carried. The Club went back to its usual activities but was naturally left with many bruises. Some members sunk very low by attacking and name calling, especially me. As already said the main battles were fought incognito and anonymously.

From here on I intentionally stayed in the background, even though I actively defended the Association or any of the presidents if they were under attack. If I was on the Committee I usually filled one of the less important positions. The following years were a constant battle to retain members in the Slovenian Association. Karantanija made a continuous effort to lure the members from the Association and every general meeting was a battle for supremacy. The battle was also fought in the *Novo doba*, a Yugoslav weekly with a Slovenian page. Several years later Pribac commented: "Čuješ from Sydney, Peršič from Melbourne and I in Canberra joined forces against Falež". Beside these were also others: Lojz Košorok, Jože Žohar from Sydney, Marjan Peršič and Ivanka Škof from Melbourne and Franc Sečko, Albin Grmek, Ivan Urbas and Alojz Kavaš of Canberra. I also had faithful supporters for without them my fight against them would have come to an end much earlier. What ever position I held I usually answered to the attacks in writing. They came from all these people that I have mentioned above. I got involved when exceptional circumstances developed, no matter what.

The meetings even though hotly contested always elected presidents and Committees that I or rather our side supported. I think that the president following Polde Bajt was Miha Hovar. I am battling with my memories but you must understand that without minutes or rather Club's record remembering is difficult. Some time into Miha's presidency an argument started between Erik Fras and Franc Čulek on one side and Miha Hovar on the other. During this argument Franc and Erik took Miha, the President, under arms and forced him outside the front door of the Club. This in fact was the first time Čulek really came to notoriety and showed his real character. Actually this statement is not totally correct. When Arch-bishop of Ljubljana Most Rev. dr. Šuštar was visiting in early 1980's, at a dinner in his honour the electrical fuses disappeared when the dinner was half cooked and Čulek just vanished. Čulek was blamed but nothing could be proved. Going back to the story the Association could not tolerate the removal of the president as it would have set a precedent and presidents could be replaced by anybody who was stronger and violent enough. To resolve the matter the Association called a general meeting.

The meeting decided that the trustees, Ivan Urh, Andrej Madon and I would listen to the people involved individually and then decide on the matter. The trustees consequently asked the three participants in the matter to leave the meeting so that they could be called in separately. Miha Hovar was prepared to leave the meeting but Franc Čulek and Erik Fras would not hear of it. They kept on screaming and yelling and no real solution was found. The trustees decided that there is no question that Čulek and Fras were at fault, what is plainly demonstrated by their behaviour even now. That was how far we were able to go. With all the controversy in the Club I think that we could not have pursued the matter any further.

I am not certain but I think that the next president was Marjan Kovač. He was probably the only president that caused a riot at someone else's club. He attended the opening the new Club Triglav in Sydney that Matica helped to finance. Marjan invited me to join them going to Club Triglav for the occasion. I was surprised that Marjan would organize such a visit to Triglav and I declined the invitation. Planšarji, an entertaining ensemble was visiting Australia.

In the following days after the visit in Sydney our Club was buzzing. Those that went to Sydney were complaining that Marjan Kovač totally discredited our Association in Sydney and therefore had to be removed as president. I was naturally eager to talk to Marjan to find out what happened. Marjan was quite pleased with himself and told me that like all the other representatives he went on the stage and handed over a token present in front of all the communist dignitaries from Slovenia. He then told them that we in Canberra are very proud because we have built our Club without any assistance, especially from communists and that we fly a Slovenian flag without the red star. As he was still speaking a group of Triglav men grabbed him from behind and dragged him from the stage.

At the general meeting in Canberra Marjan's explanation was accepted and he continued as president.

The next president was Zinka Černe. Zinka complained that there were too many members of my family on the committee. There was an argument about her wages that did not affect me personally at all. She did not confront me, as is often the case, but had a lot to say to others. I might say that when one or another group dominates the committee, this can lead to problems, and it happened before. Penca's involvement was complained about and Kavaš's family also caused such difficulties. This is due to the fact that people are not keen to join the committee if they object to its composition. We come to catch 22. When there are too many people of one family on the committee the others won't join it and at the same time you have to accept people who are available even if they are from the same family. The argument with Zinka made me decide not to argue about financial matters as I have so far argued too often about politics. It convinced me that I must resign and distance myself from the Club which I did to some degree.

During Zinka Černe's presidency she negotiated with Bert Pribac to readmit members from Karantania to the Slovenian Club and in turn disband Karantania. It would be interesting to know what happened to the money that Club Karantania accumulated during its existence, which it did mostly at the expense of the Slovenian Australian Association. Who was the beneficiary or did the money just evaporate? After the deal Bert Pribac became active in the Club and even became the treasurer. Not long after his involvement he was accused that some money was missing and the big accuser was the president Alojz Kavaš. I have my doubts about the validity of the accusations as the Club had a low turnover.

Not everything that happened in the Club was to my liking but I tried to ignore it. We patronised the Club, not as much as in the years before but certainly more than the people that continuously complained about one thing or another and often most particularly about me. Rumours and innuendo continued and I tried to ignore them, even though they usually attacked my character and honesty. Again and again I and my relatives that at one time or another worked for the Club were slandered with theft. I might explain that it was all about voluntary work and no one from our family, except Barbara, who was employed as a waitress for a year or so, ever worked for wages. It might seem petty but I wish to state that I never took a free drink in the bar even though I worked in the club voluntary for many hundreds if not thousands of hours. Even more, on dance nights I paid an entry fee to the dance and then worked nearly all night till early hours in the morning. No one but I was as silly as that.



Protesters at the Federal Parliament

In late 1980's things started to move in Slovenia. During my respite from the Club I welcomed alternative interests that were much more exciting than the obnoxious arguments in the Club. The political articles in Nova revija in 1987 with a call for independent Slovenia propelled political activities that eventuated in the arrests of Janez Janša, Jože Borštnar, David Tasič and Victor Zavrl by the Yugoslav army. The persecution and their arrest sparked a flurry of activities and excitement also in Australia. In Canberra I was able to

convince friends that we need to take action and call a meeting which was reasonably well attended. The meeting established the "Committee for the Protection of Human Rights in Slovenia" (CfPoHRIS). Marjan Kovač, Erik Fras, Vivien Zontsich, Alojz Kavaš and I were elected to the Committee and I became the President. We decided to organize a protest in front of the Federal Parliament in Canberra and present a petition to both Australian Houses of Parliament by friendly politicians and senators. At the same time we initiated a general meeting in the Slovenian Australian Association of Canberra. We were delighted with the good attendance and the meeting decided that

the Club donates 10,000 dollars for the defence of the four persecuted journalists in Slovenia. While the signatures for the petition were collected we also wrote to all Slovenian organizations in Australia and also other ethnic clubs in Canberra asking for their support.



Protests in front of the Federal Parliament

After the speeches in front of Parliament and the presentation of signatures to Members and Senators of Parliament we all Marched to the Yugoslav Embassy. Our writing to every Australian politician bore results. The Department of Foreign Affairs invited the Committee of CfPoHRiS to discuss the plight of the persecuted and the situation in Slovenia. They promised to send a note to Belgrade and soon after they also informed us that the four arrested will be released.

It might be worth recording that nobody from other Slovenian organizations across Australia was present except Ljenko Urbančič with his American wife from Sydney. Eventually I spoke to the president of the

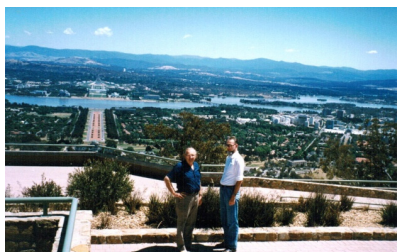
Slovenian Club in Albury who told me that the President of the "Council of Slovenian Associations of Victoria", Mr Peter Mandel specifically advised them not to participate in our efforts. Not one organization from all over Australia replied to our written pleas. Only Father Bazilij Velentin from Melbourne supported us in his monthly 'Misli'. We were able to get some signatures for the release of prisoners in Ljubljana from individual friends only otherwise there was no response from all those who became great supporters of Slovenian independence only a few months later.

In the same year a referendum for the independence of Slovenia from Yugoslavia was called. CfPoHRiS again supported independence with a large public notice in the Canberra Times and a money donation. A public collection among supporters also netted several thousand dollars. CfPoHRiS later became Slovenian National Council of ACT (SNC ACT) and eventually joined the Australian Slovenian Conference (ASK). The referendum in Slovenia was a great success with 93% of the voters supporting independence.

Around that time Stanka Gregorič started to publish a monthly "Slovensko pismo" that brought the latest news on political developments in Slovenia. A new organization called "The Committee for the establishment of the Slovenian World Congress" urged Slovenians all over the world to establish committees that would become members of the Congress which was to be formed on the principals of the Jewish World Congress. In Sydney Fredi Brežnik and Stanka Gregorič organized a conference of leading members of Slovenian organizations in Australia. CfPoHRiS of Canberra was also invited. I proposed Marjan Kovač to be the President, Stanka Gregorič became the secretary and I became the treasurer.

In the following months we received sensational news involving Matica. It was revealed that the organization was connected to UDBA (political police) by the internet. Those of us that were always convinced of this cooperation were delighted, but Kavaš, the then president of the Canberra Club was somehow disappointed. One day he called me and invited members of the CfPoHRiS to the Club. I was shocked to find a long table full of people. Several of them were from Club Triglav, a couple from Sydney Club, one from Melbourne and a couple, man and wife from Ljubljana that represented Matica. Present among them was also Boris Cizelj, the Ambassador of the Yugoslav Embassy. I immediately told them that I was not prepared to talk under the dominance of Yugoslav Embassy. Boris Cizelj responded and said that he was not present as the ambassador and that he would like to talk as an equal among Slovenians. This was acceptable and I was eager to hear what was on the table.

It soon became obvious that the Couple from Ljubljana were sent to apologise for Matica who was found out. Kavaš gave a speech explaining how disappointed he was to hear of Matica's involvement



The first visit from Slovenia was the minister for Slovenians in the world, Jozsef Puhar

with UDBA, because he always trusted and believed in Matica. There were all kind of comments regarding this and other events concerning Matica which did not cause any fundamental change of attitudes. John Černe recorded this meeting on a video tape that is also in my possession. Boris Cizelj invited me to an unofficial visit to the Embassy to discuss our attitudes.

In Slovenia in the meantime the democratization proceeded. A coalition of new democratic parties named Demos was established. This enabled the election of a democratic government with the President of the Christian Democrats Lojze Peterle becoming the new Premier.

This commenced a flurry of political visits from Slovenia. During the following weeks a group of ladies from Slovenia rode from Melbourne to Sydney on push-bicycles. The ladies, Ada and I were invited to lunch by Boris Cizelj that we attended. Very soon after professor Jože Pučnik, a prominent Slovenian dissident and the President of Demos visited Canberra. Again Boris Cizelj and his wife hosted him and other guests at their residence. Invited was also the President of the Australian Slovenian Conference Marjan Kovač as well as the President of the Slovenian Association Alojz Kavaš and I with Ada as the President of the Slovenian National Council of ACT.

ASK members travelled to Slovenia shortly before the 25th of June 1991. I was again able to go to Slovenia after 21 years and was overwhelmed. The highlight was the pronouncement of Slovenian independence and the tragic attack of the Yugoslav army.



Minister Peterle in the Slovenian Club



Minister Janša in the Slovenian Club

The pronouncement of independent Slovenia and its aftermath can not be described in a few words so I will not attempt it.

I must describe my attempts for reconciliation with some of my main political rivals after my return. Franc Bresnik accepted by hand without any comment. Franc Sečko was civil about it even though he was responding as if he was doing me a favour. In the months after he was reasonably friendly so much so that I felt obliged to visit him when he was very sick before his death. At his funeral I decided to speak and I specifically mentioned his positive attitude to reconciliation. His wife Marija was also friendly and approachable for several years but has now become hostile for who knows what reason. Pribac was not in Australia for some time after independence but generally we greet each other with no great enthusiasm. I had no political quarrel with Čulek at the time and I saw no reason to approach him. Ivan Urbas was the only person who would not accept my hand when I wished him a Happy Easter in 1992. Unfortunately he went to his grave without accepting reconciliation. I might say that no one ever offered any kind of reconciliatory gesture to me.

After independence the atmosphere in the Club was bearable even though some people still carry a grudge. The first musical group on a visit from Slovenia was Big Ben from Nova Gorica. The tour in Victoria and South Australia was managed by Ivo Leber and he asked me to take the tour over in Canberra, NSW and

Queensland. We travelled by bus and it was a marvellous trip. The musicians were full of enthusiasm and joy and it is a pleasure to remember every moment of it. Members of the group

were also Giani Rijavec and Vlado Čadež. We became such good friends that they insisted that I visit them when in Slovenia. Vlado's father was nobody else but the famous tenor Danilo Čadež that was in Canberra with the Slovenian Octet some 15 years ago. He was eager to meet me and was my host when I was given a lavish reception in Goriška brda. He told me that he was anxious to meet me. When in Canberra he was told such stories that he was convinced that I must resemble the devil himself. We became good friends and we still keep in touch.

The second tour I organised was the choir Jakob Petelin Galus from Celovec in Austria. This was a large group of some 45 Slovenian singers. I hired a bus with a driver and we visited all Slovenian Organizations starting in Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide through Broken Hill and Lightning Ridge and Sydney. Because of their limited time we were unfortunately not able to visit Brisbane. They were all delightful people full of enthusiasm and gratefulness. Even Ada joined us some of the way and was delighted which is not often the case. All the groups were by now coming to Australia at their own expense, more like tourists and they looked after their own affairs.

A tremendous bunch of singers were Tržaški Oktet from around Trieste that was led by Danilo Čadež. I was delighted to invite Danilo and his wife Franka to Australia and they gladly accepted. I can even claim that they enjoyed the visit very much. The group was not very large and this time I drove a mini-bus for them. Our friendship extended to overseas cooperation and they became the host for Prvi rej when the Canberra dancers visited Slovenia and Slovenians in Italy and Austria.

In mid 1990's in Canberra a group of young dancers prospered under the expert guidance of Ljuba Vrtovec-Pribac. Her expertise in making Slovenian national costumes propelled the dancers to great perfection and I was able to attain financial support from "Društvo Slovencev po svetu in domovini" to sponsor them on a tour of Slovenia. The organization attracts funds from the Slovenian government. The dancers were also promoted by choir Galus on the Austrian side of the border. It was a great success and they earned a lot of praise. The dancers themselves had tremendous joy and satisfaction and it is unfortunate that they lost interest and broke up. Again I have to recall an ugly incident that actually brought about the demise of Prvi rej dancing group. Most of the national dresses were made by Ljuba Vrtovec-Pribac and the girl dancers. The materials for the Costumes were bought with the money they earned with performances. After they returned from Slovenia a large wardrobe was made by Miha Hovar in the room above the Bowling Alleys, where the costumes were stored under lock and key. Zvonko Bezjak, Lojz Risa and Frank Čulek were accused of breaking into the cupboard and removing the costumes on the pretence that they have to protect them from Bert Pribac. Simona Osolnik tried and tried to have them returned and even approached the police, who would not get involved and said that it was a civil matter. I do not know what the full story is but I do understand that the costumes were returned. No doubt that the saga around the costumes contributed to the demise of the dancing group.

One of the last tours I was involved in was Oktet Suha also from Austrian side of Koroška. They brought with them an enormous amount of enthusiasm. They promote original Slovenian folksongs especially from Koroška and are a great joy to listen to. Each year they organize Suha Festivals that brings together groups from Koroška, Slovenia and all Europe. I have been to a few of them and they were unforgettable. When in Australia they brought a lot of joy and pleasure to all that met them and listened to them. What a shame that there is not more enthusiasm for this type of cooperation among us here. I found that it becomes really difficult to convince the Clubs to promote and accept groups that cultivate Slovenian culture. The clubs these days only seem interested to make a lot of money with the hire of their premises; they forget that soon they will have them empty or serving strangers.

The latest incident that really brought me to my limits was the so called selling of the club. When Jože Hebar was still president in late 2006 he told me: "The Club was not far from being sold." Had that statement been true it would have really been a sensation among Slovenians, not only in Canberra but everywhere in Australia and it would have meant that I, Cvetko Falež wanted to sell the Club on my own, without regard to the Association and their members and anyone else for that matter. No wonder that people were angry after they heard these rumours. What is the truth?

To get the full picture we have to go back some ten years. The Club at the time has not been in the best financial position for some time. The committee was canvassing for loans. It received a loan from Franc Erpič and Tonka Pavlin of around 30,000 dollars. But that did not save the Club from a heavy burden of wages. Some people simply could not understand that with a poor income the club could not afford to be open seven days a week. This amounted to approximately three full wages for the bar staff plus a cleaner that had a very light load. These expenses plus insurance, rates, electricity and other running costs were just unsustainable. Most of the time the Club was next to empty and only late in the afternoon there would be a few clients, hardly ever more than three to five people. Even for the weekends there were only few people around, except if there was a function run by a visiting group.

All this simply did not convince some people that the Club with this meagre income could not stay open for seven days a week. Two of the most determined supporters for continuous trading were Milan Šprohar and Alojz Kavaš. Kavaš himself even did unpaid work for some weeks in the bar to promote his conviction. But all these did not make much difference.

I was again president at the time, my son John was the treasurer and Barbara was the secretary. Our domination in the Committee was again criticised, however there was no volunteers for the positions. The Association was constantly looking for ways to reduce the trading hours and reduce the costs. At one of the general meetings in 1997 Florian junior was asked to examine the options that were available to the club to overcome the difficulties. During this trying period a lot of useless talk emerged among the members. Justin Hodnik and his wife Danica who were running the kitchen were constantly present. Their son worked in the Bowling Club across the road. They often spread the rumour that the Bowling Club had the intention of purchasing our Club. After a certain period I asked Justin to ask them how much they are prepared to pay for it. Later the Association received a formal letter offering 190,000 dollars. As soon as we read the letter at the committee meeting I said: "This is an insult to all of us since an average house costs as much". I also asked the Committee to stop the talk about selling.

After a few months a Real Estate Agent named John (surname unknown) came to the club and talked to individual members and finally also to me. He talked of some scheme he had with another club in Tuggeranong where they built some townhouses around the club that still kept operating. I told him that all such talk was useless without the members' approval and I told him to come to the general meeting. Before the meeting a letter was sent out to all members when I mentioned the agent and told them of a proposal that he wished to present to them. I also told them that no one could sell the Club without the approval of the committee, the general meeting of members and the ACT Government, that gave the land to the Association free of charge. I also pointed out that the club rules actually forbade the selling of the Club-house.

At one of the previous committee meetings the employment of the cleaner Milka Penca was discussed. It was general knowledge that Milka Penca actually worked for Canberra Casinos and that her daughter Majda was in fact doing the job. Her work was minimal because of poor patronage and she only came to work on some days. It was then decided that the club can not afford her and that her employment would have to be terminated. A member of the committee was also Lojz Kavaš, who voted for the motion. It was my duty to inform Mrs. Penca which I did over the phone the following day.

Before the General Meeting some people, mainly Alojs Kavaš, spread the false rumour that Falež was selling the Club. The meeting was well patronised and in a state of excitement. Present were also both Penca's girls who have not attended any previous meetings and they were highly emotional. The meeting started with yelling and accusations and again the loudest was Kavaš. He immediately accused me that I was selling the Club and that Milka Penca did not have to be sacked for she was with the Club for all this years. Majda and Kathy were yelling at the top of their voices and demanded the reinstatement of their mother. Florian junior's proposals, how to save the club, were not read or discussed and the real estate agent vanished, most likely because of the unfriendly atmosphere of the meeting. The financial affairs came up several times and people were talking about loans to the club. If I remember rightly Celestino Benčič asked what would happen to

the money if he would lend it to the Club in case the Club went bankrupt. It seems that he wanted to know if the club would become his property. This brought on a bit of a laugh at the meeting but it was simply not possible to discuss anything sensible.

I was under constant attack and so was John, the treasurer, with a claim by Čulek that he was responsible for some discrepancy. John himself still can not work out what Čulek was on about. Eventually Čulek said to John that he would immediately pay the Club 5,000 dollars if John resigned from the position of treasurer. John immediately accepted the challenge but Čulek till today did not pay the 5,000 dollars. Once John resigned Barbara also told the meeting that she is resigning and so did I. The three of us then left the meeting. This finished our direct involvement in the club affairs. It might be of interest to the reader that Milka Penca was sacked anyway only a few months later.

After a few weeks, when the group Pogladič was visiting Australia, Lojz Kavaš was boasting to everybody that all Falež's were thrown from the club. No, he did not tell anybody that because he wanted to become the president of the Club he made our position unbearable, by spreading lies that Falež was selling the club, and that precisely his lies were the reason for our resignations.

Florian junior stayed involved which also ended with a tragic episode. At that time I was in Europe and I can not speak as a witness but only what I heard. Apparently Florian was speaking at an annual meeting when Zvonko Bezjak hit him. He stumbled and fell. Florian claims that he was not hurt and that the hit looked worse then it was. The meeting continued with an election of office bearers and Zvonko Bezjak instead of being reprimanded was elected secretary.

From then on Florian junior never again passed the threshold of the club. He says that he did not expect anything better from Zvonko Bezjak but he can not accept that the committee did not reprimand Zvonko but accepted him as one of their own. Florian says that with such people he has nothing in common and has therefore refrained from visiting the club. This has put all members of our family in a confronting position. Even though we miss the club and we would like to have a place in what we have built we can not abandon Florian in his isolation and hurt.

During the last years while Jože Hebar was President I approached him and his wife Maria several times and explained that we would all like to patronise the club but we can not do it unless Florian junior receives some kind of satisfaction. I was asking for a letter of apology where by the club would acknowledge its mistake for not acting against Zvonko Bezjak. Several times I was promised that they would see what could be done and finally I was told that there is no chance. Frank Čulek and both Maria and Duca Sečko are strongly opposed to any reconciliatory action and they have the majority of the committee on their side. Zvonko Bezjak since then had a disagreement with everyone in the Club and stopped patronising it.

This then puts us totally outside the Slovenian Association. I did not see Čulek for several years and finally I met him at the funeral of Toni Grlj. He was intentionally keeping out of my way. I was then able to ask him, what I have done to him, that he is so intentionally avoiding me. He began accusing me of having some kind of political agenda which he has finally woken up to. He was accusing me that I was using him against Bresnik, which is absolutely new to me. I have no disagreement or any kind of argument with Frank Bresnik. Čulek then reminded me of the solicitor's indictment that is still in his drawer. Only then did I remember that I asked the solicitor to serve him with an indictment if he does not stop spreading lies that I was stealing from the Club. He also accused me of wanting to sell the Club and no explanation of mine would convince him otherwise. We both had a lot to say to each other. My main complaint to him was that people spread rumours and never ask themselves who started them and whether they are true. He seemed to agree at the time but he is now back to his old tricks. The Yugoslav embassy or any other pretence for arguments has become irrelevant. What is behind Čulek's actions this time?

Through the years I built many houses in Canberra. Almost all my subcontractors and employees were Slovenians. Did the communists try to invoke their envy and resentment because I succeeded and became in their eyes wealthy? That was then, more than fifteen years ago. What is happening now? Why is the hatred continuing? Is there no end to this anger and distrust?

Last year, in 2006, I was asked by the three Jausnik's sons to give them Slovenian lessons and a few others joined in. I asked the president Jože Hebar if I could do that in the Club. He immediately agreed and asked Jože Žužek to open up the club for me each Wednesday night. One night I was approached by Čulek. He asked me if I was qualified to teach Slovenian. He also informed me that I have to have a written permission from the committee and that I would have to pay for the use of the class-room. When I talked to President Hebar about it he simply said: "Forget Čulek. He is crazy." I did not stop teaching and I was questioned by Čulek several times later. Finally I wrote to the committee giving them my qualifications and explaining the President's approval.

In the July issue of Misli 2007 Čulek reported on the activities of the Club. He mentioned that the Club had a general meeting at which there was sufficient number of members present. The Constitution of the Association requires a quorum of 15 members. I wonder if there were only 15 present or if there was one or two more. I believe that the attendance was poor because Čulek also appealed to everyone to return, to again give life to the Association. Čulek also reported that they got rid of the entire lot of 'Freeloaders'. It would be interesting to know who those 'Freeloaders' are? Is everyone that does not patronise the club a "Freeloader?"

In the same article Čulek writes: "Our Club in Canberra is breathing calmly and quietly to the pride of all Slovenians; it is not sold and it will never be sold (there were already two failed attempts). Čulek continues to spread this false rumour about the selling of the club. I wrote previously about the co called failed attempts and it should not be necessary to go over them again.

I escaped from communism but communism followed me to Australia through Yugoslav Embassy and their sympathisers. I believed that I could resist their power in a western democracy but I was wrong. Perhaps it was naïve to believe that communists who secretly murdered some twelve thousand innocent, young, Slovenian boys after the WWII would let me win from abroad and so undermine their dictatorship. Who was I to fight a giant that even the West could not defeat until John Paul II, President Regan and Gorbachev showed the way.

Australia had cordial diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia so they were not at all interested in the fact that I am Slovenian or anticommunist. They told me to forget the past and the reasons why I came to Australia. I was here to embrace Australian values and work quietly to achieve Australian goals. Yugoslav ambassadors always knew which of our people would feel honoured to be invited to the embassy for a friendly drink, a chat, and betrayal.

I often asked myself why would people seek to be friends with the Yugoslav embassy; didn't we escape from communism? I realise now that the embassy had power and for some of our people being popular with the ambassador meant more than their principles. Some felt slightly guilty disobeying the orders of the masters that brainwashed them through schooling. Most of them were homesick and became friendly with the embassy because Yugoslav embassy held the key, the visa, to their homeland Slovenia. They were scared to openly side with me because they would be punished as I was.



In the company of friends

One by one the embassy alienated people from me; most of my supporters and friends began to follow the more popular and powerful leaders. Who was I to stop the flood of attacks and bribes that Yugoslav embassy could afford to offer. They tried to discredit me,

they tried to portray me as an obstacle to their friendly relations with the Slovenians at home; they tried to smear me with Nazism and fascism. Communist regime through their publications invited Slovenians to cooperate with the cultural groups at home. They offered us singing groups if we promised to let the embassy infiltrate our clubs and our activities. When Slovenia became independent and democratic all our political arguments suddenly became irrelevant and those that followed popular courses before, again claimed victory with the victorious.

Only a few are still convinced that we justly fought the tyranny of communism and that due to the united consistent pressure from all anti-communist movements we won the victory they claimed. Communists couldn't stop me being a successful businessman so they were determined and relentless in destroying my reputation, my social life and my friendships. They eroded my reputation by stealth and determination because they knew that I was also determined to stand on my principles. I am a practising catholic so they constantly attacked my religious views as old-fashioned.

Josefine (Jozica, Josie & Fini) Bresnik.



I was born in Belgrade on 22 September 36 as the middle of three daughters in Habor family. Mum was Slovenian but my father was of German origins living in Belgrade. During WWII my father was told to either go into the army or to work in Germany. I went to work in Germany with the intention to send for us when I arranged accommodation. We already bought train tickets when I returned because I broke two fingers and was sent home on sick leave. As we already gave up our flat in Belgrade we travelled to our Grandma who lived in Loka near Zidani Most in Slovenia.

Dad later got a job making partitions in Brezice castle which was taken over by the Germans for the Employment offices. By the end of the war dad was advised to send the family to Austria but mum would not go without him. Germany lost the war and the new regime told us on the 29th of May to be ready at the Post Office at midday for a hearing. They placed us for first two nights with other families into a Textile factory in Trbovlje. Later we were taken to Tezno army barracks; we slept on floors like sardines. From there we were taken to Strzisce in the middle of the night; we got a small piece of bread and half a mug of watered down bean soup a day. On the 12th of August mothers with children under four and children up to 14 years of age were transported in the cattle wagons during the night to a castle in Ptuj where we were given better food. We were starved and emaciated; my 9 month old brother died during the trip. In September 1945 my Father was told that we are free to stay in Yugoslavia or go to Austria; I chose Austria as his Mother was sent there from Backa in 1944. We joined Dad in Strzisce; all the young children died in Ptuj except one; we were herded into the wagons and sent to Klagenfurt where we had our first good meal of potato Paprikas before we were sent to Graz Refuge camp which was a 3 story boy's school. Eight families slept in one class room but we all had beds.

Dad found a job in a British factory. THE following year my sister Anne Marie was born. During the summer holidays Mum was put in Hospital to gain strength and weight as she was pregnant. Olga was 13 and I was 9 years old when we were sent for a holiday to the country. I was happy with a family which had a baby and I was allowed to look after him while they worked on their farm and in a small grocery shop. My sister was placed with a farming family and learned to milk the cows.

Mum gave birth to our 2nd Brother but sadly I also died at two and a half month. In 1946 dad's distant cousin, offered him a job in a workshop making Zithers Violins and Guitars; these instruments needed French polish which my dad was trained to do being a cabinet maker. Olga also learned to work with him on the musical instruments till we migrated to Australia.

After five years my parents realised that there was no future for us in Europe. We were displaced persons. Before WWI my grandparents immigrated to America for a short theme and we now hoped that our American relations would Ship us enter America. They did not, so we decided to immigrate to Australia.

My sister Olga was 18, I was 14 and Anne Marie was 4 when we arrived in Australia in 1950. Australian government subsidised our travel so Dad had to go to work where they ordered him. They gave him a job in Steel works in Wollongong; I did not like the job; I had to work on Christmas Day scrubbing the boilers with iron brushes; I was sad away from his family who was in a Camp in Parkes. We heard that a man that arrived with us changed his job to be with his family. Dad got the bricklaying job but unfortunately I lifted the wheelbarrow the wrong way, strained his heart muscle and was off work with no pay for two months. I asked the Employment Office to sent him back to Austria or give him a job working with wood. They sent him to Canberra to be a carpenter where I continued to work as such until I retired.

I married Frank Bresnik at the age of nineteen and a half. It was a double wedding because my sister Olga married her Frank on the same day. THE first year we rented a room from Mr/s Vesic in Kingston ACT. We received first a Government Flat in Civic and later a house in Campbell which we eventually bought.

We have three children. Our daughter Josephine was born in 1957, our son Frank was born in 1958 and Michael in 1960. They also all married at the age of nineteen like their mother. We had nine grandchildren but Josephine's oldest son died of cancer when I was nearly sixteen. Frank and I are very proud and happy with our family. They are all talented, hardworking and kind people.



Frank (Franci) Bresnik



I was born on 6. 5.1930 as one of three children in Spodnji Porcic, a village of fourteen farming families, parish Sveta Trojica in Slovenske gorice. My surname was Breznik but it was misspelled when I crossed the border and renamed by English FSS to BRESNIK.

We have been considered fairly well off, because we owned over 20 hectares of cultivated land. We produced everything we needed: leather, wood, wheat, fruit, nuts, grapes, vegetables; we produced wine, plum brandy, apple cider and vinegar. We had two servants, a lady helping in the house and a man doing the work on the fields and with the cattle.

My parents were very religious and my father's brother Reverent Father Janko Nepomuk Bresnik, was a priest. Every Sunday evening we would all kneel on the wooden floor and pray holy Rosary. Our servants joined us and we all sang hymns. Singing gave me much joy all my life.

We had a shoemaker and a tailor and a dressmaker come to stay with us every two years to make clothes and shoes for the family.

Our lives were severely disrupted by WWII. Germans considered us for deportation because we were religious, our father had tuberculosis and we owned land.

I was a very active youth participating in choir and drama groups. I became Hitler Youth and that might have saved our family from being deported. One day I came home from the army training wearing German uniform; I saw trucks and German soldiers in and around our house. Mum and grandmother were kneeling in front of the little corner altar praying in front of the statue of Virgin Mary. I stepped into the room where the commanding officer was sitting and I saluted Heil Hitler. I was a tall and confident youth. The officer asked who I was and I said that I am the son of this family. He asked me a few more questions and then gave the order for soldiers to leave.

My older brother went into hiding and he spent war years helping a widow with jobs on the fields.

I was too young to be taken into the army but I had a regular training with Hitler youth in the town of Sv.Trojica. Germans suffered huge losses everywhere. They began recruiting young boys. My father was afraid that Nazis would promote me into a higher position and more active service when I was fourteen. One day I received a letter inviting me to training in Strzisce Youth Camp. My father came with me and on the way we stopped for coffee. He said: son promise me that you will come back home with me instead of going to train in this Camp. You can say back home that you have been there. I promise to buy you any pair of shoes you choose if you come home with me. A good pair of shoes meant more in those days, than a new bicycle today.

All our priests escaped to Ljubljana or Zagreb to be safe from Germans, so we had an Austrian priest every few weeks. After mass we would hear the news bulletins of what was happening elsewhere in Europe. We heard about gas chambers and extermination camps. We also heard that Germans killed twenty to fifty Slovenian civilians for one German soldier killed by Slovenian

resistance movement. We all became afraid of Germans and hoped for someone to liberate us. I no longer enjoyed being in the Hitler Youth but I did not dare leave because Germans might have retaliated against our family. In 1944 we first heard of Slovenian resistant forces called Partisans. There were also Cetniki soldiers of regular Yugoslav army fighting against Germans.



Germans robbed our parish pilgrimage church Holy Trinity which had three towers with seven large bronze bells; Germans melted them for cannons. These bells were tolling in a beautiful harmony over the hills and valleys in the morning, at lunch and in the evening. They were missed very much.

During WWII I attended German School. After the war I was attending High School in Maribor. We have been given notice that the first and second class has to be with less subjects completed in one year. After the High School I was accepted into the Commerce Academy and progressed fast.

In 1947 my father died of tuberculosis. Communist nationalised most of our property and took some of our cattle. I never liked Nazis or communists. They were both bad for Slovenians. Communists nationalised private enterprise, they closed private shops and created village co-ops. They offered me a job in a little co-op shop in St Jurij.

In September 1949 I was called into the army; I decided that I will not serve in the army so I escaped.

At the time I was active in a drama group in Sv. Jurij; we performed plays and concerts. In a play Rastrganci we needed someone with a gun who would pretend to shoot me, the main actor. We lived close to Austrian border and the border guard had a gun; we asked him to play the part of the shooter. After the play my friend Stanko and I planned to escape to Austria. This guard was later quoted as saying that he should have shot me dead during the play.

That night Stanko and I were hiding under the bushes on top of the hill looking over the border to Austria when we heard someone coming on a bike. It was Stanko's girlfriend. She came to warn us that the coming night there would be a 'death guard' which means that border guards would shoot anything that moved without warning.

I returned to work the next day and Stanko arranged with the farmer on the border to let us stay in his stable until the opportunity came for us to go over. The next night we were hiding in the stable. I looked out and saw border guards talking outside with the farmer. Stanko and I escaped through the back opening and walked over to Austria. The creek was the natural border and I attempted to jump over but I fell into the water. Border guards were shooting after us well into Austrian territory. We reported to the Austrian border patrol and after questioning they escorted us to the refuge camp in Strasburg. Stanko soon left to live with his aunt. He also found a job on the farm for me. A driver who transported farm produce later helped me find a job in the shop close to the border because I spoke German and Slovenian. Many Slovenians came to buy things they couldn't get in Slovenia. I really enjoyed my work and my company there.

When I went to Leibniz to a dentist I noticed the advertisement that migrants are wanted for America, Venezuela and Australia. I applied and was accepted, but they told me that only Venezuela or Australia would take me at that time. I chose Australia.

On 12 July 1950 I arrived to Fremantle in a Norwegian army vessel SKAUGUM converted into the passenger ship. Korean war started then and authorities were afraid that communists will attack us because our ship carried many Jews and anti communist political migrants. We should have sailed to Sydney but we stopped in Fremantle; from there we travelled to town Northern where we were put into an old army camp.

Two weeks later I hitchhiked to Perth. I did not understand any English so I smiled a lot. I had the address of Dr. Koce who was a manager of a factory. As I wandered the streets of Perth looking for Dr. Koce a heavy hand of the policeman tapped me on the shoulder. I was terrified because I was convinced that he was going to arrest me because I left the refugee camp without telling anyone. The policeman seemed friendly but I could not tell him anything so I smiled. He saw a piece of paper I was twisting in my hand; he read the address and waived to me to follow him to the bus station. He also slipped two shillings into my hand and told the driver where to take me. The bus driver stopped at the entrance of the factory although the bus never stopped there. I went in and a middle-aged man in a suit asked me if he could help me. I gave him the piece of paper and he told me that he was Dr. Koce. He arranged for me to work in a lemonade factory as a bottle washer. I was later promoted to the bottle machine and soon I was mixing soft drinks. I met another Slovenian Franc Zajc who worked as a waiter. I always liked to work with people so the job was attractive to me. I told the hotel owner that my family was also in a hotel business so she gave me a job. After a few weeks the food waiter was sick so I took over. That's where I learned the difference between ham and lamb although both sounded the same to me.

I always loved music; I found a teacher who was willing to teach me to play a Hawaiian guitar. Other Slovenians made fun of me and my music. One day I had a call from professor Pusenjak who was teaching German and Italian at Perth University. He was also a director and producer of WA Operatic Society. He was preparing to stage European operettas like: Bless the Bride and Gypsy Baron. He heard somewhere that I can sing so he invited me on the set of the choir. I listened to Straus music in the operetta Gypsy Baron and suddenly tears came to my eyes and I felt very homesick.



We prepared Janko Gregorc's operetta "Melody of Hearts". I was happy and very honoured and privileged to be a part of the first Slovenian operetta staged in Australia. Dr. Koce and I were invited to join the committee of The Operatic Society of WA. This was a very happy and exciting time for me.

A year later I took a holiday and a Croatian barman Joe Popic talked me into buying two tickets for us to go by train to Melbourne. On arrival Joe found a room. When I woke up in the morning Popic disappeared. He returned the next

day and told me that he found a spoon and fork waiter's casual job for us. This was in a high class Hotel Menzies. Later Joe found a job in Murunda Lake Hotel near Healesville in Victoria. That was heaven on earth for waiters. We earned as much in tips as we did in wages. The manager was a Serb Miroslav Jankovic. We earned lots of money and one day I asked Joe to pay me back the money I paid for his ticket to Melbourne. He came with a bag of sixpences and threepences saying: That should do. I started to count and it was even more than I paid. Since the hotel was closed Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I had time for painting.

A Muslim kitchen hand asked me to go halves in two lottery tickets with him. We won eight hundred pounds on one, and sixty pounds on the other. I could have bought half a house for that at the time. I felt very rich. The Muslim man was so pleased that he told me a secret of his success: he prayed to Allah on the kitchen floor five times every day.

Summer season finished so I booked a plane to Sydney. I felt rich and really wanted to experience the plane flight for the first time. Unfortunately the plane could not take my large paintings and I had to pack and send them by train.

Dr Jez advertised in Slovenian monthly news bulletin Misli, that he was willing to help Slovenian migrants with translations and to find work and accommodation. I came to him in a taxi but he lived very poorly in a single room and he packed me off to "People's Palace" run by the Salvation Army. They told me that they had no locks on the doors so we should watch our luggage. Soon I found a cheap accommodation in a private hotel.



I went to see Slovenian Franciscan fathers in Waverly. Father Okorn and Father Korbic came from America to organise religious services and cultural social life for Slovenian migrants. They started to print a magazine Misli before they returned to America. Misli were then published by Cujes until Father Rudolf Pivko took over. Pivko was a missionary in China and was expelled by communists so he came through Japan to Australia. I helped Pivko with production of Misli. I did the title page for two years until Stanko Ropotec took over with Fr. Bernard Ambrozic who later changed the format of Misli which remains to this day.

Those were the exciting, productive and interesting times for Slovenians. We organised gatherings and celebrations. For one New Year celebration we had 820 Slovenians. I organised the program and hired Paddington Hall while Darko Sedlar organised food and drinks. Slovenian opera singer Darmota who came from Vienna by invitation of the ABC sang a couple of songs to a delighted audience. I painted my first portable backdrop of Lake Bled for the Paddington social.

The success of our social life inspired Slovenians in other cities to form Slovenian associations. More people also subscribed to Misli and so Slovenians gradually became better connected throughout Australia.

I worked as an assistant head waiter in Wentworth hotel until 1955 when I left for a holiday in Canberra. I was very impressed with the beauty of the city. I stayed at the Kurrajong Hotel and walked to nearby Hotel Wellington; I had a drink with a man who delivered flowers to hotels. He invited me to accompany him on his deliveries. We stopped at Hotel Canberra which is now called the Canberra Hyatt Hotel. The delivery man told the manager that I was an assistant head waiter in Wentworth Sydney hotel. The manager offered me the same position in his Hotel.

From Misli subscriptions I had an address of Habor Family in Queanbeyan and on my day off another hotel employee took me there. The two oldest Habor girls were not home but I saw the picture of a girl I wanted to marry.



Josefine warmed my heart; she was working at Woolworths in Canberra. I wanted to make a good impression on her Family so I asked Father Pivko to come with me on my next visit. I wanted to get married before I was 25 like my parents did so we rushed the wedding a bit. Father Pivko married us in a double wedding in Manuka St. Christopher's Cathedral on the 5th of May 1956. Fini's sister Olga married at the same time.

My wife Josefine, they called her also Fini or Josie, later told me that she married me only to get out of Queanbeyan which was then considered a slum area.

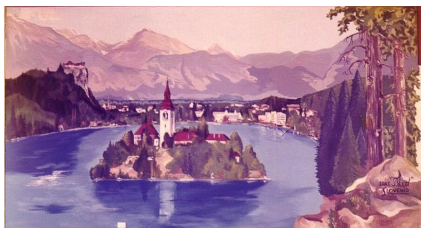
We met other Slovenians in Canberra. I met Cvetko and Ada Falez when they came to see the chef of the hotel, because they both worked in the hotel kitchen. I also met Ivan Urh at their place later.



Young Bresnik Family 1971

A few Slovenian boys lived in a hostel where Australian Parliament House stands now. They liked to socialise and sing Slovenian songs. Vlado Skrbinek, Frank Hribar and Ivan King joined them and they called a meeting in a Methodist hall in Forrest. Between 20 and 30 Slovenians attended. Skrbinek took a chair as the organiser of the planning committee and they decided to form a Slovenian association. Skrbinek was elected president, I became a secretary and Falez volunteered to be a treasurer. Vice president became Ivan Urh. At the next meeting we elected the committee and decided to register our association as Slovenian Australian Association Inc. We began organising

social events and dances. I was responsible for liquor licence at every social. We also organised children's concerts and teachers to prepare the programs.



Soon we built Slovenian club with volunteer labour. Our tradesmen happily contributed their time and money for our new home. My contribution to the club was a 3 by 5 metre mural of Lake Bled our national icon.

I was always in a hotel business in Canberra doing various jobs until I became an assistant manager of Tooheys hotel in Kingston.

Josie and I were visiting her parents and on the way we always looked at a little shop in Queanbeyan that was often closed. We made some inquiries and were told that the income was too small for the owner's family with six children. We approached them and asked if we could lease the shop and were offered a six months lease. It was a very primitive setting with one refrigerator and a

hand cutting machine for cold meats. We took a loan and modernised it. One day a bank manager came and told us that the bank owns the shop because the owner became bankrupt. We went to the bank and signed the shop over to us. We mortgaged everything. With growing clientele we needed to extend and refurbish. I was a member of a Rotary club and another member who was a manager of the biggest Queanbeyan enterprise guaranteed my overdraft. I hired weekend drivers to sell ice-cream, soft drinks, chips, chocolates, sweets and cigarettes on the streets of Canberra and that proved very profitable. The drivers were bank tellers who welcomed some weekend overtime. Our business grew rapidly; we extended the shop with two flats above. I bought another van and every lunch time I delivered hot pies, sausage rolls, salad rolls and all above mentioned goods to the building sites, the most famous being the



Next to the shop were my bees, my Sweet hobby

Canberra Mint. In the end our little shop became Frank's Superette.

I used to help my dad with beekeeping and this became my hobby. Honey is not only the sweetest, nicest taste, but a great medicine for many ailments. I fell in love with bees, despite a sting or two and made some money by selling honey. In 1968 my good friend Daniel joined me in this hobby, and we together started beekeeping in Queanbeyan.



In 1972 we bought a farm near Cooma. Our children at the time liked to watch TV series Bonanza so they named our farm Ponderosa. I told them that it wasn't big enough so we named it Mini Ponderosa.

In 1977 we sold our Superette and in 1985 moved to Cooma where we build our home. We raised cattle but now we are pensioners and can no longer manage the farm. We are happy here but maybe we should have sold the farm and moved back closer to Canberra and our children's families.



Slovenians are generally pretty ambitious lot; we try to prove ourselves worthy wherever we may live. We are proud of being able to overcome hardships and obstacles. Maybe we need to win public recognition because we come from a small country that has all through history struggled to maintain its identity and culture because bigger neighbours coveted our beautiful and rich land under the Alps and stretching to the Adriatic Sea.

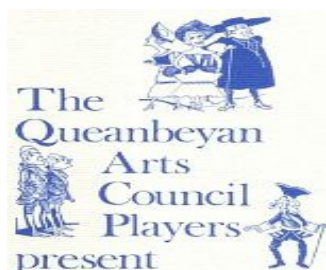
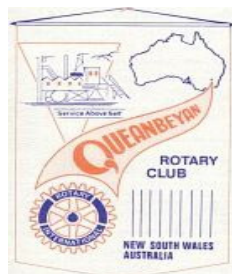


Perhaps we Slovenians take ourselves too seriously; we are always careful about the impact we have on life and people around us. We try to build a good reputation and represent our nation with integrity to the rest of the world. We are also concerned about the personal standing in a community; we want our ethnic group to be acceptable and respected by other Australians as well as by the Slovenians in Slovenia.

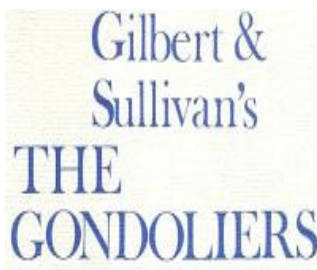




I offered my services to Australian community; I have been a member of a Rotary club for 22 years, I have been elected Alderman Councilor in the Queanbeyan City Council for 10 years and served on various committees; I represented our council as a delegate around the State. I also served as a Justice of Peace.



The Queanbeyan Arts Council Players was formed in 1974. In 1977 I was in the Gondoliers and in 1978 in the Pirate's of Panzance “.



I organized a permanent National Costumes Display in the Queanbeyan Community Centre emphasizing the region's diverse multicultural community.



One of my hobbies is poetry. I published a 28 page booklet in Slovenian on my Computer; it includes two Hymns I composed in Slovenian and in English. I have distributed the booklet in Australia, Slovenia and Belgium.

My Catholic religion has always been a great comfort to me. Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the light for me. Mother Mary really is our mother waiting to receive us at the end of our earthly journey.

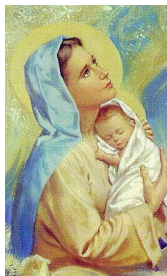
I served in various capacities in the Catholic communities. I grew up as an altar boy. I have been an Acolyte since March 1978. Acolytes are Christian men instituted by the Bishop as lay ministers to help priests and deacons in their ministry.

I am saddened that much of the catholic community no longer follows the values and directions of our Holy Father in Rome like we used to.

People consider public opinion more important than a doctrine and the rules of the church. Public opinion favours fringe groups who do not want to comply with rules of the majority so life became unpredictable for everybody. If Jesus was here with us public opinion would have him killed every five minutes.

I wish that the old discipline and morals would return; we used to have respect for life and people around us; we felt safe.

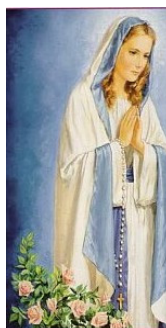
I dedicated my life to our heavenly Mother Mary; I believe that she played a greater role in the life of Jesus than all the saints.



On my pilgrimage to Fatima in the evening of 13th of June 1997 I felt a strong presence of Mary; I saw a bright light above me in the cloudy sky and felt cold sweat wash over me; Josie was next to me and she thought that it was the moon but we suddenly realized that the moon was in the opposite direction. It was not till the October 2000 that I dreamed that I was in a huge cathedral listening to the heavenly music. I remember these words being said: Vseh podob Maria which means Maria of all images. I got up and became inspired to write a song and compose a tune I heard in my dream in Mother Mary's honour.



I had the music written for my song and I presented it to Slovenian clergy but they rejected it. I believe it bothered them that I beseeched Mary to bring morality and virtues. I have presented this Hymn to the Fathers at the Shrine of our Lady of Mercy Penrose they accepted it. The hymn was officially sung for the coronation day of the Black Madonna in the presence Canalini and four bishops, a number of clergy and pilgrims on the 26 August 2001. I felt very honoured and they sing it regularly. We had a word that other Hymn to their hymn selection.



back the old Polish Pauline Park pilgrimage and first time on the of the Archbishop several thousands touched. Since then parishes added the

Slovenians only rarely offer recognition to other a stranger to appreciate your art. That is so often the mentioned that a prophet is never appreciated in his Hieronim says that a stranger will praise your talent but be jealous of your success.

Slovenians. It takes case. Even Jesus home town. your own people will

It seems that Slovenians do not let one of their own get ahead; they pull each other down like crabs especially when they know them personally. Instead of being proud that we belong to a nation of talented people we belittle each other's successes.

I was one of the first Slovenians in Australia and one of the first who started to organize social and cultural gatherings.



Despite escaping from communist regime in former Yugoslavia I tried to maintain cordial relations with Slovenians at home; I was eager to promote cultural exchange programs. The cultural exchange was not possible without the approval of Yugoslav embassy in Australia until Slovenia became independent. Some Slovenians resented my contacts with Yugoslav or Slovenian authorities because they did not want to deal with the regimes they escaped from because of religious or political oppression. These Slovenians resented those of us who wished to enrich and improve our social and cultural life by keeping in contact with Slovenians at home.

I always lived by Christian values and forgave those that wronged me. I also hope that others would forgive any of my unintentional failings. I wish Slovenians could dance and sing together and enjoy each other's company. I still believe that we all wish to reconcile before we will follow each other on our last journey. Unfortunately national and international political and religious differences made us

enemies when we most needed each other's friendship, company and support. We realize now that we expected too much; although we are all Slovenians we could not be the same because we came from different backgrounds with different levels of understanding.

Painting and singing provided much joy for me throughout my life. I started oil painting during my school years. When I came to Western Australia a friend saw me painting a picture and he suggested that I would be a good sign writer. I got a job and made a huge sign but one letter was missing and could not be corrected. My spelling wasn't good enough so I had to return to the factory job. While working in a hotel I had Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays free. I bought painting equipment and started painting.

Lake Bled is a Slovenian icon; it is the most beautiful lake with an island church in the middle. I only had a photograph of Bled but I began painting it as a landscape and later as a mural.

I like traditional art. While in Sydney in 1953 I saw David Jones offering one thousand pounds as a first prize for a painting. There were various sections and in the religious section another Slovenian Stanko Ropotec won the first prize. It was a contemporary painting of Jesus quietening the sea. That inspired me to study contemporary art. I became quite successful and have been awarded many prizes. In Melbourne I met Frank Benko who was a successful mosaic artist. I felt proud that Ropotec, Benko and I promoted Slovenian culture in Australia.

Our St. Patrick church in Cooma has been restored in 1999; the statues needed to be restored and I happily took the job. It was a wonderful new experience.



I am grateful to God, that I remained a traditional catholic, led by the Pope. I am most grateful for my family; my loving wife who helped me in everything I did; my three healthy and capable children who gave me nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

I am happy that I was able to accept and actively contribute to Australian way of life. I am also happy that I was able to contribute to the social and cultural life of Australian

Slovenians.

Joze Zagar



My granddaughter Nasha in my village Smartno

My parents were over 30 when they married and settled in Smartno near Litija. Mum was a parish priest's cook and dad was a miner. I was born on 12th of February 1929, the second of six children. It was Shrove Tuesday in the coldest winter they remembered.

We were considered very poor. I remember being hungry most of the time; I remember us children rattling our spoons long before the corn meal was ready!

Dad was a coal miner in Germany at some point. At home he found jobs on the farms; he cut hay, prepared wood, etc. His work was not regular so Mum

helped to feed the family by also working for farmers. Dad cleaned water reservoirs on railway stations. They gave him a special train wagon to live in and to store his tools while on the job. When a reservoir needed cleaning, they connected his wagon and took him there. On Saturdays he came home, then went back again on Monday morning. Dad also dug water wells. He kept records of every well he dug so he was in a good position to give quote and negotiate the price. Later he worked in a local tin mine until it closed.

Mum insisted that we go to mass every morning during May, and at least every Sunday at other times. A miracle happened early one morning on my way to mass. It was freezing cold when I found a 100 Dinar note in the snow. I ran home and gave it to Mum. She took it to the parish priest so he could make an announcement from the pulpit, and return the money to the rightful owner. He was a good priest and he liked Mum. He told her that nobody needed the money more than she did to feed her family. He added that he would not make an announcement, but if someone told him within the week that they had lost the money, he would give it back.

We waited a week and nobody came forward so Mum bought about 100 kg of corn. I felt like a hero because I had helped my family survive that winter. The menu was sauerkraut and cornmeal. As the snow began to melt, Mum began sowing the vegetables in our large garden and that was the main source of our food.

For Sunday lunch, she bought 250 grams of meat some bones and a piece of liver. That was a meal for seven of us. We each got carefully measured portions of meat and liver. There was also fresh salad, roast potatoes, and applesauce. We looked forward to this special Sunday dinner.

In spring we picked young dandelions on the roadsides. People used these first greens for salad. We picked lots, and my sister went from house to house to sell it. Once, she was so excited when she sold the last of it that she ran home to tell Mum but forgot her bag and money somewhere. We always teased her about it.

We had a nanny goat, a very precious source of milk for the family. At sunrise I took her to graze until I had to go to school. I would take her again after school until dusk. She was a wicked and stubborn animal! If I took my eyes off her for one minute, she escaped into someone's field and ate their cabbages and other vegetables. I was forever in trouble because of her!

In the spring, our goat had a kid that we sold to buy necessary provisions, like cheaper beef, oil, salt and clothing. Goat kid's meat was considered a delicacy. The owners of the leather factory had a permanent order for one. Our goat produced up to seven litres of milk a day after the kid was gone,

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.

Each spring, we bought a piglet so Mum could fatten it. We killed it before Christmas. Every piece of meat was carefully preserved. The fat was reduced into lard. We smoked the meat and made excellent blood wurst, kranskies and salamis. Even the head was cut into pieces and later cooked with barley.

We had Scripture twice a week. One chaplain was a sadist. He never hit the rich farmers' kids, but some poorer ones were up for punishment at every lesson. All of us were scared of him. He really enjoyed torturing us!

He would call a whole line of students to him – many boys wet their pants in fear! He would clamp the head of a student between his knees, lean back on the chair, and hit him on the backside with a stick. If he broke the stick on you, you had to bring him a new one at the next Scripture lesson.

Once, someone said that I murdered birds even though it wasn't true. The sadist priest grabbed the short hair on the side of my head. He shook my head so fast from one side to the other that I could only see lines in front of me. Chunks of my hair dropped on the floor. He kept grabbing new bits until I admitted that I had killed the birds. We hated him!

I didn't dare tell my parents, but my father noticed a bald patch on my head and wanted to know what had happened. Father went to the priest and told him if he ever touched me again, he would smash his face and his house. I didn't get hit much after that.

One Sunday afternoon, my father was drunk when he passed the sports ground where an organisation called Sokol was having a big festival – food, drinks, dancing, and gymnastic displays. Dad called out "Heil Communism!"

Everything went dead quiet. As he continued walking home, a few boys caught up with him and wanted to fight. He turned and put his hand into his back pocket. "Come boys, come here!" He beckoned them with the other hand.

Careful! He has a pistol! someone said. Everyone moved back quickly.

I don't know if my dad was only boasting or if it was true, but a couple of weeks later, they put him in jail. He said that he had made a mistake. Instead of saying "Heil Sokol!" he had said "Heil Communism!"

Dad inherited some money from his relations in America so he began building our home. We had just settled into it in 1941 when the Germans invaded Slovenia. They began transporting priests, teachers and Communists. 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 and we joined Father in Ljubljana. We travelled to Serbia where the citizens were very kind to us. 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. The shopkeepers and other rich people paid for our keep.

In Serbia, Mum and some other women cooked in the school building for the rest of us new settlers. We brought tin cans to fill with food to carry home. We called this food 'corba', a kind of soup made from potatoes, cabbage, onions, and tomato thickened with corn flour.

During the German occupation, partisans in Serbia carried out isolated attacks by blasting bridges and the railway to sabotage transport. The Germans retaliated – if partisans killed one German soldier, Germans killed 100 Serb civilians. For one German officer, they killed 1000 Serb civilians.

The town's people were ordered by the Germans to guard the railway against partisans' sabotage. There were about 20 guards every night, and each adult male had to serve at some time. The

town's rich people paid my dad and other Slovenians to do their time guarding. There was no other income so they accepted.

The job was very dangerous. If the partisans destroyed the rail, all guards on duty that night would be shot! I remember my father telling me how he thought he saw the shadow of someone hammering something on the railway. He pleaded with what he thought was the shadow of a partisan, not to blast the railway. As he got closer, it was only a dog eating a bone!

My father was never a Communist but we believe that we were transported because he had shouted "Heil Communism". He could actually be called a German collaborator because he guarded the railways in Serbia for the Germans, in order to save Serbian lives.

About 1200 Germans were housed in the Army barracks at Palanka. When Italy capitulated in 1943, 200 Italians were brought over from Albania to look after German horses. They were allowed to come to town in the afternoon, and many of them came to our place.

My father read German newspapers and was well informed about politics and the War. He sold wine to about 20 regulars, who came to hear the news and to drink. They toasted each other quite openly with the slogan: 'Slavs will win against Berlin!'

Once, an Italian soldier offered Dad some bridles, reins and chains in exchange for wine. These were valuable commodities during the War, and the Germans had lots of that stuff in the barracks. The Italians helped themselves to anything they could sell for drinking money.

Peasants brought wood, vegetables, meat and wine to sell at the market once a week. Dad offered farmers the horse gear that the Italians had sold to him, and they paid for it with wine. When Italian soldiers came again, Dad served them the wine and asked for more belts, chains, reins and bridles.

First, farmers brought bottles of wine, then small barrels, and 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 our mud house! Hundreds of litres of wine – ruzica being the favourite – were sold each week.

By now, Dad had quite a business buying and selling alcohol. He tested the wine for strength by putting a strip of newspaper in the glass of wine. The wine would soak into the paper and the water ran out over the glass.

He told the wine producers that they were putting too much water in their wine so he could pay them less. I don't know if it really showed that water was being added but the farmers believed him. I think it was only a trick Dad used to get wine cheaper!

Eventually, about fifty regulars came to drink outside our house most evenings. They sang, told jokes and laughed while they drank. About twenty Italians, many more Slovenians, and sometimes, even a few Germans came to our house. When Russians began coming, they wanted vodka, and they drank it in big wine glasses!

Someone must have told the Germans about Dad trading in horse gear, and they came back to search the house. A Serb interpreter came with them, and he saw the chains through the straw on the floor but quickly covered them up. Dad liked Serbs.

Italian POWs also traded things like old uniforms and other sorts of clothing for wine. Once, Dad got a jumper and later sold it to a villager; the wife of the Orthodox priest recognised it as one she knitted for their son. When she approached the man wearing it, he told her that he had bought it from my father. She asked Dad but he only told her part of the story: After the invasion, the Germans had arrested all local men and made them parade in the yard. They had to look up at a window where the Germans and their Serb collaborators stood. They chose 18 men to eliminate. The Germans took them into the field and ordered them to dig their own graves before shooting them. Italians had to bury the bodies and before they did, they took their clothes. This woman's son wasn't even dead yet! He pleaded for mercy but was hit on the head with a spade.

Dad told the woman that the Germans had killed her son and that the Italians had taken his clothes but he couldn't tell her that her own Serb neighbours pointed out her son for Germans or that he had been hit with a spade so he would fall into his grave.

In Serbia people raced pigeons. At an arranged time on Sunday mornings, owners released groups of up to five birds from their homes. One sort raced in circles. Others flew high and did up to ten summersaults down to the rooftops. Some stayed in the air for up to 8 hours. The owners and the players placed bets on whose pigeons would stay the longest in the air and whose would do more summersaults. Some pigeons were killed by peregrine falcons.

I would let my pigeons circle up, and when they came back close to the ground, I whistled them up again. One of my pigeons always came to sit on my head. At night, the Russians liked to give him vodka to drink until he got drunk!

Dad used to send me to buy him big packets of tobacco from the farmers. When I sold some pigeons, I also bought a bag of tobacco then made smaller packets to sell to those who came to drink at our place. I made quite a bit of money but when I had a good amount saved my father took it to buy wine. Once I made a good deal when I traded a pair of young pigeons for two piglets. Usually, I just traded them for corn and wheat.

A pigeon's courtship is much like ours. The males are very protective of their females. Before they mate, they wipe their beaks and then they kiss. After mating, both pigeons fly a couple of circles. Both parents look after the young – sitting on the eggs and bringing food.

I bought a pigeon pair of a really good breed. They mated and had young every month. When the chicks were still in the nest, there were already new eggs. I had about a dozen pairs of pigeons the year before we returned home from Serbia.

However, someone came and stole them. Eventually, I found out who it was, and told Dad. He came with me and told the thief that we would report him to the German police if he did not return them, and pay for my losses.

The man had re-established my pigeons at his place by not letting them out until they had young. He knew that they would return to look after the babies. The thief was afraid of my father, and brought back the pigeons and the money.

Before I left Serbia, I sold most of my pigeons. I took three pairs home with me but in Slovenia, peregrine falcons got them. It was 1945 and I was sixteen. I looked for an apprenticeship but there was nothing available.

I found a job in the textile factory tying the ropes that ran around pulleys to turn the spindles under the machine. There were about 600 spindles, and I had to check them regularly during my eight-hour day. I had to be on my knees most of the time, and my hands were blistered from pulling the ropes. It was a very dirty, hard job.

After about a year, I got a position as an apprentice electrician. When I finished, I worked for a private firm for two years before I applied to go to a business school that would qualify me to become an independent contractor.

About seventy of us started a two-year program but only twenty of us finished. It was pretty hard. For the first year, I had a scholarship from a textile factory and lived in a boarding school. They took away the scholarship in my second year, so I moved in with my sister, Ivana, and her family. I went to school mornings and worked afternoons.

In 1952, I finished college and started full-time work until they called me into the Army. I served in Serbia from 1952 until 1954. Slovenian boys had to go to the southern Yugoslav republics and soldiers from the southern republics served in Slovenia because the Communists wanted to assimilate the five Balkan nationalities and change them into one Yugoslav nation. We were all supposed to speak Serbo-Croatian to build the brotherhood and unity. The children of mixed marriages had no choice but to call themselves Yugoslavs but the rest of us resented it. Tito had a Croatian father and Slovenian mother – he was a Yugoslav! Maybe he believed that an assimilation and forced brotherhood would save Yugoslavia. Maybe if Communism lasted another generation people would forget who they were.

When I returned from the Army, I worked for about three years as the manager of a government electrical company. At the end of 1957 I moved to Ljubljana and opened a private electrical workshop and installations business. I employed about five electricians and some apprentices. I met Cilka, and when she finished teacher's college in 1960, we married.

I worked seven days a week, twelve hours a day. I bought a block of land, a car and a television. In those days that meant that I was doing well. I often worked late in the night, but no matter how hard I worked, I was not allowed to prosper because I was in the private sector – a rotten branch on the so-called healthy Socialist tree.

The shire council invited me to join the government-owned cooperative but I refused. They arrested me in July 1962 to investigate how I made my income. They wanted to teach me a lesson!

The investigator pleaded with me: Please understand Mr Zagar that I have to find something, anything! He interrogated my employees and the people we worked for but he found nothing. I began to understand that in Communism, it isn't right for a private business to be more successful than the government sector. I simply wasn't allowed to succeed.

When I got out of jail a month later, Cilka and I began preparing for our escape to Austria. Our son, Marko, was only eighteen months old. We asked relatives to look after him but it was too dangerous to tell them about our plans. They would commit a crime if the authorities found out that they knew and did not report us. We believed it would be easy to reclaim Marko through the Red Cross, once we were settled.

So, we sold most of our belongings and left the money for a man who would smuggle Marko to Austria if we could not get him through the Red Cross. Then on 13 October 1962, Cilka and I climbed over Mount Olsava into Austria.



Joze and Cilka with Paula and Francek Lorbek

Upon arrival, we met Francek and Paula, an Austrian-Slovenian couple. We were afraid that they would call the Border Police but instead they washed our clothes and gave us good food. We stayed with them for a few weeks and they became our lifelong friends.

Next, we hitchhiked to Salzburg. An American motorbike racer gave us a lift and said that he would wait for us on the German-side of the border. But we told him not to bother. We bypassed the border at midnight. As we ran to cross the bridge into Germany; Cilka fell into a freezing creek; I fell on the bridge, hurt my knee and tore my clothes. We found empty hay shed in the paddock but we couldn't go to sleep

because we were too cold. We went out onto the road again to hitchhike but the first car was a police car that took us back to Austria.

In Salzburg, they questioned and photographed us before they put us in jail. Four days later, we were transported to a refugee camp in Vienna where men and women slept in different dormitories. Early every Monday and Thursday mornings, a man came and called out the names of those who had to go by bus back to Yugoslavia. Cilka and I were terrified as we listened for our name to come up!

The authorities informed us that we would have to get Marko before they would let us emigrate. My brother came from Germany and said that he would contact the man who was to bring Marko. He took the money to pay the man but changed his mind, and tried to do it himself.

My brother Ciril was young and reckless, and the Border Police caught him with Marko. They put Ciril in jail and the police family took Marko. Cilka's mum collected Marko three weeks later. The

authorities told her that her family will go to prison and the government would take their land if she would let Marko go with anybody else.

In March 1963, I found a salesman in Graz, who often travelled to Slovenia. Cilka wrote to her parents to say that we returned to Slovenia and will come to collect Marko. The salesman posted the letter in Ljubljana, and a few days later, he went to collect Marko.

A doctor prescribed the right dose of sleeping pills for Marko. The salesman took the springs out of the back seat of his car and placed Marko inside to bring him over the border. We were waiting in Graz. Towards the morning, we heard Marko's voice on the steps. It was the most exciting sound we had ever heard, and the happiest time of our lives!

On May 13th 1963, we boarded the Qantas plane to Sydney. My first job in Australia was sugar cane cutting in Queensland. Later, I worked in the Jindabyne-Island Bend Tunnel, part of the Snowy Mountains project. From Jindabyne, we moved to Canberra where I worked as an electrical contractor. We built our home in Canberra and intended to stay there. We went for a holiday to Lightning Ridge in 1968 and stayed because I wanted to have a go at opal mining.

Opal mining changed our lives forever. People here say that opal mining is like any other gambling only you also develop muscles. Gambling on opal was exciting and everything was unpredictable. No two days were ever the same. The years passed too quickly.

My family witnessed the rise and the fall of Lightning Ridge. The name Lightning Ridge came long before opal played any role in the lives of people around here. The red iron ore apparently attracted electric storms and lightning once killed some sheep and a shepherd. People however agree that Lightning Ridge began to grow when black opal was first sighted by white settlers. Who first saw the rainbow in the dust of Lightning Ridge?

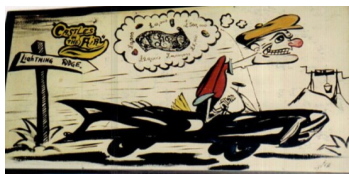
Says Roy Barker: Aborigines always had eyes to the ground foraging for food as they were, so they surely noticed pretty stones on the surface of Lightning Ridge ground. Some opals would have surfaced after the rain eroded the ground. They must have been delighted by the beautiful colours but they never considered them as having commercial value since opals are not food and they do not provide shelter.

Nobody is quite certain which white settler first spotted a flash of lightning in the stone. Maybe it was the first white shepherd during the late nineteenth century wandering around the ridge in the middle of the flat landscape. Maybe Mrs Parker from Bangate station became intrigued by the shiny stones Aborigines brought to her; maybe it was Mrs Ryan strolling near the government tank at the beginning of the twentieth century that saw something shiny in the dirt; maybe it was Jack Murray who first took a serious notice of the sighting and began to look for opal in 1906.

All agree that Lightning Ridge grew as the black opal town; the place blessed with the most spectacular colourful gem lured people from all over the world to search for this beauty. It blossomed during the last four decades of twentieth century when thousands of migrants swooned over the opal fields.

Like Graham Anderson said: Rich people like to go camping once a year but opal miners choose to camp all year around. They are where they want to be; they are doing what they like doing; they do it when they feel like doing it.

The relaxed lifestyle is the reason most miners like to return to Lightning Ridge. Mining for black opal unites Lightning Ridge people but the uniqueness of our different life experiences makes the place excitingly enchanting. Lightning Ridge, known as a home of the rainbow gem black opal, is also a home of just as colourful world adventurer opal miners who live on hope which is the high that lasts for a lifetime. They dream of the gem that might come in the next load of dirt to make all their castles in the clouds a reality. It might take a lifetime for the gem to appear but this lifetime is filled with hope and dreams.

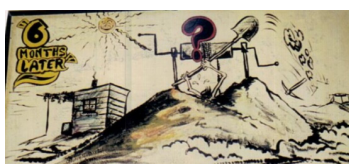


Diggers Rest hotel in middle of Lightning Ridge was the main meeting place for opal miners. Drinking singing and

story telling was part of everyday socialising before air-conditioning and television began to provide home comforts.



hotel has since then burned down and the



their doors, if they had doors at all they were open and everybody was welcome at any time. Machinery was left on the field and nobody touched what wasn't theirs; opals were passed around for inspection; everybody licked the dirt of the nobbies to see the colour better; everybody trusted everybody else.



the sunrise and sundown you work like mad to find a bit of colour to survive. The rest of the time you spend as you like and anyway you like to spend your time is fine on opal field. Our future and our fortunes are in the next truck of opal dirt. Another miner said: No sane person would stay in the dust and heat if freedom wasn't their highest priority. Here you are either high with excitement or tired from digging. You don't need drugs or plastic cards to sleep well. People say that opal miners want to get rich fast but getting rich is only a dream. Miners know how unrealistic this dream is but you have to have a dream to survive.

When we came in the sixties; the town had four teachers, one policeman, a visiting priest and a bush nurse. One policeman administered mining, traffic and law and order. If he said to a miner I don't want to see you here tomorrow, the miner had to pack up and go. We had no ratters no thieving and no disorder. We had no social security or unemployment benefit. You couldn't say that you were looking for employment if you chose to live in Lightning Ridge. There was only opal. When the money ran out miners left town to seek employment and save money before they returned to have another go. Since 1985 miners can apply for social security benefits so more and more opal miners exist on welfare. The opal fields changed. Unemployment benefits attracted some who are not self-reliant and

My first memorable impression of Lightning Ridge came from the paintings on the walls of Diggers Rest hotel. An unknown artist painted a story of a hopeful American in a huge limousine coming to Lightning Ridge dreaming dreams of instant riches he will find. The artist followed the man's Riches to Rags story. After six months of sweat and toil the man walks away swearing with his head down and the bundle of rags over his shoulder. The pictures were destroyed but I have here old photos of them. They represent the population of our tourist resort and miners' dreams.

I have witnessed many such real Riches to Rags stories. It is well known that about five percent of opal miners become rich, about twenty percent make good wages, another twenty percent scrapes for their survival and the rest go broke.

When we first came to Lightning Ridge nobody locked their doors, if they had doors at all they were open and everybody was welcome at any time. Machinery was left on the field and nobody touched what wasn't theirs; opals were passed around for inspection; everybody licked the dirt of the nobbies to see the colour better; everybody trusted everybody else.

I was amazed that the government allowed us to sell for cash but an old chum said to me: they have it on computers that the money coming to Lightning Ridge could not keep us either in prison or in a mental hospital. As long as we are happy, they are happy to forget us. Mining keeps men out of mischief. Somewhere between



responsible; ratters came to steal in the mines of honest hardworking miners. Everybody began longing for the good old days when one could trust everybody around him.



Now we have more people in the offices than down the shaft mining. Bureaucracy is producing corruption; those in the know have the power to use the poor miner any way they like. The pen pushers became the lucky people on the opal fields. They are the first to know where opal was found and they can exploit this knowledge.

Mining became too expensive for an ordinary bloke so most

of Lightning Ridge people are on some kind of social security. Office workers are out looking for the needs in the community. The more people look for needs more needs appear. The more social security offers the more scared and insecure we feel. Our names became a part of the invisible computer statistics. We are fish in the net.

We have many government agencies to take care of people, but people stopped caring. In the olden days people knew that they had to rely on each other so they were good to each other. Now miners don't even care to get to know each other.

Many miners invented the machinery and dwellings from the scraps found on the rubbish tip; we



developed and exhausted the opal fields.

Opal mining offers too many temptations and opportunities to take more than is appropriate. Partnerships, marriages and friendships were broken on account of opal.

Now we retired. The once vibrant tourist destination has become a very quiet home of retired fortune seekers. Lightning Ridge lost some of its lustre. The wages

elsewhere are high, there are no more adventurer migrants to risk their lives in pursuit of opal; the bureaucracy has spoiled mining with endless rules and regulations. The office created jobs for officers and many miners left town in protest. The easy going self sufficient community we once knew became a poor refuge for social security receivers. Hot Bore Bath seems to be the greatest attraction in Lightning



Ridge now because old tired bones find some relief in the artesian water.

Miners who could afford it escaped from the heat of Lightning Ridge summer and the town became regularly deserted for months. We spent most summer holidays in Canberra. Fishing for trout in the mountain streams and the company of good friends gave me much pleasure over the years. A group of us met in Tumut during the festive Christmas season for well over thirty years now. We camped on the banks of the cool clean Tumut River for years and there was much merrymaking. During the last few years we stayed in a motel but I still like to join the boys on the boat; we always compete who is going to catch more fish. We remember all the ones we caught and the others that got away. I am glad that my sons enjoy the pleasures of nature and a healthy lifestyle. I enjoy being with my boys and my grandchildren; I keep in daily contact with them. Family and friends really are the most important people.

I treasure the memories of the times Polde and Ivanka Bajt's family spent time with us. We enjoyed celebrating, fishing, pig-hunting, balin-bocce and cards. We enjoyed the company of many other Slovenian lifelong friends like Slavica, Marjan, Toncka and Stane Heric and Falez families. We like to remember Macek and Hribars and Visocniks. .

Nothing is new under the sun; new generations just see the old events with a new understanding. The master and the slave changed names and positions but both live at all times.

My childhood by Cilka Zagar.



Cilka Zagar's family in 1952

I was born at the beginning of WWII. Despite the war I had a wonderful childhood. My parents were simple, gentle and almost unnoticeable people. My father used to make toys and whistles for us children; he told us stories about the Cinderella and princesses while he was weaving baskets and making farm tools during winter; he took us to the forest in spring to show us birds making nests. I remember him taking me with him to catch a badger. We stayed in the field most of the night and he told me about the stars. Mum used to sing with us children as she sewed pretty dresses for us girls. I liked to comb her hair while she told me about the lives of saints. No wonder my earliest ambition was to become a saint or at least a princess.

After the war mum changed into black. I was surrounded by women in black. Black scarfs could be seen going to church every Sunday like black umbrellas in the rain. I could hear mum sob at night and her crying frightened me; her eyes were red all the time. Nobody asked why she cried.

Everybody in the house whispered. There were six children still at home yet the house seemed silent like people lost their voices. Dad stayed with the cattle when he wasn't

working on the fields. He stopped telling me stories, he barely noticed me. I remember mum patting his hair once but he pushed her hand away.

I started school in 1946; we learned under the tree because someone burned down the school during the war; we carried a homemade chair to school every day like children carry a pencil case these days. We learned how lucky we were that our hero partisans won the war and the revolution. We chanted the morning greeting: Death to fascism, freedom to the nation. For our homeland with Tito, ahead.

We learned that we were all the same and equal now and every type of work was honourable. We had freedom. We wrote slogans on the walls of the public buildings: Tito Stalin. Death to Germans and their collaborators. Death to traitors.

Every new experience seems normal to a child. I felt a kind of euphoria, a new beginning, a spring at the end of the war. We learned that Tito was our best teacher, our father, our saviour and the father of the nation. We sang songs in his honour. We created great pageants for his birthday.

My beautiful young teacher was singing with us children now like mum used to sing before. I loved my teacher and tried to please her. At the age of six I had no idea who Germans or Russians or traitors were. The teacher once asked the class who the traitors were and a boy said that his brother was a traitor. Somewhere in me was an unspoken fear that my brothers were also traitors. Nobody ever talked about them but I heard whispers that they were killed after the war. I believed that there was something to be ashamed of. I was also made ashamed of my parents because they owned land and went to church and did not rejoice in the communist victory. I was ashamed because they cried for my traitor brothers.

So much shame! So much fear that something dreadful was going to happen because my parents did not love Tito. So much guilt. It seemed to me that I was growing smaller every day. I was hiding in my confusion.

I proudly brought home my first school reader. Dad tore out the first page where the picture of Tito was. I felt that there was something very wrong with my father. My lovely teacher asked about the missing page. She took me to see the principal. I said that my little sister scribbled on it so I tore it out. The teacher and the principal whispered and looked at me. I don't know why I lied.

I was nine when the name Stalin disappeared from the walls; we heard whispers that our Tito quarrelled with Stalin. Most slogans were gradually rubbed out, changed or repainted.

A man in a black suit came at that time with a paper that ordered the surrender of our piglets. Mum protested that she needed to sell the piglets so she could buy shoes for the children. The man in a suit gave a signal for the two men in working clothes to load the piglets.

Mum stood between the men and the piglets like a mountain. The man in a suit told her to move out of the way or he will arrest her for sitting with Russians.

I did not sit with Russians when you sit with Russians, back-chatted mum and I grabbed her skirt in fear. Watch your tongue, said the man and his voice reached my bones.

I barely remembered my three older brothers. They were gone before I started school. The youngest stayed in Russia after the war and there were whispers that he was a communist; I became proud of the brother that returned from Russia victorious.

As I grew older I needed to understand what terrible thing my two brothers did to deserve to be killed in the dark forests of Kocevski Rog after the war. What was I afraid of? What was it that made everybody afraid of speaking about their fear?

At the age of sixty I first spoke about these things with Valentin, my so called communist brother. He became successful after the war and we all looked up to him. To me he was always a distant shining star. Now I wanted to know him. We began to correspond and he writes:

Jews have a day of cleansing, a day when the door opens and through this door should only go the one who truly confesses his sins and repents. I will try to pass through that door.

My parents and teachers made me keenly aware of the life choices: heaven, purgatory or hell. We had to fear hell and strive for heaven. For a catholic child this used to be simple. You sin, confess, repent and sin again. As long as you confess before you die you have nothing to fear. I worried about dying without confession. It did not seem fair that the eternity depended on this last confession. Why didn't God keep some kind of ledger to balance your good and bad deeds?

I was the fourth of nine children to a subsistent farmer. I still wonder how my parents clothe and fed us all. Two cows and two hectares of land was all they had but I don't remember ever being hungry. If they were lucky they sold a nest of piglets and maybe one calf a year.



My brothers Jozse and Rudi

Our idyllic lifestyle ended when the war began.

Our village was on the border of German and Italian occupied territory. We were under Italian administration until in 1943 Italy capitulated.

I was a restless teenager ready for excitement and rebellion. I suppose I was adventurous and often disobedient so I often had to be punished by my father. In 1942 at the age of 12 I ran away from home and joined Italians. They wanted to take me to Italy but mum begged our priest to intervene

so they let me come home. I recently read what the priest wrote in his diary; Valentin looked like a lost little Jesus and his mum commented: of course he did being the son of Joseph and Mary.

I vividly remember when in 1943 Germans transported Slovenians into German labour camps. I was 13. I saw people crying and packing their meagre belongings in bundles as they were forced to leave their homes. Brave and idealistic I wanted to help these people and fight the enemy.

My older brothers were hiding at the time but Home guards came and they took Joze, aged 18. Partisans came for Rudi, aged 16 but he had pneumonia so they left him. Home guards took Rudi towards the end of 1944. I was already gone by then.

At school I sat next to a boy whose parents were known communist activists. We were friends and on my 14th birthday 8August1944 I left home to join partisans.

There was no forced ideology at this time and I remember our unit going to Christmas midnight mass in 1944. In January 1945 they offered to send me with another 62 Slovenian boys to the military academy in Russia. We had to walk about a hundred kilometres in snow to Zagreb and in March 45 the plane took us to Belgrade; on April 45 we arrived to Kiev where we celebrated allied victory on 9May45.

In Russia I learned in Russian what Russian authorities wanted me to know. Mainly I learned political science, ballistics, armoury, topography, strategies, etc. I remember the hunger, the loneliness and the homesickness. This was a sad part of my life. I was forever hungry and cold.

I liked swimming in Dnjeper, horse riding in the open countryside and dancing at the weekend. Russian girls provided some intimacy and emotional experience for us young boys so far away from home.

I returned from Russia in October 1947 for a holiday. At the age of 17 I felt like a stranger in my family. The door between my father and me remained closed forever. Each of us lived out our own bitterness separately. I needed the love and understanding of my family but my family mourned my dead brothers. We never spoke about it but the silence was painful. My mother cried a lot; she showed love and understanding towards me but my father remained bitter to the end. In that atmosphere I left home. I tried to make something out of my life. I always wanted something better.

On the way back to Russia I stopped at my aunt's place in Zagreb where I again met a girl I knew from my childhood. I decided not to return to Russia and eventually this girl Ljerka and I married.

I began working and studying at the same time. I became an engineer and later a pharmacist; I was a director of the pharmaceutical factory Pliva for many years. I succeeded in my efforts but I found happiness in my family. There is a reason for everything one does. I always tried to make the best of what life offered.

In life one easily finds a crutch for himself when the going gets tough but one rarely extends this crutch to a fellow traveller. We like to celebrate with others but in one's pain one is often alone, an island for himself. As I look at the world events now I see that we did not learn anything. Young boys still kill for the beliefs their leaders instilled in them. They all also want God to be on their side.

So writes my brother. I am proud of him; he is a good man, he is an outstanding citizen, he is an intelligent human being, and he is a kind person.

I do not know what my two older brothers would be like if they were not murdered after the war. My parents considered them outstanding and excellent sons. I had no chance to know them as brothers.

Looking back I wonder why Slovenians still suffer the consequences of what these teenaged boys did sixty five years ago.

Slovenia revisited by Cilka Zagar

As I grew up in Slovenia during the 1940s, subsistent farmers produced their food, their wine and timber, their tools and utensils, much of their clothes and all of their toys. We washed and swam in the nearby river Krka; we skied on the surrounding hills and skated on the frozen creeks. The cows pulled the wagon with the produce. We stored fruit in the cellar, we smoked meat in the chimney, made lard, ground the grains, shelled the beans, made doonas and pillows from home grown chook and goose feathers. Dad read the newspaper and told stories for entertainment and enlightenment.

As I returned home during the nineties, I expected to see everything as I left it thirty years ago but my sister who is still living in our tiny village also had a computer and a dishwasher, a video and television, a car and a tractor. Our tiny village store now sells goods from all over the world much like Australian supermarkets do. Farmers produce cash crops. Even little Slovenia could not escape technology and progress.

I was not homesick for this modern Slovenia; I was searching for the sights and sounds and smells of long ago; I hoped to feel like I did during my growing up; I realised that homesickness is as much a wish to be young again as it is to return to an unchanged wonderland in which one first discovered love. Home is not a place on any map of the world, there are no roads leading home; I can play with memories of home and youth as perfectly in Australia as I can in Slovenia. The only home I am really homesick for is the one I carry in my heart. The place I called home has changed and changed hands and it has no memories of me.



Joe and I married in 1960 and arrived with our two years old son Marko to Australia in May 1963.

In 1966 I began teaching in Canberra. In 1968 my family went for a holiday to Lightning Ridge and my husband, Joe, found a two-carat opal at Canfells.

Let us stay for a few months, said Joe. I resigned from my job in Canberra, found a new one in Lightning Ridge School and kept on providing bread and butter for the family.

It never occurred to me that perhaps Joe should consider my job or my opinions or wishes. The man had to lead and the woman had to follow; that's what I believed at the time. Joe is ten years older; when I met him he had a business and he employed people. I was still a student. I am a follower by nature while Joe is more of a leader. Joe is outspoken and has been the most constructive critic of all my activities. He encouraged me to have a go and overcome new challenges. I rebelled a lot but in the end I am grateful to Joe for making me try harder.

Joe started mining to bring home bacon. He found a few stones and a few friends. Joe never liked to work for the boss; he was an independent man and Lightning Ridge provided an opportunity for him to work on his own, at his own pace; he hoped that here he could prove himself and prosper with his tenacity and hard work. Joe promised that we will return to Canberra for Christmas; every Christmas for many years until I reluctantly accepted Lightning Ridge as our home.

We intended to keep that first opal Joe found but we needed a roof for the house and this tiny stone paid for it.



Walgett in 1975 with my class, the Principal Sr. Betty and my assistant Unkey.



The teachers at St Joseph's Walgett in 1997

Dudley Dennis, my illiterate Aboriginal friend, once said to me: It doesn't matter where you live, it is people you live with that make you either happy or unhappy. Government can give you all the rights and all the money but if the people around you don't like you, don't need you and trust you, you have nothing. Dudley was talking about Aboriginal people but this also applied to me. I felt very privileged to work with people who liked me. I looked forward to being with my students and their parents. The nuns and other teachers also became my friends.

When our sons left home I began to study at university by correspondence. This gave me a sense of achievement. As a student in Slovenia I used to earn a bit of money by writing stories and poems for publications in newspapers and magazines; now for the first time in Australia I also found time to write. For many years I was shy and a little scared to express my opinions or tell about my feelings.

Now writing helped me clear many personal issues. I always enjoyed writing so this became my main hobby. In my social isolation writing was also my survival strategy.



With my three boys Joze, Marko and Marjan

My Aboriginal students wrote me letters when I had no time to listen to their stories. The way they wrote about their lives seemed fresh, colourful and sincere. I loved their writing so I prepared it for publication. In 1990 Aboriginal Studies Press published our book *Growing Up Walgett*.

I accompanied Aborigines in their search for bush tucker and bush medicine. Diocese in Armidale published a few of my books about Aboriginal food, medicine, legends, culture and traditions; these

In 1974 Joe decided to start a business venture in America. I quit my job ready to follow. By the time Joe changed his mind another teacher replaced me at school.

In August 1974 I found a job in Walgett Catholic School and intended to work there until Christmas. Working with Walgett Aborigines became a source of much happiness for me. Aboriginal people liked me and I liked them. I felt like I found a new family. I worked in Walgett for the next twenty-six years.



My Aboriginal Dennis family from Gingie Mission



My family in 2000. Joze, Anica, Cilka, Valentin, Minka, Jozica,

booklets became the teaching aids for teachers and parents.

In 1995 my novel Barbara was translated into Slovenian and published in Ljubljana. Barbara tells Australian history of the second half of twentieth century as experienced and perceived by Slovenian migrants.

My novel Magdalena amongst Black Opals was translated into Slovenian and published in 2000. Magdalena tells about the diverse group of people who came to Lightning Ridge to find a shortcut to riches.

Magabala published my book Goodbye Riverbank in 2000. In this book Aboriginal elders tell how they experienced the Transition from their traditional tribal grounds on the Barwon-Namoi riverbanks into the rural towns.

Historical society published two collections of my stories about Lightning Ridge miners. I regularly write for newspapers and magazines.



At the launch of my book Magdalena. Joe and I are with Australian Slovenians Ivan Zigon and Aleksandra Ceferin and the editor Aleksander Zorn

Lately I published many books with Lulu On demand publisher. I also regularly contribute to Slovenian and Australian publications.

I am happy that I was challenged to overcome obstacles because overcoming them made me stronger, wiser, more understanding and tolerant. I appreciate Slovenians who came with me, I respect those that stayed at home and I am grateful to Australians who made my personal development possible.

My only regret is that I didn't offer more support and understanding to my parents in their old age. I also feel a bit guilty that I deserted my country so I could enjoy the freedom and prosperity in Australia while Slovenians at home struggled to achieve their independence, and democracy.

My American connection

I was five at the end of the war and we were extremely poor. Mum found a large brown canvas that fell off the retreating German truck and she began sewing clothes for us children. We had canvas nappies, canvas underwear and over-wear. In 1946 I started school in a canvas dress.

The bright light in our lives at that time were our American relations. My aunt Jenny sent us the wedding pictures of her children and we admired their beautiful clothes and refined features. America seemed a magic land of milk and honey to us poor war ravaged Europeans. Most people had somebody in America and we began receiving parcels of clothes from them. We received nylon dresses and nylon stockings and high heel sandals. I wore the sandals to school after Dad cut off high heels and blocked the toe hole of the sandal with a bit of wood so the snow would not get in.

Children of the communist parents received proper shoes from the communist government. I realized that my parents were not communists and that we were not proper people in some way. I loved our rich American aunt but I was also made ashamed of my American sandals. The knowledge seeped into my soul that people who received parcels from the 'rotten' West weren't as good as people who didn't.

In 1972 I visited my Aunt in Cleveland. She was over eighty but she repainted her whole house for my visit.

My cousin Martin told me the story of his jacket:

My father died in 1942, Martin began. Mom was left with three teenaged children. She went from house to house to work as a dress maker to provide for us. She sewed me a jacket so she could send me into the navy at the age of sixteen. She told me to send that jacket home as soon as they gave me a navy uniform. She wanted my brother Rudy to follow me in the same jacket a year later. I was sent to Pearl Harbour. When Japan attacked I was wounded and sent to hospital but all I worried about was how to send that jacket home.

My cousin Jennie said:

We had a happy childhood. We weren't rich; far from it, but we used our imagination and invented things to play with. My father worked for General Motors so Mom was the first on the block to have a washing machine, a refrigerator, and a television. Depression hit us hard. Mom put some savings in the bank but the bank folded and we lost our money. In 1942 Dad died from bleeding ulcers. I was 18 and had to start working, Martin joined the navy, and Rudy was at school. Mom worked in the sewing factory. I got married in 1946. I had two little children when my husband became sick. He could no longer work and I didn't work for a year so Mom had to help everybody.

Mom had a hard life with dad. He was drinking. I remember us boys having to sell carts of wood on the roadside, said my cousin Rudy.

I suppose the happiest time for Mom was when she came home and read a chapter of her 'povest' in the Slovenian Catholic newspaper, tells Jennie. This paper had a page where they printed a chapter of a Slovenian story. Dad usually prepared vegies for dinner but Mom just disappeared into her bedroom with the paper.

That 'povest' was the highlight of my aunt's life; it was a reward for her good work and for being conscientious and fair and generous. That chapter must have brought her closer to everything she left behind in Slovenia when she joined the boy Martin from her village Dobrava in Slovenia to begin her married life in America. She had never seen her home and her people again so she needed this povest to help her dream of the people and places her children knew nothing about.

After dad died in 1942 Mom erected the monument for him; she soon also bought a plot for herself and had her own monument erected. Next to the star came her date of her birth 1.2.1891 but she left the space next to the cross where we only had to insert her date of death 21.1.1986. For 44 years she then looked after her resting place. After Sunday mass she never missed a trip to the cemetery to pull out the weeds, wipe the marble and wash the angels, tells Martin.

I realised that my Aunt was not rich but only hardworking, generous and caring. She took care of her belongings and she told me the names of her descendants who will inherit them.

I realise that I am much like my aunt Jenny. I take care of people and things; I make sure that everything runs smoothly and that everybody gets their fair share. It worries me that people no longer pass on their belongings. These days people pass away and their belongings are usually sold at a garage sale or are donated to a charity shop. Whatever is left over goes to the tip where scavengers delight in finding bits of treasure among the tons of trash. Some entrepreneurs even organise a special trash and treasure shops where more valuable or interesting items end. I like to look at things people loved and abandoned. Sometimes I find wedding albums, wedding dresses and wedding gifts among the trash soon after the wedding itself. I often see jewellery that must have at one time delighted someone. Many gifts are still unwrapped among the waste.

I remember my last visit to my aunt Jennie in 1985; she was 95 and she walked with a frame. We leaned on the fence and admired her garden. I would like to gather the seeds from the lettuce but I can't bend, she said. Next year I will have to buy the seeds if I don't collect them now, she added. I scooped the seeds and packed them away for her for next year. Her face brightened. The weeds are going to take over, she pleaded. I pulled out the weeds. Her garden was her life. On the way to the airport she sang me a Slovenian farewell song: Adijo pa zdrava ostani-Farewell and stay well.

Aunt Jennie died a few months later. She planned out her entire funeral; she chose the songs to be played and the menu for her wake.

My Aunt was my America. I suppose I was her hometown.

Travelling in Pennsylvania we saw a sign saying: Slovenian Association. We told the doorman that we are Slovenians from Australia. He announced it to everybody and people greeted us enthusiastically. Mostly older men and women rushed towards us introducing themselves in a variety of old Slovenian dialects.

When did you come to America? I asked. We were born here; we were never in Slovenia, they all said. It's so nice to meet someone from home, though, they insisted.

They were the children and grandchildren of Slovenian migrants who came to America after the First World War. They learned Slovenian dialects from their parents. We ended singing old Slovenian folk songs.

Slovenians sing wherever they are to express their feelings. I wonder why Australians don't sing. Maybe coming from all over the world they have no songs in common. Why do some people always sing and others never?

I travelled with my family on the last road between the northern edge of Canada and the North Pole. There are no sidetracks and few settlements in this virgin country. I stopped to get a drink from the only hotel for many miles. A man came towards me, his eyes alight, his arms outstretched, big smile on his face: I barely recognised you, he said to me in Slovenian. I almost fell into his arms before I remembered that I have never seen the man before. We stood speechless for a moment and then he said in English: I am sorry; I took you for someone else. The smile left his face; the eyes lost the shine, the arms hung beside him.

You are Slovenian, I said in Slovenian. Yes, yes, yes, he came to light again and we shook hands.



My American relations.

My Slovenian face was familiar to him; he mistook me for a Slovenian woman he knew. We hurried with explanations of who we are, where we come from, what we do, where we live, where we were born, when we were last in Slovenia. Soon we discovered friends and acquaintances in common; soon we were sitting in his log cabin discussing history, geography, philosophy, and childhood memories.

As Joe drove through Beverley hills we stopped next to a group of women beside the road to ask for the shortcut to the airport.

Joe was telling me in Slovenian

to mark the road on the map. One of the ladies came towards me and hugged me. I was stunned. You are from Slovenia. Please come in, she said in English. I tried to explain that we were in a hurry. I'll show you the shortcut, she said.

As we drank coffee in her beautiful mansion she told us that her grandmother was born in Bela Krajina in Slovenia. I always wanted to go to Slovenia, she said. She only spoke a few Slovenian words but she wanted to hear us speak Slovenian.

In Cleveland Joe stopped in a no parking zone for a minute while I jumped out to get something from a shop. A man stopped to talk to our two boys in the back of the car and they told him that we are from Australia. The man invited us for a drink in the pewter club next door. Joe told him that he is not allowed to park the car there. The man bought ice-creams for the boys and called a

policeman to look after them while we went to the club. He told everybody that we are from Australia and people came to join us. The man was Cleveland's Traffic Commissioner; he had a brother in Sydney so he wanted to know everything about Australia.

On a trip through Canada we became excited when we met a couple of Australians. We realised that we were homesick for Australia.

I am fortunate to have two homelands but whether I am in Australia or in Slovenia there is the longing for that other homeland.

I lived in a tent sometimes, I slept in a four by six trailer some nights and for most part I lived in a modern, comfortable house.

It is so true though what my Aboriginal friend Dudley said: It doesn't matter where you live; it is the people you live with that make you either happy or unhappy.

As for myself I learned that people remember me not for who I am or what I do but for what I recognised and appreciated in them. People loved me not to make me happy but because loving made them happy.

I also remember gratefully those that discovered and appreciated something in me. Loving also makes me happy.

Above all I learned to appreciate being a tiny part of the beautiful and perfect creation. I can finally let myself merge with the rest of the universe and enjoy its intricately mysterious diversity without trying to understand it. I praise the Creator who knows why things are as they are. I really am busy counting my blessings.

From my diary by Cilka Zagar

In the box of old papers I find a diary I began forty years ago when Joe and I came to Australia with our two years old son Marko. I open the tattered old pages to read what I wrote when I was still a young girl in the Australian autumn of 1963.

May 1963

Joe heard that one could earn good money cutting sugar cane in Queensland. We travelled to Queensland of sandy beaches and everlasting sunshine. The smell of frangipani blossoms, the sight of the blue clear surf, and the clean freshness of the vast fields inspire me to daydream about our better future.

The gang of Spanish sugarcane cutters was willing to take Joe as a partner if I would cook Spanish food for them. Can you cook Spanish food, a man asked me. Of course, I said. Food is food and it has to be cooked. It is natural that a woman would know how to cook. It comes with the gender like cutting sugar cane came natural to Joe. Nobody needed to know that I never cooked a meal before; I was a boarding school girl.

In return for my cooking we would eat for free. The Spanish sugar cane farmer provided living quarters for his cane cutters. I knew a few English words and so did the Spanish cutters. They told me that everything I would need is in the cupboard. As the men left for work in the morning I inspected the cupboard for provisions. Everything was covered in black. I shuddered and shut the door quickly.

As I recovered I stilled myself for longer inspection. The cockroaches scuttled into the corners as the sun hit them. The butter underneath was nibbled by them and the jar of sugar still held a few big brave ones that did not feel intimidated by my presence. In the crevices of the bread moved the long tentacles and munched away. I closed the door and took a broom and banged it on the door to scare the living daylights out of them. When I opened the door again the clusters of moving black wings and tentacles hung onto the corners but the food was free. I took everything out of the cupboard and let the sun shine on the monstrosity of black clusters of cookies hanging in the corner of the cupboard from the ceiling to the floor. Like me they were probably considering a new strategy of attack. We knew that we were enemies, deadly enemies.

I took the hose and sprayed hard into every crevice in the cupboard. They ran in their hundreds and I swept them out and brushed them into the bin where they were supposed to suffocate and never return. Luckily I had a hose and enough water to drown the buggers. There seemed no end of them. They kept coming huge and ugly from tiny cracks in the walls. I kept drowning them all day and by the time men returned my kitchen was clean.

It was no use telling men about my predicament. Living with cockroaches was obviously no problem for them. I had to be sensible and find a way to fit into cohabitation with the rest. It was my problem if I couldn't stand the long, fast moving black monsters. Men just brushed them aside casually. They are all a fact of life. You can never get rid of cockroaches; they have been there before humans and will probably remain after we become extinct.

The climate suits them and there is plenty of food, was all Joe said.

No use crying or waiting for help.

I couldn't sleep at night. As soon as I closed my eyes there came millions of black enemy dancing in front of my eyes. I sat in the car all night. The car was the only sanctuary not yet infested by my mortal enemy.

In the morning I returned to my clean kitchen to prepare breakfast for my men who had a hard day's work in front of them. I opened the cupboard and my heart sank. I could feel tears running down my cheeks. I lost my battle. Either the cockroaches I drowned rose from the dead or their relations replaced them and settled on the clean shelves over the sugar and butter and bread. I closed the cupboard door and banged on it with the wooden spoon to frighten them away. Cockies understood and moved into the corners so I could reach the food.

When alone, I began to consider my future. I could either leave the place and let cockroaches defeat me or find new strategies to defeat them.

Nobody ever took any notice of my fear of cockroaches. One has to live with pests one could not destroy.

I remember my early childhood. Sometimes cockroaches could be heard chirping behind the bench around the stove during the day but in the evening they ventured onto the ceiling. As the light was turned on they scuttled to the corners and sat quietly. Mum crept close to them and in one quick strike killed them with the broom. But others came the next night. Mum insisted that cockroaches came from the neighbours since we regularly killed the ones in our house.

When the floorboards of our kitchen were replaced in 1945 we discovered that cockroaches had a cosy home right under the old floorboards. Mum still insisted that they all came from our neighbours but the horrible masses of black beetles felt quite at home until we so rudely disturbed their dwelling. They began to run in all directions in their hundreds looking for safety and the new hiding places. We armed ourselves with spades and brooms and killed them like fire-fighters kill the fire that is trying to destroy the house. For many months since this assault I had nightmares about cockroaches crawling over my body. Nobody took any notice of my crying at night as I silently watched and listened for the left over cockies. Phobias were not heard of and being scared of the small creatures was considered plain silly.

At school we put our lunches in the drawer under our desks. When I opened the drawer I found a cockroach eating my lump of bread contentedly. Other sensible kids just brushed the unwelcome guests away like one brushes the fly from one's eye. I could not eat the cockies' leftovers.

I watched the floorboards while I listened to the teacher explaining that we had to be grateful to the communist revolutionaries who liberated us and brought us freedom and prosperity. I was convinced that under the floorboards rested millions of my enemies contentedly waiting to eat my lunch. I stopped bringing lunch to school and hoped that cockroaches would die from starvation.

We were finally liberated in 1947; our potato crops were attacked by the beetle brought from Colorado. We tried to kill this Colorado potato beetle manually at first. School children were sent on the fields to check for and squash the unwelcome tourist. The village co-op provided a prize for every creature we brought to them, dead or alive. Any prize was welcome in those poor, after war, times, so we, children, swarmed over the potato fields like locust.

Eventually America provided DDT powder that would kill any pest. We dusted the fields but Mum also sprinkled DDT powder in every hidden corner of our house. Mum was sensible.

From then on we had no more cockroaches. I was so proud of my home and my mum. We looked down on neighbours who did not liberate their homes. I felt superior belonging to the family that lived in the liberated house. We were clean.

One day our kind neighbour brought us a jar of cream because our cow was having a calf and did not produce milk. I gratefully dipped a piece of bread into the thick cream. When I pulled it out there were huge tentacles of the cockroach attached to my bread. I screamed and threw the bread away, the jar tipped over and mum told me not to be silly. Nobody considered my aversion to cockies an issue. It would surely develop into phobia if anyone allowed for it. Or knew about it.

Mum told the neighbour then about the magic of DDT powder in the hope that our whole neighbourhood would become liberated from the pests. Having pests in the house was shameful to mum rather than terrifying.

Mum considered our family better than people around us. Especially since she cleaned our house of cockroaches.

12 June 1963

I went to the local grocery shop and asked for some kind of pest killer.

Not that it helps much, said the shopkeeper. I spray every evening and I sweep them out in the morning but new ones will come in a few days. They multiply.

Australians are sensible about pests. They continually try to get rid of them but they don't lose sleep over them. I think the cockies became immune to the poisons, they grew stronger than poison. I believe cockroaches figured out how to win against Queenslanders.

What fails to kill you makes you stronger, said mum when she spread the white DDT powder thickly under our floorboards. She made sure that she killed.

My Queensland home became a killing field. If I am to survive I have to be smarter than my enemies. I must not let them grow stronger. They would multiply and punish me for trying to eradicate their species. Every living thing knows there is strength in numbers. I have to find a better stronger poison.

What about DDT, I asked the grocer.

Not allowed to use it near food. Too dangerous.

I want to poison ants outside, I lied. So I got the magic powder and sprinkled it outside and inside the house. I filled in every crevice on the wall and on the floor. I did not want them to grow stronger. Every morning since then I swept the dead creatures away. After a couple of weeks only an occasional cocky came to die in my kitchen. I did not tell anyone about DDT. I am watching my men for signs of poisoning but the cane cutters survived.

I remain on the lookout for cockies wherever I go. Especially in the sunny Queensland where the food is plentiful and the days are warm.

27 June 63

The grocer told me to call him George. He is an older Greek man well over thirty. He wears a green apron. He seems used to dealing with people who know even less English than he does. We both smile in places where we can not find a word and we use our hands a lot. I am as foreign to George as he is to me but we are probably closer to each other than we are to most. I can not understand a word of Greek and he does not go to Catholic Church. Actually neither of us goes to any church because I don't know any churches here. I see George every day as I buy all the food from him and put it on the account for cane cutters to fix.

4 July 63

A man came in the shop today with a crate of lemons to sell to George. He gave me a few lemons and said: When life offers you lemons make lemonade.

He was a kindly Italian man over forty years old and must have sensed that life had many lemons in store for me. He left part of himself with me in his little offering of wisdom. I was never short of lemonade.

3 November 64

How is your husband coping, asked George. Cane cutting is considered the hardest job.

George is the only person I come in contact with. so I consider him a friend. I keep chatting with him to practice my English. I don't know why he keeps on chatting.

I realise that I never even asked Joe how he is coping. I am too busy coping. Joe does not complain. His hands are blistered but he says that he has to get used to the machete. When the blisters harden they don't bleed any more.

I was so preoccupied with killing cockroaches that I even forgot my son Marko. The farmer's wife, a dark haired Spanish little lady, takes him almost every day to play with her little boys. Marko began to speak but the words he says I have never heard before. He points to the water but he says aqua. He points to the farmer's house and says cassia. I realise that Marko's first language is Spanish.

29.November 1964

In the morning I fry eggs and bacon and make toast. I put a coffeepot and a jug of juice on the table. The men like this breakfast. Maybe it is Spanish, maybe it isn't. As I clean after the breakfast, I smell the fires. The cutters burn the cane fields so that the fire strips the leaves. The blackened stocks are then cut with machetes and chopped into pieces and loaded on train carriages to be taken to the mill.

At lunchtime five blackened men descend into the kitchen and I serve lunch which they wash down with beer. Almost every day they eat soup and steak and vegetables. Every day they have custard with fruit. It is dry fruit, which I soak for a few hours and place on top of the custard. This must be a Spanish menu because Spanish lady showed me what to cook the first day and I cook it with small variations every day and nobody complains. Cooking is not nearly as complicated as one would imagine. One cooks the same meat and the same vegetables in different ways that's all.

Each of the men takes a water bag and off they go again. In the evening they return, wash themselves under the tap of the water tank. They eat more slowly. For dinner I roast the meat and bake potatoes. The farmer's wife provides greens for the salad. Sometimes the men go to the pub and have a few beers afterwards but most of the time they just drop onto their beds.

1 December 63

The farmer gave me a chook to kill and cook for the cutters. It had to be done.

I remember watching mum kill chooks most Sundays. If you want to eat the Sunday roast you better kill the chook. If mum could do it so could I.

I held the chook between my legs, its head in one hand and the knife in the other. Mum said that the chook dies quickest if you turn the knife into its eye. I poked the little sharp knife into the chook's eye, closed my eyes and turned the knife to squash the chook's brain.

There was an awful pain in my stomach as I stuck the knife into the eye of the chook but I had to pull myself together.

When the blood stopped dripping in the pot and the chook stopped struggling I dropped it on the ground but the chook began to run away with its head to the ground. I panicked and grabbed it to have another go at killing. As I held it between my legs again, it slowly went limp and I knew that it wasn't only pretending to be dead.

Mum used to drop the chook into the boiling water for a minute if she wanted to make the plucking easier but most of the time we had to pluck it dry and save the feathers. During long winter months we picked the feathers for doonas and pillows.

20 December 63

After six months the cane season finished so we moved south to look for a suitable place to settle down. It is going to be Christmas and we sleep in a car.

Joe heard from other migrants that one could earn good money in Snowy Mountains. This great engineering project fascinated men. Anything with the name snowy is welcome after the heat of Queensland summer.

Joe began to work in the Island bend-Jindabyne tunnel.

I was never able to quite separate the memory of the beautiful Jindabyne from the rats and mice I had to live with. And the terrible aloneness.

I read the diary from 5June64

I am expecting our second baby. We moved into the five-bedroom old farmhouse in the old Jindabyne. The fibro walls have holes in them but we feel lucky that we have a roof over our heads. We found some old pots and crockery and cutlery abandoned in the shed. We also found an old mattress and some clothes people left behind.

The owners of the houses from old Jindabyne moved up on the hill where they build a new Jindabyne. The old homes are made available to workers on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. They

will flood the old town and cover up all the dirt with beautiful blue water when the project will be finished.

There is no water supply. Australia has no water springs like Europe. You can't even dig a well. Joe patched and cleaned the old empty rainwater tank, took out dead birds and cats and smaller unidentifiable animals. He didn't even let me see all the rubbish he took out. I brought buckets of water from the Snowy River to wash the tank and now we are waiting for the rain to fill it with fresh, clean rainwater.

A man passed by as Joe cleaned the water tank.

Any rats, he asked.

No, said Joe.

I never saw a rat in my life so I took no notice.

They come inside during winter for warmth, said the man.

30 February 65

We are waiting for the rain. Marko is four and he follows me to the nearby Snowy River to get a bucket of water every morning and every afternoon. I also wash our clothes in the river. I rinse them in the morning, soap them and spread them on the branches of the trees to sun bleach them during the day. In the afternoon I rinse them out and hang them on the branches to dry.

On Sunday we went to church and prayed for rain.

We should take a bucket with us to church so God could give us water, suggested Marko.

I found a box of comics and short stories abandoned in the shed. The little Mills and Boon romances are easy to read and bit by bit I learn the words and their meaning. The books are half eaten by rats and mice, they were covered in dust and cobwebs but I cleaned them. These romances saved my sanity. Luckily we brought the dictionary with us.

2 March 65

Joe is working a night shift. He comes in the morning but he sleeps most of the day. He tells me that I am lucky to be staying at home but I feel jealous when he goes to work. He meets people there while I stay home alone. Marko is the only person I can talk to.

Jindabyne 17 March 65

Marjan was born beautiful and healthy yesterday at three in the afternoon. Joe had to work a double shift. They wanted him to do the third shift because the man did not turn for work but Joe said that he had to go to the hospital so the supervisor took his place.

Joe was dirty and wet as he slumped onto the hospital bed. He didn't ask about our new baby. He was shaking.

There was an accident just after I left, Joe told me after awhile. Explosion. One man is dead. A man lost his legs. Another man had his chest crushed by a rock. If I stayed a few more minutes I could be dead.

How did it happen, I asked

The detonator didn't explode, said Joe.

What do you mean?

You know nothing about the things I have to do, said Joe.

I know only that Joe works on the face of the tunnel preparing the lights for miners before they blast another metre of the mountain to make the tunnel.

I want to know. I hold his hand. He came to see our baby, he was supposed to comfort me but I know that he needs comforting. He saw it all happen. The nurse brought our baby and while he suckled at my breast, Joe told me about his work.

There is a two-story platform at the face of the tunnel. The big jumbo drilling rig with about a dozen air drills comes and the miners set the drills to drill about four metres into the rock. There is a big hole in the middle and about sixty or more smaller holes on the face of the tunnel around the big hole. The miners place gelignite and a detonator into each hole. The air pressure pushes it to the end of the hole. Then they fill the hole with the nitrogen powder mixed with diesel. Next they place another gelignite and detonator at the end of the hole.

All detonators are connected to the wires and to the firing switch. The switch is under the lock so nobody could turn it on accidentally.

When all holes are ready, the jumbo drill and the wagon with the gelignite and the miners are taken back about half a kilometre where the firing switch is. The supervisor checks that everything is in order before he turns the switch.

Each hole has a number. The holes around the big hole in the middle explode first, then those next to it and so on. The whole lot crushes and caves towards the middle where a big hole was drilled.

After the explosion the face electrician is the first to go towards the face of the tunnel to install the lights. He can't see in front. Rocks are hanging loosely from the ceiling and can kill you.

After the electrician installs the lights, the man called chip monkey, dislocates and removes the loose rocks from the ceiling.

The loader comes to load the rocks on the carriages and clear the ground for the next drilling.

What went wrong, I ask. It is hard for me to comprehend and visualise every detail of the operation.

There is a strict rule that miners should never drill into the existing holes because the first detonator and the gelignite in the hole may still be live. It rarely happens but it did. One of the miners drilled into the old hole and it exploded into his face. The rocks were flying all over the face of the tunnel.

How could he?

We were all tired. After the miner prepares his set of holes he can take a nap. One miner took a short cut. He was sleepy, I suppose. Drilling into the old hole saved time.

Do you know which miner?

It isn't important; we all learned a lesson. I was on the way out when they called me back to help.

How long ago was it?

Less than an hour.

Go home and have a rest, I said. Joe never asked how long the labour took and how heavy the baby was. Those are the luxuries we will talk about later.

I hate it when Joe is on a night shift. I am scared to sleep in the isolated house. During the day Joe sleeps and I keep the children quiet so he gets his rest. If I am lucky they all go to sleep for a few minutes and I sleep with them.

26June65

We had the first frost. Joe cut a pile of wood to keep us warm through the winter. While Joe was on a night shift I put the baby in the basket near the fireplace. Marko was asleep so I took a book and sat near the fire.

I heard a sound and looked up quickly. There were two pairs of beady eyes looking back at me. They didn't blink and neither did I. I sat frozen to the chair for a moment. A tail hanging out of the hole in the fibro wall suddenly moved, the heads of the creatures nodded to each other and moved towards the basket with my baby. I grabbed the baby and ran out into the freezing night. I stopped

up on the hill, leaned on the tree and cried. I could hear the ice forming on the branches. I shivered. The wind touched my bones.

Suddenly I remembered Marko asleep alone amongst rats. I picked a stick and returned to the house. I rattled all the walls to frighten the rats away before I sat in the middle of my bed with my boys on each side.

I read out loud to learn English and to frighten the ghosts and the rats away. I read and re-read these books until I knew them almost by heart.

I told Joe but he is not worried about the rats. He bought poison and spread it into every hole.

26 August 65

In the middle of last night I heard the footsteps under the window. I looked out and saw a man's face pressed on the windowpane. I grabbed the gun, turned the light off and waited. The man went to the back of the house. There is a little slope and the ice formed on it. The man slipped and came crashing on the back door. I had no strength to hold the gun straight, let alone shoot. When I heard the man's footsteps running away I crumpled to the floor. I never again closed my eyes until Joe returned from the night shift.

I told Joe about the man. That scared him.

I am going to resign, said Joe. We saved enough to put a deposit on a little place in Canberra.

1 September 65

I sit in my kitchen sometimes and watch mice play on my wood stove. There would be half a dozen of them jumping from one pot onto another looking for morsels of leftover food. They take tiny crumbs into their dainty hands and nibble like little children. They became my pets.

We are going away, I tell the mice. I am overjoyed. Spring is here, wild flowers sprung out, the rats moved out. Maybe Joe poisoned them and they lay somewhere behind the fibro walls rotting away. I want to believe that they moved out.

7 October 65.

The trip to Canberra was a catalyst in our lives. Joe and I fell in love with Australian Capital Territory. To us it was definitely a promised land.

The cool orderly modern design and the clean, symmetric beauty of Australian Capital Territory overwhelmed me. I believe that Canberra is the most beautiful city in the world.

I want to live here, I say to Joe right then and there.

Land is cheap. We bought the dearest block of land in Pearce for six hundred dollars. The rest of our savings started Joe as an electrical contractor.

Slovenian priest came from Sydney every third Sunday of the month and most Slovenians came to Slovenian mass. We wanted to see each other; even those that dislike each other and those that do not believe in God come to mass. I suppose nobody wants to miss out on seeing a group of Slovenian faces.

Australia is full of foreigners. Even Slovenians in Canberra seem foreign to us. They came from other regions; they have different background and they think differently.

23 April 66

I took an evening job in a local club. As a barmaid I met with Australians for the first time. The men leaning on the bar were eager to talk to me. They introduced themselves as Jack and Sam and Tom and Dave. Jack asked my name and I said: My name is Mrs. Zagar. He burst out laughing.

I know you are Mrs. Zagar but what is your name?

Cilka, I said and felt like a woman who has committed adultery for the first time. I felt completely naked because I revealed my first name to an almost complete stranger.

Men were friendly; I suppose anybody is friendly with a young barmaid while they have a glass of beer in their hand. They say that a barmaid looks prettier with every beer men drink. They came at exactly the same time and left at the same time to go home for dinner and to kiss their kids good night. Joe kissed our kids goodnight while I worked.

Most men spent a couple of hours after work in the club and would have two to three beers. Anything over that may lead into the change of home-going time and trouble at home. They were older men all of them. Any man over thirty was an older man at the time because I was so young. Some of these older men held high positions in the government but to me they were known only by their first names and by the size of the beer they drank. They appreciated my eagerness and memory. I would see them at the door and by the time they came to the bar their drink would be waiting for them. I liked to talk to learn English. Broken English was not a deterrent for a young barmaid as much as it was for men. Joe complained about Australians who mumbled their sentences so fast that he could not catch their meaning.

13 June 66

Kathy, another young mother, who works with me, invited me to her home. It was the first Australian home I ever visited.

Coffee, said Kathy as we sat down.

Oh, you don't have to, I dismissed the invitation, convinced that she will ask again and at least once more urge me to partake of the coffee with her.

You don't mind if I have one, said Kathy unaware of my expectations. She made herself a cup of coffee and accepted my refusal of her hospitality without a sign of discomfort.

I never again refused a drink of any kind from Australian hosts when I wanted one. You don't get the second chance. I had to learn fast.

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On a big dance night in the club a man asked for many fancy drinks and I felt good that I knew how to make all of them. Before he left the bar he asked for the screwdriver. I was glad that I became familiar with this tool. Having an electrician I had to know tools. I brought a half metre long screwdriver that I previously saw sitting at the back on the beer keg. I placed it in front of my customer but he opened his jaws and looked around to his friends. They burst out laughing. The music stopped and everybody looked at me. I was the only dummy who didn't know that vodka with orange juice is also called a screwdriver.

I felt embarrassed but looking back I think people liked the opportunity to laugh. They remembered and retold the story. People are usually grateful to those who make fools of themselves. Gradually I began to laugh with them and at myself and my mistakes. There are millions of opportunities to make a fool of yourself when you are transplanted into another continent and society.

Marko Zagar



My baby boy and I at Movie World

I was born in Ljubljana on the 20th of April 1961. Surely this was not a world changing event or if it was I certainly don't remember any of it. It's quite possible that my birth was greeted by wise men and angels and stuff but unfortunately no one recorded those particular events. In fact I don't remember much of my very early years so the time till I grew a bit of a brain is mostly hearsay.

My parents tell me that the escape from the communist regime into which I was born was interesting to say the least. I probably should have stayed for a while yet because I really hadn't obtained much of the cultural awareness needed to make a decision but my parents were going and I must have decided at the time that I really should

sponge off them for a little while yet. This was especially true since I didn't quite have the means to make it in the big wide world on my own. I was eighteen months old.

My parents escaped on foot over the mountains to Austria while I went partying with my uncle. He was supposed to smuggle me straight to Austria over the mountains but he stopped at the few pubs on the way and the police caught us. Mum and Dad were not happy. Dad never spoke to his brother again which seems a little sad I suppose. I am not clear on the exact sequence of events but eventually I ended up drugged and smuggled out of the country under someone's car seat. This could explain my hatred of pills etc and my love of those evils nicotine and alcohol. It could also explain why I like parties.

My parents left because of the political situation though I must confess that their explanation has always been a little vague. There has been a mention of Dad spending some time behind bars because he owned a private business in a place where it was desirable for everything to be government owned. Mum of course tagged along like she still does; I think she might have been fond of Dad.

Once we escaped Slovenia (formerly a part of Yugoslavia) into Austria we were presented with a choice Australia or Canada. I convinced my parents that Aussie was the go. They of course claim it was something to do with the plane to Australia leaving first.

Despite being born in Ljubjana my earliest memory is of being in the Australian outback and we had broken a windscreen and my parents were cleaning up the glass. I was two and a half years old. The trauma of a broken windscreen must have shocked me into awareness. There were vicarious memories told and retold of me standing next to a gearbox in Slovenia in the nude posing for a newspaper photo shoot; there were tales of my escape from former Yugoslavia but despite all that my life until that broken windscreen is a mystery to me.

In fact until we moved to Jindabyne in around 1964 most of my life must have been memorable only to my parents because they can't stop retelling it. Does it get better than this? I certainly hope so. We initially lived at Berridale from where my dad would drive to Jindabyne each day to work in tunnels as a face electrician. I remember walking towards Jindabyne with my mother to greet dad on those days when he came home in the daylight. I still remember the big black bull and I asked mum if that bull was a cow. For some reason my parents retold this experience. There was an old vintage car stuck in the middle of some blackberry bushes and it was so cool to play on it. I don't remember the house we lived in or what we ate or learning to read and write or even what we did for fun. I just remember those walks to greet dad.

My next recollection was living in an old house near the Snowy River. It's interesting that 40 years on I again live in an old house near a river. Was I homesick for that old fibro home of my childhood? The house was designated for sinking once the Jindabyne Dam was constructed and I am sure that the house I live in would have been demolished if anyone but I had bought it. Life was pretty easy then and I certainly don't recall missing out on much or having a particularly difficult time of it though I am assured we were poor. What you never had you never miss, I suppose. People can only compare childhoods to their own childhood.

Somewhere around this time my brother was born and we got a dog. Actually mum got the dog for her birthday. Dad wanted a dog so he bought it for mum and there was much said about it as a result because it was never certain as to who owned the dog. Mum tells me that she was starved for attention at the time and the dog was given more of it than she did. But this German shepherd was generally known as Marko's dog. My brother's birth mustn't have been a great event either because I do not remember any of it although I was nearly four. Though I did hear that we were thankful he was born mainly because it meant that dad was alive and whole.

How do the two events relate? Dad would often work double shifts but on this particular day my brother was born so Dad did a swap to hold mums hand and drive her to Cooma – our nearest hospital. On that day the driller used existing holes to speed the process up. The face electrician works near the driller setting up the lights etc. The driller should never reuse the holes cause sometimes they have unexploded charges in them. The face electrician that took dad's place lost both his legs.

Dad worked on the tunnels and I started school, which again I can't remember at all. I have no idea who my teachers were or who my school mates were or what games we played. I do however remember being driven there by the local doctor who lived next door and more importantly I went to school with his daughter. I suppose this is a good time to bring it up as my best memories revolve around the topic of sex.

We were both 4 going on 5 I guess and our favourite past time was playing rudies as we called it. That was my first look at a girl and we both tried to work out how different we were and why. I loved that game. Even if my piker of a mother caught us and made us walk back to the house both naked it didn't stop us. What about the doctor's wife coming over? Did mum ask her for advice or did she ask mum; however I think they decided that maybe it wasn't as dangerous as they thought. I never lost my fascination for the female form so no lasting damage was done.

It's about that time that memories also start to get a bit clearer. Certainly about things that were of interest to me. I remember catching my first fish in the Snowy River, playing with my dog (yes the one that used to be mums) and riding my bike with training wheel. I remember steering the car from my dads lap and being of assistance whenever something had to be fixed.

As I grew up we moved a bit first to Canberra then to Lightning Ridge where I suppose I spent much of my formative years. But interestingly we always seemed to have an attraction for Canberra. Maybe it was the fishing maybe the friends or maybe we were escaping the heat of Lightning Ridge summers. I ended up having friends in both places but never really formed life long attachments. Andrew Falez and I go back a long way and in some ways followed similar paths. Part of growing up in Lightning Ridge was that it was a melting pot of cultures. There were a few Slovenians and Croats which is where I learnt to speak Serbo-Croatian as well as Slovenian which had been spoken at home since birth.

I did my couple of years at Lightning Ridge primary school before travelling 70 km each way to Walgett for high school. Back in those days school wasn't considered a big thing for most kids who left as soon as they could but about 15 of us stayed through to complete year 12. In year 12 we had elections for school captain and I was voted Vice Captain or as some teachers preferred captain of the vice. Because I was in a remote area school I pretty much got to pick my university and chose University of New England where the official qualification was supposed to be Economics. However I tended to be much more interested in sociology particularly the sociology of football and pubs.

I left after a couple of years of having a great time and spent a little time chasing this girl in Wyong before ending up in Canberra. Canberra was familiar to me and although youth unemployment was high I ended up working 2 and even 3 jobs from digging trenches to washing windows. After a while I joined the public service and bought the window cleaning company. Marjan my brother was in a similar boat and also ended up in Canberra where we both did the window cleaning and I worked in the public service. We never made much money but it was interesting. I recall Marjan and I were doing the glass on the Albermal building which required us to walk along a ledge around 2.5 foot wide and 9 stories up.

We just had a water fight up there and decided we really should get going cause we wanted to get the top few floors done so our employees wouldn't be up high. In those days safety wasn't a word anyone understood and certainly Marjan and I were immortal. I started work properly and as I climbed between the building and an external column my foot slipped on the soapy ledge. I recall thinking oops better be careful here cause its a long way down. About 10 minutes later Marjan opened a window grabbed me by my shirt and said we are quitting for the day. I asked him what was going on. Next door was an identical building being cleaned by another company. Marjan pointed at the body on the concrete below and told me he had just fallen off the same floor as I was working. We packed up and left after offering our condolences to the other guys. I recall we went to the pub.

The cleaning business failed but Marjan got into the building trade and I had a nice steady job. I got married and started to build us a house on a small hobby farm and worked ridiculous hours first at the office and then on the house. Soon after the house was finished Daniel was born and shortly after that Michele. Things went well for a while and we paid off the mortgage but I was working longer and longer hours. I was soon offered the position of Departmental Liaison Officer for a Minister and worked in Parliament House for 3 years. That was about the beginning of the end of that marriage and on looking back I might be poorer but feel much better about it.

I ended up spending a year in mum and dads flat and sought solice in alcohol and floozies. It was a hell of a year and although I saw the children a lot I still had much free time on my hands. I suppose I should have seen it coming but eventually Jacki captured me. I had always made a point of telling the ladies that I was not commitment material and that I am not interested in a relationship but I got caught.

We bought a farm and I was back out of town and very thankful for it. We now live on a gorgeous 30 acre block with the Yass river running through it and horses and donkeys and chooks and all sorts of other animals.



A new foal

I am sure there are lots of other stories to tell but if you want to read about those you'll have to write them as I tell them.

Mum asked me some questions which require profound answers for the book so profundity here I go.

I really have no memory of my life prior to arriving in Australia and really my earliest memories are of Australia so I suppose in some sense I am as Aussie as they get. I went back to Slovenia when I was 11 but again that is a damned long time ago and really I didn't feel all that much ownership of the country. Its not that I don't now but I suspect at 11 more complex ancestral feelings and roots just don't exist.

I do remember however that we hung around with Slovenians as a family and I hung around with Aussies as my mates.

We were an itinerant lot to some extent when we first arrived and learning English as well as Slovenian and cross cultural issues weren't a consideration in my life. When we moved to Canberra I recall things like eating chocolate biscuits while helping Dad with electrical installations late at night. I was small enough at the age of six to fit into places out of dad's reach to help do more

delicate parts of work. I remember dad asking me to check the power points. In those days occupational health and safety weren't invented yet so the way to check power points was to have a batten holder connected to a bit of wire with bared ends. I am sure the instructions were turn off power point put bared wires in the slots turn on power point; if light works all is good. I worked out you could go faster if you turn on power point plug in wires and see if the globe lit up. I do remember vividly the first time I held onto the bared bits and found out electricity bites. Dad laughed it off and to be honest after a bit of sobbing so did I.

I have never been into hero worship of any kind. There is no one that I would rather be or that I try to emulate. Is this due to a lack of passion? Nope. Its more a case of I am reasonably happy with who I am.



Jacki and Andrew training our Champion Donkey

In terms of influence I have had lots but they were transient rather than any long term ones. My friends are rarely lifelong; in fact the only friend that I have known for most of my life is Andrew. Once I fall out of a particular activity or move towns I tend to lose touch with the people I was there with. That's not to say I consciously exclude them from my life but rather I move on. I suspect if I didn't have roots and a strange sense of obligation I would love to be an itinerant.

What am I looking for in life? I really want to be the first old fart who wins the World Rally Championship and plays for Australia in the Rugby World Cup. I suspect as the years pass by I am not going to meet these rather lofty goals but hey, dreaming is for dreamers and I have been known to do that occasionally.

I rarely plan too far ahead because you never know what will turn up. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not so good. I try to live with the knowledge that I only get one ride on the merry go round of life and there's no point in crying around in circles.

I am comfortable with what I have done so far and I could be more comfortable if I didn't enjoy the good life as I do. I am not hugely comfortable with talking about my achievements; I have done a bit.

I would change my decision not to go halves with Bill Gates in that little computer company he started. Mind you he never offered to go halves. There is very little point in mulling over decisions you have made and wondering what the consequences would have been. If you didn't learn from the first experience then you are bound to make the same mistake again. I make lots of mistakes so I must be a slow learner but for all of that I have survived.

While I am Slovenian in terms of heritage especially when girls tell me they like European men, I am also a composite of culture. I can be totally yobbish when the mood takes me, especially when there are pretentious sods around. I don't tolerate pretentiousness particularly well.

I know a little of Slovenia though it does tend to be from the perspective of people who don't live there any more. I probably know more than the average person and even more than some of the people who have Slovenian Heritage. To be honest I think they are people like any other. Some are good and some are bad. I do take pride in the Slovenian snobbish academia, though I wonder if the new Slovenians have that same drive to learn and know.

It was interesting when my son Daniel spent a month or so in Slovenia that the kids his age were just as yobbo and just as recalcitrant as the kids in any other country.

There seems to be little of information about my heritage. Basically I am peasant stock and they don't write history. Do I feel any affinity with the people who did something important and were Slovenian? No, not really they're not in my sphere of consciousness and there is nothing there to tie me to them. On the other hand I am always interested when a Slovenian Australian makes it. Not

because I see it as some vicarious path to glory but rather as a shared path that led us in different directions.

Food is something I enjoy and while I love Slovenian food I also love the foods of most cultures. In fact, food is what brings people together. Australia in particular seems to be drawn to the food first then the people. Though in recent years this hasn't been always the case particularly when looking at Middle Eastern cultures. We still like their food but the cultural and religious differences seem to be a sticking point. Maybe that will change in time.

I belong to both cultures I suppose but there are lots of Aussies and Slovenians that I don't have too much time for. It's not their culture I feel drawn to but rather their personalities, mores, values and sense of fun.

When I was a kid, mostly in primary school, I did get a bit of the wog boy stuff but I think that because I wasn't Greek, Italian, Croatian, or Serbian they weren't sure where to classify me. If I was teased it doesn't seem to have affected me greatly. Most of my friends were Anglo's and I was accepted for the most part. It may have helped that I was a biggish lad and very strong.

My mother asked whether I practice Slovenian language, Slovenian hospitality, cooking, entertainment, relationships? To which I responded what is Slovenian hospitality? Feed people till they are full, make sure they drink enough and make sure they laugh? If that is Slovenian exclusively then lots of cultures have stolen our hospitality. I regularly slip in a Slovenian influence in my cooking but then I think Slovenian food is heavily influenced by Italian and Austrian food. In fact other than Kransky I am a bit hard pressed to think of a food uniquely Slovenian.

I should add that I also slip Asian Middle Eastern and any other influences that I can into my cooking.

I do speak Slovenian whenever the opportunity arises, though interestingly I tend to slip into English when speaking to mum and my brother but it's almost exclusively Slovenian with dad.

My favourite line is that I have a non English speaking background or that English is my second language. Why does this please me I suspect is cause I have a range of accents from North Walgett (that's Lightning Ridge to the uninitiated but it sounds very out there when I want to be a yobbo) to the crisp professional accent I use in my work. I suppose it's in the same category of when people ask what I do. I tell them that my trade is economist.

Of course with a name like mine you would have to be pretty dumb not to realise it is not Anglo Saxon. But then it could be Irish if Mark O'Zagar is an Irish name.

It is interesting that I do have a love of Celtic music so perhaps I am Slovenian Irish Australian.

I read an article a few years ago that Slovenia was one of the European tiger economies and I must confess that I am proud of Slovenian economic achievements. However what I perceive now is that it's losing some of its identity. There was a quaintness almost hobbit like feel to the old Slovenia. It was a place where food and friends were more important than money and possessions. I think that if they are not careful that identity will be lost.

Daniel loves Slovenia and plans to go back. Mind you Daniel fits in pretty much anywhere he goes. Daniel is a bit like me in that respect in that it doesn't matter to him about class or heritage but rather who the person is to be with. It would be nice but at Daniel's age the only way that it would really happen is if he spent a year or so in Slovenia.

Slovenia runs the real risk of becoming just another homogenised European country. If Australia is the melting pot of cultures Slovenia is an ingredient. As the ingredient becomes more desirable it becomes watered down and then eventually it becomes artificial. It's always difficult to temper progress with maintenance of older cultures.

The push to become part of the EU is probably among the greatest risks it faces to maintaining its cultural identity. As different cultures arrive to experience the Slovenian culture they will dilute the essence of being Slovenian and change it to suit their cultures.

My philosophy varies according to my mood. The flippant me says live fast die young have a good looking corpse but unfortunately I have made it past the young and good looking. So I changed it to: I want to be rich and retired.

Perhaps it should be that you should try everything twice before you decide you don't like it just in case you did it wrong the first time. I also think we could reduce the number of commandments to: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Every generation is different. Society has made us different and certainly our aspirations change as we grow older. There are some core characteristics that we share but life changes us, which is damned fortunate since otherwise we would simply be clones of our parents.

Memories of growing up in Lightning Ridge Marjan Zagar



Marjan fishing for trout in Krka River in Slovenia.

I was born in Cooma on 16 March 1965. We moved to Canberra in 1966. In 1968 we moved to Lightning Ridge and my parents built a house next to the school. I was four. Next to our house was a drain where sometimes during floods the yabbies would be washed down and I would catch them. I used to stick my finger in the hole and pull the yabby out until one time there was a big one and it cut my finger. I loved it when it rained so I could walk and play in the mud.

I liked living next to the school so I could go home during lunchtime. We used to have plots to grow vegetables at school. I got Brussels sprouts. Very boring I thought when other kids were growing radishes and beans. I remember stealing other people's radishes and beans.

I remember times when we went to Glengarry to mine for opals. On the trip home we used to stop in Cumbora to have an ice cream. It was so special that ice cream. Marko and I would try to make it last as long as we could while driving home.

We would sometimes stay overnight in Glengarry and sleep on a trailer. My brother and I would go into the mine and dig with dad. Once we stumbled on a patch of opal. I remember when we made a long corridor but there was no trace of opal. Dad gave up and went up to switch off the compressor. In the meantime mum lifted the jack hammer to see how heavy it was. She pressed it against the side of the corridor and just inches under the surface was a nice patch of opal. It was worth a few thousand dollars. We drove another corridor in that direction but there was just that one spot.

Life at Lightning Ridge was very laid back and safe. I would often be gone for hours playing with my friend Emil. We would wander all around Lightning Ridge. There was never any fear of bad people just dogs that were roaming loose. One thing that we all learned in Lightning Ridge as children is that if we wanted entertainment we would have to use our imaginations and improvise. Today there is entertainment provided for children but nothing can compare to what fun we organised.

Everything was a hand-me-down back then. I was so happy when I got my first bike (hand-me-down). There are millions of burs in Lightning Ridge and we were forever fixing the tires. There were no tar roads and the cathead burs were thick.

We would have BBQ's all the time. I remember we would buy a cow or a sheep from the farmer. We had a bowling alley on the block and friends would come for BBQ and to play bocce which is a European kind of bowling. When the bowling alley was being built we went to gather termite mounds in the bush and use them as the base for the alley. The soil was fine and when levelled, screened, watered, salted and compacted with a roller you would only have to drop the ball gently and it would glide across the surface to the other side of the alley.

There were many exciting arguments about the rules of the game and about measuring how close the ball is to the jack. Precise measurement tools were used. Everything had to be by the rule. I like to play like that knowing your partner was not letting your side down by playing haphazardly. This made the game very competitive.

For every school holiday and long weekend we would go on holidays mostly to Canberra. From there we would often go on fishing adventures with other families. We would go to places that required great determination and often found the adventure of getting there very memorable. We felt rewarded when we reached our goal and everyone enjoyed each other's company. One particular time I remember is when seventeen of us packed onto an old army Land-rover; we also had sleeping gear and provisions piled on top of us. I bet the people who were there would remember the jar of pickled paprika that opened on us all and of the fluid seeping over us. The bush track was so rough that we had to cut our way through fallen trees at times. When we got to our destination there was a lot of talk and laughter about the adventure while we prepared for the fishing. The food was always the best. My friends who were not accustomed to European food absolutely loved it. Slovenian custom is always to welcome friends with food. Whenever I went to other places it was rare to be offered something.

High School was seventy five kilometres away in Walgett. The first thing that springs to mind is the school bus. A large part of my younger days was spent travelling. I travelled about 32000 km a year and in six years about 192 000 km. My mum travelled on a high school bus for twenty six years to work in Walgett. How many kilometres is that? She sat at the front preparing lessons, studying, reading or talking to other teachers. We had to be at the bus stop at 7.00 in the morning each day. The bus would arrive home at about 5pm. Now if you think of today's buses with air-conditioning and comfortable coach seats you would think it was not so bad. The buses we had were hot and packed with kids screaming and running around. The temperature was often above 40 degrees; the best we could do was open the window to let a hot breeze in. The seats were vinyl bench type so you were sweaty and stuck to them. After a time we established our regular seating positions with the older students getting into mischief at the back of the bus.

I am not particularly fond of my Walgett memories. The teachers were inexperienced; it was usually their first job and they stayed only until they got a posting of their choice. Every now and then a good teacher like my English teacher Thomas Grey would show a genuine interest in the welfare and learning of the students. He would organize trips for the school and try to bring the outside world into our school. While in Walgett I found that people from surrounding towns looked up to Lightning Ridge. This made me proud.

What made me happiest in Lightning Ridge is my family. We may not have had everything but you can't ask for better caring and loving family. We had hardships and different views but I know that my parents tried to provide the best. I wouldn't trade it with another. I sometimes worried because our customs were different but now I realise that every family in Lightning Ridge is different. I often felt self-conscious when my parents spoke Slovenian with me in front of my friends. I think that all children growing up feel the same at some stage in their life while dealing with new experiences and learning to find their place in life. At times I felt that my parents were too controlling but really it was only when they felt I needed it. Other times they allowed me more freedom than many other people; I was able to roam the opal fields all day specking when I was 11 or 12 years old; I could ride my motorbike unattended all over the country side. I drove my first big tip truck back to town from the field when I was 12. Once I remember the police car passed me and I thought he would stop me as I was so young and the truck was not registered. The only thing I could think to do was wave like everyone else does and they waved back. That's how it was in those days. The policeman probably thought I was helping my father so he turned a blind eye.

My mother was the one to ask if I wanted something; she was the compassionate one. My father was the strict and forceful one although fair. We often clashed but most teenagers do with their parents. I will never forget pig chasing at Deshen's. We had a new Fairlane with a bull-bar. Dad would run the pigs over and then kill them; he would cut choice cuts of meat from them. One particular time we had to run over a pig a few times before we got him.

When we had motorbikes my brother and I would often go pig chasing with dad; we would catch the pig alive with our hands. We never used dogs because we preferred to choose the pig that we wanted. Our motorbikes would be loaded in the trailer and we would go to a nearby farm. The motorbikes would be unloaded and we would carry a wheat sack with us. Then we would ride about

50 metres apart on the bikes until we came across a group of wild pigs. We would pick one out and make it as tired as we could by chasing it into the open and circling around it. You usually knew the pig was tired when it would start to chase the motorbike. That's the time to jump off the bike and catch the pig. This would be done by grabbing it by the back legs and lifting it up and rolling the pig onto its back and then placing a foot onto its neck to keep it steady. The other rider would then come and we would slide the sack over the pig's nose and onto its body. Once this was done the pig would become still; we would place it onto the handlebars of the motor bike over the tank and ride to the trailer and put him inside the cage. Often we would catch 3 or 4 pigs. After taking the pigs back to the sty; my brother and I had a job to feed them every afternoon with boiled wheat. We had a big silo for wheat storage and a 44-gallon drum to boil the wheat.

Slovenians know how to prepare a variety of special meats. We made Bacon, Krankies, Pursutto, blood-wurst, speck etc. Everybody loved these delicacies.

As I got older I would often help dad in the mine. I remember my pay was \$10 a truck or 10% of the opal found. That is OK even in today's standard when you think there are a lot of miners who can't even cover their expenses.



Marjan and Marko Zagar with Marjan's daughter Nasha

the opal fields; neither were registered or registrable. To be able to water ski we would find an old car bonnet with a curved shape at the front, get some fencing wire and tie it across the front so you could hold. Then we would find another long length of fencing wire and tie it to a car. The car would then drive around the sheep dam and we would go for a water ski. It got a little dangerous at times when the person started driving too fast as the bonnet would come out of the water and onto the bank and over the bumps. Also when there were about 20 of us anxious to jump on the bonnet and avoid the wire that was coming around. All in all no one was really hurt and we all had lots of fun. I would never trade this experience with a computer game or TV. Lightning Ridge taught everyone who lived there to "improvise, adapt and overcome" My dad was always improvising and adapting; he is clever like that.

I remember the first phone we had was a

When I was free from chores I was roaming the fields on my motorbike looking for something to do with my friends. In the summer I would go for a swim in sheep dams with my friends. These were fun times. We had no cold swimming pool in Lightning Ridge so this was the best we could do to keep cool in the 40-degree heat. We would have mud fights and swing of a rope from a tree. We even had a very crude way of waterskiing on the dam. Most teenagers would either have a motorbike or an old barely running car to drive on



Here I am with my wife Kathy and our daughters Nasha and Eliza at our son's Janez' Christening for my fortieth birthday.

wind up one. The phone was very expensive to use and all calls had to be made after 9 pm when the call rate was cheapest. In a way telecommunication made people drift away from friends and family; they communicate much less face to face. There is nothing like looking at someone in the eyes and seeing their true feelings. On the phone it is always a guessing game. They sound happy but are they really? You can only tell by looking at the person face to face.

When I was in High School I had a good English teacher Thomas Grey. We wrote poetry and performed plays. These are some of the poems I wrote as a teenager:

Me

*Me is love
For mum and dad
Me is motor bikes
On the bush track
I feel lucky
Lucky as can be
Because I am not hungry
And I can see
I am I
You are you
I feel happy to be here too.
Motor-bikes
Racing spinning
Jumping winning
This makes the motor sport living
The speed is like lightning
The falls are frightening
People are watching
Down comes the rider
Another behind
Rolling rapidly round and round
To a stop he comes
Lying on the ground
People shout
Watching the ambulance take the man
A life has been taken
The wife is heartbroken
The son is sad
The devil's word has spoken
The trophies still stand
They shall never go
This was a rider who was never slow.*

Alcoholics

*They drink all day
Never to stop
A glass or two
Or just a drop
Their eyes are red
Their breath is vile
They drive right out of style
They drive to the left
They drive to the right Until they wrap themselves around a street light*

My impressions from my holidays in Slovenia.

Whether you're driving, flying or walking into Slovenia the first thing that will place you in awe are the huge mountains, old forests and the beautiful lush pastures of the lower slopes. Everything is so green and vibrant. Over every hill there is a little village and every house has a nice quaint garden with flowers and fruit trees. The forest trees are tall and dense yet there is little undergrowth which makes walking through them easy and mysterious. The forests are like those read about in fairy tales. Slovenia shows its age with the beautiful old buildings and castles that are dotted around the country side. It is not uncommon to find a small church perched high up on a mountain peak that is inaccessible to vehicles of any type and is a long hard steep hike to visit.

After being enchanted by the beauty of the countryside and starting to interact with the people you notice the friendliness and welcoming atmosphere that they portray. The people of Slovenia make you feel like family when you are in their home even when you have only met briefly. Food and wine is immediately brought out to entice a welcoming friendly happy atmosphere. It works too.



Kathy, Eliza and Nasha Zagar

Slovenia has not been fully westernised and most restaurants still serve tasty traditional foods that keeps the population healthy and slim. The people of Slovenia are still very traditional and use any excuse to have a festival or gathering to socialize and enjoy each others company. In a restaurant one table may break out in a song and then suddenly the whole restaurant will join in. This shows openness and confidence in the people; they are not self conscious about themselves.

The beauty of the country must have brushed off onto the people or perhaps the other way around.

Natasha Zagar



I helped my relatives in Slovenia with grape picking.

Hi I am Natasha; I am 9 years old. I am part Slovenian because my dad Marjan Zagar is Slovenian. My family calls me Nasha because in Slovenian Nasha means ours. They all love me very much. I was born in Canberra on 21 January 1998. Nanny taught me many Slovenian songs and I even sang one for my teacher. I know many Slovenian words to say to my nanny and poppy. I can not write or read Slovenian but I will learn. I have visited my relatives in Slovenia. I like my aunt's place because they have a dairy farm. It was fun playing with little calves. I saw a mountain called Triglav. Before I was born my parents Marjan and Kathy climbed to the top of Triglav which is 2800 m tall. We took a boat to a church in the middle of the lake Bled where my

grandparents Cilka and Joe Zagar got married. We also visited Nan's relatives in America before we went to Orlando in Florida which has a Disney land and Expo. We went for many rides. I was a bit scared.

My friends come from different countries. Angie comes from China, Emma from Malaysia, Amna from Pakistan. I feel happy when I see my family and friends. My hobbies are netball, soccer, dancing and singing. My netball team is called the Torrens Tiggers. I have a rabbit, a cat, a fish and a guinea pig. My favourite movies are the Saddle club, Pokamon, Aeroplane crashes, and Myth busters. I go to Torrens Primary School. My teacher's name is Mrs Tobler. My maths teacher is Mrs Breenan. Mrs Breenan is pregnant. My music teacher is called Mrs Swift. My art teacher is called Mrs Collings and my library teacher is called Mrs Hines.

My family is very loving and caring. I take care of my sister and brother. Every year for Easter we visit Nanny and Poppy who live in Lightning Ridge. Poppy used to mine for opals and we always find some colours on the ground there.

Hi, I am Eliza Zagar.



Here I am in Disney land Orlando in Florida in 2005. I went to Slovenia with my family. We saw where Nanny and Poppy were born. I like animals and I know a lot about them. I am a good sports person and I like art. I have a guinea pig called Sarah and a rabbit called Gingie. Everybody in my family loves each other and we have good manners. Now I am 7 years old.

My Slovenia, my Australia By Albin Porsek



I was born on 9 February 1920 on the outskirts of Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. The beautiful St Martin's mountain above my home is a pilgrimage and tourist destination.

Slovenia is the most beautiful country in the world and my birthplace is the jewel in its crown. It is close to mountain lakes Bled and Bohinj. Bled has a little fairy tale island with the church and a wishing well. I remember my home and the changing seasons that Slovenians celebrate.

The last time I was in Slovenia I walked with my father up St Martin Mountain. He showed me a place where in 1919 he picked blueberries with my mother in the forest. They were young lovers. My father was nineteen and mum was eighteen. They loved each other but dad's family did not want him to marry mum because his family was rich and mum came from a very poor family.

Mum's mother bought a little wooden cottage and a little paddock on which mum produced most of the food. She also had a smoke-room in which she smoked meat for the restaurants.

When I was about four, mum married a handsome man but he was poor and he came to live in mum's house.

I was a love child but neither my father nor my stepfather loved me. I don't know which one hated me more.

The court ordered my father to pay child support for me and he hated me because of it. He turned away when I met him on the road.

I remember mum sending me to dad's butcher shop to buy meat. She hoped that he would give me some extra but he never did.

When I was about eight years old Dad married a rich girl and they had twin daughters. Dad then asked my mother to let me live with him but she did not let me.

My father was a butcher and his two daughters, my stepsisters, have a butchery shop each in Ljubljana.

Mum and my stepfather had eight more children and they worked hard to survive. My stepfather became a Shire treasurer. He was considered a good, hard working and well-respected man. I felt that he disliked me because he hit me all the time. He never let me go anywhere or do the things I wanted. When he hit me at the age of fifteen, I grabbed him and pinned him on the ground. I did not hit him but I told him that this was the last time he would hit me. I was a tall strong boy by then. From then on he never touched me but he tormented me verbally. Mum tried to protect me and that annoyed him.

I finished primary school and three years of secondary school before I began my apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker.

I always wanted to become an artist. I painted church domes with the artist Zeleznik. I wanted to study with him but unfortunately Mum could not pay for me. I had to take an apprenticeship to become a carpenter-cabinet maker.

I am grateful to Ivan Cerne who was my boss and teacher. When I finished my apprenticeship I worked there for two years until the war changed everything.

Slovenians were split in three groups.

The old Slovenian leaders, the prosperous business people, the rich farmers and those influenced by the church were afraid of Russian communists who wanted to change the society. They hoped to survive the war and continue as they were. Most later supported Domobranci, which means home guards. They guarded their homes and their way of life.

Most poor factory and farm labourers welcomed the change. They had nothing to lose so they joined OF Liberation front, organised by Russian revolutionists, which promised to take from the rich and give to the poor.

We were a Catholic family and interested in survival rather than politics. There were many people like us just trying to save their lives.

Italians occupied Ljubljana but northern outskirts where I lived came under Germany. My two sisters just finished primary school when Germans took them to Klagenfurt to become Hitler's Youth. They worked in the kitchen of the army barracks.

I was very sick with pleurisy and a chest infection at the beginning of the war so I did not have to join the army. When I went back to work in 1943 partisans took me during the night. In the morning mum reported to the German police that partisans took me during a curfew. Germans caught the partisans. As a punishment two partisans came next morning and shot my mother in the kitchen in front of six of her children. My youngest sister was two years old.

The younger of the two partisans who shot my mother was my school friend and a boyfriend of my sister. Later he realised what he had done and he hung himself.

Germans sent me to Klagenfurt in Austria where my sisters worked in Hitler Youth camp. I secretly returned to attend mum's funeral.

In Klagenfurt I got a job as a cabinet-maker in the same barracks as my two sisters. At the end of 1943 they sent me to the Russian Front. Grenades were falling all around me but young person gets used to everything. I was lucky. Once I picked a grenade that fell next to me but did not explode. I chucked it away. They were going to give me a bravery award for it.

In May 1945 I got civilian clothes from a farmer and tried to return to Austria. Russians captured me and put me into a solitary prison. After a week they let me out to work for them. I escaped to Austria and found work in Klagenfurt where I worked before.

I met Justine who escaped from Slovenia with her boyfriend who was a Home guard. The allies returned Home guards refugees to Yugoslavia where communists killed them.

Justine and I became friends and we got married in 1947.

Justine's sister Maria also escaped to Austria with her home guard boyfriend Vinko Ovijac. They managed to escape and migrate to Venezuela in 1948.

May 1945 was a miserable wet month. Twelve thousands Slovenians poured on the fields of Austria and surrendered to the Field Marshal Alexander along with thousands of other refugees. The world was tired of the war; they had to solve refugee problems quickly. Sending refugees home was practical and sensible as far as British were concerned but sending them to Tito was a death sentence for these anticommunists.

In 1947 Justine and I applied to immigrate to Australia. We learned English for 31 days on a ship. We signed the contract to work for two years wherever they sent us. I asked to work as a cabinet-maker and they sent me to Sydney.

I worked in the Burwood hostel where we lived. Justine worked in a hospital as a cleaner.

In 1955 Justine and I guaranteed to give Justine's sister Marija and her husband Vinko a job and accommodation so they were allowed to come to Australia.

In two years we saved enough to buy an old house and we were very happy. I learned enough English to open a workshop with a wonderful friend from Africa. We worked together until he died five years later. After his death I expanded my factory and eventually employed eleven people making occasional furniture. I worked very hard as a manager of the factory. I delivered furniture to the shops like David Jones and Mayer's. The lifting of the furniture was hard and I damaged my back.

I had to sell the factory and I opened the furniture shop in the hope that the work will not be as hard. I had to deliver things and I could not do the heavy lifting. I also had a second hand shop, which I had to sell in 1975. My wife ran a furniture shop with other employees.

In my spare time I did inlay pictures in wood. I still have some beautiful works.

At that time I visited a Slovenian friend Joe Vrtacnik in hospital. He damaged his back while opal mining and could not walk. When he was released from the hospital I drove him to Lightning Ridge.

Vrtacnik married an Aboriginal girl and sort of became part of the Aboriginal community. I lost touch with him later.

Bore bath helped my back. I went twice a day to soak in the hot water. For a few years I travelled to Sydney for therapy and back again into the bore bath.

Lightning Ridge became more and more attractive. Looking for precious gems seemed exciting. I also liked the easygoing, friendly, honest miners. I returned to Sydney but the dream of the colourful gem and colourful life did not go away. I built a portable camp in Sydney and brought it to the Ridge. It was an escape from the pressures of my business and from hard work that aggravated my pain.

I finally sold my furniture shop and the land in the Blue Mountains during the nineties. I was happy to get rid of the worry and the problems. I built a house in Lightning Ridge and my wife moved up to be with me.

My health was not good. My wife also became ill and she died in 1998. I only own the house I live in now but even that is too much to take care of most of the time.

Soon after we came to Sydney I met other Slovenians and we talked about building a Slovenian club where we could meet and celebrate and have a Slovenian school. While I was off work with my bad back I searched around for a suitable land and found it. We collected donations from Slovenians and bought the land.

We built our Triglav club with voluntary labour at weekends. We elected the committee and the president. There were twelve of us permanent trustees, foundation members, to see that everything was running well. We opened the charitable organisation Triglav Community Centre so we did not have to pay tax if there were any profits from the club activities.

Soon after Slovenian priests Bazilij and Valerian began to organise the building of the religious centre in Maryland and later Slovenian clubs grew in every larger city of Australia.

Some Slovenians co-operated with the Yugoslav embassy while others congregated around the church.

Those that resisted the embassy were interrogated when they came begging for visas to go home.

As the foundation member of Triglav and its trustee I continued to work for Triglav but I watched out for any impropriety from the embassy. They offered the club many things in order to keep us friendly. They brought artists and books and music from Slovenia but in exchange they demanded to be our guests so they could keep an eye on us.

In 1980 I returned to Slovenia with Justine for the first time since 1943. Dad's daughter invited us to stay with her and my father was there. At the age of sixty I spoke to my father for the first time. I saw Slovenia and my many relations for the first time after thirty-seven years. Since then I keep in touch with my relations.

Dad told me that he loved mum and that he was sorry that he did not marry her. He was also sorry that he ignored me when I was a boy.

Dad was born in 1900 and died in 1983. He was always a serious, businessman. People respected him and his family. His daughters helped him in the shop and later each of them opened their own shops.

There was poverty and misery when I left Slovenia but now Slovenians live comfortably. I could have had my own business and prosper there with them in Slovenia.

I am much like my father. I had little time for socialising. My business success gave me much satisfaction.

Mum was a happy, outgoing person. She was an honest, hardworking woman and people respected and liked her. Mum was not interested in making money.

Australia offered opportunity to migrants to make something out of their lives. The bank offered me as much money as I needed to open my business and I never had money problems.

Australia became my home. I like the warm climate and friendly people. I became especially attracted to Lightning Ridge. The bore bath was good for my back, bush life offered freedom from pressures of the city life, people are friendly, and looking for opal gave me hope. Unfortunately my wife did not find happiness in Lightning Ridge. She missed her Sydney friends and city life. There are about a dozen Slovenians in the Ridge but they come from different backgrounds and don't mix well.

I am not a regular churchgoer but I have been doing the BBQ for every church function during the last twenty years. Sisters and the priests have been good to me.

I haven't been well since my wife died but there are many people who look out for me.

I am happy that Slovenia became independent. I am grateful to Slovenians who stayed home and made the independence and democracy possible. I believe that Slovenians are more united and kind to each other now than ever before.

Slovenians were under German rule for centuries. Now they are eager to get back with Germans into European Union. I suppose it is good for Slovenia to be in the company of the European nations but it makes one wonder. Why did Slovenians fight for independence for centuries? All our poets and writers and artist and politicians dreamed about the happy future when we will be our own masters. Now, however, only ten years after we became independent, we want to become a part of The European Union. The wars and poverty and struggle seemed meaningful as long as there was hope and faith that one day Slovenians will rule Slovenia. It seems like we are throwing away what our ancestors died for.

Karl Knap



Karl with his wife Fanika

I was born on 17 July 1931 in a little Slovenian mountain village Magneti in Notranjska. Around us are other little villages scattered in the forest. One of them is Slivnica which became a tourist attraction because witches were known to live there. Now there is a restaurant with a four metre high witch with a broom looking down the beautiful slopes of Nanos mountain on one side and on Postojna's side one can see the churches of St Urh, St. Jacob, and St Vid nesting among trees. People go to yearly pilgrimages to these churches and after the mass they have dances and festivities in the restaurant.

My father lived in America from 1907 until 1914 and there he married his first wife. He returned to Slovenia because there was nobody else to take over a fairly large farm. On his return he was taken into the Austrian army during WWI because Slovenia was a part of Austria.

Dad and his first wife had two children but his wife died in childbirth with their third child. Dad came to mum's place looking for a maid to

help with his young family. Mum's parents had five girls and they told him to choose any one of them. He chose my mum. They later married and had another eleven children. All of us children had work to do as soon as we began to walk and talk. We were subsistent farmers; we produced everything we needed to survive. I became a shepherd before I had my first pair of pants. Little children used to wear a shirt. We had to prepare food, hay and wood for winter.

My parents often hired other village people to work for us in the fields. We always had horses and oxen for work and cows for milk. We sold calves, pigs, potatoes and timber.

We were a large family so boys slept on the hay in the shed. We gathered for breakfast; usually we had buckwheat or corn meal with bits of meat in the fat reduced into lard. We prayed before and after eating; we ate quietly and quickly. My father told us what jobs we were to do each day; we had to clear the forest and paddocks and orchards in the spring, later we fertilised the fields with manure, ploughed them and sowed potatoes and cereals, vegetables and clover. By May we cut the first grass for pigs; later we hired mowers for bigger paddocks. We were happy when they hired other workers because mum cooked better food; I was happy when I saw women coming carrying baskets of food on their heads. People liked to come to work for us because mum was a good cook. After lunch movers had a two hour rest but the family in the meantime had to rake and load the hay.

Every evening after dinner there were festivities with drinking and singing and socialising.

After haymaking we had to harvest and store cereal crops and other produce. We had a wheat thrasher powered by a horse that walked outside. I often had to scoop the grain; I was black from the dust. People looked forward to harvest time because in the evenings there was much merry making with drinking and dancing to accordion music. We thrashed millet with our feet; we went from house to house every evening to clean the corn cobs. These activities brought young people together.

In the autumn we made hay for the winter, women harvested flax which they had to spin during winter for weaving. We weaved baskets, repaired the wagons and made ladders during the winter. We had a big wood oven for bread making and also for warmth during winter months. Sometimes we slept on the warm oven stove. My grandfather always had a stick next to him if anyone misbehaved. He died for Christmas in 1943 at the age of 99.

My father was an important horse wagon driver; he looked after horses before anything else; we had one pair of horses for home use and one for hire. I often went with my father to look after the wagon brakes when he worked in the state forests.

Every evening we had to pray rosaries; in the winter months we prayed three rosaries every evening.

During winter we killed pigs. Women were talking about how many fingers of fat their pigs had. Everybody awaited this family festivity with great joy because it offered a variety of delicacies to eat. By eleven a clock mum had a roast ready. The pleasant smells of roasting reached everybody working in the snow outside.

By three in the afternoon we had lunch of soup with homemade noodles in the soup made from the bones of the pig. In the evening we had blood wurst ready. The next day we reduced fat for lard. We liked to steal bits of meat cooked in the fat and ate it with bread.

After Christmas we distilled spirits from the fruits grown in the garden. For the Shrove Tuesday we got dressed in fancy dress to have fun. We went from house to house and everybody gave us some food which we brought to the evening festivities where young and old danced. There was a tradition that during Lent forty day to Easter there were no other festivities. If the girl did not marry before Shrove Tuesday she had to wait until after Easter. Everybody had large families when I was young and we made our own fun and festivities.

Life changed since then; from twelve houses in my village there are five empty now; soon another three will be empty; when old people die there is no one to take over. On our big property are only three horses, everything is overgrown; people say that it is not worth working on the land; they are selling their forests and fields.

In 1938 I started school in St Trinity. I had to walk to school one hour each way through three villages. I remember that I had to carry a stick to stop dogs attacking me. I also remember Serb Cetnik soldiers working on the road. They had long black beards and the children were scared of them.

In 1941 Italians invaded my part of Slovenia. They demanded that our teacher starts teaching in Italian. He obeyed but partisans came and killed him because of it. My schooling was very irregular after our teacher was shot. For the next six months there was no school at all but then a lady teacher came. On the way to school one day we met men who told us that they will shoot us if we don't go home; we were not to tell anyone that we saw them. They were first partisans in 1941. They had hunting guns and fir branches in their hats instead of the star. As children we took food to forest, we gave partisans a sign that we were coming by whistling a certain song.

My brothers joined partisans to resist Italian invasion. My oldest brother was a commandant of the group that sabotaged railways from Borovnice to Postojna; my second oldest brother was a Captain in armoury division. I was a regular currier; I did not look suspicious or dangerous because I was little. I knew all the secret pathways in the forest. I had to carry messages to partisans about things happening down in the village. I also carried food and water to them. I was afraid that Italian authorities would catch me so I took a cow and pretended to graze it as I moved towards the partisans.

Partisans came to sleep on hay in our sheds but they were too scared and careful to come to our house. People knew that partisans often met in our house. There was a lot of shooting between Italians and partisans. My father was the only one in the village who had horses; I often had to go with him to pick dead partisans. As the snow was melting in spring we sometimes found dead bodies, guns and ammunition, dead horses and mules; most were partly eaten by wolves.

Italians had their station barracks in nearby Velike Bloke; When they capitulated we went into their barracks with a wagon to take suitcases and boxes full of blankets, flour and other stuff. Once I found four pairs of skis. Partisans found out and would have confiscated them so I buried them in the manure. When I uncovered them a year later they were rotten so I had nothing. I was grazing

cows and many times German planes flew over us and shot at us; we ran into the forest; once they shot two cows and we had to kill them.

After Italian capitulation Germans took over. Some women went to church in Begunje where Home guards were stationed. They told them that partisans were meeting in our place. The next day Home guards came and robbed us. In a nearby village they took all the boys with them. These boys sang together and helped each other before but now they betrayed each other and began shooting each other. It was a dirty political war. Many partisans and home guards were killed. The Home guards that escaped after the war were returned and killed secretly in the forest of Kocevje. Thousands were buried in mass graves.

When I visited Kocevski Rog I felt sad, everything is silent in those forests; even the birds are not singing.

My younger brother Tone was captured by Germans and they returned him home after the war. Tone worked in the butchery in Germany. He told us how at the end of the war he went through the city and all the shops were open with nobody inside. With his Slovenian friend they found a horse and a wagon and loaded it with food and clothes. Each of them also took an accordion and they travelled towards Austrian border where they met Russians advancing towards Germany; partisans confiscated everything even their own backpacks.

My brother Lojz was under aged; he went to get water for partisans but Home guards captured him. They took him to Velike Lasce and gave him a choice to join them or be killed. He received Home guard uniform but no weapons yet by the time war finished. He and other Home guards and some associated civilians escaped to Austria because they were afraid of communist reprisals. Lojz was in Vetrinje until July 1945; he returned home sick, emaciated and weighing 36 kg. He was lucky that my family was with partisans otherwise he would end in Kocevski Rog.

My oldest brother Franc was killed when he was 24 years old. After the war my parents found his grave among fifty others near the hospital hidden in the rocky mountain Sneznik. On top of every grave was a bottle with the name in it. My brother's body was frozen and wrapped in a sheet. My parents brought a coffin and buried him in Cerknica. This partisan's hospital was so well hidden; we could barely find it with the help of the doctor who worked there.

After the war I had to leave school to work on our farm. In 1947 I started to work with my uncle who was a carpenter. In 1951 I was called into the army to serve in Macedonia for two years. The policy was to send soldiers into another republic because they hoped to assimilate five Yugoslav nations into one Yugoslav nation.

I always liked to work with wood. As a 13 years old boy I used to make wooden clogs. I am very happy and proud that I became a carpenter.

When I came home I started work with a building construction firm in Ljubljana and became a carpentry apprentice. I worked during the day and attended school at night. I met Slovenians who came from America on holidays. They told me how easy it was to earn good money in America as a carpenter. You could get 380 dollars for five days work. I started to plan my escape.

My uncle came from America and he promised to organise for me an entry to America if I escaped to Austria. A friend and I escaped but my uncle changed his mind. A friend transporting timber to Austria by railway arranged a hole between the logs on the truck where my friend and I could hide. We arrived to Jesenice but the train did not stop and police arrested us and interrogated us for 3 days before they let us go.

My second attempt was with a group going through Murska Sobota. The girl in the group had a bottle of slivovic; she wanted to throw it away but we didn't want to waste it so we offered to drink it. We became a bit drunk and talked loudly about our plans. Some scruffy villagers listened to us but we didn't know that they were detectives. They arrested us but we told them that we were just tourists. They took us for interrogation in Ljubljana

On my third attempt I was introduced to an UDBA police man who assisted escapees for money. He took a hunting gun with him and pretended to be hunting for a badger that destroyed corn fields. I was afraid that he would shoot me.

We were to cross the border over the creek Kucnica. He told me to wait for him under some bushes in the evening but I was waiting under the wrong bush all night. After not eating for the second day I returned; the policeman rang the border patrol not to be there from midnight until one in the morning. When we came close to the border I paid that policeman 4000 dinars. He ordered me to leave him also my bag with my personal belongings. He told me to cross the creek but I was afraid that he would shoot me so I ran through the corn field. As soon as I was in Austria I fell asleep under the bushes near a footpath. The first words I heard when I woke up were two border guards saying: One escaped again. They were inspecting my footprints only 100 metres away from where I was hiding.

In Austria I found an orchard and ate some apples when a Slovenian speaking lady approached me and asked if I escaped from Yugoslavia and if I was hungry. She fried eggs for me but before I could eat them policeman came and took me on his motorbike to Rosenberg prison. They interrogated me for four days before they took me with fifty others to the refugee camp in Leibniz. There we had to assemble every morning; they called out the names of people who were granted the asylum. The ones that did not get the asylum were returned; Yugoslavia paid Austria one cubic metre of timber for every returned refugee. Most likely people to be returned were unskilled; those who left behind their children, people with criminal records and some who were sick. Slovenian farmers sometimes demanded that they return their sons because they had no one to work on the land.

I got the asylum and was sent to Leinz camp on 6th July 1957. Farmers came every morning looking for labourers. I also cleaned the ships until I heard that one could earn good money as a forest worker. In the meantime I got a visa to go to Canada but I missed the ship and would have to wait another 3 months. I had a chance to go to Australia in three weeks so I agreed to go.

There were hundreds of migrants and we exchanged stories of our escape. Women and men lived in separate barracks. A young girl Fanika came to visit her relation Tone who slept in the same room with me. Fanika and I became friends. Tone was an invalid; he told us that he held a cow by the tail and steered her towards the border to escape from Yugoslavia. Fanika and I got married before we left for Australia. I made a good choice; Fanika and I have been happily married now for 49 years. We have three good, happy and healthy children. On 18.12.57 we sailed from Genoa on Italian ship Aurelia for 34 days to Australia. Many of us had papers to go to Canada but we could go to Australia sooner. We never once regretted going to Australia. Canada was closer to Europe but Australia has a lot of other advantages. The work was easy to find, the climate was wonderful and the people were welcoming.

On the ship Aurelia we had some English lessons but I remember most the celebration when on Christmas day 1958 we crossed the equator. We had roast meat and wine instead of usual macaroni. We arrived to Fremantle on 22.1.1958 and from there to Melbourne and then to Bonegilla.

We were very impressed by Bonegilla refugee camp, the food was excellent and plentiful and we had no work to do. Slovenian priest Father Bazilij came from Melbourne and he picked 20 Slovenians to select clothes from the Red Cross bin. He also organised jobs and accommodation for us.

I learned a lot in the first 18 months while working for builders Pekol and Turk. We were subcontracting mostly weatherboard houses. Once the other two went to the pub when someone from the office brought three open pay envelopes. I had a look inside them and saw that my friends had 48 pounds and I had 23. I started to think to go and work on my own.

Another Slovenian asked me to work with him for a German fellow. He watched me work and said: I can see that you have experience so you can work on your own. I gave him a price and he accepted. When I put the frames up I asked for progress payment but he said that he had no money and will bring it in two days. In the meantime I put up the roof. He told me that he invested money and can't take it out. I finished the house. The bank manager came to repossess the house and

declare him bankrupt. After three years the court ordered that he pays me one quarter of the price. I was very surprised and disappointed that a Slovenian can do something like that to another Slovenian. I learned from this lesson.

I found another German partner and we built new houses for two years.

In 1960 it became harder to find work in Melbourne. I looked in the paper every morning but when I went to apply there would be many carpenters waiting for one job. Once they advertised for carpenters in a sewage tunnel; there were about twenty other carpenters but the supervisor was German and he presumed that I was German because my name sounds German so I got a job for three months. The pay was good and after that my friend and I started subcontracting on Housing Commission homes in Broadmeadow.

In 1972 we got a letter from authorities to come to a meeting. We had to obtain building licences. About 200 tradesmen assembled in a hall and we filled in appropriate forms. They told us that from that day on we were all licensed builders; they already had our licences issued and they handed them out to us. All I had to do beforehand was to supply references from my employers on previous building projects. I have always done a good job and I went along well with my customers and employers so that wasn't difficult.

Once in 1962 I went to the unemployment office to ask for the dole. There was a big que and I saw two Slovenians waiting. I became embarrassed and left. I bought a newspaper and found a job on a hotel. There were 8 carpenters and after two weeks they called me into the office and asked if I would be a foreman. I was very proud and I worked as a foreman for three years. When we finished the hotel we began to build 40 flats. The company had another worksite with another foreman. When we finished the flats they asked the other workers which foreman they would like to work with and they chose me.

The work was far from my home. When they began building a school nearby I asked for a job there. I became a foreman on Altona School. When I finished that job I started to buy old houses and renovate. I made some new houses and the business was going well.

In May 1973 we went to Gold Coast for a holiday and loved everything about this new place. We moved to Gold Coast in October 1973. We bought five units to let to tourists; I built a three bedroom unit for us underneath and another one for letting to tourists. When Fani got sick and could not manage the place we rented the units out permanently until we later sold them. We lived there for seven years until I built a new house for us. After that I started building houses for others. There was plenty of work because Gold Coast was growing fast. When we arrived on 12 10 1973 there were 28000 people and now in 2007 there are half a million. When my brother Ludvik came for a visit me in May 2007 with his wife he was very impressed with the beauty of Gold Coast. He was amazed at how clean and new everything was. He couldn't believe it that on public BBQ places you even get timber for free.

I don't work much anymore but I still can't sit still. I lease out one factory and have to do maintenance.

The happiest times for me and my family were when we used to go camping along the river Own in Bright. Bright is a beautiful town much like Europe and all our friends came camping with us. We had music, singing, eating and drinking and telling stories late into the night. There was much laughter and reminiscing; we enjoyed the new friendships and still keep in touch with old friends.

There were many rabbits in Bright in those days and we used their meat in many recipes. We also liked to go fishing.

Now we are retired and enjoy good social life with friends and family. We have everything we ever wished for.

I often worked long hours seven days a week but we were never short of anything. We had our priorities in life; we didn't spend on luxuries until we managed to buy



Knap Family

essentials. These days young families want to buy the best of everything when they start out and then they have problems with repayments.

I am very proud of my wife, our marriage and our three children. They are all successful, honest and hardworking people. Both sons in law are also very nice and we help each other.

Franciska Knap



I was born in Slovenia on 13 July 36 (Melisa Savinjska Dolina) as the youngest of eight children. At home they called me Fani but in Australia my name sounded funny and caused many people to have a laugh. Don't be funny they used to say. I am a happy and sometimes funny person so the name suits me. Australians know me as Franciska and I can be as serious as anybody when I am doing business. I am an honest and fair person but I do not allow anyone to take me for a fool.

My father was employed on a sawmill and in a flour mill; my mother looked after the family.

In 1941 Germans occupied my part of Slovenia so I had to start in German school. I remember being terrified of American planes shooting down small German Stuka planes; we children often ran into hiding.

Life for us children did not change much after the war. I left school at the age of 16 and became a domestic servant in Maribor. I always wanted something better; I heard from people who escaped that one can earn good money in the west. I told mum in confidence that I planned to go. She wasn't happy but she gave me five American dollars for the trip. My father later said that he would have stopped me if he knew. He was a mayor and he felt that stopping me was his duty.

In June 1957 my friend Jozica organised a guide to take us over the mountain Olsava where we were to cross the border illegally and so escape to Austria.

I packed a change of clothing and my ID. There were three other people in our group. The guide brought us to the top of the mountain at midnight and told us to go straight but we got lost; we wandered around until we became exhausted and went to sleep on the moss under the trees. Next day we wandered left and right, we felt very tired and hungry but we could not find the way. Again we slept in the open. On the third day we suddenly heard cow bells. Jozica and I followed the bells but the others stopped hidden in the bushes. We came to the paddock where we met two boys. They told us that we were in Austria but the path we were walking on was actually the border between Yugoslavia and Austria. It was midday and the boys told us that guards have a lunch break. They would be having dinner break from 5 to 6 and the border would be safe to cross again. Jozica went to get the other three. The boys' father came and invited us to their shepherd's hut in the mountain; they gave us food and beds. They spoke Slovenian and German. At five in the morning we heard accordion music. Some boys came on motor bikes to take us to the church annual pilgrimage festival. We had lunch in a restaurant. I went to the toilet and when I returned everybody was gone. The police arrested them. The boy who brought me there wanted to take me to Germany on his motor bike but the man at the petrol station told us that the police left a message that they will arrest the boy if he does not bring me to the remand Centre. We all assembled again in the remand centre and by the morning many others joined us. Police took us into the refugee centre where they would decide if we would be granted asylum or be sent back.

I was allowed to apply for entry to Australia. I met Karl in the camp and we married on 26 October 57

We travelled on ship Aurelia to Australia from 18 December 1957 until 22 January 58. We were enormously happy as we arrived to Bonegilla migrant settlement. It felt like America came to us with all the good things we heard about. We stayed two months doing nothing but enjoying good food.

I never once regretted escaping or coming to live in Australia. My family would never succeed in Slovenia as we did in Australia. We enjoyed the freedom, good earnings and friendly people.

Slovenian Franciscan Father Bazilij came from Melbourne and promised to find us accommodation and work. He arranged with a Slovenian builder Joze Turk to employ Karl as a carpenter. I looked after Joze and Karl while I expected our first child. On 1 January 59 our daughter was born dead. It was the saddest time of our lives. I blame the hospital for my daughter's death because they sent me home after my water broke. After three days they had to perform the caesarean to save my life but they could not save our daughter. When I came home there were about 300 sympathy cards and our friends were of great support to us. Father Bazilij comforted us and offered to pay for the proper burial for our daughter but Karl told him to save the money for more needy people as we had enough money for the funeral.

Father Bazilij helped many Slovenians find accommodation and jobs. Everybody turned to him when they needed help.

When in Slovenia UDBA the secret police questioned Karl about the activities of Father Bazilij; they told Karl that Fr Bazilij was a traitor; he was anti communist but Karl only had good things to say about him.

English language was our biggest obstacle but there were lots of new Australians then and we found many new friends. We are still in touch with some of them after 45 years. We joined Slovenian association in Melbourne and felt quite at home with other Slovenians there.

After Joze Turk married Jozica, we lived together and remained friends to this day. In 1960 we moved in a bungalow on our own block where we later built our house. Our daughter Albina was born in 1960. Karl began to work on his own and I looked after the family. I minded other children at home and took some part time work but mainly I was home to support my family. Our second daughter Cvetka was born in 1963 and our son Johnny was born in 1968.

My children spoke only Slovenian with us while in Melbourne but when we moved to Gold Coast in 1973 they lost Slovenian speaking peers and friends so they started to speak only English. They became self-conscious and did not like speaking Slovenian any more. They said: Why did you come to Australia if you wanted to be Slovenians? They understand Slovenian but they do not speak it much.

We bought five units in Surfers Paradise and Karl built two more on the same block. We lived in one of the units and I let the other six on daily or weekly basis. Our children helped me wash, clean, and cook breakfasts.

Karl began building houses. After six years I had to have a heart operation and the work became too much for me. We began renting flats on longer terms until we finally sold them.

In 1989 we moved into our beautiful home and never looked back. We were never short of money but we always managed our money carefully; we never wasted anything.

I always loved to have the children well dressed; people often commented on how nicely dressed my children were but I bought remnants of good material cheaply and made their clothes. I always managed money wisely and prepared good meals with little money. We always had lovely gardens and grew our own vegetables. My children tell me that I am an excellent cook and I love to cook for parties as well.

Hard work, good management and co-operation made us quite well off. People who are lazy and careless with money and possessions often feel jealous when they see others better off but they like to live day by day without worrying about tomorrow.

Karl is a very capable builder; he is quiet, patient and compassionate man; he is an excellent worker and provider. Some people say that I don't deserve him. I know that I have a wonderful marriage but I never forget to work on it every day. I look after myself first because when I am well and happy I can look after my family better. My husband is too kind and people would take advantage of him if I did not stop them. I stand up for myself and my family.

I have a good life now, I swim every day in my swimming pool, I go to gym a few times a week; I go bowling often and dancing every Saturday. We exchange visits with friends for dinners and games,

we go for holidays and picnics. We attend most events in Slovenian clubs and invite friends for card and billiard nights. Both of us go lawn bowling and Italian bowling bocce in Slovenians club.

Every year we return to Melbourne and spend some time with friends there. We go to Bright where we used to camp in our younger days. Bright is the most beautiful town and it reminds me of home.

I have help with the housework now once a week. Karl prepares a healthy breakfast; he makes fresh fruit and vegetable juice every morning; we also take health supplements.

We enjoy Slovenian mass when our priest comes to visit.

I love singing; whenever I hear singing I join in; people always ask me to start them off. I also love acting; we prepared many plays and sketches to entertain our club members. Karl and I like dancing.

I was always good at athletics and played volley ball well. I am a thoroughly happy person and appreciate my good life.

When visiting Slovenia I look at young generation; they have big ideas and plans but they are not ready to have a go and work hard like we did. People at home don't socialise as much as we do; they keep to themselves. They have good standard of living but they complain instead of being grateful for it.

In Australia we are more satisfied with what we have. We have a very good medical care in Australia.

It seems unfair though that people who worked hard and saved are not entitled to a pension. In Europe everybody who worked and paid tax gets a good pension regardless of their savings. We don't get a pension.

Dominik Simoncic

I was born on 23 March 33 in Krize, a small village near Raihenburg. I had four sisters and one brother. One sister was killed in Germany in 43 and one brother drowned during the war. I lost touch with my family after mum died in 1966 at the age of 65. Dad died in 58 also aged 65.

Slovenia was under Germanic rule for centuries and many Slovenian places had Germanised names. After the disintegration of Austro-Hungarian Empire Slovenians joined in the kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenians, which was later renamed Yugoslavia. We became a part of Yugoslavia for about sixty years. Yugoslav government wanted to get rid of German words so they renamed Raihenburg into Croatian name Savski Brestavac. The town's people hated the new name and they poured the bitumen over it. The town remained Raihenburg until they changed it into Brestanica in 1954. The creek Brestanca runs through the town.

In 1941 I was 8 when Germans invaded Slovenia. Germans transported us to German Labour Camp in 1943. I celebrated my tenth birthday in Krsko jail where we had to wait for the transport. We returned home in July 1945.

My father was an easy going man. He worked in Luxembourg and earned a bit of money but he lent it and lost it. He was fond of old Austrian Empire and he proudly wore Franc Joseph's buckle in his belt. Those were good times, he used to say.

My mother was in charge of the family business. She was against communism because she knew that communists took the land from the farmers. She used to say that communists make people eat from the trough like animals.

Times were really hard for my generation after the war. I wanted to become a mechanic but I lived too far from the city to go to high school. I had to take what was available.

Yugoslav regime was bad for Slovenians. Many men came from Bosnia and Serbia and they were given opportunities in education, work, and accommodation before us.

Slovenians wanted some autonomy for Slovenia, they wanted to have its own army but Tito would not allow it. We had to pay high taxes to bring the South Slavs up to Slovenian economic standard. Tito wanted to create one unified Yugoslav nation out of six very different Slav nations.

Slovenians were always a part of Western European community while South Slavs were under Turkish Empire for 500 years; they belong to Orthodox or Muslim religion; they have different work ethics and traditions.

We had a fair sized farm but we soon learned that in communism it didn't pay to produce more than we needed because we had to give the surplus to the co-op for less than it cost us to produce. They prescribed how much we should produce and how much we had to give. In 1948 we had a flood and all our potatoes rotted in the ground. We only produced 3000 kilograms but they ordered that we give 6000 kilograms to the co-op. We would have to buy the potatoes to give them to the co-op.

Stalin was considered a great teacher at that time and Tito followed in his footsteps. Tito promised to destroy all private ownership and he was well on the way doing it. Political leaders were getting richer while many people starved. The rich became greedier every day.

Montenegro leader Djilas had a more humane idea of communism. I remember him saying that he will not travel in a car until every citizen could travel in a car.

Slovenia became independent in 1991 but Slovenians still don't trust their leaders because they become greedy when they come to power.

I found Australian and English bosses reasonable and fair. They liked me because they knew that I worked well and knew my job.

I also like Germans because they are well organised and do their work well. Even socially Germans are more correct than others. Italians stick for each other, Greeks don't even let you get a foot in their business but Germans appreciate a good worker whatever nationality.

I continued my primary school for a couple of years until I got a place in the industrial training school in iron works at Jesenice. I was making cast iron alloys.

I was trained in the whole process of iron casting. Later I worked for Gradis, in Ravne and in Velenje as a coal miner. When they couldn't sell the coal I lost a job. I went to Blagojev Kamen in Serbia where I mined for wolfram and gold. Wolfram is used in electronics because it has the same extension capacity as glass and it melts at 4300 Celsius. They separated the wolfram and gold from the dirt. In 1955 I went to Montenegro to work in a tunnel as a powder monkey.

In 1955 I was taken into the army for two years. I trained for ten months as a sanitary first aide worker and later I worked in ambulances and clinics in Kosovo and Macedonia.

After the army I worked as a mine explosion expert on the road works. In December 57 I escaped to Austria and applied to migrate to Australia.

I came to Fremantle on 14 October 59 and was taken to Bonegilla. After six days they sent me to assist a coppersmith in South Australia. It was a boring job because we did very little; the hours seemed twice as long as they do when you work.

After three months I began working in Leonora goldmine 150 kilometres from Kalgoorlie.

I went to work in Wittenoom blue asbestos mines in Wittenoom gorge. We drilled five levels into the gorge and we had to work bent down because the hanging wall was low. I had to sit for hours with my feet in the water. I stayed for four years. Blue asbestos is used for insulation, fire proofing and for purifying water. Locals used blue asbestos metal on the road and around their homes. Moving asbestos produces dust which is dangerous for your health; small particles you breathe in settle on the lungs and expand; this causes mesothelioma.

When I stopped asbestos mining my hands were damaged. The constant vibration of the drill and other mining machines kills the nerves and I had no feeling in my hands for ten years. If I put my hands into cold water they turned completely white.

There was no compensation, we did not know about our rights.

After asbestos mining I went to WA nickel mining. I was sinking shafts north of Kalgoorlie. The water ran from the ground and I drank it. It looked like water but it tasted like milk. Once the shift boss saw me drinking it and he told me that it might be radioactive.

We were paid by the yard and we worked very hard to earn more money. I had a bet with another Slovenian bloke as to who will do more work; I worked so hard that I earned twenty-five pounds a day. He lost the bet and still owes me a case of beer. On one particular day I earned sixty pounds, which was big money then.

We had trouble with the manager who extorted money from the workers. He demanded that we pay him twenty pounds a fortnight. If we did not he would write less hours for us. Most of us resigned in protest.

I went uranium mining in Esherana near Pine creek. There was no bitumen road so we could not mine during the wet season because the trucks could not take the dirt. They transported uranium ore to Malin about one hundred kilometres from Pine Creek. In Malin mill they ground the diggings and then separated uranium by flotation. Australian uranium is shiny yellow powder.

I was very lucky as far as health goes. Tons of rocks were falling around me and the machinery was smashed but I was never seriously injured. I earned double wages because I worked in dangerous situations.

In 1965 I went to Tenants creek gold and copper mine but I did not stay. The heat and the lack of air in the shafts made miners go mad. I returned to Wittenoom and later to Kalgoorlie.

In 1977 I went for a holiday to Andamooka where I had a go at opal mining. I met Peter Milas and his family. They told me about Lightning Ridge and they came with me to see if we would like to move to Lightning Ridge. I liked the life style and the town. You work when you feel like it and for as long as you like with people you choose. I spent all my money on mining. I had no idea where opal was so I paid to have holes drilled in the wrong places.

I knew about mining but I knew nothing about opal. In opal mining you have to trust your partner or you have to watch him every moment you mine with him. I trusted everybody from the start and they all cheated. Now I don't trust anybody. There are too many opportunities to cheat in opal mining.

Less was a friend and we worked happily until we found a good trace but then Les became moody and wanted to get rid of me.

I began working on my own but even when I worked on my own opal cutters cheated me.

In 1979 I went nickel mining near Kalgoorlie to earn some money for opal mining. By the end of that year I returned to stay in Lightning Ridge for good.

In 1980 I began working for Richard and his partner; they had a claim and equipment. Richard told me that we would share a third each. He told me that it was dangerous in the mine he had, but I was used to dangerous mining. I picked the first pillar and found twenty thousand dollars. Richard's other partner who worked in the same mine before me found nothing. I found colour in the wall and on the floor so the other partner must have been stealing from Richard. I made a connection and found another level where I found buckets of opal. This opal was put in the safe but it disappeared.

I realise that I was very naive and that perhaps I should not have trusted people. Being cheated and betrayed was a story of my life. Some stole from me others borrowed and then disappeared. People come to Lightning Ridge from all over the world and you don't know who is who and who to trust.

I knew many women and I had a chance to marry but I suppose I didn't trust women either. I saw women leave their husbands and children, others made their children's fathers provide for their extended family.

I live on my own with my four dogs. I feed hundreds of birds. I believe that all living things are brothers and sisters. I believe in nature. Animals make the nature wonderful. I can not kill an animal. I like good food but I would never have meat if I had to kill. I am especially fond of Italian artichokes and mushrooms. I like venison and duck.

I am a Catholic but my faith changed; I have concluded that religions are old fashioned politics. There is an almighty power and people try to explain and use that power for their own benefit. They organised religions. More people they can get to believe their explanation of the Almighty more power and wealth they have.

I think God was smart because he did not create a wife for himself because people might worship his wife instead of him. Even so most people pray to the Virgin Mary. They even pray to their particular statue of the virgin.

Religions were invented when people still believed that the earth was flat and that everything rotated around it. I read science and history books. They discovered that earth is like a bubble among the billions of bubbles floating around in infinite time and space. New bubbles come into being and the old ones burst in infinity of Big Bangs.

I spent much money on books and reading them changed my beliefs. People see the bad things religious leaders do and they lose faith in their God.

Everybody insists that their God is the only true God but I believe that if there was God he would ban religions.

Vladimir, Les Strasek

I was born in Maribor Slovenia in 1939 and came to Australia as a teenager in 1956.

My father had a workshop making furniture in Maribor. 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 only 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 seventeen 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 Slovenian-Austrian border. From her home we could see the border guards playing soccer and so we 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 myself to the authorities. They interrogated me and then put me into the refugee 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 Yugoslavs.

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 had 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 Slovenian 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 returned to Sydney I met many Slovenians. Catholic Slovenian priests had a 40 room hostel next to the church. They offered free accommodation to Slovenian migrants who had nowhere else to live. There was a wonderful Slovenian 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 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/hotel was 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 Coocrain 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 knew that we depended on him for transport because he had a car so he felt that he could boss us around. He did not want to pull the dirt out. 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 Les 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 wanted to visit 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 by that time. Since then Maria and I 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 Coober Pedy. 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 and I worked together. When Les 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 Les 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 Suzy a very beautiful Aboriginal girl. Our son was born and we got married. Suzy'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 never liked white people. Once I brought my children to her to look after and while outside I heard her say: the little white dog is outside. I took the children and looked after them myself.

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 other Aborigines. 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 came for 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 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: Less 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 hospital 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 Les is dreaming.

I just spoke to Suzy'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.

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.

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. 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. We are also afraid of falling down from the mountain.

We, 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. And on being better. With nobody to rely on and nobody to interfere we became self reliant.

My friend's 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 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 my 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, he said.

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.

Tone Svigelj



I was the first of ten children born on 18 January 25 in Bezuljak, Notranjska village of 50 houses in a Menishija district that was once owned by friars.

My family believed in God and in the authority of the Catholic Church. My parents were self reliant and believed that hard work and prudence were the way to success. I was brought up to trust God, obey my parents, work hard, save and become self reliant.

My mother Francisca nee Rogelj was a tolerant liberal woman but my father Anton was very religious. He said that he would sacrifice everything for Christ. We had to kneel down every evening while he led us in praying the rosary very slowly. We liked it when mum led the rosary because she prayed faster.

I was rebellious and restless so I often landed in all sorts of trouble. My father often belted me and sometimes I had to kneel on the gravel. I was afraid of my father. He did not hit the girls or the younger children but the older four boys have been smacked

and belted regularly. He was an angry man.

Later in the refuge camp in Italy my father ordered me to go to church every day but I refused and out of rebellion did not go to church since then and until my wedding day in 53.

We have been considered fairly wealthy landowners. My grandmother inherited the forest called Crni vrh. She told my father that she will give him this forest if he sent me away to school. I believe that she would have liked me to become a priest because most village boys who studied in St Stanislav's school became priests. I felt that my grandmother liked me best because I was her first grandson. She often talked to me.

My father sent me to Ljubljana to study in St. Stanislav classical catholic high school. My teachers were priests. The life in that school was very strict and frugal. We had to get up early, wash in cold water, go to church for confession and communion, eat breakfast of prezganka (water poured over flour browned on lard) with stale bread. I did not like going to church or to school. I was never a good or enthusiastic student. I told them that I am not going to be a priest. I was never particularly religious although now my wife and I go to church every week now.

As students we read the paper: Mi mladi borci- we young fighters. We learned how much suffering communism caused in Ukraine and Russia. The articles on catholic action against the atheist communism encouraged us to protect our homeland and our faith from the threat of communism. We felt idealistic and brave; we wanted to defend Slovenia against the suffering communists caused in Russia and Ukraine...

In April 41 our teachers sent us home and told us that we will not have to sit for school certificate exams. Germany and Italy invaded Slovenia. The Second World War began for us.

Italy occupied Ljubljana and the western part of Slovenia where my home was and the rest of Slovenia was occupied mostly by Germans. Germans were considered very cruel but Italians were almost friendly with us and nobody seemed concerned about them at the beginning.

All Slovenians suffered and resisted German Italian occupation but communist liberation front insisted that all resistance be under the communist leadership. For many existing Slovenian leaders communist leadership was not acceptable.

My friends invited me to join a troika, a group of communists. We distributed anti Italian pamphlets. We attended OF (liberation front) lectures on dialectic materialism that denies the existence of God. We learned that we will have to get rid of priests and reactionaries who oppressed people. We learned that communism will liberate everybody.

The majority of the population was against communism but those that had nothing to lose were more susceptible to the promises of equality. The idea of a classless society where every kind of work will be honourable and equally well paid was attractive to idealistic young people. I grew up in a religious family so the idea of common good wasn't new to me; it was familiar to all Christians since Jesus himself promoted it.

Communist leaders told us to forget Jesus because God was a remnant of the old oppressive system.

Edvard Kardelj issued a public manifesto threatening with liquidation all that resisted the communist party and their leadership. Liquidations of prominent Slovenians became widespread and people became terrified.

I became confused and a little suspicious.

While I was a member of the communist troika I heard about the organisation VOS (wartime intelligence service) killing thousands of influential Slovenian civilians because they were considered a threat to communist revolution. I witnessed the arrest of Mirko Kosir. Partisans killed him and threw him in a cave Krimska jama where Village guards later found his body (Joze Kranjc) .

At this time we were in the process of getting a water supply in our village. The boss of the works told his labourers about communism and the mighty Russians that will liberate workers and make them equal.

Partisans made a few isolated attacks on Italians and then they ran away. In retaliation Italians burned the village where the attack happened. We were afraid of partisans' actions and of Italian retaliation.

My first memory of partisans was when they surrendered a group of sleeping Italian soldiers and killed 11 of them. This became known as one of their great victories.

Soon after Italians moved to Cerknica and our territory was proclaimed liberated region where partisans assumed full command. One night they surrendered Hiti's house in Begunje,; they tied up the father and in his presence stabbed and shot his oldest son Janez. They took one wounded son with them and pushed into the Mihcevo brezno, but the youngest son escaped. The news of this atrocity made people very scared and insecure. They did not know how to protect themselves so they went with the priest Viktor Turk to ask Italian officials for arms to defend themselves against the communist bandits; to safeguard their homes and keep order.

In 1942 at the age of 17 I was one of the first village guards. My two younger brothers Ivan and Franc and my father joined later. Soon I became a soldier who followed orders. How was I expected to understand the global forces and ideologies that drove us towards our fate? My Catholic upbringing would not allow me to join communists who denied God. My parent's upbringing was against those who banned private property.

After the establishment of Village guards, Italians moved to Cerknica. We were on our own. We patrolled the village to ward off partisans' attacks.

Partisans had experienced Russian revolutionaries to lead them. They had clear ideological guidelines. They had to provoke the occupier so Slovenians, scared of Italian retaliation, would join the communist movement.

Village guards had no training or leadership or planning. We were caught between two giants: communism and Nazism-fascism. How could we succeed in resisting both? Someone should have told us that our fight was futile.

On the night of 18 September 42 partisans from Krinski odred surrounded the village guards in our house and demanded our surrender. My friend and I were in the second storey of the house and did not surrender because we knew that we would end in Krimska Jama. Partisans' leader Alojz Popek, broke in and came up the steps so my friend shot and wounded him. Popek survived and later became a national hero Vandeč; he died in Zuzemberk..

Partisans burned our house so we had to move to the ground floor. We kept shooting at them until they disappeared

When engineer Vojska became our leader we moved to Begunje. We returned home to work on the fields during the day. We slept in well barricaded homes. My job was to be on night patrols. I hated that. I was restless.

At the end of 42 I volunteered as 17 years old to join the assault battalion in Vrhnika. After a couple of weeks training we were sent to attack partisans in Notranjska and Dolenjska. We rarely came face to face with partisans because they moved away.

In 43 we were told that Italy capitulated. I heard it on the radio that Italians removed Mussolini. We suddenly faced German machine guns. They disarmed Italians and Village Guards. We had no idea where to go from there. They Marched us to Sentvid in Ljubljana. I was sent to Stalag 3A prisoner of war camp. After 3 months I applied to go south as Italian volunteer soldier. I only wanted to get closer to home.

A friend Anžkov France came to see me and he told me to go home with him and join Home guards. Home guards sent me to train in Davin to become an army officer.

Partisans in Yugoslavia made isolated attacks on Germans. When they killed a German officer in Serbia, Germans killed a thousand Serb civilians; for one German soldier Germans killed one hundred Serb civilians.

Serb villagers patrolled the railway and other strategic points to ward off partisan sabotage. Like Home guards in Slovenia, Serbs cooperated with the enemy to save the lives of their families. Everybody was afraid of German retaliation.

Yugoslav regular army general Mihajlovic told Churchill that he is not going to risk the lives of his people by provoking Germans until the allies come to help liberate them.

When partisans killed a German in Slovenia, Germans in retaliation killed ten Slovenian civilian hostages.

Ideologically village guards and later Home Guards considered themselves a part of the regular Yugoslav army although we had no connection with Serbs or Croats.

General Leon Rupnik was at the time the only civil authority in Slovenia. He was captured by Germans and became a prisoner of war. He explained to German administration that Slovenia was in a state of civil war and he asked them for permission to defend themselves.

On 22 September 43 Rupnik was sworn in as a Chief Administrator of Ljubljana province. Village guards became Home guards and as a regular militia they were properly armed for the first time.

Partisans led by Stalin's revolutionaries aimed for communist revolution. They did not worry about the lives lost in German retaliation but we, Home guards, believed that the price paid for isolated partisan attacks was too high for our small nation.

On 9th of May 1945 10 000 Germans, 13000 Slovenians, 4000 Serbs and 4000 White Russians with many women and children, wagons and possessions began retreating towards Austria as the Red army advanced towards the west.

In Austria British soldiers told us to lay down our arms. We believed that we will get them back before they sent us to regroup in Italy in two weeks time. Allies did not return refugees from Italy.

Damjanovic who was deputy to Yugoslav General Mihajlovic ordered his 12000 soldiers to move south of Italy. We hoped to join Mihajlovic and Polish Anders Corps and together liberate Yugoslavia from communists. We trained every day. We trusted English completely and never thought that they would send us to Tito.

Field Marshal Alexander explicitly said that nobody should be forcibly returned.

We put up tents on the fields of Vetrinje and began digging holes for toilets and prepared places for cooking. British guards gave us food they confiscated from Germans. The first transport from Vetrinje left on 21May45. One of the refugees escaped and returned. He told us that partisans were waiting for us on Yugoslav border and that English will bring us to them. They arrested this messenger for spreading communist propaganda. We wanted to keep our spirits high and did not allow ideas like that to demoralise us.

Our commander Vuk Rupnik and his wife were the last ones to be forced to go with my group of soldiers to Pliberk railway station on 30June45.

Vuk Rupnik produced a written document he previously received from his father signed by commanding British general stating that Rupnik's family would be safe and allowed to remain where they were.

While British officers forced us towards the station Vuk's wife took a knife threatening to stab herself if they would force her on the train. All this changed officer's mind so Rupniks were taken to Klagenfurt to have this document verified

The thought of an escape was never far from my mind. A fellow officer suggested that we escape from the train but the soldiers sat themselves at the door saying: You led us into this, now you would like to desert us. That was the end of escape plan at that time.

We travelled by truck south still sure that we were going to Italy but in Klagenfurt we turned east. We realised that we were going to Yugoslavia. As we stopped in Pliberk railway station we had to line up. English soldiers told us to move away from the trucks and then March to the railway station's platform. We were shocked and stunned into obedience. Nobody resisted.

I asked our curate Polda: why don't we all rise against our captors? I hoped that at least some of us would save ourselves. But where would you go, said Polda. The allies sent us to communists and communists want us dead.

A Serb partisan pulled my officer's epaulet from my shoulder saying: What use are these to you now? I asked him to pull the other one off as well. I would have been ashamed to tear it off myself in front of other soldiers but I noticed that some other officers did. The officers were killed first. Maybe God sent this Serb soldier to get rid of epaulettes for me because that saved my life.

English soldiers left and partisans locked us in the wagons. Serb and Croatian partisans were fairly friendly to us. They let us go to the toilet and get a drink of water. They never tortured us but they warned us that we will get it from Slovenians when they bring us to Celje.

In Slovenia partisans came to check us at every station. They confiscated anything of value. They even took some of our clothes and shoes. I cut my shoes so they would not want them. I had nothing else because my luggage was lost or was stolen when we went through the Ljubelj tunnel.

As we March ed from Celje to Teharje camping ground the crowds jeered and called us names. We were starved, tired, thirsty, demoralised and disillusioned. Some walked barefooted and in their underwear. The guards ordered us every so often to lie down and kiss our Slovenian soil. We had to chant loudly: We are Rupnik's servants, we are traitors. We are murderers.

Partisans rode horses among us; if we didn't chant loud enough they whipped us. People shouted at us: You thought that English will take you with open arms but now you are in our hands.

I noticed that some women and men at the back of the crowds were wiping the tears but they were probably too frightened to say anything or help us.

In Teharje camp we had to put down our belongings. There was a high barbed wire fence and gravel on the ground. We had to dig latrines but I was too weak from sleeplessness and starvation so a partisan hit me with a gun. After five day starvation we got our first meal, beetroot leaves boiled in water without salt or fat. Since then we had one meal a day of the same beetroot leaves boiled in water. On the tenth day they gave us a piece of bread.

Sometimes partisans coming from their lunch threw their leftover food over the fence to us to amuse themselves. They laughed as we scrambled on the ground for crumbs of bread. That's what hunger does to you. There was no pride left, just the urge to survive remained.

We were divided in three sections A, B and C. I was put in a group C and I identified myself as Drago Legisa born 18 January 25 in Devin near Trieste.

My younger brother Ivan was put in A section with the underage and those that were with Home guards less than two months. They were treated better and had more food. One day my brother threw us a tub of margarine over the fence. Another friend threw a bag of tobacco which we eagerly divided among ourselves.

Most Home guards that were returned to Yugoslavia lost the will to live. A person's mind and spirit is driven by the body and the body needs energy to function; the body needs nourishment and rest in order to keep the mind and spirit alive. Home guards were starved, constantly thirsty, they slept on the gravel, they lost the war and some even began to doubt their beliefs, they were afraid and in total despair.

People often ask why those captured do not fight back but a person needs energy to act. The apathy settles in and the misery of it all drains you. It is easy for people who eat proper food, have toilets, bathrooms and sleep in their bedrooms, to say what they would do. They did not walk in our shoes.

After weeks of starvation, torture, degradation and fear Ivan Korosec approached me with an escape plan. I was enthusiastic. Lojze Debevc told me that 28 of us were told about this escape plan. Finally only 14 were strong enough to try.

We planned to overpower the guard at the end of the compound where the opening to section C was but another guard joined him and they talked. We had to abandon the original plan and around 1 am I filed a hole in the inner fence and eight of us got through to where the guards were patrolling. On a given signal we began throwing stones and shouting commands to confuse and surprise the guards while we tried to cross the outer barbed wire fence. The guards ran away but soon partisans began shooting after us. Curat Tone Poldaj, and Tone Opekaj were wounded. I heard later from Jozef Gliha that Poldaj and Opekaj had to crawl through the hole in the fence in and out while partisans beat them to death.

The rest of us split into two groups of four. Niko Korosec, Rade Pavlic, Jozef Skrlj and I went together.

Eventually only four of us survived; two went to Austria and two to Italy.

Niko Korosec and I looked for the empty farm houses to find some food. We also begged for food. A woman up high in the mountain near Zidani Most sent us next door where partisan greeted us with the gun. I tried to explain that we are escapees from the German POW camp. While the partisan held a gun on me Korosec slowly moved towards the forest. Another partisan shot after him but he escaped. They tied me and took me to Zidani Most police station.

I gave my particulars as Zvonko Legisa from Davin near Trieste. I told them that I was visiting my uncle in Ilirska Bistrica when Germans captured me and took me to Stalag 3A. After I escaped I stayed at some farmer's place in Velikovec.

They gave me food and then took me to Lasko where I stayed for a week. A plumber took me to work with him every day. I remember seeing German soldiers cleaning the old brewery under

partisan's command. After a week they took me to jail Stari Pisker in Celje for five days. I ate a lot of barley (ricet) there to recover my strength. I asked why they were keeping me since I was a returned POW. At headquarters they interrogated me but I insisted on my new identity. They said how come I had a Notranjska Dolenjski dialect. I said that we spoke like that at my uncle's place in Ilirska Bistrica.. They gave me release papers with which I was to go to Ilirska Bistrica and report to the police there.

As I came to the train station I noticed an officer. I offered to help him with the luggage and went with him towards Zagreb. The security guard asked me why I am on Zagreb train. I said that all the bridges towards Ilirska Bistrica were destroyed so I intended to return home through Susak and Reka.

I walked to Jelsane where my friend Jozica told me that it was dangerous to stay there and that I should hide under the train that would take me to Trieste. In Trnovo I found the home of Ivan Bicek where I lived while I trained as a Home guard officer.

Mrs Bicek took me in. I told her my story and she took pity on me. She only told her brother's wife about me. For 3 days they fed me and washed my flea infested clothes before they showed me the way towards English soldiers in Lokve.

As I walked there at night an armed man arrested me and locked me in a room. After he verified my release papers with his command they told him to let me go.

I went to confession and told the priest about my predicament.

The priest said: As a Christian I am obliged to help you but bishop Rozman was wrong for supporting home guards.

The priest told me how to get to Davin near Trieste where I knew Legisa family. They told me that I wasn't safe from partisans there either. They told me to go by train to Monigo camp near Treviso. Legisa took me in a wagon pretending to go to his fields but he stopped close to the railway station minutes before the train for Treviso stopped.

I spoke some Italian and on the train I told the conductor my story. He told me that in Traviso was a camp for displaced persons called Monigo which was under UNNRA's jurisdiction. The authorities questioned me. They sent young single people to Servigliano where they could go to school.

By this time I was so mentally and physically so exhausted that I had no will to continue with studies.

Franc Plesnicar who was a member of Black Hand, was a capable organiser and he brought my father and Lojze Debevc to Monigo. Lojze met helpful people on his way. His future wife saved his life and he immigrated to Argentina where he became successful and has a wonderful family. His three brothers were killed, one of them in Teharje.

While in Servigliano Leon Rupnik came to visit but refugees told him to go to Ustashi. He went disappointed. The Minister of Yugoslav government in exile Dr. Miha Krek also visited.

I was unhappy and very restless. Yugoslav officials came to invite us back home and I applied in the hope that I will get to Trieste from where I wanted to go to Switzerland. In Trieste I told them that I changed my mind about going home. Italian police arrested me and I went from jail to jail before I ended on the island Lipari. I noticed the sign on the wall ZAP Zivijo Ante Pavelic. Heil Ante Pavelic. I realised that this was the camp where Ustasi were kept. I never sympathised with Ustashi.

I wrote to Dr Miha Krek in Rome. I told him that I was mentally emotionally and physically destroyed and needed work to begin a normal life again.

Krek made it possible for me to travel to Eboly camp where all anti Tito soldiers were held. From there they took us to Germany where they interrogated us and split us into black, grey and white groups. Black was for those Tito demanded back, greys were questionable.

I was in a white group and they sent us to a civil camp in Bochołd on German Belgian border. Belgians looked for coal miners and I began working 1000m deep below. They paid well and I saved most of the money.

Germany was still very poor at that time but you could buy anything in Belgium. Someone told me that I could make a lot of money if I bought a suitcase of cigarettes in Belgium and took them to Germany to sell. I was to buy Leica cameras for the money and bring them to Belgium. I spent all my savings for cigarettes but custom officers arrested me, confiscated the cigarettes and put me first in jail and later in a detention centre in Brussels. I was there in 1948 when I read in the paper that Tito and Stalin argued. I hoped that would be the end of Tito.

In Belgium I shared a flat with France Kogovsek who was a good cook. One evening he made lovely pancakes before I went on my night shift. I ate most of them. I became very sick. When I returned home France also did not feel well. He told me that he was short of flour so he opened a pack in the cupboard of what looked like flour and added to the pancake mixture. It was DDT.

I was happy in Bochołd because there were families and many girls. During the war I missed female company and the uplifting emotional experience of a relationship. I had little experience of social, sexual or emotional life until I arrived in Belgium.

I enjoyed my stay in Belgium. My work was well paid, good company and social life made it easier to forget the horrors of war.

I met Toplisek family. Anica Toplisek and I fell in love and agreed to be married in Australia. I got permission to immigrate to Australia before her. She was a virgin when I left.

I arrived in Australia in 49. The authorities sent me to work on the NSW railway. I worked with a gang repairing railway bridges and cleaning the locomotives in Dubbo. Later I passed the exam and became the fireman on a passenger train.

I camped along the railway with a co-worker Duro Poljak. The authorities supplied us with tents, portable beds and showers. Duro was a good cook. In the evenings we talked and learned English. Each evening we learned to spell 15 words.

We read now how after the war migrants boosted Australian culture and economy but we didn't feel much appreciated then. We were allocated to do the dirtiest, hardest jobs. We were young willing and able. We brought new skills and talents to make Australia a vibrant country it now is. The newcomers had visions of a better life; they were determined to build a better future for their children.

Australia is much like America, populated by people from all over the world who weren't satisfied with the mediocre but strived for excellence. They came to the land of opportunity and rejuvenated the country with their culture and skills.

In Australia I felt alone and forgotten. At the beginning I was so depressed that I wanted to escape anywhere. The social, physical and cultural isolation matched the desolate countryside and struggling Australian economy. The thoughts of Anica helped me forget the misery, deprivations and suffering. Without the memories of Anica I would have been lost.

I was counting the days for Anica and I to be together again. When I got my first pay I bought some stockings and sent them to her. She wrote back not to send her anything because she was pregnant with another man and was going to marry him. I was totally devastated. I lost the lifeline that kept me going. In my anger and disappointment I wrote her a nasty letter saying things I should not have. I am still ashamed of writing that letter and I feel that I have to apologise to her. Anica came to Australia with her husband Albert Korencan but I never saw her again. Some things can never be repaired.

In 1950 I was transferred to Sydney and started work as engine cleaner in Redfern. Everything changed for the better in Sydney. I enrolled in English classes and learned well. I met Australian girls and life became more bearable. At weekends we went to the pub and to the dance if there was one.

Slovenian friends were a great comfort to me all my life. In the barracks where I lived I met Franc and Danica Mirnik. We became lifelong friends. They invited me to go to the pictures with them. They arranged for Lidijana Bizjak to be there as if by chance. Lidijana and I liked each other and she eventually became my wife.

There were many migrant boys looking for a wife and I was afraid of losing Lidijana. To find a girl from home was difficult because there would have been about twenty single boys to every single Slovenian girl. When Lidijana introduced me to other boys as her boyfriend I could see that the boys were disappointed.

Lidijana was twenty one and she wanted to wait a year before we would marry. I was 27 and I counted the days until we married on 6 April 53.

My partner Jure Tomazic and I saved 2000 pounds each and we borrowed another two thousand to buy the lease on a big house with the mixed business shop underneath. We opened a delicatessen, grocery and milk bar.

My brothers Lojze, Joze and Ivan came during the 50s and we lived and worked together. Lidijana looked after men and the children. In her spare time she helped in the shop. The business wasn't very successful mainly because there was no parking place for the customers. Eventually we sold the business for 4 thousand dollars.

My brothers went to work for Snowy mountains scheme and I started to work for Goodyear tyres where I stayed for 18 years. When our son Bojan started high school Lidijana started working in Driclad and remained there for 12 years.



This is my young family.

I bought four blocks of land on the outskirts of Sydney. When my brothers returned from Snowy Mountains they paid me for their share of the land

In Slovenia communists took three quarters of our land. My mother had to produce food for herself and her seven remaining children when my father and the older boys were in the war and later in exile. I used to send them food parcels from Australia. My father helped from Argentina. We invited our father to Australia in 1972 but he said that all he wanted was to go home. He died at home in 1974. I was afraid to go home until 91.

Horrors of the war followed me. For years I thrashed around uncontrollably in my sleep night after night until I woke up in a sweat. Partisans chased me, I could hear people calling me names and trying to hurt me. Fear would not let me sleep. In the midst of it was the guilt that I never finished school and never passed exams. There was my father paying all that money and I failed. I sat for those exams night after night in my nightmares.

When I woke up I felt comforted because my wife was next to me and our sons were with us. We have a very loving relationship. I dedicated all my free time to my family. Sometimes I neglected my wife so I could be with my sons. I took them to football matches where they were very successful. My boys were a source of great happiness to my wife and myself.

When my son Bojan finished his university studies my nightmares ended like by a miracle. I regained a peace of mind. I sleep easy now.

In the end I am happy that I leave the world a little better and fairer place than what I found. The greatest satisfaction in my life was always my family; I focused solely on the wellbeing of my family and they made me happy.

Both our sons were good sons, excellent students, good workers, great sportsmen and it is a pleasure to be in their company.

Would I again join the village guards or Home guards?

Knowing what I know now I would avoid war altogether. When we asked Italians for arms we had a chance to apply for work in the west. With a hind sight that is what I would do.

When Italy and Germany invaded Slovenia in 1941 Slovenians were terrified. Nobody in Slovenia collaborated with the invaders. The government considered their options. How could a tiny nation resist the power that conquered Europe? The leaders knew that it was suicidal to fight Germans by ourselves. They tried to save Slovenian lives and homes while they waited for allied help.

Communists took advantage of this most vulnerable time in our history for communist revolution. From 22nd June 1941 until 17th July 1942, communists killed 1500 prominent Slovenians who were suspected of opposing communist revolution; they killed them for no other reason but so that they could assume leadership. Their killing had absolutely nothing to do with the German invasion. 1500 prominent citizens killed in a year is a lot for a nation of a million and a half people. They had 25.000 Slovenians on their killing list.

The fear of death created antirevolutionary movement.

The occupier, according to international conventions and practise, is bound to keep peace and order in the occupied land. If the occupier can't keep the population safe, a domestic force under his control is necessary.

I still believe that Home guards and village guards were right. We defended Slovenian civilian population against Italian-German retaliation and at the same time we tried to stop the spread of communism. We did not want bloody revolution on our soil. Our aim was to save our nation and wait for allies to help us win the war against Germans.

We were caught between two world forces and tried to fight both evils: the communism and Nazism-fascism. Our resistance was doomed to fail.

Our fight was just and our idea was good but our effort was futile because in the end the greater powers decided Slovenian fate. Even before the war Slovenian leaders predicted that this would happen. This was also what Home guards believed.

Stalin's Red army joined the western powers in the fight against Hitler. The allies washed their hands off anticommunists just before the iron curtain fell and cold war began and the west did not want anything more to do with communists.

I blame English for returning us to partisans; they share the guilt for the mass massacres of refugees. We were betrayed and became sacrificial lambs in the pragmatic solution of refugee problem. The west had to make concessions because Russian Red army suffered huge losses and they were pushing towards the west. To keep communists back and to secure peace they compromised and sent refugees into certain death.

In the end pragmatism won over justice.

There would be no fratricidal war and mass murder after the war if communists did not use the muddy waters of the war for political takeover. There would not be a split of Slovenian nation to this day.

I blame VOS entirely for formation of Village guards and home guards. VOS planned the political takeover. They killed influential Slovenians before the formation of home guards or village guards.

I regret not having proper friendly guidance in my academic and political life because I would have liked to study law or accountancy.

I liked Kocbek Christian socialism line and believe that Kocbek had good intentions but I can not understand how an intellectual of Kocbek's calibre could believe it possible that cooperation with communists would bring about Christian socialism.

I would accept socialism that allows more flexibility. The Swedish model of socialism allows people to prosper and be different.

My beliefs did not change but I would not go again through the suffering I endured because in the end neither communists nor home guards achieved anything.

The rule of the jungle applies also to human apes. It is most evident during the war. The stronger wins the fight, writes the laws and the history. It also indoctrinates its young to believe that the ruling elite are just and good.

What did the revolution achieve? People changed. Many became savages.

There is a constant struggle for the power and the glory. The victorious live in fear of losing it, the defeated want to win it. I realise now that in 1945 fear made Slovenian communists murder those who opposed them. They were afraid to lose the power, the wealth and the glory. I do not hate the idea of communism; it was only the greed for power that made individuals commit mass murder in peacetime Slovenia.

The revolution was celebrated in Slovenia for years. The parks and market places were named in the memory of the revolution. Since the fall of communism people don't want to hear about revolution. They insist on the war of liberation from the Germans. This is a new lie.

Last year they erected the monument for murdered Home guards in Rog. They wrote: Here we lie killed that's what the country ordered; don't forget us. This too is a lie. At least half of the Slovenian population was anticommunist and would not order the killing of thousands of their young sons. The sign should read: Here we lie killed because communists ordered our murder so they could secure their power.

I believe that all living things are in constant state of war. In every competition there are losers and winners yet we compete and try to get ahead of others from the day we are born...

In 1991 the minister of the independent Slovenia came to visit and he assured me that I had nothing more to fear by going home.

My feelings were indescribable as I looked at my Slovenia again. I visited every corner of my country, every friend and school mate, every school and all the places I longed to see for almost fifty years. I relived my youth and regained hope that Slovenia will become a just and fair home for all Slovenians.

The hatred, anger, guilt and fears evaporated. I even visited people I fought against. Most were still convinced that they were right and that we were wrong. That was to be expected since they learned all their lives to believe that. They have also been constantly rewarded by the government for their beliefs.

They told me that the killers who murdered home guards in Rog were drunk Serbs and Croats. Maybe it was true but in Teharje they were all Slovenians.

In Slovenia communists took three quarters of our land. My mother had to produce food for herself and her seven remaining children when my father and the older boys were in the war and later in exile. I used to send them food parcels from Australia. My father helped from Argentina. We invited our father to Australia in 1972 but he said that all he wanted was to go home. He died at home in 1974. I was afraid to go home until 91.

I have never witnessed personal retaliation of home guards but no doubt there were despite our strict judiciary orders. We were not to punish without a court or to punish the family of the partisan.

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How do I see Slovenian history and politics now?

Perhaps the biggest and most lasting crime of the war for Slovenians was that communists paid with our land for the return of the refugees.

Drnovsek and Kucan government continued the old line but under Jansa I hope things are moving in the right direction.

Lidijana Svigelj



I was born Lidijana Bizjak on 13 March 31 in Predmeja near Ajdovscina as the first of five children. My father was a policeman and on 4th April 1940 he got a job in Anhovo which was in Zone A under Italy. We had to move to Anhovo and my childhood ended. All the beautiful memories were left behind. Italy attacked England on 9 April 40. I remember students chanting on the radio: We want war.

Dad worked for us until in 43 Italy capitulated and he went into hiding. He had no idea what happened to us and he looked for us through the Red Cross.

Mum had to go to work on the farms to provide food for the family. As the oldest I had to look after the four younger children.

I remember how we were all scared. OF was written overnight on all doors and partisans came and recruited young boys. A friend of mine was 14 and they took him to pick up a wounded German soldier. As he held him up a partisan shot him. My friend was terrified and he ran away. He came to hide in our cellar and mum would give him food but in the end partisans caught him and shot him. They buried him in a shallow grave near the river and later we found that the fox ate one of his legs.

Once a Home guard came asking for some eggs. He held a gun on me but I told him that we had no chooks and no eggs. My brothers and sisters begged on their knees to let me go.



Mum found work in a factory and after the war dad found us but his sister told him that it was dangerous for him to return to Slovenia.

Primorska on the boarder of Italy felt oppressed by Italians. I grew up with the idea that Serbs were our friends and protectors against our enemy Italians who did not allow us to speak Slovenian. I was brought up in the belief that being a part of Yugoslavia made Slovenians stronger and better able to withstand Italian oppression. Slovenian priest Izidor Zavladov secretly gathered Slovenian children in the presbytery and taught us scripture in Slovenian language. He told us to be proud of being Slovenian. He said that we will go through hard times but we must never lose faith in God. Italians did not like our priest but we adored him.

During 1946 communists killed Izidor Zavladov because he would not join their organisation.

Gradually I realised that our Yugoslav savours killed people who disagreed with them.

I was picking firewood in the forest with my friend one day when we met a group of partisans. They told us if we told anyone about seeing them they will kill all our families. We became afraid. We heard the wailing during the night when partisans killed my friend and her fiancé because he

was an Italian and she was Slovenian.

In 84 when I visited Slovenia for the first time I asked my friend's brother about it and he cut me off. We don't talk about that.

People were still afraid to talk about it.

I noticed that there was a great Serb influence in Slovenia in 1984. Music, language and even swear words and graffiti were Serbo-Croatian.

Primorska which always sympathised with Serbs became the first and strongest opponent to Serb influence after the war.

When I was in Slovenia again in 1991 I was amazed how attitudes changed in short six years. Everything Serbian was out and everybody spoke Slovenian again. People were angry because Serbs held key positions in Slovenian politics and economy in order to assimilate Slovenians into a Yugoslav nation. Serbs who came to Slovenia were ordered not to learn Slovenian but try to make Slovenians speak Serbian. Even in Australia most Slovenians accepted this rule. Sometimes a group of Slovenians all spoke Serb if and when there was one Serb among them. Somewhere along the way we must have learned to believe that this was the right thing to do.

Helena Leber

A very small part of the world, in the frame of mountains and the sea, is the valley of Slovenia. We can hardly remember that it took thousands plus years to become Slovenian citizens, yet, 1991 will be written forever as a rebirth of the country that once was very proud as it hopefully will be again from then on.

I remember the day that I immigrated to Australia in 1958; my father said to me as I was leaving: Lenka do not forget in the far away strange world that you are Slovenian. I, as a seventeen year old teenager, never imagined what a deep meaning that sentence had. My father was born in 1912 and lived and died in the same spot of the world yet his birth certificate stated that he was born Austro-Hungarian. He later lived and served in the army as an Italian then became Yugoslav in 1945 and unfortunately passed away in 1990, just some months before Slovenian Independence. A lot of Slovenians have experienced this background particularly our Primorska region (Kras). After two World Wars in Europe, a lot of things such as borders, even traditions, as well as languages have changed. Prior to this era, Slovenian people shifted or migrated out of need to survive and for political reasons. The small area of Slovenia could only offer a meagre existence even through the small Adriatic seashore was our window to the world beyond. Even though you can travel from the very north part of the high mountain tops and borders, to the seaside in a matter of a few hours, Slovenian landscape is unbelievably diverse, from the shores of the Adriatic through the rocky regions of the barren land of Kras, you enter in to the greener pastures of Notranjska, to the beautiful capital of Ljubljana. Towards the border of Croatia lies productive green land of Dolenjska, home of creativity and Cvček and then very quickly towards the Hungarian border you see the hilly panorama of Stajerska with its vineyards and Prekmurje with its productive countryside and the stork nests on the chimneys. On this small piece of land grew a great many man and women scientists, doctors, researchers and in particularly poets and writers such as Preseren, Cankar, Jurčič, Slomšek, Trubar; artists like Gaspari, Jakac, Jama, Jakopič and Grohar; singers and musicians like ensembles Avsenik and Slak. On top of the hills are castles and churches telling about ancient history.

Slovenian people achieved recognition in various fields all over the world. In America you can find Slovenian names in astronomy and science. After the WWII Australia became a home to many of us; most of us escaped across the guarded borders; some of them lost their lives by taking that path. Many could not take the communist regime that took over in 1945; some of us had to leave our homes to save our lives because we were considered either too wealthy, or politically too dangerous or religious. Most escaped during the night; in a strange land in so called migrant camps we waited for months or years for the open paid passage to different parts of the world. We had no money or clothing so we became totally dependent on the generosity of those around us. After we landed on dry land after weeks and weeks of ocean travel; often residing up to 30 or more in one room at the base of the liner, we cheered to the sound of land ahoy Australian shores. Fremantle greeted us. What now? No knowledge of the language, the cultures or the political system, we were driven by train, trucks or buses like cattle to different destinations. Migrant hostels became our residences again for months or years until somebody somewhere needed us. We were not accustomed to the climate under the southern stars; we had to adjust to culinary differences; the smell of mutton was so strange that up to this day many cannot stomach it. Gradually they sent us to the farms, sometimes snake infested, abattoirs, forestry work, road works, factories, domestic work. There was a well known saying: if you are educated you get a new shovel while others get second hand shovels. So even doctors and scientists became shit shovellers, jam packers and cane cutters in Northern Australia. As the years went by we were followed by our religious leaders and others to help us along. Groups of Slovenians all over Australia came together and in time formed Slovenian clubs and religious centres; they bought land, built the buildings by voluntary work and spend their own hard earned money. Church services and Slovenian schools were organised, ensembles, musicians and singers, and amateur actors filled the stages. Today Australian born

Slovenians are holding positions in Australian government, medical world and research fields. Many businesses supplying the Australian and World market are the result of hard working Slovenian immigrants that came to this land with nothing. Some found luck in the gold and opal fields. As we are crossing, or approaching, the golden anniversary of our settlement in this red continent, one can look back with amazement that despite these many changes we remain proud Slovenians as well as dedicated Australians. These days Slovenian names can be found among Australian media, artists and writers as we are enthusiastically trying to restore the culture of our ancestors from thousands of years ago.

Everything has its beginning - Stanka Gregoric

Who am I? What am I? I like open books so I am opening myself to you. It stands in black and white that I was born as an only child in Maribor on 22 August 1938 after eight years of my parent's marriage. My father Stanko Žerovec comes from Mlin on Bled and my mother Cirila is a descendant of our first important poet Valentin Vodnik from Šiška in Ljubljana. My grandmother's maiden name was Johana Vodnik; she was born in 1871 in Ljubljana and died in Maribor in 1940. After the WWII I spent many lovely holidays with mum's sister in Vodnikova ulica in Ljubljana.

My childhood was spent without games and toys and overshadowed by the neurotic events of WWII. People from Maribor were struggling for survival amidst daily bombings and running into the bunkers for safety. I rarely put pyjamas on for the night because we were in constant readiness to flee. My life was threatened on several occasions. One day my mother took me on her bike to get milk in Razvanje; Americans were shooting at us "tifliger" because Maribor during WWII was a German city. There was not a tree or a bush to hide- I get goose bumps even today in that place. After a few shots the plane left; maybe the pilot realised that we were just a mother and daughter trying to stay alive.

Once we were suffocating in the bunker in Studenci near Drava; next time our train was attacked from the air. There were many more dangerous times so my childhood was anything but carefree. I attended German preschool and had to speak German.

In 29 bombings on Maribor during the 1944 and 1945 1518 ally's planes mostly called B24 Liberator dropped 15.795 bombs weighing 4750 tones. Bombs destroyed 47% of the buildings mainly around the railway station and near the bridges and industrial projects. There were 484 dead among them 60 children; there were 4200 homeless. Maribor was one of the major industrial centres of old Yugoslavia; it never fully recovered.

The allies considered Maribor as part of German third Reich although this region has never been formally annexed to Germany.

Slovenian ministry for defence had an exhibition on 20 4 2006 about bombing of Maribor titled Cilj Maribor-Target Maribor. It was said that bombing of this region should be counted as a war crime resulting from Nazi invasion.

I was brought up as a good Christian, I had to follow mum's strict rules and never be anything less than excellent at school. I had to learn ballet and play piano although I was much more interested in sport.

Mum died when I was twelve and my whole life changed. I dedicated myself to volley ball and gymnastics. As a good sports person I travelled throughout Yugoslavia. I was also given a scholarship to go to a teacher's collage in Ljubljana. In 1958 I became an early childhood teacher. After the unhappy end of my five year old relationship with a soccer goal man I left Maribor and started work in Sarajevo.

As a director of a preschool centre I had to become a member of the communist party but I returned the membership in 1967 with explanation that I was disappointed with the morality of communists. As a result I lost the position and my accommodation. In 1974 disillusioned but with a spirit of adventure I applied to migrate. Australia paid my passage because they needed women. I barely made it because of my age; I was 36 years old.

My hope was to live in Australia without stress, mortgage and other pressures and to have a roof over my head. I was brought up with the idea of Yugoslav unity and I brought that idea with me to Australia. But not for long. With this philosophy one did not get far specially with Australian Slovenians.

In 1974 I became one of the editors, reporters on government radio station 3 EA now SBS.

As my English wasn't good enough I had to find employment in the factory Siemens and later with Telecom where I passed the test to become the assistant of an electronic technician. I suffered work related disability and became an invalid pensioner in 1982. My unemployment caused me to become depressed. I married my husband Zvonko in 1977; we holidayed overseas; we went to Fiji, Castaway Island, Hawaii, Waikiki Beach, Bali, Greece, Spain, Germany, France, Italy; we enjoyed travelling but we more and more realised that we had nothing in common; there was nothing for us to talk about; he was interested in horse racing and cards – he spent on horses so much money that he could buy at least twenty houses.

I was lonely with my romantic dreams so I looked for happiness in shopping. I wandered through the boutiques.

I can't say that I had a bad husband because he let me do anything I wanted. He was from Zagreb but he did not mind my activities in Slovenian community. I had plenty of time and I dedicated it to my people. After I resigned from SBS radio I isolated myself for 8 years. I wrote I wrote articles for SALUK's anthology and at the same time I was a Melbourne columnist for Yugoslav paper *Nova doba*, where Slovenians had our page. I edited one issue of literary magazine *Svobodni razgovori*- Free dialogues, published by SALUK.

Year 1988 was a year of ideological change for me. I was in Slovenia when Yugoslav government arrested four Slovenians who opposed Slobodan Milosevic and demanded autonomy for Slovenia.

Earlier I wrote an article in *Nova Doba* against Milosevic ideology. The Editors of *Nova doba* punished me for writing against Serb ideology. Lojze Košorok who was the editor of Slovenian page lost the job with *Nova Doba* and I became banned as a writer.

In the first issue of *Democracy in Slovenia* they published my article *Biti ali ne biti* (Yugoslavian), to je zdaj vprašanje- to be or not to be Yugoslav, that is the question now. In 1988 I experienced a revolution of my convictions and became only Slovenian.

During the disintegration of Yugoslavia Slovenians elected me a president of organisation for the support of democracy in Slovenia; Ne political party Demos also supported us. Later I spread the idea of *Svetovni slovenski kongres*- World Slovenian congress and established *Avstralska slovenska konferenca*- Australian chapter of the conference.

I always wished to have my own newspaper where I could publish freely. The members of the ASK (Alfred Breznik, who was a Sydney president of the group supporting democracy in Slovenia and a businessman Dusan Lajovic; both men later became honorary ambassadors for Slovenia) helped me establish the publication *Slovensko pismo*- Slovenian letter. Soon after I established with cooperation and help Alfred Breznik and Dusan Lajovic an informative fortnightly paper *Glas Slovenije*- The voice of Slovenia which was published in Melbourne from 10.5.1993 until June 1996. When I moved to Sydney my partner Florian Auser registered it and we worked together for six years.

During this time I hosted visits from Slovenian government and had interviews with dr. Dular, Milan Kučan, Janez Janša, Lojze Peterle, Jože Pučnik, dr. Dimitrij Rupel and others. Since Slovenian independence I focused on promoting Slovenian language, culture, tradition and government. I received awards and recognition for my efforts.

As the editor of the paper I had to deal with Slovenians of different ideologies and past allegiances but for me they were just Slovenians. I had no hatred and no wish to boycott anyone. I was forming my own views. I wrote as I understood the issues and the readers liked my editorials. It was interesting that I was damned by some as communist in Melbourne and as a right wing anticommunist sympathiser in Sydney. That told me that I am on the right road.

However, I can say that I sacrificed the autumn time of my life and much money for Slovenians.

Anita Bertoneclj

While on holidays I read a book called "Magdalena amongst Black Opals" written by Cilka Zagar who is a Slovenian writer, living in Lightning Ridge. I liked that book so much that I said: "If I ever go to Australia, Cilka, I am going to find you."

It was also my wish to start a new life somewhere abroad. It was a question of my "soul" and not in the sense common to emigrants i.e. to have a better life with more money, bigger house and expensive car.

Our family used to live in a little country village Kotlje, close to Ravne na Koroškem in Slovenia. I worked as a high school geography teacher for twelve years; my husband who is an architect worked as a planner in urban planning for almost ten years. We have two kids, now aged almost six and eleven; they were both raised up in a very nice natural area in their early years. Our house was a nice house near the forest and the mountains.

I like to teach, particularly geography, although I also finished sociology as my second subject. Obviously it is in my nature that I like the world, travelling and talking about what I have seen. Well, not only talking and teaching about the world, there was and is also my own need to write about it. Writing became mostly connected with our life events while we were living abroad. These were real stories that happened to me and to my family or/and to my friends, and all are from the time we emigrated from Slovenia, first to Mostar in BiH two years ago and then to Brisbane, last month. Until now, I must say, I am very happy we are here and that my goal is realized. My family never complained about my decision to start a new life in a new country, with a new language, new life style, new school system, new bank system, new medical and insurance system etc. There were/are many hard beginnings in our new life in Australia, particularly for us two adults at forty who have had all life organised (till now) and had to find in a relative short time accommodation, new car, new driving licence, new job, new education... It was really a big thing to leave our nice and safe jobs in Slovenia and move to Australia without any job organised before and without relatives or friends that would accept us. Our friends in Slovenia told us they would move in Australia but only on the condition if everything is prepared for them.

My partner Sandy and I wanted to move somewhere and our first choice was New Zealand. We flew Down Under when our son Erik was three; we just wanted to touch/see/smell New Zealand. We rented a station wagon and drove around for three weeks in winter cold and wind; we saw the fences everywhere, because the country is dominated by sheep and cows. Sandi was quite sad because the rain forests were mostly cut down and replaced by tree plantations.

Slovenian man who was supposed to give us some help just disappeared. We returned home with a bitter taste about the country, but on the other hand I was so happy and proud that we travelled to the other side of the Earth. It seemed that Sandi gave up on moving somewhere; but not me. No. The life in Slovenia was becoming less attractive and less fair and I became deeply melancholic about Slovenian society after Slovenia became independent.

We heard that Slovenians have their own Slovenian schools in Australia, Canada, and Argentina. I was hoping that maybe they need some Slovenian teachers. I tried to get phone numbers from some of these schools. The boss in Slovenian emigration office didn't want to give me necessarily phone numbers of schools: He said: Are you young educated Slovenians really going to leave your own lovely country? We want to keep you at home."

He was a very important politician who saw the world all over and had his own sons all over the world. Finally I got these numbers and phoned to Slovenian school in Canada. A woman said to me: I am glad you called but we have no Slovenian school; there are only Slovenian courses run by volunteers on Saturdays. I realised that what I taught about Slovenian schools abroad isn't true.

My son Erik was five when. Sandi and I split up. I was pregnant. I stayed in Kotlje and he moved to Ljubljana. Although I had health, job and a house, I was very sad at the prospect of the future by myself and with two kids. I didn't have my mum- she was dead for so many years, father got his own new life with another woman and we have no contact since mum died; my brother and his wife gave me a cold shoulder; my aunt's husband said that there is no hotel at their place for us to stay in. All my relations deserted me during my most difficult time. I wondered how I was going to organize my life with two kids and what wishes and goals did I still have. Then a relative man came and said to me: Don't be afraid about thinking to move somewhere if this is your wish. You should just open your heart and ask God to send you help. He will do so. You will see. With these words he actually gave me the faith and courage. I was so sad that I started to pray to God by myself inside myself. I gave God many messages. I was restless while pregnant until a baby daughter Kiri was born. After one year of maternity leave Kiri, Erik and I went to the seaside and then to Tunis, than back to the seaside. I saw people who I thought were my friends suddenly just pass my house and would not stop and knock on the door. People avoided me; my neighbours wouldn't speak to me. I cried and felt alone and lost. I put an advertisement on the local TV that I am searching for somebody to live with us for free in our big house. That somebody: to be our grand mum. She wouldn't be lonely and that we would be nice to her. I wanted to give a chance to somebody. But nobody answered. Finally some people I knew helped me get an old woman, a very nice person from Gorenjska. So Lojzka came to my house; then Martina heard I am searching for someone and started visiting me. While I prayed to God I also kept asking people if they know anybody from Slovenia who is living in Australia. I wanted to find out what chances I had there as a teacher with two kids. I heard about a young girl Maja; she told me she is going to move to Australia with her boyfriend to her father and step mother Marjana. Marjana lived in Australia for years and knew Australian life much better. By internet correspondence we became friends and after a while she said to me: You have enough time, money and health to visit me together with your kids and we will make a little trip around Australia. As I read that message I was surprised and grateful to Marjana and to God. I really didn't expect such a response and support. I was crying; I felt much happiness. In April 2002 when Kiri was 11 months and Erik 5 and a half we flew to her place to Australia. Marjana was very happy we came. She also had problems in her family. She said: Let's go and make a little Australian trip in my huge car. So, we settled our four kids, my two and hers two and drove to find Cilka Zagar. Marjana said: I am working in mines, but don't know any opal mines. And yes. We found Cilka and her husband Joe.

We saw some exciting places. I also flew to Perth with my kids. After four weeks we arrived back home and I decided I will do anything to get a visa. Sandi and I reunited.

Why Australia? I told Sandi I would really like to live in Australia. We started to work to get permanent Australian visa. It took us three years but we finally graduated at this little emigration university with Tony's help; he is a migration agent. In the meanwhile Sandi got a job with the UN in Mostar (BIH) and had to leave Slovenia.

As I locked up the house we were living in for twelve years to return it to its owner I got a message (by mobile) that we got the Australian visa. Amazing. Wasn't this God's will? I sat in the car and drove to Mostar to Sandi. Herzegovina's era was wonderful. It was of course much more wonderful in Tito times and not really after last war times when we were living there, but anyway, people there are still glad, alive, temperamental, they like to talk, they like to take time for themselves and for their neighbours, they enjoy life even though it is (money)poor. Of course they have post-war destruction all over and inside the people's mind (they can't forget the war events and never will), they don't have money, jobs, the opportunity to be involved in the world economy; they have a deem view for their future, they have mine fields all over, corruption, crime, huge unemployment and fear about the future. I used to stay at home with kids who were going to the state school; I started to write Mostar stories and paint pastel paintings. Actually I discovered my secret talent for painting in Mostar. After one year and a half living in Mostar we moved to Australia.

We applied on the grounds of skilled migration; I am a teacher and Sandi is an architect.

As Sandi is very familiar with internet, English language and also with special words (the language and the way of thinking in the field of the immigration politics) we didn't think we would have any problem to make it on our own. Sandi was also a leader of the family of visa procedure.

We had to collect all the necessary papers and certificates of our study, including all marks of the subject we had at the university, the numbers of lessons of each subject, all assessments collected at the university connected by practise of the study, excursions, exercises. Everything for both of us. It was a huge problem to get all of these papers from my faculty. The people there, staff, were like mean by not giving them to me after many times of recalling and asking. With Sandi's staff faculty we didn't have any problem at all, but with mine lots of them.

We also went to pass IELTS test. I needed to pass it with level 6 in all fields and Sandi 7. We passed it and were very happy. We posted all educational documents, language documents and essential family documents (birth certificates etc.) to our Slovenian verifier translator whose translation cost around 20 dollars per A-4 page. So we paid a lot of money just for the translation and then once again to the Office for just notarisation; we wanted to have originals for our own. In Slovenia you have to pay for the notarisation twenty dollars per page.

Then we sent all this documentation to Australian Department of emigration to get approved our professions and skills. Sandi become approved as an architect, but they didn't get my documents on time.

I became red in my face, ran back home, took original documents, went back to the translator and back to the Office for Notarisation, paid again a huge amount of money and sent it again. At least the Australian Emigration Office got my documents and sent it to the NOOSR office to see if they can approve my qualifications. While my documents were on their way to this certain office the IELTS demands were raised for foreign teachers; they demanded language knowledge level 7. They didn't want to understand I sent it before the change in IELTS levels. The lady told me that I was simply "too late". She received my post two days after they changed their IELTS rules. We were sad; Sandi was angry; we felt lost.

We heard about Slovenian man Toni who is working as an agent to help people who want to emigrate to Canada, New Zealand or Australia. As we were sitting in a huge room he said: The only chance to get additional points to get permanent visa is to sit down and learn English to reach level 7.

Again, I become red in my face and argued with him: I don't believe this is the only way. I am willing to learn very much, but I can never learn English that high in the next six months. I am going to work every day but I don't have/know anybody to even talk with me in English. Well, I simply don't believe this is the only way.

The agent became surprised by my anger.

That night we didn't sleep well. In the morning, the next day, Sandi said: I have an idea. We can ask for the assessment at the Wetassess as you are also a geographer and not only a teacher."

We phoned an agent, and he agreed. We sent him all the papers he wanted, we went to the translator the third time and to the Notification office as well. We posted documents but this time to the agent. After that everything went on quite fast.

We got an assessment for my profession and then we had to pass the medical examination, sent to the police statements and personal letters as a proof we are together longer than our eldest kid.

On 5th January 2007 we arrived in Brisbane. When there was a question about buying airplane tickets I said to the person at the counter: we will buy the cheapest tickets to anywhere in Australia. It is true; we don't have any relatives or close friends in Australia except Marjana who is living in Kalgoorlie in Western Australia and almost in a desert. We were open to any city or any coast. The ticket seller said that flight to Brisbane gives the cheapest solution, and we bought those tickets. Immediately after our arrival, we got our first two weeks and a half long temporary stay at the Brisbane hostel, called-funny Somewhere to Stay in West End. This was our first Australian nest

from which we were making further decisions, observing opportunities about finding a normal place/(house/flat) to live in; we began job searching, buying a car etc. We didn't know anybody except Tony a migration agent who is living in Gold Coast but we were very close to meeting one Slovenian family. Finally they gave us a message they don't have time for us because they are too much busy. I had an obligation to pass a little present for one Mostar family who is living in Redcliffe for four years, so I phoned them and they were very generous by coming to our hostel and organising a barbeque for us. It was two or three days after our arrival and we were very glad that someone gave us a positive support for our new future. Instead of staying at the Brisbane youth hostel called 'Somewhere to Stay' for a few days, we stayed there three weeks! Thank God, the place was very nice, bohemian, with lots of young people from all over the world; there were music events, restaurants, trees and flowers everywhere; you wouldn't believe you are in the huge city. The hostel is a huge old wooden house with balconies, it has a swimming pool and you would think you are staying in the camping place, because of so many flowers and trees, shade, birds, sounds of birds, and birds again, lizards, voices of the nature of animals in the middle of the City. We went 'on a hunt' to get a nice place to rent but you wouldn't believe it!! It was very hard to get something not very expensive and nice for us. They have a special procedure to get something to rent. You have to have a job, a references from the rentals before, electrical and phone bills, all personal information and certificates as possible, our friends' Australian addresses and phones; beside this you should have a car immediately to drive to the places you are interested in as fast as possible to be there first. Then you apply for an inspection together with the agent to see the flat/house inside; this is a must!! before renting and it is not enough if you like just by seeing it from outside and through the windows; and after all you should fill a form that takes you at least 50 minutes. Anyway getting a house to rent was as hard as passing an exam at the university. We even enclosed our bank account which showed that we have enough money; yet we didn't pass through the competition with others. Also because we didn't have a job and previous references. We got that house we are living in now because we have paid for it for three months ahead. The cost of this house is 250 dollars a week. The same house in the city would cost 350 dollars a week. But the house was empty. This is a normal thing Down under. It is very rare to get a full furnished house. And we were not ready to spend our money for a luxury immediately!! So after buying a used station wagon Toyota Camry, we bought essential things like Ikea and mattresses. For the first time in my life I have a new one!! pillows, sheets, kitchen staff, new chairs and one table). I enrolled kids at school and bought them school things and uniforms etc. But we still couldn't come to our house because it was available to move in at the end of January. So, we even couldn't organise ourselves and our lives before that date. We needed to wait in 'Somewhere to Stay' hostel. We were going to the South Bank of the Brisbane River every day and swam there; it is free and open for everybody and it is a very beautiful place for kids!! People are coming every day from everywhere; we were visiting the main Library to have an internet contact with friends, we visited the state museum, galleries and other children's activities because it was a holiday time; January is a main holiday month, and finally we made a four days trip to Lightning Ridge to visit Cilka Zagar, a Slovenian lady who is a writer and lived there for 39 years with her husband Joze on opal fields. She used to be a school teacher but she still helps in school, she is also an official translator. They were very kind to us, first Slovenians that we came in touch with. We drove through a dry inner land, spent very interesting time with her and her husband and miners searching for opals, we were swimming in artesian basin and drove home at the beginning of the school when the house became available for us.

Kids adapted to school very well, Australian children are very calm and disciplined; they don't yell inside the school area or anywhere else as in Slovenia or Bosnia; they invited Erik to play immediately; yesterday he got a skate board just because he was simpatico to someone. Erik made friends immediately, he can speak and communicate without any problems, but for school of course, he doesn't understand much and he will get a special teacher to support him. Sandi and I are already working with him which is good for me too. In a way our life is already organised; on the other hand we still have to find jobs. There are lots of advertisements for Sandi but he didn't search it seriously before getting settled. I will stay at home; someone has to pick up our kids at school at three and hug them; I will also improve my language and prepare myself to pass a language test

necessary to work in any Australian school. Sandi and I are going to apply for a driving licence; it is a must after three months of living here. We are non stop happy here even though we have hard times. Australian lifestyle is very simple but also very complicated with all these bureaucracy things we would never ever think it is possible to complicate a little thing so much; everywhere we go, we make sure we have with us: all!!! personal documents, including library card, medical card, European and Slovenian driving licence, telephone and electrical bills, as much addresses as possible...you never know when they will order you to show up something.

People here walk and run a lot for fitness, they have barbeques, but they are quite reserved and not as talkative as I. I even don't know and haven't seen my neighbours which is a strange thing for me. It seems that food means to the people a lot too much...You get lost in big shopping centres easily. They are offering much many more kinds of food than in Slovenia or any European country.

Now we are living in Thorneside, which is a quiet little sleepy village at the Redland's Bay. Our kids go to Birkdale state primary school, daughter Kiri is in 1st level, Erik who is 11 in 6th level. They like school although they say that it is better to stay at home. We find the school well organised, safe and friendly even I would say, and there is a very different school system as we are used to from Slovenia and in BiH. They don't have much homework; it is more on parents to teach the kids work habits. If not, nobody cares and students pass levels study years even when they don't work much and haven't much knowledge.

What I really don't like is that much bureaucracy and all awful paper work for every little thing. In the future, we will probably move out from Brisbane. I must get the recognition of Teachers College in Queensland and pass the language IELTSA test to reach the state educational demands to becoming a teacher. So, it is a long way with a lot of learning and good luck. I hope that God is by my/our side.

August 2007 Settling down Under episode

I am writing this eight months after we immigrated to Australia with great joy. I am still not perfect in my English but I have learned much about Australian way of life.

I was personally happy and satisfied to give a new beginning to our family. I have never been very much connected to Slovenia and have always maintained that the whole world is my home. On my travels I found beauty everywhere. I felt overwhelmed by new scenery and people. Moving somewhere meant to me so much that I was prepared to be patient in the new country. I believed that there were no barriers our family couldn't overcome by our own strength. As we had already organized our family life in Slovenia, I thought we could do it again in a new country.

Sandi and I are highly educated and healthy; we have healthy and very adaptable children, so we thought we are prepared enough for a new start in a new country like Australia. After three years of hard work on visa demands, we finally got an Australian permanent skill visa and I was happy we at least emigrated in January 2007. Our migration agent was to come to the airport to meet us but then cancelled the meeting. The meeting would really offer us some hope and optimism. Nobody seemed to have time for us. We heard and read how easy and simple Australian life is; that many jobs are available and that one can get a job just around the corner. We also heard how Australia needs teachers and urban planners and how many jobs are advertised. People said that Australia needs massage therapists, cooks, waitresses, electricians, miners, different engineers, doctors and more and more. Maybe there is really a big search to get all this work force, but in Redlands, where we live now and around Brisbane Metropolitan, there is no job for migrants at present. Most migrants have trouble to get a job unless they arranged for it before their arrival which is a very smart thing to do. Both, Sandi and I still haven't got jobs in our profession. I met many well educated migrants particularly at TAFE who didn't get their professional jobs sometimes for many years. Now some of them really work as cleaners, taxi drivers or became pizza makers and are very disappointed; they have to get approval and recognition from Australian institutions to accept their study and years of experiences. Usually they need to get an Australian certificate by an Australian "standards", so they are forced to study again although their study overseas has been already done and they have been working for many years in their profession in their country. Further education

cost much money, time and energy so many migrants just give up and find their way to survive by working manual jobs in service or in the hospitality industry. Very rarely somebody's qualifications are approved immediately. Yes, some of these people aren't young any more. There is a 52 years old woman from Russia with 24 years of experiences as a doctor, but she sits with me at TAFE because she needs to pass language tests and also further medical tests because her education recognition becomes successful. She is sad and insulted but still determined to become a doctor in Australia. I am a teacher, massage therapist and a pastel painter, but none of these skills became recognised in a way to offer me survival. I graduated at the Faculty of Arts and taught for thirteen years in Slovenian High School but I need to send a twenty years old study program from the time I was a student to the Queensland Board of Teachers. I have to prove that I had enough pedagogical hours in my syllabus; if I do not prove it I have to study again. I also need to pass certain English tests with its very high level and pay much money to participate. These tests can be very difficult and all my school mates believe they are difficult on purpose to get from us as much money as possible. Despite my Massage course in Slovenia I can not be registered in Australia until I pay a certain amount of money to the certain organization; they tell me that I need to pass an Australian course. Everywhere I go, I have to pay for something; I even had to pay when I went for a check up if I needed some dental work on my tooth, we had to pay for Erik's English language test, his orthodontist's service, etc. We didn't prepare for all these expenses. Maybe this became a common practise in Slovenia also, but I hadn't experienced that there yet.

Sandi is highly educated and high profiled in the urbanism field, he worked for the UN in Bosnia and Herzegovina but he hasn't found a satisfactory job here yet. He sent numerous applications all over Australia without success. It seems strange for him too since they said how desperately they need urban planners. There are advertisements everywhere and Sandi filled each application form fully focused on its requests; he was happily waiting for a call but many times they did not even respond. Sometimes he was told that he was over qualified after they interviewed him; sometimes he had a feeling that they have already chosen a person for the job. He was just used as a figure in the job market process. At present he is working as an architect and is happy with the work and the position but is still waiting for a job as an urban planner; perhaps in some dry or rainy remote national park area. Once I met a teacher at TAFE whose sincere thoughts meant to me much at that time. I still remember her words: You know, Anita, the most important things to get a job in Brisbane is to know the right people and to have studied at the same University as the person, who can help you to get a job. You know. Brisbane is like a big country village, where everybody at my age knows everybody. At the moment I work in Child Care after school lessons. I am an assistant and float around Redlands from school to school. This floating is the most interesting part of my work because I meet many different schools, staff, children and parents. I have an insight into the Australian school system and education but the truth is I can't earn enough money to take care of my family. I work only three to four hours per day which is enough only for buying some food and fuel. My involvement in family economy is minimal compared to our needs although we live very modestly, easy and simple. We don't buy fancy clothes and we don't spend any money in restaurants. Our cars are second hand and we live in a little unit which isn't too expensive for being close to the beach. We are still aware we are new migrants therefore we are still beginners and have no ambitions for wealthy life. What we would like is to live a real simple life and be able to have trips into the nature. We are still open to move around Australia.

From my perspective life in Australia is very complicated specially for the beginners. It is far away from simple life style we expected. Everywhere you go, you have to fill in forms. This has happened to us immediately after our arrival and still does: filling in papers, papers, papers. When we were searching for a house/unit/flat to rent: the whole procedure was extremely connected with information, numbers and paper. The same was with the process of getting a driving licence, Blue Card, school enrolment, getting the First Aid Certificate, organizing internet and other communications, papers connected with Centrelink and Australian Tax, Child Care enrolment during school Holidays. Everything is connected with filling in forms. Twice we tried to avoid papers by accepting certain services through home land phone. But unbelievable: it took me one hour and a half on the phone to the administration officer. They also wanted Sandi's data. It was just about getting a phone number for my new mobile I bought in the shop as I need it for my work, but the

officer wanted again: to get as much information as possible to just give me a simple mobile number. The same thing happened when I bought a used car and wanted to pay an insurance against the third person. They took me another hour and a half of standing by the phone to get it. Why were they doing this so long on the phone? After they wanted to know each detail about the car and myself, they were reading rules to me, the policy and legislation and after all that both of us happily finished the procedure. Sometimes I say: Even though I grew up in a socialistic country known to be very bureaucratic, Australia is still much more administrative. I heard some Slovenian people say that they are afraid to return to live in Slovenia because of the bureaucracy. Now I think I know and understand why they think so. They were already so much overwhelmed by the bureaucracy here that are afraid that in Slovenia is worse. But it is not. For a new migrant, starting a new life in Slovenia is easier than in Australia. At least people in Slovenia are more connected than they are here and arrange things more quickly. Slovenian procedures at government institutions such as councils, social workers, banks, kindergartens, schools, insurance companies are much faster and easier and you spent less money and time to make things work. The only exception I don't know about is the procedure of building a house as I had never built any houses anywhere. Here, at Centrelink people are changing all the time, they are really kind, but after getting your data, they send you home to wait and wait until you might find out that they made a mistake in their papers and all procedure will be repeated. And you will go there again and again wasting your time and money. It is very hard to get someone's help personally. All staff also does not know all the information, it happened that I had to search for the same information from another city. And I got it there. Social relations in Australia are many times really very impersonal business but in Slovenia sometimes too personal. I think everything is made harder and more time consuming that it should be.

In my opinion one can really become scared about how to survive in this system simply because of the bureaucracy and particularly when one is a migrant and doesn't speak perfect English or when one is old enough NOT TO BE on time and doesn't know how to handle the computer which became part of every society. I often think about how these people survive with so fast and dangerous roads and traffic. Strict rules are everywhere and sometimes I find them too tough and strange.

Australians are very kind and I feel comfortable but it seems they don't trust one another much, so through time (decades) they created so much bureaucracy, so many rules and legislations. Maybe it is because they received many immigrants from all over the world (and still do) that they had to write all these rules about the behaviour in all walks of life. Many migrants don't know much about the system before their arrival. I am sure there are successful stories, but I think migrants should know essentials to be better prepared before the migration. They should know more about Australian way of life.

Australians seem obsessed by safety. Safety notices are wherever I go. I understand high safety requirements in Child Care but maybe Australians are too frightened, nervous, and unnatural. Therefore children can't just run around and climb on the trees as Slovenian children do, although staff is very much limited due to their position and work. Of course we are not supposed to offer children affection and knowledge since I am there mostly to organize the food and safety.

Here are some of the important rules that surprised and embarrassed me:

Don't run towards toilet and back because you can get you leg broken

Don't climb on the tree

Do not try any food from your school mate

Egg, tuna and vegetable sandwiches must be separated

Use gloves all the time, disinfection liquids and certain cloth for certain thing to use

Only closed shoes required everywhere

Never ever think about going with the child alone to the toilet even if he is very little and needs help. Take two children or the second staff to be with you, otherwise can happened that the child or his parents might sue you that you did something to him while being alone with him

Never take a child on your lap since this can be understood as sexual harassment/abuse

Never leave a child in the car even for five minutes because somebody can take it or call the police

Never help anybody who is calling for a help on the street or in the shop, as he may say that you hurt him badly while helping him by moving him

Never whistle to any woman, as this might be understood as sexual harassment and you might pay penalties

Yes, I wrote just some breath taking rules that were explained to me. There are many of them and every time I became shocked and scared a little bit. What if I will do something against the rules and they have so many. Shall I live in fear? As long as I am surprised and astonished by so many events and circumstances I will still feel unsettled here Down Under.

Our children have adapted well. They go to state primary school. They like school and school system and have learned English language quickly. They do sport a lot. Even the school system is very different to Slovenian one; I often get messages from many migrant parents I should work with my children at home as well. Not just here and there but regularly to give them as much knowledge as possible. It seems immigrants don't trust the school system in Australia much so they encourage me to work maths and English language with both children. They say children don't get enough knowledge, not as much as they got in their countries of origin when they were little and where they came from. These people came from former Yugoslavia, India, from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Filipines. They say an average Australian isn't interested much about anything, he isn't curious, doesn't read much, doesn't search for world wide information and is only able to talk about easy subjects. For these reasons Australians might give an impression that they are easy going and not complicated people. People don't have much knowledge; even those with university degrees are very narrow minded. You get such experience easily in any shop, school, service etc. They are lost in wider outlook and don't know much. My work mates say the school system does not give them knowledge and doesn't force students enough, although I see many positive sights of the school system.

My children like to go to school and they get homework that is mostly based on using the knowledge that is given at school; they need to use their own resources to write an essay or a speech for the class audience. Much attention is given to build child's self-esteem regardless of nationality, race or age. University study is finished by the age of 21 and they can go on a hunt to get a job. All through life people are positively encouraged about their future. They are rased up with hope, optimism and pleasure because they live in Australia. Maybe this is a reason, you don't find bad tempered people and Australians often use many positive superlative words in conversation. Words like: fantastic, marvellous, awesome, wonderful make me feel embarrassed all the time as in my culture we are not accustomed to use them so often. Newspapers are very fat/bulging but mostly filled with

advertisements and puff as well as TV programs. They don't give much information about the world and are mostly short and connected with scandals. Therefore, in a way, I understand why the society is limited with so many rules, legislation and control everywhere. Their 'easy' life is connected with barbeques; on weekends Australians invite friends who bring drink and food. Also, when you are invited out for a dinner in a restaurant, you will pay it by yourself. Again, a habit, you should better know, before being too much surprised or disappointed by Australians. On the other hand they are very relaxed about their attire and often go around barefoot. Many times I see them just like that even when it's raining and cold. They come



Art to warm the heart

BY TURVYA SAHNI

She used to paint, make pottery and sew as hobby, but began working in paint when she settled in as an art class in Broom's two years ago. Painted pencils Anita wanted to Broom and some she produced since moving to Broom will have at the Midlands Art Gallery at 120 Queen Street.

September 18
Call 3226 1971 for more information and opening times.

More art news in The Guide, P 48 and 49

ANITA Bernerich, painting is about bringing joy to other people. "I have so much optimism in myself and I like to put it on paper to share with other people," she said. "My pictures are very romantic." Anita's diverse collection of pencil on paper works, which are now on display at Midlands Gallery in Cleveland, are strong colours to bring out the beauty in everyday items, buildings and fantastical scenes. The Thorneside resident said the

address of her art career because she only painted when she was inspired. "I could go for weeks without painting but when I'm touched by something it's my thing," she said. "I've learned with my computer and some things I have ideas for my next painting."

Slovenian-born Anita, who immigrated to Australia with her family in 1989, became interested in art 12 years ago.

Anita with one of her paintings.

without shoes when picking up their children at Child Care, shopping, at the petrol station, at the post office, 'take away' restaurants. I used to see some people dressed just in a pyjama when walking around in our local shopping centre. Such behaviour is very unusual for us, Europeans, and gives an impression of a very relaxed life style. Children aren't playing on the street or in parks without an adult and you can't see dogs and cats without somebody as this is not allowed. But people seem happy and safe despite all that. They really look and talk with satisfaction. You hardly find a person unkind and even more, they don't grumble and complain about anything as they do overseas (particular in Slovenia); although I am sure, they also have their own problems.

We experienced two very stressful events in the time we are living in Australia and both were connected with Slovenia somehow. Three months after our arrival we received our stuff with the container. We paid for the service as it was charged by Slovenian trade service. But that service wasn't professional so we needed to pay the same amount once more in the port of Brisbane. Nevertheless the container was lost in the port and we had to pay penalties for it's storage at the port although this wasn't our fault. Sandi was jumping here and there every day, we both had nightmares and spent nerves, time and money.

Then just last week we had another bad experience. We were supposed to buy a little unit we are living in because I sold a flat in Slovenia. Many professionals entered our little unit to sign a contract and finally, right at the end, before signing the contract, when we just needed to get the information about the transferred money, we got a message from my rental agent that my flat wasn't sold as the client left to buy another one. Well, they didn't know anything about that until one day before signing a contract. We were shocked on one hand, but also grateful we got the information before signing the contract.

Who knows what the future holds for us but I hope we overcame the worst obstacles.

In August 2007 I had my art exhibition in Queensland and I was happy that people loved my work.

Vika Gajsek-Veda

I was born in 1926 in Doljna straza near Novo Mesto along the green river Krka. My father was Czech and my mother was Slovenian but I feel Slovenian because I grew up in Slovenia. I respect Czech nation and specially my father who was well educated, honest and good.

I finished primary school before WWII. The war did not spare anyone but Slovenians suffered more because we had a civil war and a communist revolution during the war. After the war communists killed my two brothers, many relatives and numerous friends who opposed them. There was a dark cloud over our homeland. I had no chance to get a high education. As the oldest daughter I was my mother's right hand and had to help with a large family.

After a long persecution I found a job as a nurse in Ljubljana. I married in 1952. After the birth of my first child I had to stop working because I became pregnant again. In six years I had four children. With odd jobs I earned enough to feed the family. My husband's wages went into the building of our home in Stajerska. Luckily I bought many things for the house before I married. I knitted and sewed children's clothes. With the help of family and neighbours and with a small loan we finally came under our own roof after nine years. The old saying says that When home is built the man gets wild. Dom se gradi, moz pa znori. Our marriage which was never harmonious ended in 1971. I took my four children to Australia. I am enormously grateful to this beautiful, generous country for accepting us and paying our travelling expenses. We finally found freedom and peace.

I began writing poetry and stories as a sixteen years old girl; I wrote about the horrible events I witnessed but I was afraid to show my writing to anybody. It was dangerous to write anything against the regime that oppressed us. Unfortunately my early writings got lost. I started writing again in Australia so I can leave my children something of my life experiences.

In 1990 my children published a collection of my poems in a book Slovenske Korenine Na Tujem.

Miriam Klemen

I was born on 11.12 1950 in Hotize which is close to Slovenian Hungarian and Austrian border in north East Slovenia. I was the second of six children. My father worked as a seasonal labourer in Austria so he could save and buy modern machinery for our farm.

I was very close to my maternal grandmother and when I finished third grade of school I went with her to visit her son, my uncle, who was a priest near the Hungarian border. His cook left him so he asked us to stay and we stayed with him until he died from a stroke on New Year's Eve in 65. I was 14 years old. There was a lot of work to do on the fields and in the stables but I remember the time I spent there as most pleasant. I liked to wander in the forests looking for mushrooms.

My girlfriend had an aunt in Cakovac convent and four of us school friends decided to spend our holidays with her in the convent. We wanted to learn to sew and cook. Maybe we also wanted to get out of the jobs on the fields. All four of us became nuns. I remained a very happy nun for 15 years. I stayed in Ljubljana for one year where I also learned German at university. They sent me to Zagreb to study theology and pastoral care for four years. I taught scripture and took care of families in need. I found my calling and it made me happy.

In 1969 I came to Sydney with Franciscan Nuns of Immaculate Conception. Some of our sisters came to Melbourne before in 1965 and they organised the Slovenian school, scripture lessons, a crèche and a church choir. Father Valerian was enthusiastic and asked if he could get a couple of nuns to do things like that in Sydney. It wasn't hard for me to accept the decision to stay in Australia for five years. There was a shortage of young women in Australia at the time so Australia made it possible for us to only pay fifty dollars towards our trip. I arrived on 23 July 1972 and joined sister Ksaverija who was the housekeeper. Sister Ksaverija served previously in China and she told us about her interesting life. When sister Ksaverija and I joined Slovenian Church Centre in Merrylands they just laid the bricks for the church but there was still much to do. We had fundraising, picnics and working bees with one goal: the way of the Cross. People were very generous and enthusiastic.

Ten years with them were the happiest times of my life. I enjoyed teaching scripture to Slovenian children and going on camping holidays with Slovenian youth. I prepared religious radio programs and helped with the church services. The best part of my work was pastoral care. When a family lost a loved one or when there was sickness I tried to help and bring new hope to those families. I was happy to make a positive difference for people in distress. Being accepted and appreciated was my reward. I enjoyed travelling and meeting Slovenians all over Australia. Everybody was hospitable and welcoming and interesting so I looked forward to meeting people. The convent was a sanctuary for me; it was like a safe warm pool compared with the cold ocean where the sharks of humanity are ready to pounce. I felt well loved appreciated and safe. Like a bird caged in a cage I wasn't prepared for the uncertain outside world.

This period of my life was also very much an eye opener for me because I was often in the presence of experienced and wiser older people. I feel privileged that I could listen to intelligent and good people who have had much greater experience of life.

Like most migrants born after WWII I have been indoctrinated by communist teachers in Slovenia. We learned what they had to teach; we all followed the line and learned to believe what they wanted us to believe. We had no literature or history that would tell us anything different. Only after I came to Australia I learned how communists really came to power. There was Dr. Janez who was a home guard. He escaped from the train that was taking home guards to their death after the war. He said that he warned his friends by saying: Don't believe that they are taking us to freedom; we are bound for the slaughter house. He jumped off the train and lived in Chinese Formosa until he died. There were other good people who escaped from communism. I realised that there are always two sides to the same coin; after seeing both I gradually formed my own opinions. Father Valerian in Sydney is the most neutral and tolerant person I ever knew. He always lived in hope that the other person

would come to see and know the truth and form his opinions accordingly. Father Bazilij was more openly conservative and anticommunist.

Among the people generally were those who stood for something one way or another and then there were those that were easily swayed by the more powerful or popular. I remember how enthusiastically one Slovenian praised Whitlam's labour government but as soon as Liberals took over he wrote in Triglav bulletin: The fish begins to smell at its head, denouncing Whitlam as a rotten leader.

I have no time for people who go with the winds of popularity because these people have shallow roots and stand for nothing. I do not trust those who stand for nothing because I never know who they will follow next.

There were those who changed their beliefs like the two Slovenian brothers I knew. One was a partisan and became anticommunist and the other who was a home guard joined the group that favoured cooperation with communist Yugoslav regime. Then there were Lajovic brothers Dusan and Miso. Senator Miso was a real politician who tried to be everything to everybody but Dusan had stronger convictions and never changed his stand.

The leaders who do not tolerate diversity of opinions cause much division among Slovenians. Fortunately there are also those who see something good in everybody.

I can not blame migrants who came from communist Yugoslavia for being at least partially brainwashed by the school they attended. I can only help them to see both sides of the coin and form their own opinions. I can only show the way by an example.

Yugoslav authorities followed our activities through their representatives in Australia. They tried to influence our people to favour them against those who escaped for political reasons. Sydney Slovenian association soon split. In Triglav club gathered those who favoured the cooperation with Yugoslav regime; they were generally younger and less active in religious activities. They were brought up by communist teachers and found it hard to make a total turnaround demanded by some anticommunist leaders.

I developed conservative but tolerant views; I hope that we would be more accepting of each other.

At the age of thirty my maternal instincts were calling and I knew that my biological clock was ticking: I realised that it was now or never. I told my superiors about my dilemma. They gave me twelve months dispensation to make up my mind. They also gave me an around the world ticket so I could travel and see my sister Toncka in Canada and my parents in Slovenia before I decided. I remember 23rd of June 1980 because on that day I made my decision to get married and have a family. I was with my sister then but I wanted to get the blessing of my parents before I told anyone. My parents more or less said that I will make my bed and sleep in it.

My parents were sincere, pious practicing Catholics and I learned to love the church teachings and traditions; to this day I do not feel right if I miss Sunday mass. I am also very fond of all other rituals specially the family praying before meals.

In August 1982 I returned to Sydney and Leon, my future husband, took me to Queensland. In the meantime he brought his parents over. His mother was very unhappy because she had to stay for six months as her ticket demanded. I stayed with friends until the wedding on 10 October 07. I often remember a Slovenian proverb: a man who is good to his mother will be good to his wife. Leon wasn't kind to his mother. I was too much in love to see that.

After the wedding I felt let down; it became obvious that Leon and I were two very different people. I am energetic, hard working and athletic while he is reserved and likes to take things easy. I am an extrovert and Leon is an introvert. I am excitable and enjoy company while he is cautious and cool. I cried when I said goodbye to my religious life and friends and Leo retorted: One would think that I am taking you to the abattoir. I felt that Leon was not sensitive to my feelings.

I soon began to feel that I was mentally abused. Nothing I did seemed good enough for Leon. I tried very hard because I was determined to make a success of my family. I wasn't allowed to have

opinions of my own. He did not say anything while others were present but when we were alone he gave me a verbal lashing for disagreeing with him on any topic. I was used to speaking my mind before I married but he expected me to confirm everything he said and agree with all his opinions.

I like people and always try to make them happy but I could not make Leon happy. We never really sat down to try to work out our differences. Maybe Leon was as disappointed with our marriage as I was. We just could not make each other happy.

Leon was unemployed after the wedding so I had to find a job. Thanks to Anka and Tone Ambrozic who drove me around, I soon found a job in a Nursing Home in Redcliffe. I like the work and still do similar work. At present I work for the frail old people who prefer to stay in their own home. They pay for care and are very demanding.

Our son Simon was born in 1983 and Marko in 1985. I decided to work night shifts in a nursing home so that I could be with my family. Simon and Marko still live with me, they are good people. Both are working and helping me financially.

One day I came from work and our teenage sons Marko and Simon told me that dad left a message that he will no longer return to live with us. I did not do anything about it. After a couple of months he returned and wanted to talk. I told him that he really did me a favour by leaving because I could never bring myself to end the marriage otherwise. We both knew that the marriage was finished.

I begged Leon to come once a week to have dinner with us so the boys would be with their father at least for a few hours. He refused to even have a cup of coffee with us. He said: Don't you think I have enough poison in my body? I asked him what he meant and he told me that a doctor told him that detoxification might improve his metabolism. I wondered if he thought that he was being poisoned. We all ate together and we had good regular meals but he really did not feel well.

I am grateful to Leon that he is not a vindictive person. He has never bothered me after our divorce. I hope that he finds happiness without me and I hope that our boys maintain a good relationship with their father. It seems to me that Leon never enjoyed life; he always found something wrong with people around him. Now I wonder why he was unhappy. I wish we talked more and resolved our differences.

Maybe I worked too long hours and did not spend enough time and energy on our family; we simply lost touch. I had three nights a week at home and I asked Leon to let me sleep the first night. He would come to bed late after watching TV and I told him not to wake me up. I suffered from migraine headaches. Sometimes Leon complained that I always had a headache.

After our separation Leon let me stay in the house with our sons and he found accommodation elsewhere. I wanted to arrange the property settlement through the mediator but when Leon moved in with his herbalist lady they decided that we take a solicitor each to arrange the property settlement. This cost me eight thousand dollars. I wanted to keep the home for my family but I had to pay Leon half of the value of the house. I tried to get a loan from the bank which was difficult since I was already fifty and now single. I worked four jobs simultaneously so I could prove to the bank that I was capable of repaying the loan. I became exhausted, weak and stressed. I told Leon that he could collect his personal belongings and he took many things that were of sentimental value to me. Since our divorce I worked very hard and have almost paid off my house when I got caught in another net.

All my life I lived with people I trusted completely. It never entered my mind to doubt people. I have after all surrendered myself with my vows of chastity, humility, fidelity and obedience. At the beginning of my convent life I rebelled against daily praying sessions but I got used to them. The hardest vow to keep was the one of obedience. Sometimes I wanted to rely on my judgement in daily chores but eventually I relented and obeyed. I did as I was told even when I knew that my way was more sensible. People have always been kind and good to me so I learned to take them at their face value and trusted their words without thinking. I am naturally friendly and enjoy being helpful to everybody. As I am very energetic that meant that I always worked harder than those around me.

Leon and I separated in 1999 and got divorced in 2000. My mother died in 1983. In 2003 I went home for my priest brother's fiftieth birthday; my sister Toncka who lives in Canada also came with her family so we had a family reunion. When my sister left for Canada I was alone with my father watching television when he had a heart attack. He died in hospital three weeks later on 20August2003. I felt very alone after I lost my father.

I felt especially vulnerable and in need of friendship and support.

While I was still married I worked for eight years as a housekeeper for Judy's family 4 to 5 hours a day beside my night shift in the nursing home. Judi and her doctor husband moved to Melbourne. Judi's daughter introduced me to a Pilipino lady Elizabeth White. Elizabeth had a grocery shop in Brisbane; she first engaged me to do some housekeeping for her but later she asked me to manage a fruit and veg part of her shop where I also barbequed chickens. Elizabeth wanted me to travel every day 75 km from my home to work with her in Paradise Point; she was very pleasant and friendly; she promised to open a shop closer to my home for me to manage.

In 2003 I decided to resign from my nursing job. Elizabeth's husband died and she invited me to work for her full time. I worked in a nursing home for twenty years by then and my back was aching from heavy lifting so I welcomed the change in work as well as Elizabeth's friendship. She kept saying that we were like sisters and that I was like a member of her family. I felt well liked and appreciated. Elizabeth opened another shop in Brisbane. I worked about fourteen hours a day to help her establish her crape cafe and carvery shop. My wages were less than in previous employment but I enjoyed the new venture and really felt like a member of the family and a part of Elizabeth's business. On the average I was paid considerably less than ten dollars an hour although I managed the two shops and did most of the work with cooking and serving and ordering supplies. I felt that Elizabeth and I worked towards the same goal; it never entered my mind that I was being used or that I could ever be betrayed by Elizabeth.

I worked for Elizabeth for three years when she took over two more shops. Ten days before the opening she told me that she needed the bond money on those two shops. She asked me to lend her \$150 000. I felt happy to be able to help realise Elizabeth's big new venture because I felt very much a part of it and a part of her family. I mortgaged my home to help Elizabeth.

Elizabeth's bookkeeper wrote the agreement in which Elizabeth promised to pay interest on the loan plus make one thousand dollars a month repayment on the loan. Elizabeth also agreed to repay the loan in full when she sold the shop. The magistrate registered the agreement. Elizabeth promised privately to repay part of the loan in six months and the entire loan in the next six months.

We opened the shops and the business was doing really well. We worked very hard and long hours; there was a sense of euphoria with the success.

In December 2006 both shops went in liquidation, Elizabeth declared bankruptcy. I learned that although the takings in the shop were good she did not bank them. Elizabeth disappeared and I never saw her again. Insolvency office was not allowed to give me her address but they said that they would have to disclose it to the court. She is receiving war veteran pension after her husband but I don't know how to get her address. I have been advised not to spend more money for the solicitors and the court because the court could not get the money from her if she has none.

I am in contact with Elizabeth's sister who returned to Philippines because apparently her mother was sick. They also own shops and they apparently invested hundreds of thousands in Elizabeth's business ventures. I asked them for help but they tell me that Elizabeth recently informed them that

she bought a new unit and a Porsche car. They are not aware of any financial problems. Elizabeth may have put her money into her daughter's account. Her daughter apparently also inherited money from her father and invested it in her mother's business.

I am at present just keeping my head above water working over ten hours a day to make interest



Miriam and her sons Marko and Simon visiting Cilka Zagor

repayments. My two sons are helping me with home maintenance so I would not like to sell my house and deprive them of their home. I do not know how long I will be able to work as I am not in good health and at 57 I am not young either. I hope that this black cloud over my head will somehow disappear one day. I hope that what goes around comes around; that one's good deeds get rewarded and the bad ones get punished.

Bert Pribac

Bert Pribac wrote the following autobiography and he wishes to have it published as he presented it. Bert Pribac writes that he learned at school not to use the word I so he writes in third person when he writes about himself.

An Australian Librarian, a Slovenian Dissenter and a Poet Perhaps..(As presented by himself)

Contents:

1. Landing at Broadmeadows (a poem of some sort)
2. A concise life story written mainly by myself
3. The BIBAM project
4. The slovenski Oktet tour of Australia in 1975
5. A dissenter all the way
6. Some Literary achievements of Australian Slovenes
8. The Magic circle... and Contrasts (2 more poems)

Landing at Broadmeadows

*I came to Australia on a Boeing 707
late one evening at the end of March of 1960,
together with my wife and a crying baby
on our hands, with almost no luggage,
with some little change only in the pocket,
and I barely escaped a kidnapping attempt
in Munchen in Germany,
a few days before boarding the plane for Oz land.
We were disinherited and exhausted, destitute.
Our soul was empty, our spirit low.
We all needed a long, long sleep and rest
that first evening on Australian soil.
They put us up for the night
in barrack Number five
near Broadmeadows somewhere..
I don't remember having dreamt at all that night.
The next day they put us on a train
for Bonegilla in the middle of nowhere.
Yet, I still remember the moon that evening
so large over Broadmeadows*

*like an orange barrel
and so threatening close.
This was not another continent only,
this was for us another planet.
And the wind blew a mixture
of sea fragrance
and the smell of strange trees
and everything was otherwise
so dry and empty
like my dispossessed mind
but the scent of gum trees
gave us a glimpse of hope
of better things to hope for,
of a difference perhaps.*

A concise life story written by myself and with comments from other people.

Bert Pribac was born in the hamlet of Sergaši near Koper in Slovenia on January 16th in 1933. As an eight years old boy he was caught in the turbulence of WWII and later in the traumatic events of post war Yugoslavia. And he understood what was happening. After all, in addition to speaking his native Slovenian dialect, he was able to read and write proficiently Italian at the age of four. Quite a story yet to tell perhaps.

As a fifteen years old boy he was enrolled in an intensive 6 month course in journalism, after which he began writing full time for a local weekly newspapers in Koper; the local chronicle events and sport events at first. When in 1955 at the age of 22 he finally finished high school, he began university studies in comparative literature in Ljubljana and completed them in 1959, except for his degree because he was forced by politically adverse circumstances to move out of Slovenia ¹. He arrived in Australia in 1960 as a refugee and started first as a hospital cleaner and then as a mail officer until in 1965 he passed his English Matriculation exams. In 1966 he started to work as a library officer at the National Library of Australia in Canberra.

Bert spent the first six years in Melbourne and later 36 years in Canberra. He worked also one year at the Wollongong Public Library. During his employ as Chief Librarian for the Federal Health department (from 1972 till 1988), he obtained in 1977 an Australian Public Service Fellowship to study for his master degree in librarianship at the UNSW in Sydney which he completed early in 1979. At the time of his employ with the Federal Health Department he acted also as a biomedical information adviser to many Australian health institutions and also to the World Health Organization. He left behind over 50 reports and articles on library technical and management issues. Especially relevant was the Bicentennial Bibliography of Australian Medicine and Health Services or BIBAM, a work of considerable historical value, and current use.

¹ Under the threat of an ultimatum of being deprived of his scholarship, then being refused a visa to travel to France, unless he spies for the regime among his colleagues at the University and reports to the secret services or UDBA on some cultural and religious personalities.

As part of his job he traveled several times all over Australia and abroad², especially to China and the Philippines. In 1980, on a WHO Fellowship he visited also the USA, Canada, England, and New Zealand, some European and some Asian countries and Brazil.

Because of his journalistic and literary studies background, Bert dabbled also in poetry and published his poems in magazines in Australia and Slovenia. He published several poetry collections: *Bronasti tolkač* - The Bronze Doorknocker (Melbourne, 1962), *V kljunu golobice* - In the Bick of a Dove (Canberra, 1973), *Prozorni ljudje* - The Transparent people (Ljubljana, 1991). Some of his poetry in English: *Winds from the Brindabellas* appeared at one stage also on the Internet, was read on the SBS and at some literary happenings in Canberra, Melbourne and Perth.

After his early retirement in 1988 because of a major MV accident in Marulan, he only undertook occasional library work; for over one year also at the Australian Parliamentary Library. He became though more active in his literary work. In 2002 his book *Slovenske spravne motnje* - Slovenian Reconciliation blues was published in Ljubljana. For his 70th birthday, a collection of love and religiously erotic poems *Kiss me, Koštabona, poljubi me* were published in Koper. The translations of some poems of Australian poet Dr. David Brooks were also published in 2003 in a collection entitled *Hoja do jasnega rtiča* - Walking to Point Clear. Bert translated into English also the libretto of the operetta *Planinska roža* - Mountain rose by Radovan Gobec.

A large anthology of his more relevant essay writings, many from his migrant experience in Ozie land, entitled *Črni krokav na mojem oknu* - The Black Raven on my window sill is being now prepared for publication. And on encouragement from his wife and sons he wrote down in the last few years (in Slovenian and some also in English) almost twenty delightful children's bed stories he recounted to them over the years, with the title *Trinajst plus štiri otroške zgodbe iz Šavrske Istre in Oz dežele* - Thirteen plus four children's stories from Saurin Istria and the Oz land. Over the years he translated into Slovene (from a French edition of F. Toussaint) the famous *Rubayati* of the Persian poet Omar Khayam. These translations are being published in September 2007.

In 2007 he completed the translation into English of almost all the poems of the famous Slovenian poet Srečko Kosovel (To be published next year, hopefully in Cambridge). He says he has still many plans for the future but God only knows how much time he will be given to do it.

Bert returned to Slovenia for the first time in 1974 just for a couple of weeks to visit his ailing mother. He was in bad shape at that time also himself. He returned again (after his MVA) in 1988 for several months. While recuperating, he became then involved in the Slovenian independence movement. He also married again and then soon returned with his new family to Australia, but in 2000 they all came back to Slovenia, while he still tried and tries to commute between the two countries.

Recently he retired to his native village of Sergasi in Slovenska Istra. He says that while he is waiting for (non)eternity, he reads as much as he can and in between he tend his vineyard and orchard full of figs and olives. As he often says, he dreams in four languages proficiently and Australia appears in his dreams every night.

Bert has three sons, he has built four houses and planted many, many trees. His oldest son Friderik or Fred, a scientist with the CSIRO (and prominent musician on the folk scene), lives in Hobart, Tasmania. Together with Friderick he still owns a block of land in Tasmania over the hills of Lachlan, just in case.

Berts views and experiences of migrant life in Australia, especially as related to the Slovenian migrant community and himself personally, are scattered all over the many interviews and articles for the Slovenian media. A good selection of these comments and interviews are intended, as already mentioned above, for his planned book "A black raven on my window sill". Some happenings could be glimpsed from this text.

² I was travelling on an Australian official passport and I was granted intelligence clearance from Australian authorities for my travels overseas and later for my employ at the Parliamentary Library in Canberra.

And for about 30 years or so, while he lived in Australia, he also wrote in Slovene and in English about 1500 pages of diaries which have been now almost fully typed into digital format. These may require some editing before publication. Probably some selected passages only will be published, most likely under the title: A Diary of a Disintegrating Fundamentalist in view of his religious and social explorations.

3 The BIBAM project.

In his professional career of librarian, especially of medical librarian, as already said, Bert left behind over 50 reports and articles on library technical and management issues and in 1988, together with the late Professor Dr. Bryan Gandevia of the RACP, the 4 volumes BIBAM or [Bicentennial] Bibliography of Australian Medicine and Health Services. He remembers fondly also the other colleagues on the editorial board, like George Franki, Richard Travers, Allison Holster and Prue Deacon.

BIBAM was published by the AGPS in Canberra in 1988. Some testimonials about this great project in the history of Australian medicine, consider it to be Bert's greatest achievement in his Australian working life. In those years he and his team were responsible also for the first Australian online library catalogue named HEMLOC³.

Here below are some testimonials about the BIBAM project:

By George Franki BDS, of Waverton Sydney, 12 November 1999:

»Mr. Pribac, with Professor Bryan Gandevia, was the instigator of the [BIBAM]⁴ project which produced the most comprehensive bibliography of a subject ever published in Australia. It was published in 1988 in four large volumes and recorded on a data base. Mr. Pribac was the technical planner and coordinator for this landmark work«

By Neal Blewett, Minister for Community Services and Health, in his Foreword, 1988:

»I have pleasure in acknowledging that the Bibliography originated from a suggestion by Mr. H.V. Pribac, then Principal Librarian in the Department of Health«.

By Bryan Gandevia, Chairman Editorian Board [BIBAM, 1988]:

»My regret in concluding this introduction is that it is not also signed by my colleague Bert Pribac, whose foresight and enthusiasm were fundamental for the project«.

And further: In fact, when in June of 1992 I left Australia on a longer trip to my native land, I visited Professor Bryan Gandevia in his mountain lair on Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains, I felt almost guilty for leaving Australia with so much unfinished work or plans. Bryan consoled me with these words;

» Don't worry Bert, you have done your bit for Australia. Take your deserved rest. You have done something that many of us only dreamed of doing for many years!«

What Paul Hodgson wrote in 1999:

»Bert had a record of very significant achievement, having built up the Department's [of Health] library services from a very indifferent base to a level where they ranked among the best and most influential in Australia. He created a team of intelligent, motivated and highly professional librarians and library support staff. As a result of his successes in the library, the Department extended his responsibilities to include records management functions.«

³ HEMLOC: Health and Medical Libraries Online Catalog

⁴ BIBAM: Bicentennial Bibliography of Australian Medicine and Health Services 1788 - 1950

»... I also saw him in action representing Australia in medical information activities in the World health Organization's Western pacific Region and he made a contribution in this area that was second to none.«

Paul Hodgson of Informed Sources, Deakin ACT, 10 November 1999

The Slovenski Oktet tour of Australia in 1975

That was a major event that I was asked to organize in 1975 on behalf of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and of which I am very proud. It came about because the then Australian Ambassador in Yugoslavia Mr. R. Booker heard them singing during a Christmas concert at Bled in Slovenia, and he was so impressed with their singing and invited them on the spot to Australia for the occasion of the opening of Qantas flights between Sydney and Belgrade. One condition was, that the Slovenes in Australia hosts them and arrange for their transport between Australian cities.

Because the Slovenian communities in Australia, being split at that time, could not agree on a coordinator, Mr. Booker asked for my services, because two of the singers were my colleagues during my University studies at the University in Ljubljana. They may have suggested it. They even sung for me in the hotel Evropa in Ljubljana on the night of March 31, 1959, on the occasion when my first son Friderik was born. My involvement with them came handy, because in Australia I was then already a mid level Australian Public servant and, acceptable as coordinator to most Slovenian societies and was thus granted special leave from my employer to organize their tour. With a friend, a councillor at the Queanbeyan City Council and merchant Mr. Frank Bresnik, we provided the guarantees for their travel around Australia and on the insistence of the FA Department we also invited to some concerts the Yugoslav consular and diplomatic representatives in Australia. We never put up any Yugoslav flags, but only the Slovene national colours in the forms of coloured ribbons or bundles of carnations. And everywhere we went, we had full concert halls or Slovenian societies clubs, except in Canberra, where at the Slovenian Association, a few misinformed Committee men declined to have them as guests unless they renounced my coordinating role... etc⁵, upon which the Oktet, on seeing on the club's house announcement Board their decision and arguments, the singers refused to sing in the club's hall and said: »Without Mr. Pribac with us, we are not going to sing in this place!« and they left their premises⁶ and instead they sung to full halls in the Albert Hall and at the Jewish Memorial Hall. Music critics of the main dailies in Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart wrote enthusiastic reviews about their singing. Slovenes around Australia were crying of happiness on hearing after so many years of exile such beautiful singing from their native land.

Quite interesting was their performance at Padua Hall, the Slovene Church Centre in Kew, where the late Rev. Fra Bazilij was reluctant at first to accept them as hosts, but relented on finding that some of them were his schoolmates. He asked me, if any of them were members of the Communist party, to which I retorted that to the best of my knowledge, at least five of them were, but that he should not bother, because they are above all »dobri Slovenci« - good Slovenes and they will sing also in the church some Slovenian church songs, if he wishes so. To which he somehow agreed. But later on he entered into some bitter correspondence with me about the value of such tours in view of the Yugoslav political situation (about 30 pages in my archives), accepting though that they were a top cultural event, an opinion confirmed in 1991 also by Mr. Lojze Peterle, a declared Catholic, then the first Prime Minister of the newly independent Slovenia, who rightfully stressed that

The fact that I was coordinating their tour on behalf of the Australian DFA and never on behalf of the Yugoslav Embassy, did not convince them. There was probably some personal or political grudge and small peoples' envy against me and Mr. Bresnik that made them act in such a stupid manner. In fact, during those days, myself, my wife and Mr. Bresnik, we received telephone threats of bombs to be planted in the Albert hall unless we cancelled the concert and we had to ask for police protection.

⁶ In fact I offered it to the Club and to the singers, that I could easily absent myself from the concert there in order to defuse the issue.

the Slovenski Oktet represented the Slovenian culture and name wherever and whenever it sung, and I should add: nothing else but.

5. A dissenter all the way

The tour of the Slovenski oktet, although most successfully organized, brought to the fore again all the adversity some people had against me. By then I was an active member of many Slovenian societies in Australia, first in Melbourne, then also in Canberra and in Sydney. Later on in Canberra, I produced for 15 years fortnightly Slovenian radio programs for an alternative Slovenian grouping named Karantania. But because of my declared antifascism, I was shunned and attacked very early by some Slovenian rightwing circles, who even intervened with the Australian migration authorities, to deny me at first the Australian citizenship⁷. Being always interested in spiritual symbolism and the fate of mankind, I also gradually and actively participated for many years in evangelical religious groups, first in Melbourne with the Church of Christ and then also in Canberra with the Christadelphians for both of whom I still retains my sympathies, but that made things worse with my Slovene compatriots. But because I accepted the evangelical views on religion and society, I was never quite at ease with the many narrow minded predominantly roman-catholic Slovenian opinion makers in the Australian Slovenian community. For many years, I was either ostracized, shunned by most of them or even viciously attacked verbally or even threatened physically by some of them⁸. I discovered gradually though, as I learned the language and the mores of my new found country, that I became more at ease and quite at home with the more tolerant Australian society, including its wonderful Irish -Australian Roman-catholics.

Nevertheless, when Slovenia was separating from Yugoslavia in 1990, I joined the Slovenian community in Canberra at a great meeting in front of Parliament house where I was somehow the main speaker in front of about 3000 Slovenes and other friends from Eastern Europe, Croatia and Australia. With some of them, I also made a successful submission to the then Prime Minister of Australia Mr. R. Hawke on January 15 of 1991, to recognize Slovenia, although, his foreign Minister Mr. Keating said only a few hours earlier on the ABC radio, that Australia shall not recognize Slovenia's independence until all its neighbouring countries shall. Keating went on the ABC radio the same late evening news to eat his morning words and announce Hawke's decision. And believe it or not, Mr Hawke was swayed in Slovenia's favour and persuaded his ministers to recognize Slovenia immediately because of a pun I made on his wife's and daughter's friendship with my former wife. That much I have been told the next day by his Secretary.

My Slovenian political and social opponents in Australia could not accept that I was one of the rare socialists dissenters⁹ among them and that because of my traumatic experiences during the 2WW, I was a strong antifascist. I was a thorn in their side, being an articulate opponent and left leaning Christian. I was trying my best to have good relations with all of the Slovenian groups and I was

⁷ I was refused citizenship at first and when I complained to the Immigration Department, I was fortunately interrogated by H. Opperman (later Sir), who told me about denunciations originating in the Slovenian Community in Melbourne. Opperman, who became convinced of my integrity, then granted me Australian citizenship in a matter of days.

⁸ In fact, during my stay in Victoria, a rabid group of six or seven Slovenian nazi apologists had a meeting at Mount Macedon at which they decided to lure me somewhere and punish me physically for my for them unconventional view. I was advised about this with some urgency by an officer from Russell St. Police Headquarters. This was confirmed a few days later by a relative of one of the plotters who came to visit me in haste to warn me about their threat.

⁹ In fact when the most famous Slovenian dissident Jože Pučnik, was jailed in Ljubljana for his view, I was leading a dissenting discussion circle at the University of Ljubljana and was spied upon. In view of the infiltrations and dangers we were in, I disbanded the circle, and managed soon after to escape with my newly established family over the border into Italy and then through Germany into Australia.

called upon sometimes by simple working class people to defend them when they were singing Slovenian partisan resistance songs. But Fra Basil told me quite early that I can't be a true Slovenian unless I belong to the RC church, to which I retorted that I am a Slovene because I was born into the Slovenian tribe and not because I belong to any church or other grouping. The Slovenian Santamaria¹⁰ or DLP adherents tried to ostracize me from the then Slovenian Association in Melbourne and in later in Canberra too.

Some of these opponents were quite rabid in their attitude towards me, trying to deny me at first even the Australian citizenship or later even promotion at work by false accusations to my supervisors or even writing denigrating letters to the Australian Parliament.

I always maintained that I can have with them quite good genuine human and cultural relations if they were willing to accept my free and unconventional mode of thinking and if they were prepared to listen to my arguments as much as I was prepared to listen to theirs. And with many I achieved eventually good relations and friendship, even with some priests and community leaders. But that was impossible to achieve with some of them, but they rather branded me a Yugoslav spy among them, not being a Slovene at all, attacking my conversion to protestantism etc etc. and heavens knows what else, which forces us into some paradoxical behaviour, into an incapacity to have proper human or social relations or collaboration. I don't ever deny that some of them were decent human being, even of genuine patriotic feelings, but inspite all of this, some of them were representing the darker concept of the Slovenian past and I opposed them for such extreme right wing attitudes. And that was my pain that I had to deal with them and that was their destined misery that they could not subdue me even with physical threats.

When I first joined the Slovenian Academic Society, a self select group of university graduates in Sydney, knowing that I had many friends among the alternative Slovenian groups in Sydney and Melbourne, an academic among them, a lecturer at the UNSW warned me: "Bert, if you are going to cooperate with those proletarians rather than with us academics, we shall ignore you when the history of Australian Slovenians shall be written." Well," I told him "I could'n't care a hoot for it. Because I like my peasant compatriots from the Karst, from Brkini, from Prekmurje: human beings like me and I shall feast and sing with them or whomsoever invites me in good spirit".

Now that this history seems to be written by various writers and some extremist denigrated me and my work again quite recently in the Slovenian Kolping Sorority Bilten, I would indeed prefer to be ignored.

Literary achievements of some Australian Slovenians

Bert wrote profusely at one stage also about other Slovenian writers and poets in Australia. This writing shall also appear God willing and weather permitting (as the English say it) in »The Black raven ...«.

A couple of glimpses will be given here below, but first:

Of his poetry work, Bert takes pride in his translations of Australian contemporary and Aboriginal poetry which over the years was read often on the Slovenian radio and which was published in Ljubljana in 2003 in two anthologies of Australian contemporary verse Vesolje okrog kuščarja - The

¹⁰ I knew personally the late Santamaria of the DLP, having met him when I was a cleaner in St. Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne and he was there as a patient and upon finding out that I came from Istria, a former Italian province, he was friendly with me and declared me an Italian, which I resented. To me, his pro Mussolinian sympathies were quite evident from our discussions or his puns when I cleaned along his bedside: He was otherwise a pleasant person and we spoke Italian naturally. I found out that later when I was doing my Library course in Canberra, his daughter was my study and working colleague, a very amiable, competent and reasonable person indeed.

Universe around the Lizard and Konec sanjske dobe - The end of Dreamtime. These two books were greeted with very positive critical acclaim and have been almost sold out.

As of writing this contribution, he has finished translating into English almost all of the poems of Srečko Kosovel, a modernistic Slovenian poet perhaps as famous in Slovenia as the 18th Century bard from Vrba, France Prešeren.

But let us ponder a bit about the Slovenian migrant writings in Australia. First of all we must consider that most of the Slovenian migrants were poorly educated young peasant or working class boys and girls. Yet, we believed that it was important that Slovenia hears our voice and offer us recognition for our literary efforts but we only reached a small circle of people. Our writings were read by only a few friends, but we, the writers and poets, became opinion makers with our writing and publications, at least among our community in Australia and some friends in Slovenia. Slovenia ignored us, during the communist era, at least until the eighties, because we were not ideologically pure for them. We were also too distant; maybe we were not good enough. It is strange, that after Slovenian independence we became largely irrelevant. Many of our Ozie writers are not returning home or stopped writing because they became frail or the earth asked for their remains. Young Slovenes in Australia are becoming integrated into Australian society and there are some promising quills among them.

In Slovenia, ten years ago they used to publish in total about 400 to 500 books a year. Last years, only in poetry, 400 books were written. Yet during the last hundred years, Slovenian migrants all over the world published about 500 books. If there are 350 thousands migrants i.e. one sixth of Slovenians outside Slovenia they should have written at least 3000 books in a hundred years. My arguments is again, that the Slovenian migrants were almost illiterate, escaping Austria, Italy or Slovenia because of dire misery or political intolerance.

The late Milena Brgoč from Melbourne, in her Bibliography of Slovenian publications in Australia, counted almost a hundred publications before 1996 but since then, Slovenes in Australia certainly wrote a few dozen more books.

Since Slovenia became independent in 1991 some of our memoirs have been published. It became obvious that with a heavy heart we needed to tell about our exile before God or before destiny demanded our exit. Here I remember principally the writings of Ljanko Urbančič: Srečanja, portreti, dejanja (Encounters, Portraits, Actions, 1990), of Marjan Persič: Na usodnem razpotju (At the fatal crossing, 2001). I can't ignore Cilka Zagar's novel Barbara or Ivan Kobal's Men of the Snowy Mountains and neither the memories of Ivanka Škof¹¹ Pod ognjem in pepelom (Under the fire and the ashes).

I would say however that our most active and best prose writer is Cilka Zagar, a teacher from Lightning Ridge. Her stories of Aborigines are beautiful, strong and true. Her novel Barbara has compelling and compassionate descriptions of ordinary people and events in the Kocevski Rog massacre after the war, that greatest stain on Slovenian contemporary history. I consider Cilka's political views though, to be slightly naïve and one-sided but still most interesting. And she is still writing.

Danijela Hliš also writes prose in English for Australian magazines and has published a bilingual collection of poems: Šepetanja –Whisper..

But our most mature poets and on a par with eminent Slovenian poets in the old land, are certainly Jože Žohar and Pavla Gruden from Sydney, authors of excellent poetry collections and editors of Svobodni razgovori – Free Conversations. Ivan Burnik Legiša from Adelaide can't be disregarded either, neither the late Peter Košak from Ararat.

Ivanka Škof should not be forgotten by the avstralski Slovenci, after all, together with the late Jože Čuješ from Sydney, she designed the first curriculum for the Slovenian Sunday schools, or clubs' schools.

We wrote principally, because we wanted to express our visions and tell our memories and experiences. Often we wrote because some things we had no one to tell to. It was a healing experience for us, a meditation with the numen in us.

And below I added two more of my early poems, written in English. These poems indicate my early and later attitude to Australia and my exile.

*The magic circle on the ocean
Unconscious rocks,
polished by the unending tides
and caressed by the winds,
sands lying for ages
in the bed of the rivers of mankind
was our existence in the middle of Europe
and then a sudden terrible storm
a treacherous tide
destroying tribes
and splitting nations apart
has forced us into a magic dance
where the devil was leading the pipes
and our coroboree
was in the middle of the Ocean of despair
from where we longed for a shore
and we prayed for a boat
to take us to this welcoming port,
to this haven of peace,
to terra Australis, still pure
though not quite immaculate.
We are here now, at peace at last
yet we anguish in our hearts
as we look across the seas
at those of our kind
who stayed in their old place
whom the storm has spared them
on their native soil and we ask ourselves,
will they succeed to build again
a community of equals stronger than before
a mighty castle built on love
which does not distinguish between
colours and creeds and race,*

*because we see from afar approaching
another cyclone
and wide and treacherous is the ocean
for those who are divided
by hatreds and ideologies.*

Contrasts

*And here under we are now,
at the brim of the world
after many wanderings, refugee camps
and interrogation lights.
It seemed at first that we have fallen
into a cobweb between giant and ugly stars
and so in our loneliness and despair
on strange foreign lands
we have thrown our anchor again
into the clouds of former lands.*

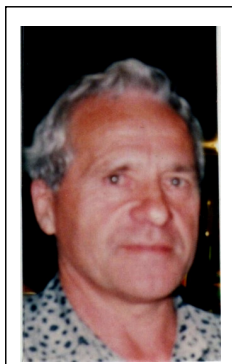
*As a vine transplanted
into a foreign soil
we could not at first
push our roots into this ground
or feel cool under the shade of the gum tree.*

*The sails of our heart
were longing for the old home
across many seas
for the shade of the linden tree.*

*But we realized as time went by
that our children,
they will establish their roots
and draw the juices of this new land,
becoming one entity with it -
across the wastness of the sandy dunes
they shall plough fresh rivers
teeming with life and for ages to come
they shall count the coming and going
of the southern cross.*

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Stefan Hribar



I was born on 26 192 1931 in Celje Slovenia. My mother Elizabeth worked as a domestic servant and could not take care of me so she put me in an orphanage in Ljubljana. I never knew who my father was. I guess I was too embarrassed to ever ask my mum who my father was. Later I learned that I had an older brother who was also put in an orphanage before me.

I am looking at mum's photos; I see a beautiful tall and slender girl with long curly blond hair. Sometimes I wonder what sort of life she had; she must have been unhappy to give away her babies; why didn't she marry and have a family? How and why did she die? Was she sad without her children? Did my father know about me at all? I guess I will never find the answers. Over seventy years ago life must have been very hard for a young unmarried mother. She did not have choices young mothers have these days.

I also treasure the photos of my friends because they are the reminders of me being young and having fun with them. The photos are the only

souvenirs from my youth and my home country.

I have one picture of myself which mum must have given to me. I am among other children but there is a cross on top of my head indicating which one am I.

An older peasant Janez Zugelj from a little village Dobravce in Dolenjska took me out of the orphanage when I was very young. I grew up with his family until I was fifteen. I called him dad and his wife mum but I was never really a son to them; I wasn't a part of the family; I knew that I was a hired hand, a servant. I worked on the fields and with pigs and cattle. They loaded big loads on my young back to carry home from the fields.

Other children knew that I was a servant boy so they called me names and tormented me. They teased me and pushed me around because I was poor and had nobody to protect me. I slept in a stable with the animals. My bed was over the sewage pit. Sometimes I slept in the corner of the room where Janez Zugelj slept with his wife. He was spitting on the floor all night and in the morning I had to clean that. Towards the end of my stay on the farm I shared a room with the farmer's grandson. They even let me eat at the table.

My whole childhood was miserable. I often wonder how I survived as a barefooted hungry boy during the cold winters. My feet were black from dirt. Everybody slapped me if I did something wrong or if I didn't do enough. Everybody was ordering me around and nobody had a kind word for me. There were no games, no rest, and no friends while I stayed with Zugeljs.

While working on the fields I often had to run into hiding when German planes were bombing us. Partisans sabotaged the train and Germans retaliated against our village. They burned all the houses and we escaped into the forest. We made a shelter from tree branches and stayed in it for the best part of a year until the nearby bishop offered us accommodation in his stable where we spent the rest of the war time with bishop's cattle. Zugeljs had another little house near the railway but it was used by Italians and Germans. After the war we moved into this house.

During the war I attended school very irregularly. School was far away and I had to feed the pigs and cows and work on the fields. We had to learn Italian while under Italian occupation.

My new parents had two grown up sons and a daughter of their own. One son was with partisans and the other was killed as a Home guard. It must have been terrible for Zugeljs seeing their sons fighting on the opposite sides. They were themselves poor peasants trying to survive.

Zugeljs had a woman servant; she was the most vicious person I ever met. She hated kids and I was terrified of her. I buried myself in the straw to hide from her but she came after me with the pitchfork and started poking me until I came out. She was a mean woman who never married or had children of her own.

Zugeljs sent me to church and I didn't mind that because the old priest was good to us during the war. When I was 15, however, the new young Chaplain replaced our priest. I saw women taking best foods to him and he threw much of it in the rubbish rather than offer it to us hungry children. He asked me at the confession if I had a girlfriend and what we were doing. I had no idea about girls; I was very embarrassed and started to hate the church. Later I met church people who helped refugees in Austria. Girls told me that they had to do favours for these men so they would speed their emigration.

After the war in 1946 Zugeljs received a letter saying that mum wanted me back; she found me through the Red Cross. When she came to take me I ran away in the forest to hide. They had police searching for me. I did not want to go with a stranger and leave the only family I ever knew. Mum found a place for me in Kreka Tito's institution near Tuzla where I became apprenticed as a fitter/turner. The school had about 300 students.

Mum's brother Rudi opened a bakery in Tuzla and mum also worked in Tuzla as a domestic help. Rudi was a nice enough, kind man; he had his own family and I only saw him a few times. I was never a part of his family. I have no contact with him or his family now.

I returned to Slovenia in 1949 and found a job in TAM car, truck and bus factory. I lived in a factory barracks and ate in the factory kitchen. I was hungry most of the time; there was food shortage and no bread to buy. My boss was a communist who had less training than I but I had to obey him. They asked me to join the party but I declined. I never wanted to be a member of any organisation. I like to be on my own.

Years later I visited the farm where I grew up but not because I liked it there; I just wanted to show them that I was fine, I had new shoes and fine clothes. I wanted them to know that I succeeded on my own. Of course the farmer's family were themselves poor and didn't show any excitement or happiness seeing me or my new clothes.

In 1951 I was called into the army.

Before I went to the army I visited mum; she worked as a domestic for a politician in Sarajevo. She had a flat next door to the minister she worked for so I had to go through the security procedure but once I was in the building I was allowed to stay with mum for a few days. I could not bring myself to call this woman mum because she was never a real mum to me. I felt embarrassed and frightened of her. I later heard that she was going with one of the security guards then; that's probably how she came to be shot with the pistol owned by the security officer.

I left my belongings with my aunt in Ljubljana and went to Osjek for military training. After two months in the army I got a letter that my mother died; she was 47. I wasn't allowed to go to her funeral because I wasn't sworn in yet. The swearing in comes after three months of military training. I never found out why and how mum died. I do not know where her grave is. Mum's sister in Ljubljana also died a tragic death soon after mum. Nobody ever explained to me about them.

The military training was terrible; we had to slide and walk and crawl in the dust and mud and rain. I was wet, dirty and tired in the evening but I was expected to be clean and ready the next morning. Once I lost my uniform buttons while sliding in the mud. I asked the officer where I could get new buttons and he told me to figure it out for myself. The only way I could get them was by stealing from another soldier. I had to do extra duties like cleaning toilets because I lost my buttons. We were ordered to go to sleep for a short time after lunch but as soon as I would fall asleep there was a call to assemble outside.

Later they sent us in groups to work on the railways, bridges and tunnels. Every Sunday afternoon we had a couple of hours free to go to town.

Uncle Rudi told me that I have a half-brother Tone so I went to see him when I came out of the army. Tone never came looking for me although he was five years older than I. Mum never knew where Tone lived; only Rudi knew. I lived with my aunt Toncka in Ljubljana at the time but they never met Tone either. He lived with Kos family; they were kind people and had no children of their own. When I next saw him he was married with two children of his own and had his own house. Before I escaped I went to see him for the last time and he had 5 children.

When I returned from the army in 1952 I found a job as a turner fitter at Ljubljana railway station. I have pleasant memories from the time I spent in Ljubljana. I often went swimming in Sava River with my new work friends. We also went socialising, drinking and dancing. We joined a folklore dancing group Tine Rozanc and we travelled all over Slovenia performing national dances. That was the best time in my life; that's how I met my first love Ivanka, who was also a dancer. Being with Ivanka made me happy for the first time. We had a son Bojan. Unfortunately Ivanka found somebody else to love. He was a student and had a car so she left me.

The railway station was my real education. I watched people kissing and hugging and saying hello and goodbye. I dreamed of one day saying goodbye to everything I knew until then; I wanted to start a new life. When Ivanka left me I decided to escape.

A friend told me that he knew the way over the Austrian border because he was a border guard while in the army. We tried to escape over the mountains but we got lost and became separated. It was a foggy, snowy night and I fell down a slope; luckily a tree stopped me from falling deep into the crevasse; I almost froze to death hanging onto that tree. I tried to make a fire to warm myself but everything was wet. I had a can of sardines and the oil from the can helped me make a small fire so I survived. In the morning I decided to return home. As I boarded a train in Jesenice a policeman tapped me on the shoulder. We know everything about you, he said. I believed that they caught my friend and he told them but that was just their way of interrogating me. The judge asked if I will ever try again and I said yes I will try until I succeed. He told me that he will give me only one month jail because I had no criminal record but if I ever came before him again I will get five years jail.

Ivanka came to see me in jail and she laughed at me for trying to escape. Her boyfriend left her so we started going together again. I would not marry Ivanka because she betrayed me once and I could not trust her again. All the time I knew that one day soon I would escape. Ivanka later married an Italian widower who had three children and they lived like a big family. I met her every time I returned home and I spent time with Bojan. He is married now and he named his son Stefan after me. He also has a daughter Francesca. My son Ashley recently went to meet Bojan but they could not communicate much because Bojan does not speak English. Ashley does not speak Slovenian but he is a Slovenian citizen now.

When I came out of jail I got back my job and my room so I stayed there for seven months. A friend then offered to help me escape by train. I had to give him all my belongings as a payment for his help. He knew the train driver's wagon had a hole under the table just big enough for me to squeeze through into the underbelly of the train which was full of sooth, oil and dust. I waited for the train driver to go with his books to the office and while he was there I squeezed in. I laid there for 16 hours until the train came to Munich. When everybody left the train I came out and tried to clean myself in the toilet. A civilian policeman tapped me on the shoulder and asked for papers. I did not understand German then but I understood when he said: Straight back to Tito. I was terrified.

I was sent back to Salzburg jail in Austria for a couple of weeks. Austrians were sending back many Slovenians especially if they found out that they had a criminal record, sickness or dependant children at home.

From the jail they put me in a refugee camp and I was allowed to go out to look for work. I registered to immigrate either to Canada or Germany. After five months in 1957 I was allowed to go to Germany. I had to sign a contract to work for eighteen months in the Essen coal mine. During that time my half brother wrote to me; he asked me to send him a motorbike. He probably thought that once you are in Germany you can pick money off the street. I did not write back and we lost contact since then.

In Germany I met my best friend Franc Narobe. While others spent their time and money drinking we stayed in the barracks and played chess.

After my contract expired I could go where I pleased. I wanted to go as far from Europe as possible so Franc and I decided to register for Australia.

On 6May59 we arrived on a ship to Fremantle and then by train to Bonegilla. On the ship I met Vinko Jug. Vinko knew Martin Turk who was a friend of a Slovenian boss Paul on the Snowy Mountains project. He arranged for us to do shift work in the Tatangara tunnel. I lived with other Snowy workers in the barracks. It was a boring, miserable existence. Occasionally we went to the pictures in Cooma or to the pub in Adaminaby. I brought a camera and projector with me from Germany and started making photographs; this hobby made life a bit more bearable. I worked and saved hard. I had to be strong and resist bad company if I wanted to save and become independent. Many boys went to Cooma or Sydney on pay days to spend their money on drinks and girls but I wanted to save my money.

Vinko Jug went to visit relations in Mildura. They told him about opal mining in Andamooka. Franc Plajbas bought a car and four of us, Vinko Jug, Franc Narobe, Franc Plajbas and I decided to try our luck on opal. Anything seemed better than labouring in the dangerous tunnel. Little did I know that opal would become my life. The wages on the Snowy were good and we saved enough money for this new venture. We went to Adelaide to buy picks and shovels, ropes and candles and off we went. We stopped at Andamooka Station and started to make a tent thinking that we reached our destination but it was just a farm 27 miles before Andamooka and it was called Andamooka Station. A farmer came with a dog and a gun to ask what we were doing. After a lot of explaining he let us sleep there for the night.

Andamooka was a barren, isolated little settlement of about thirty miners. There were Aborigines specking for opal in the dug out dirt, there were about ten Czech miners and some Germans. The four of us were the first Slovenians.

It was hot; there was no shade and no water. Eventually we got a cistern coming so we could buy water to fill our tanks.

We started digging shafts by hand. It was a backbreaking job and soon we became disillusioned, exhausted and rather sad. I was thinking of what to do when I got an idea: Boys we saved money on Snowy why don't we buy a compressor and jack picks.

We towed the compressor on a dusty dirt road from Adelaide and on the way a wheel flashed past us and flew into the scrub. We realised it was a wheel from our new compressor. The studs were not tightened properly.

Ours was the first compressor on the opal field. We registered a claim each in German Gully and began sinking. Frank and I worked together and Vinko and Franc worked nearby. We had no idea really what we were looking for. A Czech fellow Vladimir came every day to check what we were doing. He was an old miner so he told us what to look for and what to do. One day he saw that we reached the opal level and told us to stop. In the dirt he picked opal chips. I yelled to Frank to stop the compressor but he did not hear me so I switched it off. He came up, Vinko and Frank joined us and we were very excited looking at opal for the first time. We made it; we were enormously excited and happy. The news of our find spread like a wild fire.

An older Czech miner introduced himself as Petnushak; he said that we uncovered a very rich vein of opal. He warned us that the buyers would cheat us because we knew nothing about opal. He also offered to clean and class our opal before selling. I wasn't too keen but others liked this friendly kind Petnushak and so Petnushak became our partner. This was our biggest mistake. We let him work my claim where we bottomed on opal; we started sinking new shafts. We found a slip going through most of our claims carrying pockets of opal. Petnushak cleaned the opal on a hand grinder. We sold the first lot to opal buyer Jim Collins for 6400 pounds. We split the money and felt very rich. You could buy a beautiful house for that money in those days. We competed who will dig more opals but once found, opals seemed to vanish. We realised that we had valuable stones so I became

suspicious. Where are other bags of rough opal? We have been warned by other miners not to trust Petnushak but he seemed so kind and honest; he bought drinks for us in the pub. Soon we found out the reason why he kept us drinking. His friend Skrusny was ratting in our diggings while Petnushak kept us in the pub.

Petnushak began complaining about his health and he made several trips to Adelaide 'to see a doctor'. Petnushak paid sixty pounds to a man to take him to Adelaide. The man warned us that Petnushak was stealing our opal and selling it in Adelaide. Petnushak even pulled a gun on him threatening to shoot him if he told us. This man also told us about Petnushak's friend who had a nightclub where they stayed. Petnushak opened the suitcase full of opal and said: I don't ever have to work again. I have my boys working for me and they are getting opal every day. When the night club owner saw the opal he arranged for some girls to entertain Petnushak; in the meantime he stole most of the opal. The driver had an argument with Petnushak and returned to Andamooka alone. We rushed to Adelaide and learned that Petnushak put the rest of the opal in a bank vault. Being young and inexperienced we had no idea of how to get our opal back. We took him to court and that cost us 1700 pounds but before the case came up Petnushak sold most of the opal. After all the trouble we only got 2000 pounds from him. We were disillusioned and our partnership ended. We sold the claims and divided the money equally.

In 1961 Vinko Jug went to Europe for a holiday. Franc Narobe and I went to Sydney and rented a flat in Woollahra near Slovenian religious centre where young Slovenian migrants met. The church had a good kitchen; we also had music and dances. We played games like Italian bocce.

After an operation I started working in Sydney and I put a deposit on an old house in Homebush. After a few months I leased the house to Dobrsek and left with Slovenian friends Vinko Jug, Franc Narobe and Martin Turk for Lightning Ridge opal fields.

Lightning Ridge in 1961 could hardly be called a town because it had no proper buildings and no facilities. You couldn't get in and out of town when it rained because the dirt roads were slippery and boggy; the place was a dump; there was a shack in the middle where you could buy or order a few supplies. Later they built a Diggers rest hotel where this only shack store was. There was no bore bath or town water but one could buy water from a cistern in town.

We took two 44 gallon drums of water twice a week and we pitched our tents in Coocrain. There were four other Slovenians Less, Slavko Franc and Rajko mining at Coocrain at the time. We cooked on open fire under the tree. We started digging but found mainly green and blue opal. Everybody wanted red on black then. We dumped buckets of inferior green and blue opal which could bring us a fortune today. Later other miners found lots of red on black a level lower in the same claims we mined.

Opal dealer Harold Hodges had two trams which were converted into the only motel accommodation in town. Whenever someone found opal in those days they would invite the whole town for a BBQ and although we did not know anybody we joined them.

When I returned to Sydney Dobrsek told me that his German wife had a sister Elizabeth in Germany. Elizabeth came to Sydney and we married in a civil ceremony. I became a conventional husband going to work and tending the garden and doing everything other husbands do in the city. And all the time I wanted to be back in the wilderness of the opal fields. I longed for the open spaces, for the talks and laughter of friends around evening fires, for the peace of colourful sunsets. I missed the open spaces and friendly camaraderie of opal fields. I was lost in the city; I became a nobody among strangers. I missed the desert and my friends with whom I used to share my life. I knew everybody in Andamooka and I missed the place itself. As time passed I overcame the disappointment of being cheated and nice memories of Andamooka surfaced more and more often. I asked Elizabeth to come with me to Andamooka but she did not like to leave behind the comforts of city life. I sold the house in 1963 and then Elizabeth came with me to Andamooka. I felt free again and among friends. I started buying, cutting and selling opal. I bought a drill with my friends Gabrsek and Plajbas. I found in Andamooka what I was looking for but Elizabeth was less happy every day. For her there was nowhere to go and nothing to see. One day she said: I am not going to waste my

life in this desert. I am going back to Germany. If you are not coming with me I will go alone. I paid her a ticket and took her to the boat and I never saw her again. The next day I applied for the divorce.

A few years later I met a drunk slumped over the bar. It was my worst enemy Petnushak. I wanted to smash a bottle on his head but my friends stopped me. He wasn't worth it. He was just a drunken rag. He called to me: You don't talk to me anymore, you silly so and so. Let's forget what happened so long ago. Come and buy me a drink. I bought him a whisky because I wanted to hear what really happened so long ago. How much did you really get from our partnership, I asked. I didn't keep the books but I reckon I got from 60 to 70 thousand pounds. And how much did your mate get mining in our claim at night. About 30000, said Petnushak slurring his words. He later returned to Czechoslovakia and I believe died there.

I tried mining in many places but I only found bits of opal. To survive I began cutting opal half a day and mining the other half. Eventually I began buying small parcels to make doublets and triplets. As my business grew I had to go to Coober Pedy to buy opal so I could fill my orders.

As a turner fitter I was used to working with machines and metals but I learned to cut opal by experimenting. Opal industry was new and there was no one to teach me. Opal was cut solid if it was thick enough; when the colour was thin I made doublets, i.e. I glued a thin layer of colour on the dark patch which is natural opal silica without colour. Opal is fragile and can be damaged by heat or impact. In 1963 I heard that some gem stones like sapphires had a top protection made of crystal quarts which is a harder material. I bought some quarts and shaped a cover for opal doublet. That's how I made the first triplet which is opal made of three layers. I went to Percy Marks, a buyer in Sydney, and sold him some solids, some doublets and some of my first triplets. He asked me for my business card but I had none so I gave him my address. A few months later I got a letter from a solicitor because Percy sued me. I had no idea that he previously patented the triplet making. I had to pay a fine of 700 pounds. I had no idea about the law and my English was poor but an opal dealer Bruno Mauser helped me.

Eventually everybody in Andamooka started making triplets and they became very popular all over the world. Solid milky red opal was cheap at the time so it was more profitable to make triplets. From a two inch milky red opal you could slice 120 slides to make triplets. Every solid opal is unique so it is hard to find a match for pairs and sets of jewellery but when you slice it the layers are the same or very similar; they are suitable for matching sets of jewellery like bracelets, earrings etc. The colour of triplets is much brighter and more beautiful than solid milky opal because the cabochon top makes the colour reflect from different angles. The quarts also protected the opal. At the beginning I shaped every cabochon quarts dome for every triplet but soon Japan produced calibrated ready made quarts tops. By 1965 opal triplets could be found in most jewellery shops all over the world. The tops were no longer made from quarts but from ordinary glass. I bought my first glass tops in Germany. Glass is not as strong as quartz. I bought white glass from the company that makes eye lenses. I used it for those triplets that were individual free form but good quality.

Percy did not renew his triplet making patent because he could not stop everybody.

A Hungarian, Joe Bilke and his brothers invented the first opal slicing machine. Actually Bilke took a marble slicing machine and adapted it for opal. The cutting process was slow but there was a minimal loss of opal through cutting. Bilke offered to sell me a couple of his machines at 3500 pounds each but he said that I can not see the machine until I paid for it. I insisted on seeing it first but he said that everybody could copy it if they saw it. A German friend eventually helped me make a machine but I was already too late to make big money because the world was flooded with triplets.

Bilke had a lapidary shop and workshop. They sliced opal and made triplets secretly day and night. They made three to four thousand triplets a week.

There is not much opal left suitable for triplets. There is also less demand for triplets. Since making triplets is more labour intensive than doublets and solids it is also less profitable. I do not make triplets any more. I rather create jewellery from cheaper pieces of opal.

In 1963 a Slovenian priest Dr Mikula used to come to visit us every year in Andamooka. He said that he is visiting every Slovenian wherever they live in Australia. He collected donations for a Slovenian religious monthly magazine Misli. He said that if I had no money I could pay with opal. He returned every year.

In 1972 I moved my business to Adelaide and bought a house there. I was a regular customer at the nearby chemist shop owned by Leo, a Serb friend. Ute worked there as a pharmacy apprentice. Ute and I married in 1972. Our son Julian was born in 1973 and Ashley in 1975. Ute came with her parents from Germany when she was four years old but we spoke German in our home all the time. I did not teach my sons Slovenian because I was away a lot and they stayed with Ute.

I planned to buy a plane because I travelled to other opal and gold fields. I began travelling to Asia and Europe to sell opal and jewellery. I travelled to Andamooka and Queensland opal fields to buy rough opal. I had flying lessons but I had a few bad experiences flying with others because of dust storms. I decided that a four-wheel drive is more reliable.

Ute was complaining that I spent too much time with opals and that I did not take the family out and spend time with them. She wanted me to sell the opal and invest in real estate but I couldn't part with my colourful gems. They became my life. Every stone is unique; every gem has the power to enchant someone. Japanese like them green, Europeans prefer them red; the brightest and colourful are rarer and more precious; some are known by name. No two opals are the same and one is more beautiful than the other.

Ute became interested in alternative medicine and she studied at university. Later she opened her own clinic with homeopathic and herbal healing; she is also a pharmacist.

In 1985 Ute left Ashley a note that she will be away for some time. She went to Sri Lanka on business but she never returned. She found somebody else. She left the boys with me. After three months I received a letter from a lawyer saying that she wanted a divorce. By 1986 we sold the house by auction and settled outside the court. I paid for boys' schooling but they lived with their mother.

After the divorce Hans, a German opal dealer offered for me to stay in his house because he was going to move to Gold Coast. Before he left he met a woman and both stayed with me in his home. Hans knew all my opals well. He and I travelled together doing business around the world. I had a parcel of about 500 carats of top quality opal which wasn't for sale.

I travelled to Lightning Ridge frequently and eventually in 1990 I bought a block of land here. I became a wheeler dealer in opal.

Before I left Hans's place to go to Lightning Ridge, I put the parcels of good opal into a safe deposit box in the bank. On each bag I wrote the colour of the opal and its weight. I did not check the bags closely at the time I deposited them in the bank or when I took them out. A friend told me later that Hans told him that he has a good buyer for top quality opal. He asked me if I still have my good stones. I became suspicious and went to check my parcels. I discovered that the opal in my plastic bags was not my opal. It was of much poorer quality. It was of the same weight and similar colour but much inferior to the opal I deposited. I was in shock. Only Hans was capable and had opportunity to swap it while I lived in his house and travelled on business. I confronted Hans but he acted offended and denied it. I could do nothing. I was so angry that I wanted to kill him.

Ute and I sometimes visited a Dutch clairvoyant who was very talented. She was helping police in criminal investigations. She told us that one of our sons was exceptionally talented. She charged 80 pounds a visit and I saw her about once a year. I did not tell her anything; I just listened to her information.

After Hans stole my opals I went to her; I did not tell her about my problem but as soon as I sat down she asked me: how much do you think he stole from you? I said one hundred fifty thousand pounds. She said: It was much more. But don't worry, he will get his. What goes around comes around. During the next year Hans's wife divorced him and took most of his money. She threatened to tell the taxation office about his dealings if he did not pay up.

I used to socialise while I had a family. I was the foundation member of the Slovenian club in Adelaide and we socialised there every weekend. I know most Slovenians in Adelaide but I lost contact. Their club has good programs for their children; they have schools and games and concerts and family celebrations.

We were competing with friends who will have a better house; we went for picnics and dinners but since my divorce I live alone. I don't care anymore.

Lightning Ridge is opal business; there is no social life, no closeness, no connection; people come and go and you never hear from them again. Everybody is here to make a quick buck and people are cheating each other all the time. I would like to go somewhere else but I can't decide where. I would go away but then I would have to start from scratch again. Anyway I would be alone and a stranger wherever I went. I am lonely here and I will be lonely elsewhere. I could buy a beautiful home but I don't need it.

I get tired of life. I feel that life does not interest me anymore. Everything seems futile. Sometimes I feel like: Why do I have to keep going?

I do not like going to people's houses because they might not like it. Some people like to meet new people but it is hard for me to begin liking and trusting new people. They are likely to ask for favours and money if they get too close.

I don't go out much. I have nothing in common with the drunks in the club. Most proved to be dishonest users and I don't need them. I know the history of many people; I know how their friendships and relationships were broken because of opal. I live in my workshop; I cook for myself; nobody complains about my cooking or about my lifestyle.

My boys tell me to enjoy myself and spend my money but I find more joy in work than in spending money. I grew up to work and save so spending is new to me. I created what I have from nothing and I believe that everybody should do the same. If you really want to do something you will find a way of doing it. Maybe necessity really is a mother of invention. Maybe I wouldn't achieve everything I achieved if I could rely on the family to do things for me. I would not be as strong as I am.

I don't like children just sitting and waiting to inherit from their parents. Life means developing skills and trying your best.

Once a week I like to go pistol shooting. 35 years ago I got robbed in Adelaide a few times so I applied for a gun licence. I was told that I had to join the shooter's club and since then I really enjoy this sport.

I watch the news and read the paper but films and stories don't interest me. I am happiest when I am making jewellery and cut gem stones.

I am never homesick because I never had a home; I am not even homesick for Slovenia because I lived in misery there. Most people were miserable during and after the war but most of them had families to share their misery with. I was on my own.

Times have changed and Slovenia prospered; now illegitimate children are as welcome as those who have two parents. Slovenians at home also have everything they want and need but they live their lives and I am not a part of that.

People often tell me that I have to teach them about opal business but I don't want to. Let them learn the hard way like I had to. Once I showed a lady what I do and on the way out she just said: Now I know everything. She never said: thank you. On the street she said to me: I know why you don't want to share your business secrets. You are scared that I would take over your business. People are nasty like that. I don't trust anyone. I stay on my own, I prefer being on my own. I don't want to bother anyone and I don't like anyone to bother me.

If I had another life I would spend it dealing with Queensland opal. It is more stable and easier to shape and mould. I could have bought a trailer load of Queensland boulder when people did not know much about it but now it is almost as expensive as black opal.

I always wanted to create something special. I did not have much formal education but I became expert in things I like to do. Opal industry is only a small part of a huge jewellery industry. As a fitter turner I was used to working with metals so I started working with gold and silver. I created my own ways of doing things. I read magazines to enrich my own ideas as I create master pieces from gold and silver. It takes me a long time to fashion a piece of jewellery and then I have casts made to fit the stones in.

Many people all over the world steal other people's ideas. When I sell a piece of jewellery I made someone can easily take out the stone and have more casts made of the piece. That happens in every other area of trade, of course, and nothing much can be done about it. I make individual setting for special free form stones.

There are always dangers of being cheated or robbed in opal business. If partners don't cheat you, opal cutters and dealers will. You are also always in danger carrying money and gemstones when you are doing business. I travelled all over the world but I could never relax and have fun because at the back of my mind were always opals. Sometimes I left them with friends, sometimes I put them in the lockers or safe deposit boxes but I was never completely sure that they were safe. I was often in Frankfurt and there are crooks at the airport and at the railway stations waiting for the next victim. I understand many languages and I heard them talking about their plans. They had no idea that I could understand them.

I'd like to go for a real holiday and enjoy myself but there is always something holding me back. If I could only get rid of all my property and pack my bag. Belongings I love became my great burden; I want to unload and be free.

On 26 March 06 I went to Andamooka and stayed there in a motel with people I knew for many years. Heather and her boyfriend are running the motel and the post office. I hid two bags of opal behind a shower curtain before I went for dinner in a restaurant next door. There are cameras on the entrance and inside the motel so it seemed pretty safe because I was right there next to my room. I did not even check my bags of opal while I was there but when I returned home I had a shock. One bag had a lock on it and it wasn't touched but there was opal missing from the other bag. They stole over thirty thousand dollars worth of opal. What could I do? I had no way of proving what they did. There were cameras but they must have used them to monitor my movements so they could steal while I was in the restaurant. I was so upset that I could not sleep for weeks. I tried to think of how I could get my opal back but there is no way. I tried to ring Andamooka police but I could not even get anyone to answer. I was going mad about it.

I heard later that Heather and her boyfriend stole other people's money and opal. They knew what I was carrying; they knew all the people that stayed with them.

It is hard for me to trust anyone. Perhaps it is best if you own nothing; at least you can sleep in peace.

I only work now because I enjoy creating special pieces; I do not need to make money anymore so I can afford to be creative and spend time on things I like. I am carving opal. Creating these pieces helps me pass the time and keeps me sane.

I wanted to teach my sons to take over my business but they are not interested.

About twenty years ago a Swiss man and a Frenchman discovered the formula for chemically growing opal. They made perfect stones a little harder than opal. It is hard to tell them apart from the natural opal. They sold their secret to Japan under the name Gilson. Now many people tried to grow their opal but nobody else has been really successful. Lately they are selling a plastic version of synthetic opal which can be used for triplets or inlays. Gilson opal is sold from two to one thousand dollars per gram but this plastic version goes from two to twelve dollars a gram I used some of their materials and it is magnificent. Most people could be fooled into believing that they have real opal while they only have plastic. When you are a reputable businessman you have to tell the buyer exactly what you are selling. There are fines of ten thousand if you sell something else for

opal. Nobody can fool me though about any kind of opal. I have seen it all and experimented with everything.

There used to be quite a lot of matrix material in Andamooka; it can be very beautiful and often much nicer than real opal at the same price. I bought a lot of that material and treated it. Black matrix is the most expensive and does not need treatment but other varieties do. There is a soft porous matrix that can be treated in a few hours and there is a hard variety that takes weeks. It seems that every matrix dealer has a different recipe for treating matrix. Generally it is cooked in sulphur acid and sugar so the material becomes black and the colour stands out. Some people even treated it in used gear box oil.

Ashley who is 29 is a musician; he has piano concerts and travels around. He is also a composer and music teacher.

Julian who is 31 is a public servant interested in computers. He got a Slovenian passport and is thinking of working in Europe.

I was never interested in politics and religion. I am not saying that I don't believe in God but there are too many religions and people fighting each other for their God. I read the Bible but it makes me sick to read about people asking God to help them kill their neighbours. It has always been like that, people saying that they are fighting for their God when they were really fighting for themselves.

Ivan Cimerman among Slovenian Opal Prospectors in the Heart of Australia

Man likes to look for eternity in moments: into the deepest corner of his soul he encloses a precious memory and into velvet padded little boxes he closes a ruby, a sapphire, or an opal – something rare, unique, precious. It is easier to fight the desert of everyday life if in the moments of hardest distress, poverty, and loneliness something permanently beautiful shines through the darkness. I've come across various searchers and collectors in my life, but none like the opal prospectors I met last July in Coober Pedy 852 kilometres or an eleven-hour bus ride from Adelaide.

Janez Ritoc, president of the Adelaide Slovenian Club gave me the names of some Slovenian prospectors, hardened veterans in search of luck; travellers and adventurers who came to this Australian desert.

My travelling companion, theatre director Zvone Šedlbauer set out on our journey to find his brother Boris, whom he did not see for nine years.

The devilish, industrious, modest and tough tribe of Slovenians can be found everywhere, and as if possessed by the devil, they have proved themselves in the hardest workplaces of the world: the gold mines of Colorado, Klondike and Alaska, U. S. A., in the coal mines of Aumetz, Merlebach and Sallaumines in France, in the coal mines of Westphalia and Ruhr region in Germany, in Belgium, Netherlands and God knows where else!

Now here in this wild dynamic place where people from all continents have come, people of all kinds-vagabonds, adventurers, rebels, clear poetic souls, the restless and impoverished, the granite strong, drunkards, cowards, and those who just pop up in these places, get scared of the sand and of the heat that can reach fifty degrees Centigrade in summer, and continue on around the world when the illusion lets them down. But not our people! Our people are like the cobras and scorpions who adapt to the severest desert conditions!

The bus is an excellent transcontinental, equipped with television, toilet and reclining seats. At the front of the bus is a lattice bumper of thick logs which reaches to the driver's nose _ to protect the bus from kangaroos!

Bright morning breaks over a landscape covered with sparse bushes; twisted gum tree trunks, young eucalyptus, thorny bushes, "mulga" and thistles of all sorts in the colour of freshly-baked bricks. It was a long journey, from seven in the evening to six the next morning. Coober Pedy is only an intermediate stop: Stuart's Highway continues on to Aboriginal holy mountain Uluru, fantastically shaped mountain chain Olgas, Mataranka Volcanic Thermal Pool; where we have been rowing in canoes, deep in Natimuk Gorge. We later enjoyed Kakadu National Park with all kinds of tropic animals; feeding crocodiles in East Alligator River; passing through Aboriginal Arnhem Land, on to Darwin, the main Australian town on the north.

Coober Pedy – the Wild West of Australia

This mining town grew suddenly when in 1915 young Willie Hutchinson found extraordinarily beautiful pieces of precious stone, "floaters", on the surface southwest of the settlement. The news spread like lightning around the world, and newcomers of all kinds crowded this place without trees, water, or valleys, no streams like those by which the American Yankees in their Wild West built cottages, stables and houses and staked out pasture land for their cattle. Each of the men who arrived here had to forget every comfort civilization offered in the cities.

Zvone Šedlbauer and I share the same destination although different impulses drive us. Tone came to Australia as a director with Slovenian actors to direct Tone Partljič's satirical play *My father*, Kulak

of Socialism, and now he is on his way to see his brother. I am on my way as a journalist and editor, searching for real stories, about adventurous Slovenian "janezes", opal miners.

Boris Šedlbauer arrived in a car bearing the sign "Explosives", symbol of opal mining. I looked for the information office or the police station, to ask where Slovenian miners Tone Predikaka from Ptujška gora, Avrelij Krnac from the village of Marežice above Izola and Albin Oblak from Škofije live. Boris showed me to a dugout where Tone slept. It was six o'clock in the morning! The settlement wakes up slowly. I climb the hill behind the houses. The dusty main street, Hutchinson Street, drags across the town. The most important buildings stand by it: the self-service grocery, the post office, a church which is dug underground _ only a small steeple and a cross are above ground _ and the Opal Cave, a hotel where one can spend the night and get breakfast for \$78. The heart of the settlement are the fifteen Opal Shops and jewellery articles made of opals of all kinds, cheaper and more expensive ones, the same as one can find in Adelaide, Sydney or Melbourne: broaches with opals, rings with opals, bracelets, necklaces. But the cunning desert lions don't shop here: they dig their own opals. The brick red hill all drilled with holes is the heart of a former opal-rich mine. Here you can see how hard working opal miner pioneers of Coober Pedy lived seventy or eighty years ago.

Working conditions didn't change much! Just the newest machines took over previous hand working.

There are restaurants for tourist and watering holes for miners from all over the world: the Italo-Australian Miners Club, the Greek Community Hall, the Opal Inn Dinning Room and Lounge, the Desert Café. Cheaper than the Opal cave are the Underground Hotel, the underground Umoona Mine, and Radeka's Dugout Motel, mostly used by students

About 6 km out of town you can visit an extraordinary dugout, changed to a museum and a flat, named CROCODILE HARRY'S NEST. It looks like an enormous molehill, all drilled through by opal tunnels. In the warmest "sleeping room" waits a bed, surrounded by women's' souvenirs and picturesque drawings with names and dates of the visitors on the walls. Harry Von Blumenthal made this museum with exhibits from his former life, and another, surrealist too. This adventurer was once a famous crocodile hunter and movie actor. His dugout is a place which is known as a source of positive energy, peace and contemplation. Young girls from all over the world are roaming to this underground museum as pilgrims. They stay for a day or two, meditate and pray for their souls which are then more or less cured of bad influences of the civilization.

Slovenian pilgrim just can't imagine a winter, Christmas and New Year _ without any snow! But here we are, near the Capricorn, Slovenian people, born at the feet of Alps in Middle Europe _ under the Southern Cross, in the warmth of shining stars! Is here a real danger for us, born as snow flakes _ to be melted!? We were lucky to arrive in the middle of winter on July 14th when winter is such that temperature in Coober Pedy reaches 26 degrees centigrade. In Australia you can see snow only in the Snowy Mountains near Canberra where many of Slovenian opal miners who live here now, once worked on the tunnels, dams and roads. They were building the biggest hydroelectric Australian system, named: Snowy Mountains Project in the years 1949 _ 1974. Slovenian writer Ivan Kobal wrote about it in a book Snowy Mountains Project, Cradle of a New Australia.

When the sandy desert reaches up to 50 degrees Centigrade in the summer, it is best to live in a dugout, a flat earth cabin dug underground into a hill where they once dug for opals. Tone, Avrelij, and Albin live in dugouts; only Boris, the fourth partner of the group of opal miners, doesn't.

In the yard of Tone Predikaka's dugout stands an old caravan, and early in the morning I shake hands with Miklavž Reven from Hotedršica, near Logatec. He is a welder by profession and he was a construction worker on Australian dams and roads; he also worked on railway bridges, high upon in the Andi mountain chain in Chile. Now he would like to return to the village where he was born. But! Living his bohemian life, he hasn't saved enough money so he is now searching for the richest opal vein in his whole life. Good luck, Miklavž! But how will you prove to authorities that you are Slovenian by origin, when you return home? Miklavž is a war child; his father worked in Germany in 1939, when Hitler attacked Poland. His birth certificate was lost.

There are no records kept in Australia about one's working life. When you reach a certain age, you are entitled to a pension regardless of how many years you worked. And this pension is the same for everyone unless people saved and can support themselves.

Geologists claim that opals were formed during the tertiary period around 70 million years ago. Opal is a silicate formation similar in chemical composition to crystals, containing six to ten percent water (H₂O), 2.5% Aluminium Oxide (AL₂O₃), 0.9% Calcium Oxide, 0.4% Sodium Oxide (Na₂O), 0.3% Hematite – Iron, 0.19% Titanium Dioxide (TiO₂), and some other elements. The richer and deeper the play of an opal's colour is, the more valuable it is. The prospectors from Coober Pedy find the most precious opals 30 meters deep. The opal fields spread over an area of 640 square kilometres. We drive among the hills of dug and drilled silicate rubble that seem like huge molehills.

Boris's car jumps wildly on the rocks and holes in spite of its double springs. Greyish-red fine dust is everywhere. Mobile cranes rise here and there above the dull plains with their boilers and long pipes through which waste rubble and sand come out from the depths of the opal pits. In the pits the tank-like steel-jawed diggers roar. A huge bulldozer was digging, driving and loading, making opal mullock hills. Warning metal sheet with: DANGER - LOOSE GROUND - KEEP OUT didn't keep me away from fantastic photo motives! We stopped by a 90 centimetre wide shaft above which stands an iron frame with a steel rope, down which the men descend every day. Helmet on my head, spoke between my legs, I descend into the depths, landing some fifteen meters down in a horizontal shaft. The shaft is neatly, almost symmetrically dug out in layers. At the front end of the shaft sits the "head worker" on a machine specially made for digging, with spiral steel jaw that bites deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth. The shaft is some four to five meters high and perhaps three and occasionally four meters wide. Fresh air is pushed into the pit by compressor. Care must be taken that the layers aren't under-dug, for the driver of the machine can be buried. The driver, Albin Oblak, sits on this small "tank" with caterpillar tracks. The "tank" must dig itself firmly into the ground so that the jaw can grab a new bite. There are Albin Oblak, Tone Predikaka, and Avrelij Krnac. The fourth member of the partnership is our guide, Boris Šedlbauer, who is looking after his brother and me. We would like to help too, but this is not a place for amateurs! The machine drones, the air circulates through vertical shafts drilled to the surface. We approach the jaws that grab for a bluish-violet opal vein hiding under the innumerable layers of silicate sandstone. Albin slows down the machine and waits. Through the dust the strong beams from the flashlights shows they have dug into a vein! We hold our breath: Dreams, realized dreams! But men were cooler than visitors. They check the opals falling in chunks from their thousands and thousands of years-old bed. They bring a small can where other opals glitter already. I take a rough and unpolished, glittering blue-violet-gold rock covered with mud in my hand. And I talk to this glittering stone: So, you are the one who causes happiness and tragedy, murders, unfaithfulness, and silent, unexpected joy! Albin Oblak, who is responsible for cleaning and sorting, will take the stones home. Everything is veiled in great secrecy, and there is a silent agreement among miners not to tell anyone else about one's own finds! Opals attract thieves. Many have been caught by the police and there have been shootings too! There is a sacred "love" connecting miners with opals and danger; there is lust for wealth that will fulfil all their dreams. There is also an evergreen fear: 'Will some gang rob me and steal my precious stones? The fear and hope!

We are pulled into the bright day, my eyes sore from the light and the silent, mysterious lustre. Not far from us on a mullock heap kneels a group of six Aborigines noodling for opals. Dirty but with glowing black eyes they rummage out their daily bread from the waste materials of the miners. Those who don't have enough money for "real" opal mining seave the dirt on the opal mullocks.

Tone Predikaka from Ptujška Gora, Štajerska Region, Slovenia travelled the distances of Europe and Australia until he landed in Coober Pedy. Born before the Second World War, he was hardly old enough to become a soldier:

He tells about his war: In 1945 Yugoslavia was full of Chetniks from Serbia and Ustashi from Croatia, who did not want to join partisans and Tito. They wanted independent states of their own; they did not want to be a part of Federal association consisting of different Jugoslavs republics.

We were ordered to clean out the country of Germans and any quislings. Our commander ordered us: Don't dump any prisoners of war on my back, have done with them yourselves! Whoever isn't our ally, a Russian, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a partisan, and is armed, kill him yourselves!

It was on May 9th when we March ed into Ljubljana victorious and beautiful girls covered us with flowers and kisses. We were the liberators! Slovenian flags were everywhere! Oton Župančič spoke from the balcony of the old University building in Ljubljana. Girls plied us with drinks, crowds gathered, wild and ready to celebrate. Everyone was having a ball, everyone was dancing except me! My superiors placed me on guard at Liberation Square. Beautiful girls tried to seduce me but I had to stand guard with my machine gun, my mistress. I've come from the front where I've been sleeping with this mistress; she saved me and my war comrades several times.

Jesus Christ! People were simply lifting me up! I was twenty, for God's sake. Hey, tell me, are Ljubljana girls and women still as beautiful as they were in 1945?

Yes, Tone, even more beautiful, because today they are not frightened or hungry like they were during the Italian and German occupation.

I have been in Australia for 35 years. I helped my daughter Dragica to open a bar at Ptujška Gora; now I'm getting ready to retire.

Avrelij Krmac is from the village Marežice, above Izola. This is my home, says Avrelij, shoving me around the large dugout where he lives alone with his parrot and his opals. When we open a shaft, we must first prepare a hole wide enough to lower the digging machine. Only then can we start digging horizontally. A new opal vein usually runs in a 30 to 40 centimetres thick layer; the special colour of the soil betrays it. Between 1974 and 1979 times were very dangerous in Coober Pedy. Those were the times when rich veins of opals of a special kind and high quality were found in the 17 Mile area. In one vein only one prevailing colour in opal can be found or else multi-coloured ones of different quality and value. Normally a vein is one and a half centimetres thick, a richer one more, even five or eight centimetres. Coober Pedy is famous for milky opal with green, violet, blue and red iridescence. Andamooka Opal Fields, about 230 kilometres southeast of here, is known for bright, transparent opals that glow red, blue, violet on lighter backgrounds. Lightning Ridge in New South Wales, 750 kilometres from Sydney, is famous for its black opals, the most precious in the world. Black opal radiates strong colours, shining from the black base.

I came here twenty-four years ago. When I was digging my flat into the hill I came across opals for which I got about \$1.700. My friends and I only noticed them when we were clearing out the rubble! They were a particularly valuable kind, too!

The five large rooms belonging to this lone wolf opal hunter, a real underground palace, fill me with admiration for this bachelor from Primorska who is said to have emigrated because of a disappointment in love. An Italian girl Mirella told him: You are a very handsome man, and I love you very much. But you are so poor that I can't marry you.

Avrelij decided to become rich as quick as possible. He became an opal miner. When I visited him 15 years later he was still a bachelor with a new parrot, still digging for a rich vein. Just his hair became grey and the two shining sparks in his eyes disappeared.

You've got to be tough to survive on opal fields, says Avrelij. Some adventurers give up in days, others in weeks and months. To start mining you need money for fuel, maintenance and machines. I arrived with seven thousand pounds in my pocket, this was an enormous sum thirty-four years ago; I joined a good team! We bought a compressor and a digger. The settlement was just starting to develop. Three small shops were open, there was no inn here; we had to order supplies in the store every week. Each of us did the shopping and cooking for one week in turn. We tried several times to invite good hearted women to marry one of us and cook for all of us. When potential brides saw this dusty place where snakes, scorpions and dingos live they escaped by first bus back to Adelaide.

Albin Oblak from Škofije, near Slovenian-Italian Border is the only one of our guys in Coober Pedy who is married (to Audrey, an Australian). His pleasant dugout is large and neatly arranged.

We dug it with our own hands, says Albin. Other lucky diggers travelled to Europe to spend easy come easy go money but that's not for us! We would like to return to Adelaide, buy a little house and live there.

Albin shows me around their dugout of 110 square meters. Huge piles of silicate opal-bearing layers of earth are above us. In the bedroom there is a ventilation shaft covered outside like a chimney so that rain doesn't get into it:

When I was preparing this land, I dug a hole in the yard for an outhouse and saw chocolate-coloured earth the drill started throwing at my feet. Of course we widened the hole, tells Albin. An opal vein! My home is standing on opals! These mines were abandoned a long time ago, but not even the most experienced prospectors can precisely determine how capriciously the earth layers were broken up millions of years ago when the opals were formed. So, we followed the vein and dug out \$27,000 worth of precious stones! You see, there's a tree here now and flowers grow around it. They are the love of my wife Audrey who is a great support to me, the pillar of our home.

Albin cooks the steaks while Audrey makes a salad. In this friendly, cool dugout I feel that Slovenian vein runs all over the big globe with men who are brave, who take chances and dare to challenge fate. I wish to bring this veins home, enriched with experience, skill and knowledge, to work in our mines and to find opals in the hearts of their people at home. In their home villages the roofs are sinking. Fertile Slovenian land, together with abandoned houses, which for centuries belonged to their ancestors, waits for them. Poor and exhausted old peasants are selling for a poor price to strangers and tourists swarming like ravens from whole Europe!

Albin starts telling his story:

I left my homeland in 1955. There were five children in my family. I became a joiner. My sister and I remained alone in the world; all the others died. When I was twenty-one, I was working in Koper and I didn't have a real home, so I decided to find my fortune in the world. I headed to Trieste, to the immigration department, handed them my application, and got permission to go to Australia.

How that tore my heart! After almost one month's travelling by a ship, we came to our Promised Land waiting with her wonders, demanding and lonely, surrounded by vast oceans. I arrived in the Northern Territory and when I got fed up with joinery, I headed for Tennant Creek. There I worked as a carpenter for fifteen years. I was in a high, really high position – on the roofs, Albin smiles. It was hard and dangerous work in wind, heat and rain. I was sick of the constant danger of roofing work. We were colourful company of Croats, Serbs, Italians, Greeks, and others. In Tennant Creek was one of the biggest gold mines. In house construction I earned about twenty-two pounds a week, and my food and flat were free, supplied by the mining company we worked for. In March 1971 I arrived in Coober Pedy where I found some other Slovenians, strong industrious guys. There were Tone Predikaka, Avrelij Krmac, Ivan Karnel, Ivan Parapat, Slavko Jevšnik, Danilo Puš, Matin Turk, and others. Before my arrival I had sold my house in Tennant Creek so I could start with my own share at machine digging. I bought a hill and dug my own dugout in my spare time. I worked in the mine and usually came home around four or five. My wife and me, we live for each other, we don't have children. In this room I clean and sort out the opals that the four of our team found. We've got to trust each other and stick together. You can't do anything by yourself, and you can't even think of working without the machine and enough capital to start.



Ivan Cimerman with Joze and Cilka Zagar

After having heard all those stories I asked myself: "What keeps about 100 families in Coober Pedy together so long at this edge of the Desert? Is it only a chance for lucky ones to find exceptional opals, and become rich overnight? Or is there something deeper, much warmer human bond, lasting long time after they return closer to more comfortable settlements or cities? Yes, this lonely desert place offers something warm and human. Something you can't find anymore in big cities where business rules; where you get lost in the traffic of humanity; where

unknown neighbours live in strange fortresses; blocks made of steel, concrete and glass ; where is so difficult to find a real friend, or devoted wife. Speed, competition and success rule the cities! In Coober Pedy you can still find old fashioned friendships and honest neighbours, who will help you without being paid. Families live on the opal fields, and often women mine with their husbands. Children are quick at finding opal on the mullock heaps. Girls often work the mine with their fathers, and groups of young women form partnerships amongst themselves.

Strong and hard working women who live and work on the opal fields take care of everything while their husbands are digging underground. They help with their children's schooling, drive hundreds of kilometres for supplies, which they can't find in Coober Pedy, cook and clean – and still they are full of optimism and humour.

Men stick together; they share information about opal and mining. Albinos Promised Land demands from new coming opal hunter's strength, courage and pioneers' enthusiasm. Due to successful opal miners the fame of opal rainbow extends all over the world.

Mirko Cuderman's Journey from OREHOVLJE to MT. MEE

I was the oldest of there children born on 11.9 19940 in a small village Orehovlje belonging to the parish Predoslje with a beautiful church of St. Kxist. Our parish was a self-sufficient community with primary producers and trades people operating from their homes. I finished primary school before I became apprenticed as a fitter turner. Apprentices were the lowest rang of the workforce in my day; I had to work hard and I got paid about 1000 dinars a month when a pair of shoes was about 5000.

Our parish is famous because nearby is a beautiful castle Brdo; the place is so beautiful that Tito claimed it as one of his holiday places. He had the most beautiful places all through Yugoslavia in constant readiness for his visit. Tito was supposed to be the representative of the working class but he enjoyed the wealth beyond the imagination of working class; he had his own hunting lodges, lakeside castles, and beach residences with servants ready at anymoment to grant his every wish.

People resented Tito's red engine roaring to Brdo because even church bells had to remain silent while he was in residence.

My parents were pious, honest, hardworking people; they did not talk about politics, because they were afraid of us children repeating their opinions in school but I knew that they were very much hurt by unjust communist regime. My brother and I once tore down placards with communist propaganda and we caused a lot of trouble for our family. People at home lived in fear. We realized that there were no prospects of a better future for us within Yugoslavia so we started planning our escape. My brother Nace was only 14 and I was 18. I would soon be recruited for the army and I did not want to go. Nace joined a youth mountaineering group to make himself familiar with the Austrian border which ran along the mountain peaks. In April 1959 we went to explore the area near the border.

Nace was naturally adventurous and used to the mountains but I was more timid, cautious type. When we first tried to escape I chose the wrong path lower down the slope and we had to return. Next time we came to Celovec railway station and boarded the train to Salzburg but police took us into the refugee camp where they interrogated us for two weeks before sending us home. We were too young and not experienced enough; we had no idea what to say to get the political asylum. Once back in Slovenia police put us in chains; they took us to Brestanica where we had to spend one month in goal. This whole experiment served us right because during our stay in the refugee camp we learned a lot about migration processes.

Next time I tried it on my own. Nace came with me to the mountain STOL and then he returned. Nace wrote to me recalling those frightening but exciting days of our escape. After I escaped the police came with a search warrant. They gave Nace a suspended sentence because he was under aged. Nace was later working in Berlin for over 15 years as a mechanical engineer and he now built a house at home in Sencur. I also have ten years younger sister Paula living in Brnik; she is married and has three sons. Her son Uros renovated our home.

In Celovec railway station I carefully bought a ticket to Salzburg. I had a plastic bag of personal effects because I intended to swim across the Salco River from Austria to Germany. My aim was to get to Nierenberg as I was told that in those days only American camp in Nuremberg was accepting refugees. Unfortunately due to heavy rain the river seemed too dangerous so I had to return to Halle and then I walked to Schulenburg bei Berchtengaden and then with the bus to Bad Reichenhall and from there by train to Munich. In the park there I met a friendly girl who suggested that I find accommodation in a student's boarding house. I had no passport so the police took me to the watch house. After two weeks of interrogation they returned me to Slovenia. On the way home I escaped from the train and was hiding on different trains to Beljak; from there I took a train towards Italian border which I intended to cross on foot. An old lady directed me to the police station in Trbiz. It was late so they told me to come the next day but I begged them to take me because I was starved and

tired. My last meal was two days ago in a Munich jail. They put me in a dark cell and I slept until at nine next mornings a young Slovenian girl greeted me in Slovenian. She was an interpreter.

They fed me and then interrogated me before they sent me to Udine and later to Trieste. I did not tell them that I came through Austria because I was scared that they would return me. I was in Trieste refugee camp Sann Sabot from 17th August until on 24th November 1959 I got a political asylum. Everybody in the camp lived in fear of being sent back. When they sent me to the camp in Napoli I finally felt free.

Life in the camp Forigrotta in Naples was quite carefree. I often went to town with my friends. We even climbed Mt Vesuvius but after walking the whole day we failed to conquer it. We had to return from ¾ of the way up because we had no more time. On December 7 1959 they sent me to Latina where my emigration process began. On December 22 I went to Australian immigration commission and got my visa on February 8. From Latina my friends and I often travelled to Rome to sell blood. We heard that Italians paid well to blood donors only you had to bargain with them. In my group I spoke English best so we went to American hospital where we were offered good price for our blood. I got enough money to buy myself a cardboard suitcase to take to Australia. In the shop I also noticed a large baby doll which I knew my mother really wanted to decorate her bed with. You could only buy this doll in Italy so I bought it and posted it to her. Everything was bought with my blood money. We have all been happy with our trade although we knew that Italians cheated us and took more blood than they paid for.

While in Rome we visited Slovenian priest Dr. Robic Pavel who often visited us in the camp. I was surprised that he lived in a small modest flat. He was on the way out so he told us to cook ourselves something for lunch; he was going to join us soon. All three of us used our cooking skills to prepare the potato meal we used to cook at home. I had to cook this meal when I came from school so my parents had dinner ready when they returned from the fields. The priest praised our meal but when we told him that we sold our blood he scolded us.

That is prostitution, he said. You sold your body. We promised not to do it again. We remembered a huge jar which we had to fill with blood.

The priest Dr. Robic Pavel was very generous; out of his own poverty he distributed goods among Slovenians who were in a greater need. In this priest I first saw in practice the faith in God. This priest patiently explained our faith and the suffering of Slovenian nation due to communist regime. At the time I was enthusiastic about the poet Prezihov Lovrenc and I contradicted the priest with the words of the poet and with the words of communist propaganda we learned at school. The priest took no offence and I am still grateful to him for that. He had connections in Rome and he sent us there to see religious relics like the part of the original cross on which Jesus was crucified, the crown made of thorns, nails and the spear that pierced Jesus' heart. Other groups had their guides explaining everything to them and when we told them who sent us they gave us a Slovenian guide who explained everything to us for free. We walked all over Rome and saw much more than ordinary tourists. With us was Jozе Zuzek who knew Rome well and we never got lost. Jozе had good memory and he followed tram lines on the crossings.

Food was very bad in Latina camp. My friend bricklayer Lojze Markic often found work on building sites. Once he bought me a piece of spec and I am still grateful for that gift. In our camp were also Slavko Mrak and Cvetko Kabaj who got a job as a camp policeman; eventually we all came to Melbourne. I arrived to Melbourne on May 29 1960 on the ship Sydney. Dr Robic told me to find the Slovenian priest Fr Bazilij and I also recommended my friends to him. In the port of Melbourne I had a pleasant surprise from the Commonwealth Bank; it was a Welcome letter written in Slovenian.

From Melbourne we travelled by train to Bonegilla. I liked everything about Bonegilla; the food was good, there was freedom, lovely scenery, I still remember the magpies singing.

I met a Croatian priest who found a good Croatian family that gave me board; they also found me a job in Armitage Ware where I stayed for three years

I first bought a Buick 1936 car which I sold after a few months and bought a new 1960 Morris Major. Dutch co-worker Cornelius guaranteed my loan. I soon found new accommodation with an English family Ken in Jenny Howard in Fawkner so I could learn English; from there I moved to Brunswick and Essendon and finally to Pascoe Vale to Car Hartman family. Mrs. Veronica Car also washed and cooked for me. All this time I was in contact with boys from Slovenian Baraga home where I spent most weekends. In this Slovenian company I met Anica Molan and we soon became engaged and on November 16. 1963 Fr Bazilij married us in St Patrick's cathedral in Melbourne. Anica comes from a good Slovenian family. Her mother Anica and father Vinko with her brothers Edvard, Vinko and Andrej were very much involved in Slovenian community in Melbourne. Just before our marriage I paid off my car so I entered a marriage union without debt, but with not much money.

After marriage we rented a flat in Glenroy Thurana Street. I also changed my job because I wanted to return to my trade as a fitter and turner locksmith. I started in Hilton Hosiery as a maintenance fitter. I later worked in Ford factory in Broadmeadows. I was in charge of the afternoon shift when they brought for repair the car of the American president L.B. Johnson because demonstrators splashed it with red paint.

Before Anica and I decided to build ourselves a home we decided to see what it was like in Queensland. We took with us two years old son Mirko and six months old son Vilko. On the way we stopped in Sydney where Fr Bernard gave us the address of Stanko Plaznik and Janez Primožič. It rained all the way but as soon as we reached Queensland border the sunshine greeted us. We considered that a good omen. In Queensland I started to work in Bulimba where I repaired small fishing boats but soon I became a fitter/turner in Shut Upton Water and resource Commission; later I worked for Martin Engineering on the big lathe. With the help of Stanko Plaznik I got our first flat in Moorooka; soon we bought two and a half acre of land with an unfinished house in Moggil where our third son Bernard was born.

With the help of Alojz Klekar I got a job on construction of the Bougainville mine in 1970. I had to stay and work there for at least six months to get a paid return ticket. The pay was excellent with full board included so that I could send all my earnings home to Anica. In these six months I earned enough to pay off the house in Moggil. On my return we sold the place and bought 20 acres in Park Ridge, Andrew Road and another old house which we sold and invested the money in the new house in Andrew Rd. In 1981 we sold that house and bought the land on Mt. Mee where we built a house called MIRANI; the name has the first three letters from our names Mirko and Anica. I found work on a saw-mill as a boiler attendant in a nearby town Caboolture. I worked there until my retirement.

Now I have time to reflect on my past and my present. I am very happy about my decision to immigrate to Australia. I am repeating this every day: Thank God that I am in this good, kind, sunny country where I enjoy the freedom and kindness; where all citizens have the same rights and a chance to aspire to prosper and live free. I really thank God I am in Australia. The good attitude towards us migrants and the kindness of Australians impressed me from the beginning. In Europe we Slovenians were often treated as inferior foreigners. Here we are all equal; I specially appreciate the fact that there are no obvious class distinctions between the rich and the poor. My first employer did not even allow me to call him Mister but just Bill. It was hard for me to get used to that because I respected him; he came every day to work in clean white shirt with a tie and an overcoat but he came to talk with me. I was brought up to respect my superiors. I also had a fear of superiors. Here in Australia it isn't unusual for highly educated, rich people with high positions to socialise with simple workers either at work or in the church, hotels or in the public without making themselves look more important. Humility and simplicity seem to have priority and people appreciate common sense and sincerity; that is why I really like Australia. I think it is stupid to judge people according to their wealth, position, and nationality. I value the Truth although I am still learning about its real value.

All my life I was observing the injustices everywhere. When I first came to Australia there was a lot of talk about the injustices in South America and South Africa and South Vietnam. There was little known or said about the victims of communism. I felt that ignoring the suffering of nations under

communist dictatorship was ignoring the Truth; nobody wanted to know about the millions suffering and dying as victims of communism. Slowly I came to realisation that wherever the injustices occurred there were witnesses to testify to the Truth. God who is the Truth makes sure there are witnesses. One way or another Truth comes out and prevails. Nothing remains hidden forever. Knowing that God is Truth and that he will finally judge the good and the bad, this is the greatest consolation for me. Knowing that, I am no longer anxious about the events around me; knowing that God will judge us all, gives me hope while I am looking for real life virtues and values. I really have nothing much to boast about but although I have no high education or knowledge God's hand guided me all the days of my life and I never lacked anything.

I was always satisfied with my new country Australia. In 1968 I lost my driving licence because I lost too many points and I rebelled against the police and politics but after my Slovenian holidays in 1979 I liberated myself from this animosity. On my return from Frankfurt I felt so happy to see the Qantas plane. I was disappointed with European way of life; arrogance of people, high prices and fear of authorities made me long to be back in Australia. Although I am very happy in Australia in my heart I still feel that I am Slovenian. I say that even to those Australians who disagree with me. The commandment: Respect your mother and father in order to live happily also mean to me to respect the nation I was born into. My belief is to be loyal Australian with the heart of the country from which I arrived.

Straight away in the first year in Queensland I became involved in Slovenian association work and was elected president. That was the start of hard physical and mental work for Slovenian community in Queensland for me and my wife Anica. This work required many sacrifices and much self denial, persistence and determination. We finished the work we started. On our arrival to Queensland the Slovenian Association Planinka only had 800 pounds; they had no committee. The association progressed but the divisions appeared; they were caused mainly by the communist regime at home. Some believed that not agreeing with the regime meant that you are against your nation. My stand within the association was always to be independent and reject the cooperation or interference of Yugoslav Embassy which wanted to infiltrate our clubs; they provided bribes like films and visits from singing groups. They intentionally split Slovenian communities all over Australia.

In 1969 Anica organised a drama group to perform on the stage. They prepared Finžgar drama: The ruins of life, which was very successful. We prepared the constitution for our association so we could purchase the land for the club. In the following years, when I was leading the committee we bought the land, community land called hribček, built the clubhouse hall with bocce playground next to it and our social life progressed satisfactorily despite the political divisions. We were united in the belief and hope that we are working for the good of our people and our nation. We firmly believed that the Truth and Goodness will prevail and that gave us hope and strength to continue with very demanding work. Communism was our common enemy and we were determined to be positive in our approach and work.

Anica and I with our three young sons dedicated all our spare time to Slovenian association; we

were members of the committee for 16 years and involved for many years in the community radio 4EB in Brisbane as committee members and as radio programmers. Anica made over 200 Slovenian one hour weekly programs. For many years I published the community newsletter Glas Planinke.

We tried to present Slovenia to our children in the most positive light. They are not burdened with the political traumas we had to endure. They learned Slovenian language



Cilka and Joze Zagar visiting Anica and Mirko Cuderman in their lovely home.

and participated as children in Slovenian festivities but now they feel fully integrated into Australian society and I am happy with that. I leave my children and their future in God's hands.

Slovenian Community here is at present still going strong. Most of us are retired and the future is in God's hand. We have done what we believed was our duty to fellowman, our neighbours and our country.

Our home at Mt Mee bears the best and closest resemblance of Slovenia countryside. It is a place of natural beauty and peaceful nature. Because of all those privileges that we enjoy in this country Australia, I am constantly reminding myself of God's goodness to us.

Romana Favier Zorzut

From Goriska Brda-The Hills of Gorica to the hills of Bright



Much has been written about my life and work. Different people defined me the way they came to know me and the way my art touched them. One finds what one looks for in life. I also painted life as I found it; I painted what touched my soul; I looked for beauty and expressed it in my oils. I always liked drawing and painting; I was also fortunate that I met many artists who encouraged me and showed me the way.

Once a Dutch painter said to me: it is difficult to decide when the painting is finished. You can overwork a painting so that you might lose the depth of the message in the painting.

It is the same with life. I have to move on with ever new challenges; it isn't good for me to dwell on the past because the future has so much to offer. Once someone said about my painting: it is definitely not licked over. He meant that it expressed the natural beauty. I am not licked over yet either, I still feel that I have much to offer. I put my soul and my emotions into my paintings; I rather like to paint cheerful and beautiful and forget the dark and the sinister. On arrival to Australia I felt sad looking at desolate drought stricken country but gradually I found the hidden beauty in the peaceful vastness of the continent. Now my landscapes of Australian outback are as colourful and bold as those of my home country.

During Mother Teresa's visit in the 1970's there was an SBS program Scoop featuring 18 snapshots of the most interesting Australian and overseas Personality of the Year. I was honoured to be included with other great, important people representing a small country such as Slovenia. I am always mindful of the fact that we, Slovenian migrants, are all ambassadors for Slovenia so I was happy to represent Slovenia in a positive light.

I am happy with my life; I am grateful for my loving family and for my many wonderful friends. I enjoy painting pictures and I hope that people who buy my art enjoy it. It is simply wonderful to get paid for something I love doing. I do not paint the likeness of things but how I feel and think about them.

I look after myself because when I am well and happy I am a better person for those around me. I always try to do my best but I never allow anyone to intimidate me.

I was born on 26.4 1930 in Goriska Brda. I am Slovenian from the fertile valley in Central Europe that produces an abundance of fruit and wine. My birthplace is so beautiful that Austria, Slovenia and Italy fought for it through the history. When I was born it was under Italy; after WWII it became part of Yugoslavia and now it is a part of an independent Slovenia. Regardless of who ruled us I always knew that I am Slovenian.

My region has its own personality; it is half an hour from the Adriatic Sea and surrounded by the Dolomite Mountains. My paintings represent my father's property, vineyards and fruit orchards and the area around the Adriatic Sea and the Julian Alps. At my Exhibition at the Crown Casino people purchasing my painting were impressed thinking it was Tuscany, so my ambition was to show them that Goriska Brda had more to offer than Tuscany.

The biggest problem for me was that I didn't belong to the 3 countries: Yugoslavia, Austria or Italy, which ruled my homeland. I specially resented Italy, which I was born under. I was deeply offended by Italians, that as a Slovenian, we were "**Schiavi**" or "Slavi", which meant to me that we were worthless; Italians never gave us recognition for our intelligence. We were always repressed as

powerless slaves and had to serve the ignorant masters. Nevertheless, we depended on Italians for employment. That is why I searched for a different future and chose Australia.

I owe my life and success to the 6000 population of Goriska Brda, for giving me the strength and encouragement to go into the world with lots of pride and honesty.

I finally received my recognition from Italians with an Honorary Award through the Spoleto Melbourne Festival of 3 Worlds in 1986. The Founder/Artistic Director, Gian Carlo Menotti, a successful opera composer gave encouragement to artists and helped develop their careers.

My mother died of tuberculosis when I was two years old so my Nona, dad's mother, took care of me. As I was an only child without a mother, everybody was protective and supporting towards me; I felt quite precious and well loved. Perhaps I grew strong and have an optimistic view of life because of the love I received in those first years of my life. I was always confident and had high self-esteem.

They told me that mum was a very pretty, elegant and artistic lady who learned dressmaking in Gorica and specialised in Paris for a year and then started her own dress making school in Vedrijan (Brda). I hope I inherited some of her talents.

My father was a gentle and wise man; he grew fruit and grapes. The sunny hills around my home are known for good wines and delicious fruit.

My father remarried when I was eight and since then my stepmother took care of me. I never felt loved by my stepmother the way my Nona loved me. Maybe my stepmother and I both competed for dad's attention.

I had to attend Italian school because our part of Slovenia was under Italy at the time. There were placards everywhere saying: we only speak Italian here. I only learned Slovenian from my family. We felt discriminated against; Slovenians had to do the hardest jobs for the lowest wages. In 1942 Italians forced dad into the Mussolini's army. He soon became American prisoner of war in Corsica.

During the war only women with children and old people were left in our village. I remember the time when white Russians came with their wagons and they camped on the church ground. We heard that the soldiers raped young girls so the church keeper woman took about half a dozen girls into the church for protection. Under the altar was an opening where the bones of dead priests used to be buried. The church keeper made us crawl inside and she lowered the confessional box over the entrance. We had to stay there without drink or food for three days until the Russians left.

When dad returned in 1945 he and his friends often discussed politics and music as they played chess. In 1946 I left home to live with my aunt in Goricia. I became a waitress and I also began a nursing course.

In 1947 our part of Primorska became a part of Yugoslavia. I remember my father saying: We had Italian gypsies lording over us now we have Yugoslav gypsies. It was the best when we were under Austria.

I remained In Goricia which was under Italy. My father's home and farm was now in Yugoslavia but we never felt that we had anything in common with Yugoslavs. Communist government nationalised our land but my father and his friends challenged the government saying: why should we work for the government co-op while our own land lies bare and abandoned. He won and eventually got the land back. I learned Slovenian in the church and with my family. Dad's brother was an orchestra conductor in Ljubljana.

Once I illegally crossed the Italian Slovenian border across the fields to visit my father. Yugoslavs caught me but they could not keep me because I had never lived in Yugoslavia. At the same time I had no Italian citizenship. I became a displaced person so I joined an immigration organisation for displaced persons. When I went for a check up in Trieste a lady tapped me on the shoulder. That's how I met Ada who later married Cvetko Falez. Ada was a few years older than I and she looked after me like a mother. We remained friends for the rest of our lives.

I was nearly 21 when they offered me a chance to emigrate to either Canada or Australia. Dad's friends were going to Australia so I thought that it would be safest to go with them. Australian

government paid my passage on the ship Farsi that brought me to Australia on 26.4 19951 which was my twenty-first birthday.

In Bonegilla they offered us girls a chance to train as nurses. Ada chose to go to Canberra but I chose to learn English and nursing. They provided the room and board for me; I had everything I needed but I lived under strict supervision of the hospital matron. I received one pound a month spending money. I trained for three years.

That's where I met Mrs Favier who was recovering from hernia operation. She must have liked me because she invited me to her home. She had eight children and maybe she hoped that I would take one of her sons off her hands. Faviors were a gentle, cultured, softly spoken family; there was a piano in the house and singing and classical music. I felt very much at home with this family. I met Frank Favier. I am grateful that the fate brought us together because that was the beginning of a very happy life-long partnership. I have been very fortunate also to become a part of Frank's family. Frank's brother Monsignor Favier married us in 1953. They built a Favier House in Canberra to honour Monsignor Favier's memory.

Frank's family had a good standing in the community. They have French ancestry but they never acted as if they would think less of me because I was Slovenian. I might have been the first of Slovenian migrants to marry an Australian. I never regretted it because Frank became not only my husband and the father of my children but also my best friend. He writes poetry for me, he is a singer and a writer. Frank is my rock and he supports all my work. He is very artistic and capable at whatever he does. He can tend our large garden or cook a delicious feast; he provided well for our family and supported our endeavours.

Frank had a column in a Catholic Advocate before he joined his brother in a delicatessen shop. They employed four people and did well enough so I could stay home with our daughters. Occasionally I did some part time nursing but I was a homemaker and an artist first. In 1966 Frank became a councillor for the Eltham shire. He represented Eltham to its sister shire Montmorency in Paris; when he went to Paris we used this opportunity to visit my family. Frank loved my country and my people; he even learned some Slovenian in the three months we stayed there. Frank loves my Slovenia and Slovenian people. This is a poem he wrote for me:

Brda's Treasure

TO ROMANA BY FRANK FAVIER

Was it fate? When he saw that face

Eyes that spoke of an inner place!

A glimmer of a smile, he did but see

Carriage erect, of proudness be

In that crowded city, her steps did glide

It's said "her home was Briski pride"

It's flowing guard the laughing Soca

She, and Brda, have much to offer

Tales of seductive, curving valleys green

Soft and graceful, in their silken sheen

Shaped from natures caress did clothe

A form so slender, yet composed

Gentle movements, the winds do stir

As perfumed fragrances excite the air

Slim tapered spines lead mysteriously above

Exploring this is a treasure trove

Breasted fruits are there to taste

As wine and earth meet in one embrace

Sip these nectars, rare supreme

Vivacious, Paradise, she is so serene

While in Slovenia people told me that they liked me because I never changed. I bought a snuff box for my grandmother. She could not see anymore but she touched my hair and said: You came from America but you don't even have a hat. I was as I have always been.

Frank worked in the film industry as a script writer and producer for twenty years. He is a gentle unassuming man who like me finds beauty in everything around him. We entertained many interesting and knowledgeable people. Sometimes I wished I was better educated but I was fortunate to learn instead from the wise people around me. I am grateful that many of these fine people became my friends.

Our first daughter is named Marisa because she was such a beautiful baby; we named our second daughter Noella because she was born before Christmas. They were both beautiful and talented girls. They grew in a protected safe family environment where people appreciated them. They learned to trust people but maybe we did not prepare them well for the world that is sometimes treacherous and deceitful. I feel that they did not find happiness in their relationships and that they did not find partners they deserved.

I was a wife and mother first until our daughters grew up but when they left home I became an artist first. There just were not enough hours in a day to do everything I wanted for everybody else.

It has been the saddest time of my life in 2001 when our Noella became sick; I painted to overcome my sadness; maybe in my despair I needed to create hope and vision on canvas. I also sold my best works to pay off the mortgage on her house because she could no longer work. We were devastated when Noella died at the age of 39 leaving two teenaged sons. We felt betrayed and disappointed that after Noella's death we also lost the closeness with our grandsons. Although we made a great financial contribution towards their home we feel that Noella's husband does not welcome us into his home and into the lives of our two grandsons.

I feel sad that my daughters did not find the same happiness I did.

I always had everything I needed; I never dreamed of being rich but I never lacked anything. I was always healthy and in control of my life. After Noella's death we moved from Melbourne to Bright because this place is the closest to what I had at home in Goriska Brda. It is my little Europe with colourful seasons, vineyards and orchards. We have autumn festivals when our many trees change colour and make me feel more at home. Nature always provided an intimacy and comfort for me. I always searched for a place where I could lay down my defences and enjoy the intimacy, harmony and wholesomeness of life away from the buzz of the city.

After we moved to Bright I needed my work to overcome the sadness and to express my feelings and thoughts. I completely immersed myself in painting. People enjoyed and praised my work. They told me that I sold it too cheaply but I wanted it to go out of my studio and make people happy. I believe in doing my best and not to worry about what people say. Art was always my friend. It was there for me when I was homesick and when I was sad. It gave me hope, it paid my bills, and it helped me overcome the unpleasant times.

A famous Polish artist Jablonski once said to me: now you know what it means to put your name on the wall; it takes great courage to do so.

Art gave me courage.

In Australia I also liked to be a part of a Slovenian community although it hasn't always been easy; I found it hard to share Slovenian phrases, slang and humour because I grew **up** under Italy.

Once a Slovenian in Sydney said to me: you are wasting your time having exhibitions in Slovenian clubs because these people will think that your paintings are just smudges of colour. I said that I appreciate all criticism. Sometimes I wish I spoke better Slovenian but people generally appreciate me for who I am. When I had an exhibition in Slovenia I spoke in my home dialect and people told me how happy they were that I never forgot where I came from. Many of the village girls went to Italy as domestic workers and they changed their speech and behaviour. I had exhibitions in Slovenians clubs all over Australia; I contributed a painting for every Slovenian club house so a part of me lives with all our people here. Many Slovenian homes also have at least one of my paintings. My paintings compliment many Private Collections, Galleries and Museums all over the world.

When I worked in the Italian nursing home I met many Slovenians there. I spoke to Fr Bazilij about them. I also reported when one of them died. I told Father Bazilij how Italian nursing homes operated financially, how they got permits and what categories of care they provided. They had independent units for couples, they had supervised accommodation and then they had terminal section. When patients become terminal they need 24 hour care. The government financed half and the patients provided half of the payment. Italians also had to make initial payment of 5000 dollars which was later increased to 10000. Father Bazilij wanted to build a Slovenian nursing home, Mother Romana's home-Slovenian Hostel for the aged at the time. He always felt responsible for the needs of Slovenians in Australia. I suggested that he build the home at the Eltham Slovenian club because the children could attend Slovenian classes their parents could come dancing and socialising at the same time as visiting the older members of the family. My idea was to bring Slovenians together. Fr Bazilij said that Eltham would be too far for him to travel to visit the sick and the dying. He built Romana home in Kew. I was concerned that the home was on a busy road where inpatients are not allowed to go out because it is too dangerous. They are not allowed to lock the doors so the nurses have to watch them very carefully. Mother Romana's nursing home could not provide terminal care at the time. In the last stages Slovenians had to look elsewhere for a place. I told Fr Bazilij that the pension simply won't cover the expenses. He said that he could not ask Slovenians for contribution because they usually transferred their assets to their children before they came into the nursing home.

I am not a member of any club but I believe that it would be nice to have a place for all Slovenians somewhere outside the city; perhaps they should sell all the clubs and buy one beautiful, peaceful property out in the country.

I am enormously proud of our people and their achievements in Australia. I am also proud of Slovenia and our people at home.

I sometimes have the impression that Slovenian leaders in Australia think that they are better Slovenians because they escaped from the Yugoslav communist regime but I always feel that I deserted my people and my country when they needed me most to resist the system. I admire those that stayed and nurtured our nation and made it possible for Slovenia to grow and prosper. They brought up and nurtured the young generation of Slovenians who made Slovenia prosperous and kept the Slovenian spirit alive. If we all left Slovenia in protest against communism we would have lost our identity and our country. I believe that we should not isolate ourselves from Slovenians at home. We escaped from communism but they had to find a way to survive within the system, they had to fight and challenge the system for the benefit of us all. They took the brunt of the political regime and still remained patriotic Slovenians.

Communism was bad for economics; it did not allow people to prosper and get ahead; their idea and their aim was equality. Of course those in power became greedy and wanted more all the time. They could not live what they preached. They might have had good intentions but the power corrupted them. People always want to push ahead. Still Yugoslav system wasn't all bad; it promoted art and culture, it offered education and advancement to everybody, it allowed people to become what they were capable of becoming; it provided health care and employment for everyone.

I feel that by escaping we migrants made Slovenia poorer, weaker and more vulnerable. I was happy and excited when Slovenia became an independent country. My daughter Noella was in Slovenia at the time and she said: I have never seen any people as united as Slovenians have been at that time. Noella wrote a poem which she published and put to music. I can't imagine how a young girl growing up in Australia could capture my thoughts and feelings so well.

New Ground by Noella Favier.

I came miles from the other side
In hope for a new ground
I worked hard and I was bold
But nothing turned to gold
It was written no men are alike
I know you know I'm different
And you were here
A long time before me
Men shouldn't leave their given land
Only to be a stranger
What life am I to lead?
In a half way life of memories
I have tried and I have learned
I must I must return
Return to where people understand
That I am no lesser man.

The new system allows Slovenians to compete with each other and they again became greedy. Capitalism made some very rich while the weaker ones barely survive. I suppose there is not one perfect system because we people are never perfect. It is the same everywhere.

I say that perhaps at the time I left Slovenia there wasn't enough room for us all there but in my heart I still know that I was selfish in leaving my home and people.

My father was 84 years old in 1988; he was sick and alone on the farm. I went back home to care for him and the farm for over 1 ½ years. In the meantime, I painted 42 churches in the region 12cm x 20cm in size that impressed me with all the differences in architecture and spiritual feeling for the history of Goriska Brda. I felt that maybe I paid back something to my country. Dr. Ksenia de Lorenci bought the paintings and may publish them in a book.

Since I chose to come to Australia I also try to accept Australian culture and people. I feel at home with Australian people. Many Slovenians isolate themselves and never open their minds and hearts to the wider community. Most migrants never venture out of the safety that their own ethnic setting to connect with Australians. Frank likes to associate with different ethnic groups he finds Europeans a stimulating company. We are becoming members of the global village. Everything is global and English is taking over whether we like it or not. Slovenian language is disappearing at home; most of young people speak fluent English.

I found a home in Bright because the hills and the countryside remind me of home. Frank and I tried to recreate the orchard and the vineyard of my home in our spacious garden. The Owens River provides its own music for our peaceful setting. Among my treasures are mementos of what made me who I am: the cane baskets my father made remind me of his love and of the man he was. I

picked items of beauty on my way. My house is also filled with treasures Frank's parents left behind and these treasures offer some history to our family.

Here in Bright I say I am going home to Goriska Brda but when I am there I long to go to Australia that has been my home now for 56 years.

I always liked to draw and paint. I was overwhelmed by beautiful things in life and I needed to express in colour what I felt and what I experienced. I attended evening art school after I arrived to Australia but I learned most by experimenting. I like French impressionists but I haven't really followed any particular style; I always looked for my own style and originality.

My first Exhibition Monash University in 1972 gave me great encouragement to keep my own style and present myself overseas in 1976 for my first overseas Exhibition in Gorizia, Italy.

During the last fifty years I painted about 2500 pictures, I had exhibitions all over the world, I received awards and people wrote about my work. It always was a great pleasure for me to capture on canvas something of what I loved, I hope my paintings also give pleasure to people whose homes they decorate. Giving pleasure is as important to me as it is receiving it. I enjoy painting pictures and seeing the pleasure and richness they give to the people who purchase them, be it in a public gallery or a private home. I also like to paint subjects that have pleasant memories/subjects that I express with an understanding for the general viewer.

I learned dressmaking and I love to make beautiful pieces of clothing; I love to prepare special delicacies in my kitchen and I love to work in the garden; I enjoy parties and meeting people, I appreciate every minute of my life. I learned to accept the things I can not change and try to be happy with what I have. I sometimes wonder if I would be a greater artist if I spent less of myself on my family and more on art. Maybe if I did not have my family I would have nothing to offer. My family was also my inspiration. It is a pity that life is so short and by the time you learn how to live, it is all over.

Stephanie Jakovec

“Stephanie J. – who are you?” I was asked that question once. Just because I don’t have a long line of heritage from one country, it doesn’t mean, I don’t know who I am. On the contrary, I feel so much richer to belong to more than one country. My maternal grandparents are Slovakian and my paternal parents are Ukrainian. Both grandparents migrated to former Yugoslavia during the WWI.

My maternal grandmother was married to a baron in Bratislava before the WWI. They had a son soon before the war. They managed a large property with 15 servants. At the start of the war, the baron was taken by the war and the Russians came to the property and her world was burned down. One of the servants, much younger man than her, fled with her and a baby boy to Croatia. This servant, a Slovenian from Carinthia, became my grandmothers’ life partner and my grandfather. I was two years old when my grandmother passed away in Croatia, where we lived for a short period; I remember running barefooted after my mother, who was following the procession to farewell her mother to the graveyard.

I was born in Bosnia, where my parents lived for few years after they married. It was a December night with plenty of snow. Christmas, never celebrated in a socialist country, passed and the eve of 1954 was approaching. There was no transport from the village to hospital through the snow and the midwife could not be contacted. My parents put my 2 year old sister to bed and told my 6 year old brother to stay in the next room whilst a baby was going to be born. My father prepared for my arrival alone with my mother. He boiled a pair of scissors and prepared some clean cotton sheets. My mother was having contractions and hoped that all was going to be well. It was soon after the midnight that I decided to arrive into this world. My father cut the umbilical cord and I gasped for air. My brother knew I was born and he couldn’t help himself from peeping through a keyhole. As soon as he heard my cry, he opened the door to see his little sister.

It was a successful delivery and my father is forever proud of my perfect belly button. My parents, my brother and I have since had a special bond.

Few years down the track my parents moved to Slovenia. My father was a carpenter and my mother was looking after us, sawing our clothes and doing lots of other work. In little town of Jesenice, we moved from one place to another, always in search for a better accommodation. For a few years, we had a privilege living in a local theatre. My mother was a caretaker, as father went to work to Germany together with many other carpenters at the time. Here, in the theatre, I was introduced to a wonderful world of theatre, opera, concerts and art. I loved it. I often observed a stage manager as he produced the stage and props for stage display. My older brother was attending a school for merchandising and worked as visual merchandiser. He loved painting and I would often stay with him in the room to watch him paint. After my primary school I decided I want to do art. So I enrolled in Visual Merchandising School in Ljubljana, a capital of Slovenia, and regularly visited many galleries.

My parents were people of faith and did not conform to a socialist regime. I took our faith seriously early on in my life. As a young child I learned how to stand firm in my faith and prove myself worthy of what I believed. In my secondary schooling, I was expelled from the school due to my religious beliefs. But I was determined to finish the school of my dreams. And I did. Despite the opposition and reprimands by the Headmaster.

In Slovenia my parents were indirectly persecuted for their religious and moral beliefs. They were Seven Day Adventists. My father went to work in Germany and my mother found it difficult to live separated from my father. When I was only 16, my parents decided to migrate to Australia, as two of

my aunts lived there. They agreed that I stay in Ljubljana to finish my schooling. Then I would follow them. My younger brother, 14 at the time, migrated with them. My older brother was married and decided to stay in Slovenia and my sister was studying in Berlin to be a nurse. The family became fragmented.

When I finished my secondary schooling, I decided to study languages at the University. I wrote a letter of my intentions to my parents in Australia but despite my decision, my mother arrived to Slovenia, with a one way airline ticket for me. I was unwilling to go but my respect towards my parents prevailed. I travelled with my mother to Australia at the end of 1973.

The farewell was unbearable. I kept my departure a secret from many people. Only few close friends knew about my trip to Australia. I found myself leaving my first love which I found the very same summer, but I buried it deep into my heart and left without saying goodbye. Little did I know how all this was going to affect me later on. It was like life was playing a game with me.

I remember arriving to Brisbane into an intense heat, a big family gathering and an evening scent of frangipannis in the air. How I missed my love, how I missed my friends and my dreams. I wasn't sure what to expect. Everything was new and so different. But I had an idea that I will go back as soon as I earn enough money. After looking for a job for awhile and trying a factory for a day and a half, I could not imagine myself in that environment. I soon found myself in a job as a Commercial Artist, designing badges. I liked it.

I was completely overwhelmed by a sense of freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom to practice your faith, freedom of choice. It was wonderful.

In the meantime, at a family event, I met my future husband. There was no return. I got married after three years and eventually moved to Albury-Wodonga. We both enjoyed skiing and a quieter lifestyle. After six years of marriage our daughter Tamara was born and two and a half year later our son Simon. I kept myself busy as a mother, housewife and doing art whenever possible. I worked part time in graphic art. As the children grew and started school, my passion for art grew stronger and I decided to pursue it in a serious way. I started painting in a big way and exhibiting in local art shows. As my artwork sold well and was well accepted, I decided to exhibit as solo artist. In the years to come, my work earned respect by many discerning art lovers and I received many art prizes. I finally decided to travel back to Slovenia and have my first exhibition in Ljubljana. At that time, I was also teaching art in a private Secondary School.

It was June 1995. I travelled to Slovenia on my own and my family would join me two weeks later as I was invited to paint in the international artist colony. I arrived to Munich where I hired a car. I packed the little Golf with my paintings and drove towards Slovenia on a busy, speedy autobahn. As I drove through Austria towards the Julian Alps, I noticed the horizon of Alps, still very much fresh in my memory from 20 years ago. My eyes filled with tears as I was nearing the Karavanken Tunnel. As I Passed through the tunnel, a valley spread in front of me. I stopped the car and cried looking at the valley bellow the hills. I realized how dear this view was to me and I couldn't wait to drive on. I arrived to the town of Jesenice and drove straight to my primary school. It all seemed like yesterday. I walked to my classroom and looked at the artworks on the walls. I tried to find my own. One of the teachers came to see who the stranger was. I explained why I was there. To my surprise, she said that my art teacher is coming soon to the meeting. I waited ten minutes and he arrived. He greeted me with a big, warm smile as he recognised me by my smile and voice. We talked and talked and he seemed to be so proud of my achievements as an artist. We talked about future exhibition in my hometown that he would organise later, being a director of an Art Saloon. I happily departed to my artist colony in Dolenjske Toplice. It was a week of great inspiration and new friendships. After the artist colony, I had a busy time hanging my exhibition which was organised by my school friend Bogdana. The opening night was fabulous and I left the paintings there whilst travelling the Europe with my husband and children. As we left Slovenia, I had a feeling that I did not have enough of it. I decided to visit very soon. I seemed to be in awe of my country. My homesickness for Slovenia never fully healed. As soon as I returned to Australia, I wrote the following Love Letter to Slovenia:

"Twenty years has past since I touched you last,

Since I embraced you with my vast view and deeply inhaled the fresh air of your forests and mountains,

Since I felt the warmth of your earth and indulged in the inebriating scent of fields with flowers that again and again enticed me.

I feel elated and ecstatic.

My eyes filled with tears as from the other side of border I recognised the horizon and colours of the mountains.

Impatiently I sped through the Karavanke Tunnel in anticipation

To embrace and kiss you.

I am alone and hardly can believe that I am in your embrace.

I feel secure and enraptured. I missed you so much. For twenty years I carried you in my thoughts and wonderful memory. I pined for you every day.

I sketched you in my mind, embracing you and dreaming about you.

Now I feel you under my feet, I breathe your fresh air and smell your sweet, intoxicating scent. Night is approaching but I don't wish to sleep, for I know that I don't need to dream.

You are here – I am here. We are alone. I know that you feel me and are receiving my greeting.

It feels like I never left you.

The old little house is still here. Deserted and lonely. No one has enjoyed the childhood here anymore. The door is open and windows have no glass. It is dark inside and smells of frippery. I am not surprised. The neighbour is still the same. Like he never aged. The old cherry tree is still here and the path leading to the forest where I used to go mushroom picking with my mother.

I continue very slowly past the old church all the way to school. I can hear the voices of children and it seems to me that I might recognize somebody. The empty rooms and desks are still the same. I am looking for my painting on the wall. Maybe I will recognize my name. Everything is here. Even the art teacher recognised me.

You kept everything, just like time has stopped.

You are wonderful. The meadows and fields are full of bees humming busily and inebriating with the sweetness of the pollen. I adore you and wish to never leave again. The old hay stack is still standing, where I received my very first kiss. Thank you for the fond memories.

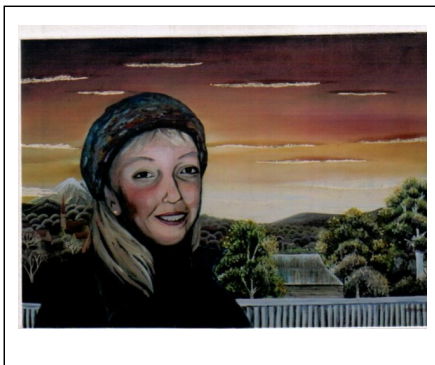
I wish that I could offer you a gift. I am not thinking anymore. I am not daydreaming anymore. This is reality. I gaze into your eyes. You radiate warmth and love. I feel fabulous. You are reaching deep into my soul and you are not even aware of it. You are reaching deep into me and scooping my love and sweetness. I am not resisting. I know that I love you and you know it, but we are too far apart. To feel the warmth and euphoria of love. There is only a sweet memory. I still feel your firm embrace. I still carry in my memory the sweet scent of your breath. I remember the depth of your gaze. I see you clearly in my dreams how you gaze at me and how our souls entwine into inseparable knot.

I take a deep sigh, close my eyes to feel you once more and to embrace you. Life goes on."

I posted this letter to my art teacher. It was read at my next solo exhibition I had in Jesenice two years later. All the visitors were wiping tears from their eyes as the intensity of the emotion grew.

As my art became more and more accepted and I gained respect, my inspirations also grew from my deep affection for my country Slovenia. My love for Slovenia turned into a conflict between my Croatian husband and I. In the year of 2000 I had to leave in the agony and realization that I need to continue my journey on my own with the identity only I could connect to.

I decided to acquire a Diploma in Visual Arts and continue to paint and exhibit. My art was taking another dimension now, as I had to express my grief and disappointment and had to let go of my past. I was involved with refugees as a result of the Balkan war. That was another inspiration for a new series of paintings at the time. It seemed to be once again a method of my debriefing and offloading. I kept selling my art, this time to public venues. I kept travelling back to Slovenia to artist colonies, to walk the streets of my home town, to breathe the air, to talk to people from my past. It never seems to be enough. It never seems to quench my thirst for my homeland.



My art has taken off to many different avenues. But it always keeps coming back to my soul for more inspirations. The passion that I carry is expressed with the colours I use, with detail and carefully arranged compositions. The eyes travel through the landscapes of flowers, landscapes decorated with mighty trees and mountains. Occasionally they are filled with villages, houses and churches with terracotta tiles. The person in the black hat often intrigues the people. But only I know that it is a portrait of me, of my family and of people I know. My art is for ever telling a story, a story of my life, of other peoples' lives. It is a tribute to my homeland, to Slovenia. It is a tribute to people who live on this earth. It is a tribute to my faith and to God.

I know that I will keep going back to my soul for more inspirations. I know that I will keep listening to people and observe their relationships from a distance. I will adore the mighty mountains and trees and put them in the landscapes with flowers and add a touch of magic of human love and soul that wishes to connect to God.

I am grateful for many experiences that life offered me. I am happy that I can express them in such a way that other people can connect to them in their own way and gain another experience of their own. It is only through sharing of my experiences that my life becomes enriched and I can enrich lives of other people.

I have a particular style of painting influenced by Croatian naïve art and surrealism. I had 22 solo exhibitions and I feel that I have much more to express. Much of my art was about immigration, my homesickness for Slovenia; about ten years later I started to paint Australian landscape.



Those Blue Jeans is a self portrait oil painting after migrating to Australia. I sit in front wearing blue jeans which symbolise the freedom of expression to me.

In my experience it is not necessary to abandon the country you have immigrated from. I feel that I belong to both sides of the world.

My friend told me about a fair-haired person who told her that she is an Aborigine. But you don't look like an aborigine, people say to her. You haven't got much of Aboriginal blood. You might be less than a quarter of Aborigine. You are half German, people say. You have English in you. I grew up as Aborigine, the girl insists. I know nothing of German or English or Italian ancestors. Aborigines accepted me; they are the only family I ever had. If I am not an Aborigine I am nothing. I can not be half of anything.

My story is similar to that girl's story; I might have Slovak and Ukrainian blood in my veins but I grew up in Slovenia as Slovenian; I learned to talk in Slovenian; Slovenians accepted me as their own. I feel Slovenian regardless of

how much Slovenian blood flows through my veins. I carry Slovenia in my heart and in my memories. I experienced my first taste of love in Slovenia. If someone was to take away my Slovenian heritage I would have nothing left.

I did not have much luck in my relationships with men. I suppose men loved me the only way they knew how. They wanted to break my wings in fear that I would fly away. I was flattered; they made me feel precious; they also made me feel that I had no right to be who I am. I needed their trust and support but I also needed my freedom. I needed the recognition of who I am. I felt diminished rather than enhanced by their loving. I provided the background support for their egos but my identity was crushed by their possessiveness. I became afraid and sad; I felt trapped. At the moment I have no partner; I miss the intensity of emotion love offers but I am at peace. Perhaps I had to experience the spectrum of emotions and feelings in order to be able to paint the stories I painted. Wisdom and understanding are born in pain. Appreciation of the beauty comes also from knowing the ugly and the hurtful. I am grateful that life offered me such a variety of experiences; they made it possible for me to understand and to give pleasure to those who identify with my picture stories. Art is very important to me; it may not offer me a living but it offers me life. It is hard to earn enough with painting to pay the mortgage but I get by. Most artists lived in poverty but their lives were rich with creativity.

My life-A Compromise. By Jaka Chuk

As in a dream I see a mountainous country with snow capped peaks reaching for the sky. There are forests, creeks, waterfalls and lakes. Narrow gorges widen into valleys. The greenery overwhelms. Beauty surrounds me. This is my country Slovenia.

I am the youngest in the family of twelve. Our parents brought us into this world between the years of 1920 to 1940. We eked our living on a small farm on Crni Vrh above Idrija. To the west are the fertile Vipava Valley and the Adriatic with the port city of Trieste; to the East are forests and the mercury mine in Idrija as you are going towards the capital city of Ljubljana.

The good people Slovenians lived in these places from the times immemorial although they were ruled by other states. Both my parents were born under Austria; they brought up their family under Italy and died in Yugoslavia. This is a stark contrast in one life span. My parents and my siblings were forever grateful to the Almighty to have survived both horrific wars. Many of my school mates were not so fortunate; many lost their fathers and brothers; some became orphans. My generation knows well the consequences of the war. My parents died when I was very young and my brothers and sisters took good care of me.

Slovenia became a literate nation during the Reformation. As Lutheran faith swept over most of Europe, the Bible was translated into Slovenian and Slovenian Grammar book was compiled. During the Anti-reformation period that followed the Lutheran places of worship were destroyed and the books were burned. We returned to Catholicism but we used the same Bible for the next two hundred years. Slovenia has been a Roman Catholic country ever since. We go to church every Sunday.

Slovenians are proud and head strong people. We observe our traditions and inherent principles of right and wrong. We are proud of our language which was spoken centuries before English but at the same time we are keen to learn the languages of our neighbours.

My father was a veteran of the WWI; he was fighting Italians on Soca Front. He spoke German, loved the Emperor Frantz Joseph and strongly resented Italian occupation. My parents did not allow Italian language in our home. Mum was teaching the children Slovenian but stopped after my older twin sisters. She was surprised that at the age of five I taught myself to read and write.

Italians banned Slovenian language in all public life; only in the church could Slovenian be heard from our young priest.

Italians benevolently promised that they will give poor Slovenians some of their two thousand years old culture. They built and improved the roads over the mountains but that was for strategic and economic reasons because Idrija's quicksilver and timber were in great demand.

In 1943 Italy capitulated and soon Germans took over. Crni Vrh was a stronghold of anti communist partisan resistance; in short it collaborates with the occupier. Partisans retaliated by burning the place. Our supposed liberators burned us down.

The liberation on 5May1945 did not bring us much joy either although we welcomed the freedom to move. There was much to do to survive; we had cows for milk, sheep for wool and we grew potatoes and vegetables. The old money was no longer legal tender and the new was worthless. The ancient barter took over. The people were resourceful and helpful towards each other. There were few able bodied men so the work was done by old men, women and boys.

In September 1947 I was to go to school but there was no school building. We gathered in an old farm house; pencils were precious possessions but there were no books; we were happy to use butcher's paper. The school years were the happiest years of my life. I was a bright student and found it easy to express myself clearly. I also started to write poetry.

There is one dark memory though from that time. I clearly remember our headmaster announcing: There is no God, only old silly women believe that there is God. I became confused; at the age of nine most women looked old to me. I believed that all women were clever; most of us children also attended scripture lessons.

I remember the day when the pictures of Lenin and Stalin were taken off the classroom wall. There was just lonely Tito and two whiter spaces where his comrades were hanging only the day before.

No class today. We are no longer friends with Russia because they betrayed us, announced the headmistress. On the way home I stopped at the timber mill and saw that the mill workers also enjoyed the day off; they were drinking wine and talked and laughed excitedly. On the ground was Stalin's picture and the young man proceeded to pee on it.

My early education was full of contrasts between home and school teachings. The school was glorifying socialism while my parents were teaching old honest way of living. I kept asking questions.

I was a big boy and wanted to become a school teacher but my family was not agreeable with communist ideology so I received no scholarship. Grudgingly I enrolled in commerce-trade apprenticeship serving the public in a mixed goods shop. The state as the only employer in the new regime, paid for me to go to the boarding school for four months a year as part of my apprenticeship.

I was a popular young man and my ability to speak out well got me out of a lot of trouble. In retrospect I think I was also naive and conceited. I enjoyed good company, dancing, reading and going to the movies. I was searching for foreign literature. I disliked politics and ideology.

Slovenians are a small nation with many good writers and translators. We lived close to Italian Austrian border so despite the restrictions from the regime we could hear news from the West through the media. The life in my beautiful country was stifling and I dreamt of escaping.

At the age of eighteen I received a conscription notice from the Yugoslav Army. I found my self in uniform deep in the fields of Croatian Slavonia. I was surrounded by young men from Kosovo, Bosnia and Serbia; the Hungarians, Bulgarians, Romanians and Romi were also with us but the only language we were allowed to speak was Serbo-Croatian; we learnt the Cyrillic script. Expressions of nationality, religious beliefs, other languages or opinions generally were not allowed. I deeply rejected communism and decided to escape into the big wide world.

After two years in the army I was happy to return home. Things changed in the meantime though; self serve stores opened and my old job disappeared, however in communism there is no unemployment. I was given a new job but it was hard to find accommodation. I packed pocket books of poetry by Preseren and Gregorcic with a few necessities and crossed the border to Italy. In the Trieste centre for foreign economic refugees I found people from Yugoslavia and other Balkan countries. The European migrant Assisted Commission gave me a choice to immigrate either to Canada or Australia. I chose Australia. The commission paid half of my 130 pounds Qantas plane fare and I had to sign to pay the other half in monthly instalments. The flight was fantastic but the view of Australia from the plane was shocking: everything was brown, light brown and yellow, no mountains but long straight lines like drawn by a pencil. We landed in Sydney on 3rd of February 1965.

The Boing 707 carried 120 passengers, most of them were Italians; there were 50 Yugoslavs of which 27 were Slovenian single men. I still refer to them as my 707 friends.

An officer of the immigration department handed me a letter and I recognised the writing of my dear Australian sister-in-law Judy. She wrote that my brother Gus was waiting for me at the Albury airport to take me home to Ballarat. I travelled on a small plane over Sydney and was surprised to see so many small single story houses on large blocks of land. On the way to Albury I was also surprised by strange olive grey coloured trees.

I vaguely remembered my brother Gus who is 13 years older than I. He left home when I was four years old as the war was coming to an end. Gus found himself in a German camp for displaced

persons. He immigrated to Australia and worked as a signal man on the railways. He married a wonderful Australian school teacher Judy. They had four sons and lived in a wooden house owned by the Ballarat Railway. I recognised Gus from the photos; Gus came with his Volkswagen and at the front of the car was hanging a canvas bag. My 707 friends wanted to know why he carried a bag outside the car. Of course it was his water bag.

I slept soundly at the Bonegilla migrant camp but something like a child's cry woke me in the morning. I listened and decided that the sound was more like a drunken laughter. It was a kookaburra. Gus signed a paper promising to provide accommodation for me but the authorities told me that I can return if I needed a job.

On the way to Ballarat Gus and I talked and talked happy to be together. Judy and my nephews were waiting for us at home; the table was set with a welcoming dinner; it was John's birthday and Andrew's first day at school. The boys were surprised that I did not speak English. Gus never attempted to teach his children Slovenian. I also never had a day of Slovenian schooling so it was easy to find excuses why we did not teach the children Slovenian.

Judi was a fulltime housekeeper, mother and wife. Their youngest son Peter was not well so she has a lot to do with washing, ironing, making sandwiches and shopping. The large laminex table in the kitchen was a centre of activities always full of books.

In the large backyard was a shed, a hills hoist, a firewood space, a toilet and a garage. There was also a veggie patch, a chook yard and some fruit trees. The place was well maintained and the railway rewarded Gus for that every year.

Ballarat was the largest inland city at the time. It started as a gold mining settlement in the middle of nineteenth century gold rush days; a lot of gold was extracted from this ancient volcanic earth. When I arrived it was quite prosperous and surrounded by large farming towns. I found Ballarat interesting and dignified with fine Victorian buildings made of granite. The two large churches facing each other intrigued me. Are they too small for everybody to worship together, I inquired. They told me that one was Anglican and the other Catholic. I later discovered the Lutheran and Presbyterian and Methodist churches and so became aware of Australian diversity. I began to compromise and assimilate, tolerate, understand and accept new things into my life. I acquired new habits, accepted new food, and liked people who were very different to me. I came to terms with my new life. People did not have to agree with me for me to like them and I did not have to agree with them. I found my compromise. I gradually learned to like my morning cup of tea. I get along. I put aside old attitudes and found a compromise.

My brother's family belonged to the Field Naturalist Club and the guide led us to the bush where I discovered lakes, swamps, hills, and abandoned gold mines. Everything was new to me and I wanted to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible. On our trip to Melbourne I saw a huge mob of sheep and asked: Who milks them all? They burst out laughing and still retell this as a joke.

My first job was picking grapes- sultanas in Mildura. It was hot and I got sunburnt; I also sprained my wrist lifting full containers onto the tractor. I earned good money so I bought my first photo camera. In the evenings we headed to the Gol Gol pub for a drink; it is over the Murray River on the border of Victoria and NSW. The atmosphere in the pub was fantastic and everybody enjoyed themselves after a hard day's work. Nobody told me why in Victoria they closed drinking places at 6pm.

My next job was at the potato processing plant in Ballarat and after the season finished I found a job at the ball bearing factory.

During a smoko break my work mates sat at the big table and talked in an expressive quick friendly Australian jargon; they laughed but I did not understand what was being said so I smiled.

My English was improving, Judi and the boys helped me and I spent a lot of time reading. Judi told me that I was a fast learner. At the time I probably didn't even appreciate how fortunate I was to share my life with an Australian family where I could learn about Australian way of life.

Gus enjoyed fishing and on our fishing trips we spoke Slovenian and remembered the olden days at home. I wasn't homesick but I wrote long letters to my siblings and nephews. There were no migrants in Ballarat and Gus did not know any Slovenians there. He kept in touch with one Slovenian couple in Geelong and another person in Melbourne whom he knew from Germany.

One day I went by train to Melbourne; Gus and Judy told me what interesting places I should visit. I enjoyed the city and the people were friendly but they walked straight into me and I had to avoid bumping into them. I walked into the park and sat on the bench; I felt the loneliest person there among the multitudes of humanity. Finally it dawned on me that I walked on the wrong side of the footpath; I had to learn to walk Australian way.

Eighteen months after my arrival to Australia my 707 friend Slavko invited me to join him; he wrote that he worked at Whyalla shipyards; he earned good money and lived in a single men's quarters. My English was better and I saved some money so I headed to Port Augusta by train. Slavko and his friend waited for me with their Holden and we headed south. The countryside was lifeless and brown with no indication of farming.

Whyalla was a company town; BHP owned practically everything. To the West were Iron Knob and Iron Barron iron ore mines; to the north were iron works with blast furnaces and shipyards to the south. The single man's Tanderra and Tarrina quarters were a walking distance towards the shipyards in the south.

The town had a few pubs, shops and a cinema. The beach was shallow and the iron ore was exported on the Japanese carriers. Slavko was fishing from these long jetties with the conveyor belt running in the middle.

I started work the next day as a trade's assistant to Kevin, a friendly Australian plumber. I carried a bag of tools and followed him around.

Our quarters were a single story building with verandas on each side and a corridor in the middle. Each worker had his own room but we shared other conveniences. Nearby was the recreation centre with shops, TV rooms and a cinema. Men met and relaxed there. The food was plentiful but bland; the vegetables were boiled to the pulp but as a war baby I was used to eating anything put in front of me.

Everything was provided for us, there was plenty of hot water, and laundry was collected and brought to our rooms washed. All we had to do was work and save. Men regularly sent a part of their pay to the folks back home.

At the time Robert Menzies was a Prime Minister and Paul Husluck was the minister for immigration. The Labor opposition leader was Mr Calwell. They decided that all non English speaking migrants be called New Australians. This did not apply to people from United Kingdom whom we referred to as 10 pound Poms.

I enjoyed going to the movies and every film started with God Save the Queen. I wondered why since I came to see a Western or Elvis Presley. Everybody stood up for the queen but I remained seated. To me a queen of England was a foreign monarch and I decided to become a republican. Officially all Australian born people were British subjects and I drew a parallel with my own situation since the records stated that I was a Yugoslav citizenship.

Whyalla was a New Australian men's town with a few women who were rarely seen. Australian born were a minority. We just worked. I read a lot. Old movies were screened and alcohol wasn't allowed on the premises. Occasionally I paid 12 dollars for a return ticket to Melbourne where I visited churches, galleries and museums. I loved the city and just walked and looked at the shops.

In 1967 Referendum we were asked if Aborigines should be included in the national census. I taught it strange that Australians knew the number of their sheep and cattle but not how many people there were.

Friendships were forged mainly on ethnic lines. On pay days the illegal gambling of two up was on and Slavko took me to see it. There was a strange atmosphere with only one light globe above the

circle of players on the dusty ground. Yelling and the general excitement were overwhelming but the police or company security broke up the game. The globe was trashed and people ran in panic.

Sex could be bought for as little as five dollars and no knowledge of English was required for it.

There were several of my 707 friends and life wasn't so bad. Slavko went fishing regularly.

I became a storeman and the open compound store stretched for acres next to the wharf. It was an open air expanse with lots of asbestos sheds for paints and other materials needing protection from the sun. The boss was very pleased with my work because I mastered the imperial measures and wrote legibly. After eighteen months I had enough of Whyalla; nobody stayed there for long.

In September 1969 I boarded the train for Perth. The countryside looked like the surface of the moon for most part. The patches of grey green told me that there must have been life somewhere in that great expanse of nothingness.

Perth was a pleasant city it was more like an easy, friendly country town than with few high rise buildings. I booked into a boarding house on St George Terrace close to the Supreme Court near the pub and the Swan River.

I took a trip to Fremantle and found a few very good Italian restaurants and many pubs. The tourist Bureau conducted trips to the country. Perth Show was on. I decided to find a job there. While I waited for the job in mining I worked as a storeman with Sandovers at Belmont and boarded with a Yugoslav family. I enrolled in TAFE for English and bookkeeping. I worked full time and went to school three nights a week. For recreation I read, wrote letters home, went for long walks to the beach. I tried to find the best in people and did not consciously seek the company of my countrymen. Females found me rather too serious. I was assertive but not bold. I was weary of Yugoslavs who were keen to engage me in politics. I considered their discussions a futile waste of my good time. I follow Australian custom of not discussing politics and religion because I don't wish to offend those that believe differently.

There was no Slovenian club but a large Yugoslav one. My landlords invited me to come along. There were many Slovenians and Croatians but I felt that there was an underlying tension. I loved dancing but the girls were carefully watched and single men were asked about their girlfriends.

My Chinese workmate invited me to join his large family for the Chinese Luna New year and I joined them every year since.

I studied accountancy for three years; I rented a flat and started to work in an air-conditioned office as an accounts clerk

Early seventies was the time of great, fast changes. I became an Australian citizen and Mr Whitlam became a Labor Prime Minister. I participated in anti war demonstrations and gradually became a lefty Labor supporter.

In 1973 I bought a pair of old duplex houses in Fremantle near the hospital. The stone and timber buildings with iron roof were cheap at 1400 dollars a pair because they were in need of repair. My boss was rechecking my purchase agreement and commented: a good working man needs an address. My supervisor exclaimed: But why in Fremantle? Only Commos, wharfies, pimps and prostitutes live in Fremantle.

My savings dwindled quickly. The repairs of the houses cost me three times as much as the purchase itself. I took a second mortgage at 13% interest.

Fremantle was not a desirable place to live at that time. I made my biggest investment ever while people were leaving the town in droves. Old houses were sold to pay for the new ones.

The new lot of enthusiastic people arrived to town and we formed a Fremantle Society- a self help group of home buyers; we were referred to an s local pressure group. We were the renovators, restorers and preservers because Fremantle needed a new lease of life. This was hard work but it was also my most productive and happiest time. I was proud to be a member of this closely knit

community of planners, architects and good workers. We met at parties and celebrated together the finishing of projects.

Gus came to visit and he was sorry for me and appalled at the expenses and hard work my house required. He said: this will always be an old house. With the money you invested you could have built a new house.

I loved my independence perhaps that is the reason I never married. The way I lived would scare away any woman. I was studying in the evenings and working on the house after work.

After working for 15 years for the same employer, he moved to a far away suburb and I had to give up my job. I gave up the study just before the final exams which I still regret.

In 1980 I found a new job in Fremantle Arts centre where I worked for another fifteen years. I earned less in this job but I felt much happier. I became a jack of all trades working as a curator, administrator, cleaner and maintenance man.

I became a certified interpreter and translator for Slovenian and Serb Croatian languages. The phone interpreter service pays well. As an interpreter I go to courts of law, to the workers compensation tribunals meetings, to the third party insurance hearing and to the doctors.

This is a new challenge for me and I learned a lot about people through it. I hear lots of sad stories.

In 1982 I sold my two restored houses for 80 thousand dollars. I paid off my debts and bought another old house built in 1898 for forty-one thousand dollars cash. I still live in this good house now.

In 1995 I retired from my job in the Arts centre and used my superannuation to renovate the house. I stopped doing what I did not like doing and started doing what I liked doing best.

I live in harmony with people and the environment. I love my city Fremantle and consider myself a very fortunate man. I am indebted to so many people for this, to my family first but also to many strangers.

Emilija Dovgan-Debevec

What can I say about my life? I can not boast that I achieved something important. Bad health did not allow me to do many things I wanted.

I was born on 7 January 1950 in Prem on Brkini as the youngest and fourth child to a subsistent farmer. Our small village lies in the hilly country and you have to either walk down or up all the time.

We suffered post war destruction and I had to start helping with chores at the age of five. I remember going shopping; we only bought oil, salt and sugar. Mum would pay when she sold farm produce. We were all involved in producing food; I remember taking grains into the water powered flourmill and watching our grains turn into flour. Mum baked big loaves of bread and she also made pasta. We soaked our washing and boiled the whites in ashes to whiten them. Once we received a parcel from America with clothes for me.

My job was grazing the cows for many years. I was with our cows morning and afternoon from May till November. Close to nature I daydreamed and observed the birds and nature. I liked to sing and read. By the time I was twelve I started to cook for the family. During the winters I was often cold watching the ice flowers on the window panes. I liked to go sleighing on the snow. I also remember going from house to house in funny fancy dress for Shroud Tuesday. I had to go to church every Sunday.

By the age of eight I began to help other children with reading. In fifth grade I wrote my first poem instead of a story but the teacher crossed it out.

After I finished school I began serious work with my father. We prepared the manure and ploughed the land, cut the timber, sowed and harvested the produce.

We killed two pigs a year. I covered my eyes and ears not to see and hear the squealing pig but I helped with the preparation of the meat that had to last for the whole year.

We had lots of apples; some we sold, some we ate; some we turned into cider.

I became a domestic servant for one of my teachers. Her husband was a dentist and I went with them to Switzerland where I stayed for two years. Later I became a housekeeper to an architect and his eighty years old mother. This man was very kind to me especially at the time of my father's death which was a great loss for me. His son and daughter were studying and came home only during holidays. After a year he married and I had to find a new job. I worked in a restaurant where I became sick. I was very proud that my boss came to visit me in the hospital.

I later worked in hotels cleaning the rooms. My room was in an attic and every morning I stepped on a stool to see the mountains and the rising sun through the window.

I later worked in a hotel near Saint Moritz and became overwhelmed by the beauty of the place. I wanted to work in the kitchen and learn new things. When I went home for holidays I met my husband who was also on holidays from Australia. We began to correspond and eventually I decided to join him in Australia in June 1972. We got married and I started to work in the Arnott's biscuits factory. I realised that being a domestic help was better than factory work. I learned a lot more from the people I worked for and I missed working in the pleasant environment in the sun. In the factory I worked at the conveyer belt with electric lightning along with ten to fifteen women of different nationalities. They liked Turkish women best, they were diligent workers but I was afraid to make friends with them because we learned at school about the cruelty of Turks who plundered Slovenia during history. All the same we became good friends. Arnott factory employed 1100 women in two shifts. They had no crèche for children so one of Slovenian ladies looked also after Turkish babies. Later I worked in a paper factory.

Every morning as I was waiting for the train I saw a young woman with a sleeping baby in her pram. I helped her with the pram on the steps. She took the baby into care so she could go to work. I

wondered if that woman's life was any better than that of my mother who took her babies and left then in the shade of the tree while she worked on the fields. At least my mother heard her babies cry and she could comfort them.

In May 1974 my first daughter Mojca was born and since then I stopped going to work. I am the mother of four. Many Slovenians came to visit and hearing Slovenian language was the sweetest melody to me. It helped overcome my homesickness. Once we had a couple of Slovenians sleeping in our dining room because they had nowhere to go.

When my youngest started school I intended to go back to work but because of bad health I could not.

We brought our Slovenian traditions to Australia. I preserved fruit and vegetables, made sausages and wine; I baked traditional cake potica for Christmas, I coloured Easter eggs.

While I was on holidays in Slovenia I noticed that Slovenians became modernised and are not as connected to the land as we used to be.

My children understand but do not speak Slovenian well. Three of them finished university studies and one is going to continue. I am grateful to Australia because my children were never hungry here and they achieved high education. I am also grateful that my husband looked after us well. I learned to love Australian plants and animals; the bottle brush in front of my home is in full bloom and in it are nesting colourful birds.

The life of first and second generation migrants is hard because we miss our extended family. This is our refuge and we hope that our children will find a better life here. It is our duty to be a good example to our families and other nations as well.

My hobby is writing poetry; I self-published two collections of my poems: Domovina-tujina and Nase poti. I write in Slovenian because my head and heart wants it this way and because I do not write well in English.

The child does not belong to parents alone

We are parents to all who need food and comfort

The child does not know what religion it belongs

Or what nation

The child is not aware of the colour of his skin

The child just wants to be loved

If we don't give to the child

Support and love

He will have nothing to give

What he will get from us

That he will return.

Oh that our children would receive love and food

That they never experienced hatred and war

So they will be able to sow only love.

A few days ago a woman in a sari passed our house and I greeted her. We talked about weather and before she went on her way she wished me God's blessings. I felt blessed and I also felt that the whole country is blessed.

I believe that people arriving to Australia should learn some English before; they should also have a driving licence. They should be settled in places similar to what they were used to. Australia is not good for dreamers like me. I miss the seasons and the places.

I feel the spring coming
Early in the morning the birds are heralding it
The tree lined streets are blooming and scattering fragrance
Eucalyptus opened yellow, white and red flowers
Wattles are covered in gold
At home they have autumn now
But when spring comes there
I will return home in my dreams.

Josef Zohar - Time Where It Begins, Where It Ends



Josef zohar

I was born and grown up in Slovenia (then part of Yugoslavia). In 1967 I was supposed to join the Yugoslav National Army. I did not want this. Naive and silly I escaped to Austria. After a few months I went to Australian Embassy in Vienna, where they accepted me as a migrant for Australia. In January 1968, I arrived at Sydney airport. I was 23 years old.

Mirjana Klancar, of same age and to be my wife, came to me from Slovenia in 1970. Shortly after we moved to Wollongong where our first son Alexander was born on 31 December 1971. Mirjana and I married a year later.

After a while, we went back to Sydney, where our second son Michael was born at Auburn Hospital on 31 July 1975. Since this story is for the memory of Michael, I will from here on mainly write about him.

Michael was only two years old, when we bought and settled in a new home at Werrington, where he and his brother started Public Primary school and later completed nearby High School.

Michael was a beautiful and well behaved child growing up gently. He cared about his learning, was hard working and successful. Because of his interest in music our neighbour taught him to play a piano. After school he also regularly learned a classic guitar. We happily bought him a standard and electric piano, as well as a guitar. We liked listening when he played classic music on piano, or sang the popular songs accompanied by his guitar.

When Michael finished High School, he enrolled at The University of Sydney to study nursing. Though we did not like him to leave home, he decided to live in the City, close to University. He believed that would save him time, wasted by travelling every day to and from his University, time that he would instead use for studying.

Some time later, when he visited us at home, we noticed that he began smoking and even using marihuana. We begged him to stop for his own good and told him, that marihuana may negatively affect his mind, disturb his studying and maybe even lead him to try other drugs. However, he believed that marihuana would not affect him in any negative way.

Unfortunately smoking marihuana and later most likely using other drugs, as some of his friends did, caused him problems in studying. Despite this, with his intelligence and hard effort he fulfilled all the requirements and received his Bachelor of Nursing degree in June 1997.

During his last year at University, Michael became depressed. This increased when driving from home in his new car he had an accident hitting a tree. Luckily, he was not injured, but his car was so damaged that it had to be written off. Once the insurance company covered his loan for that car, he bought another one.

Sometime after this accident he attempted suicide by cutting his wrist. At that time he was staying with his close friend Jessica who helped him with her emotional support. One day she told us that Michael promised her, he would not make another suicide attempt without speaking to her.

On our request Michael visited our local doctor and then a psychiatrist; he was prescribed medications for depression. Slowly he started feeling better.

As a male nurse, after practicing his profession in various hospitals, he took up his job at North Ryde Hospital. Working mostly nightshifts, he was earning relatively good wages. However, it seemed that he was not fully satisfied with that because, as he told us several times, he intended to

go back to University to study and become a doctor. He also wanted to complete a computer course.

Later he returned to live with us. He brought home his belongings from Sydney: He had a bed, television, radio and music player, computer, hundreds of popular CDs, university books, documents etc.

On 28 February 1999, at our home, it came to a terrible, shocking tragedy. That morning, Michael with our grandson Jeremy (Alexander's son) went to the shops, where he bought several things for both of them. When they returned just after midday Michael told his mum that he will go to sleep, because in the evening he had to go to work at North Ryde Hospital. He asked her to wake him up about half past seven in the evening. Early in the evening, I was preparing to go patrolling on trains and stations as a Security Guard; I was employed by Chubb Security. When Mirjana went to wake Michael, she called me to his bedroom: Josef, come here quick. I can not wake up our son. I called and shook him, but he did not respond. He is blue, not breathing and looks like dead.

I could not believe that so I yelled: "Bloody hell, do not joke and be so horribly rude."

Still, I stopped shaving and went straight there. I had a quick look at Michael, touched his face, his hand. He was cold, blue and not breathing. I rang up 000, told them what happened to our son; I gave them our address and begged them to come as soon as possible.

I picked up Michael, carried him in the lounge room and put him on the lounge. I touched his wrist and jaw, checking for his pulse, but could not feel it. I knew basic first aid, so I gave Michael mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and pressed his chest to revive him. Though I did not see any change in his body, I continued until Ambulance arrived. The Ambulance Officers then put Michael on the floor and started with resuscitation. We hoped that they would revive him. While they were working for more than 40 minutes, I went to his bedroom. On his bed was a needle and syringe, which I did not see when I lifted him up. I then realized that he must have injected himself with heroin.

I showed that needle and syringe to Ambulance Officers, who put it in a plastic bag and told me to give it to Police when they arrive.

Finally they pronounced Michael dead. They called Police and another Ambulance to take Michael's body to Glebe Morgue for post-mortem examination.

Mirjana and I were in shock. We knelt down around our son, crying, caressing and kissing him. Even our grandson Jeremy, who also liked Michael very much, woke up and came to see what was going on.

Jeremy, I told him, Michael passed away. Since you are now here, come and join us. He started crying with us.

When the Police came, they asked several questions, looked at Michael, made some photographs and took the plastic bag with a needle and syringe. They asked me to come to the Police station during the next few days, to give them a statement.

The second Ambulance arrived. They gently picked up Michael and carried him out. Mirjana and I walked behind. For the last time we embraced and kissed him, before they put him in the Ambulance and departed.

Even when son Alexander arrived home that night, we could not go to sleep. We were still crying and discussing Michael's past and his death. We assumed that he injected himself and overdosed with heroin. However, why would he do this, when he had to go to work that night? Was this his secretly planned suicide? We will never know.

Michael did not leave any messages. Only some months later, I found among his documents a strange piece of writing:

Thoughts

Death Mum Jeremy Puschka (his kitten) Pain

Time (where it begins, where it ends)

Allison's death, Jason's winning of death. We are all vulnerable, as each other's dreams are hard to follow.

Everyone is primarily unconcerned about himself or herself. We are all selfish, self-indulgent and greedy for the things we do not have but really want. Even love, human touch, romance, only boil down to one's selfish drive for self-gratification. We can all care, however care is limited by patience of one. We all die one day, moment. Is it a celebration? It is the only escape I believe in. It would be peaceful, away from all the responsibilities of every day living and endless mental confusion and turmoil...

Maybe Michael wrote this when his friends Allison and Jason passed away from drug overdose. He probably misplaced this short writing and forgot about it, or decided not to continue with it. But, because it was addressed to mum, Jeremy and his kitten, may that have been intended as his farewell from them? We can only guess.

Two days after his death, we received Coroner's Order authorising the disposal of a body. We have arranged for his funeral on 5th March 1999 at Pine Grove Memorial Park Crematorium, Eastern Creek.

Later we regretted our decision to cremate him. Michael was battling hard enough to successfully finish University, he suffered depression, and lost his life, had post-mortem examination, pathology, and then we let him burn into ashes. This was our awful parental decision that turned into our feeling of guilt.

When we received the report of Michael's post-mortem examination, it confirmed that drugs heavily affected his body, and that heroin's overdose caused his death.

Loss of our dear young son will cause us pain and regrets as long as we live. This tragedy started my depression that was increasing over several years; it became worse with other sad, hopeless problems and difficulties. I withdrew into myself, stopped contacting or visiting friends, and the suicide settled in my mind. Searching on internet how to carry it out in easier way, I chose instructions on self-suffocation, tried it, but could not end my life that way. It was not easy to end a life. I did not want to do it like Michael and some of his friends and hundreds of other young people do every year. I never tried any drugs in my life. So, the next easier, quickly effective plan was to hang myself. I bought a strong rope, chose a suitable tree and prepared a farewell letter.



This is my son Michael

Only about three months ago I was pressed to visit a doctor and psychologist; I started taking medication for depression. This treatment seems to be slowly effective, changing my mind, or just wiping away my plan.

For this, I do not blame my son, or anyone else, but just myself. I still feel guilty for his death and keep asking myself: Why was I not a better father? Why I did not stop him to leave our home and to live in the city? Why I never visited him there? Why I did not find out where and when he started smoking and taking drugs, to somehow help

him out of this? On the tragic day at home, why I did not go to check what he does in his room? Why I did not revive him? And so on.

I suffer from losing my lovely son at his age of 23; that was my age when I arrived to Australia. I will not forget him. He is still with me. In our lounge-room, on the computer table I keep his photos, his University Degree and his ashes. I look at all this every day. When the time comes, all this will go with me into my grave, where we will be even closer together.

There, my dear son, I will try to be much better father. However, God has already taken your soul into the heaven, while mine will be thrown into the hell. Ah, so be it..

Marjan Lauko

I was born on 5 August 1926 in Pakrac, Croatia, into a Catholic family. My sister, Oliva, preceded me by four years and we loved each other, likewise both our parents till the end.

My father and mother come from Dravograd district so they are both Koroska people. After the WWI Koroska was divided into Austrian and Slovenian Koroska. Mum's family went to Austria and dad's family came under the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians later renamed Yugoslavia. Mum's father was a teacher in Koroska. Mum did not call herself either Slovenian or Austrian but Korosica. I received Slovenian citizenship in 1994 and feel very proud of my Koroska roots.

Father was employed as a clerk in the very large forest and timber industry, when in 1932 at the height of the world depression, the mill went into receivership and closed down. My parents moved to Pekre, a town near Maribor, where dad took over a country tavern (gostilna). In 1934 the economy began to recover, the opportunity for a timber retail business appeared and we moved to Vinkovci in Croatia. I started school there. Four years of Primary school and four years of High school (gimnazija). I showed interest in foreign trade, so they enrolled me in 1941 in the Commercial Academy in Osijek, 30 km away. I travelled daily by train until 1943 when it became more evident of partisan activities and sabotages on the railway line, stopping the trains and forcing young men to join their forces. I was forced to find full board in Osijek. In summer of 1944 the Germans took over the school building and used it as a hospital, so we had to abandon our education. My mother was not very impressed with the advancing front line, so she chose to go to Slovenia, where it was much more peaceful and less partisan activity. I joined her on the 11-day goods train journey and stayed with our relatives; mother was helping them on the land and in the house. I however joined the partisan units, after receiving an order to join the German army to help defend the onslaught of the Russians on Vienna. The day after I joined x (deleted full stop) I heard men under a tree singing a beautiful song, which I never heard before (ob jezeru v tihi noči...) The melody was easy to follow, but the lyrics were something new, so I came closer, leaned against the tree and joined them in the chorus. One of the fellows turned towards me, commented on my good voice and asked if I would like to join the choir, which was a unit of the brigade headquarters. Next day I was a member of the choir; free from sentry duty and fighting, but heavily engaged in singing and reciting.

So, shortly after I joined the partisans, the Germans realized that they can not win, and they ended the war.

I was demobilized in December 1945 and continued my education in January 1946 and matriculated in August the same year, when I was called up to finish serving my obligated two years of army service. I was sent to southern Macedonia where I contracted malaria. On return my parents informed me that my father's business has been nationalized; he lost his business and was now employed as a storeman on a building site with a wage hardly sufficient to support them, let alone my further education at the University in Zagreb, where I was already enrolled. So I moved to Slovenia. The main reason why I wanted to get out of Croatia was my involvement in an underground secret organization which was not exactly friendly towards the oppressive regime – to put it a nice way. My political record soon followed me, so I was on constant alert.

In August 1948 I met Tone Zagorc, the manager of my uncle's general store, which was also nationalized. We became good friends, as a matter of fact such good friends that we fully trusted each other with our lives. We began to plan our escape from the ever more oppressive tyrannic Communist regime. We decided to escape on the night of 29 January 1949 the night of new moon – total darkness, so we could not be seen from a distance while crossing the border. The winter 48-49 was one of the mildest winters on record with very little snow even in higher mountains. That night was also so painfully still and beautiful, which slowed our progress to about 100 meters an hour. During the day the snow was soft, due to the above zero temperature, but during the night the top of the 10 cm thick layer formed a frozen crust, which made a crunching noise with every step. We tried to walk under the trees, where there was no snow, but there the dry leaves and twigs made a

similar breaking sound. It took us seven full hours before we reached the barbed wire – the border, the last few meters to freedom. We tried to lift the barbed wire so we could crawl under and to the other side, but just at this point we did not succeed. We tried more to the left but it was just driven and held by steel poles into the ground. We retreated over the fifty meters of grass cut to a height of about 5 cm back some 50 meters into the dense forest. There we spent the rest of the night and all next day. We did not have any food with us, nor did we carry any spare clothes for that matter, just in case we were stopped on the way and questioned about our presence in this forbidden area. In that case our excuse would be, that we are about to visit our friends living nearby.

We did not eat or drink all day and we did not feel any hunger, so nervous and tense we were. As a matter of fact we didn't even mention food or drink.

All day we recited the poems of our great poet France Prešeren, whose pocket size book of poems was my only treasure that I had on me and to this day still dearly treasure it.

At the nightfall, close to seven o'clock, we slowly made our way towards the border. We carefully crossed the path where the border patrol walked when changing the guard. We reached the barbed wire a bit more to the right. Tone reached under and successfully raised it high enough for me to crawl through. Then I raised it for him to crawl through. We were on the other side. A feeling of relief went through me, but we were still not certain that we are out of that land of hell where one is not convinced to wake up in the morning still in one's own bed.

So we slowly and very carefully crawled slightly downwards towards a well lit house. Now, this simply must be Austria, as in Yugoslavia since last August each household in the country received a ration of one litre of kerosene a month, so it was impossible this well lit house to have lights burning in every room. We were now standing behind a big tree and listening to any voices. I finally gathered enough courage and walked around the house when on the entrance door I noticed a big sign which displayed a large Austrian coat of arms. The feeling that hit me that moment was simply indescribable. I ran to the big tree and loudly announced to Tony "this is Austria! We are in Austria! We are free! Free! We didn't knock on that door, but on the neighbours, which was some 100 meters to the right. The woman of the house, carried a pail of pigswill, opened the door and nearly dropped the pail. "Is this Austria", I asked in German, which I still spoke, although the last four years one would have suffered unpleasant consequences for the next few months had one been heard speaking the language of our enemies.

"Ja, ja, Austria", she replied with a trembling voice. "We just escaped from Yugoslavia", I said with an excited voice. Her eight year old son came to the door, politely said "Good evening" and disappeared into the night. She invited us inside and after she found out that we did not eat or drink since midday the previous day, she gave us each a plate of cooked potatoes and poured over hot lard. I was still so nervously distressed that those potatoes, which were one of my favourite dishes, tasted like plain sawdust. I could not even swallow a spoonful, so the lady gave us a glass of milk, to wash it down. Two minutes later three Austrian gendarmes entered, the sergeant shouted in a commanding voice "Hands up!" Tone and I stood up, with hands in the air, when the lady yelled at him "For goodness sake, let them finish the potatoes. They haven't eaten anything since midday yesterday".

When we finished, they escorted us to their station and we had to give detailed description of our flight.

We were interrogated for the next three days by the British occupation forces; afterwards we spent three weeks in the quarantine camp in Strass. My mother's family lived in Klagenfurt, Austria, so I went to them, hoping they would receive me with open arms. Instead, I was told to go back and apply for a legal permit to leave the country. They obviously had no idea of the conditions in Yugoslavia in those days. I helped in my uncle's food shop and got paid at the end of the week enough to buy a packet of cigarettes. I helped some of our distant relatives on their farm, which was rather hard manual work. I helped my second uncle excavate four meters deep hole on his block of land, for the cellar. I was mixing concrete by hand for the whole foundation, excavated and

concreted the wall for the 25 meter deep water well and finally the last three months before the winter set in, made hundreds of besser blocks by hand for the whole house.

The twelve months in Austria were the most difficult months for me. I also married in December that year, as we could not migrate to Australia unless we were married.

We arrived in Bonegilla on 28 March 1950 and I was sent to work three weeks later on a two year contract to Tasmania. I was given a pick and shovel and told "Dig!"

Blood blisters formed which turned into hard calluses. Yes, it was physically very demanding work, but the wonderful feeling of being free overcame me with an indescribable enthusiasm. I will never forget the day – payday, the only time I treated myself with a small glass of beer in the pub on the way home. With my Polish workmate Janek we left the pub, walked towards the railway station and burst out singing old partisan songs. People were looking at us, smiling and waving. We also sang a German wartime Marching song and we were not arrested nor punished. I really began to like this country.

It was in those days that I decided never to get involved in politics, never to enter into serious quarrelsome discussions and never to reveal to anybody which party I will vote for when I acquire the voting rights. O, yes, I did on few occasions reveal that I voted for this, that or the other party, but nobody, I repeat nobody really knows what numbers I put in what squares while I am in that little polling booth.

Twelve months after our arrival in Tasmania, we succeeded to convince Mr. Smith, an Employment officer, to permit us to go to Melbourne, as my wife's sister was there. In the Austin Hospital, Heidelberg I became a wards man; I was given a broom and told "Sweep". The remainder of the two year contract I spent as an attendant in the Mont Park mental hospital, where I learned a lot about the English language. On my days off I found myself a job as a cleaner-labourer, later as a painter with a painting contractor. Two years later, with my friend Jack, who actually was a baker by trade, we started our own painting company. After five years we became successfully "big", but because we lived on opposite sides of the town, we split up.

I was aware that the intellectual Australians had accepted us, likewise I was aware of the harsh, uncivilised and rude rejection of the primitive Australians. We were told to "go back where you came from", they gave us titles like "you bloody New Australian bastard", dago, wog and some unmentionable ones.

In 1959 we became parents to a most beautiful girl – Angela Adelaide. In 1963 when Angelca was 4 years old we went home for a six months holiday. It was sad to see the old country still suffering under the cruel whip of communism. Lack of goods was so evident, compared with Austria or Germany, who were actually the defeated nations in WWII; they were now enjoying much better living conditions than people in Yugoslavia, with the exception of communist party members. They had it good! In the papers and on the radio they were boasting how progressive the country is, how strong the army is. As a matter of fact Yugoslav army was the second most powerful army in Europe after the Soviet Union. But the shops were still barren. If you needed something, you had to KNOW the shopkeeper (government owned shop!) or the doctor (on the government payroll!) And even had to hand him under the table a 'thank you' envelope. Compared with Austria or Germany the country was far behind, that was a fact.

The following years were quite fruitful for me. We were blessed with another increase to the family, this time a boy, Victor Julius. The business expanded thanks to my strong involvement.

In 1973 I went to the Yugoslav Consulate in Hawthorn to apply for a three times entry-exit visa, but the rude Serbian officer, who obviously was a secret agent, told me in very nasty and uncivilized manner, typical for a Serb, that only single entry-exit visas are available. After nearly thirty minutes I angrily told him that "I will not visit Yugoslavia, I will not spend my money in Yugoslavia, although I know for a fact, that you starve for foreign currency, but will rather spend my money here in this free country Australia", which I did too. I was very relieved when I was outside on the footpath again.

My next visit to my country was in 1992 when Slovenia broke away from the Eastern block and became an independent nation, rightfully belonging to the middle European Western system with its own new currency: Tolar. Slovenia was accepted into NATO, then in 2004 into the European Union. In 2007, 1 January the new European currency, the Euro was proclaimed as a legal tender, which the two million people gleefully accepted. On 1 May 2004 Slovenia was accepted as a full member of EU. To mark this historic occasion, I decided to celebrate it by undertaking a charity walk. After months of e-mails and phone calls I began the walk at the source of the river Soča in the Trenta valley, which is in western Slovenia close to the Italian border. Twenty eight days and about 930 km later, I finished this unforgettable walk, which at the same time was in aid of cancer cure; I was received by the President of Slovenia, Dr. Janez Drnovšek. I handed him a present in the name of all Slovenians in Australia, a present to Slovenia – a real boomerang made and decorated by an Australian Aborigine. On the bend of the boomerang was an Australian black opal. Also in the velvet lined case with a Perspex cover, was a plaque with a description and an Australian and Slovenian flag. The president was very impressed.

(More details about my walk in Slovenia can be found on the internet. Just type in Marijan Lauko or Marjan Lauko. Details about my walks in Australia can be found if you type in Mario Lauko).

At this point I must say that during my walk I have noticed a vast change in enthusiasm, passion and eagerness in the every day people's lives. In these few years of independence they have achieved an enormous economic growth, which can be accomplished only by erudite thinking, deep seeded natural positive application of previously prohibited free thinking. The people and their leaders have proven that this great little nation definitely does not belong and can not be ranked among or be classified as a Balkan or East European state, as still claimed by some uneducated and misinformed reporters.

Anyway the Balkan Peninsula is a thousand plus kilometres away, the Balkan Mountains are also hundreds of kilometres to the south east; Slovenia is situated on the eastern slopes of the Alps, which every intelligent person knows is a mountain range in Central Europe and not on the Balkan.

In hindsight regarding my charity walk in Slovenia and my life in general in Australia I can with confidence say:

My dear Slovenia! I have observed many facets of your natural beauty. You have mighty mountains, fertile plains and your fast flowing rivers. I have visited hospitals, museums, churches, black kitchens, monasteries and ancient castles. I have walked on very steep terrains, on snow, bitumen roads, gravel, rough rocky paths, railway lines, and steep bush tracks and across paddocks through knee deep grass in drizzle, rain, gale force winds and a few clear days. I was interviewed almost daily by TV stations, had three live TV appearances, radio, press three to four times a week and SBS Melbourne every week.

My dear Slovenia, you will remain in my memory till my last breath.

My dear Australia, my dear Queensland. You are now my second home. I will always treasure your beauty and be grateful for the most precious thing you have given me – freedom.

Twelve months after my return from Slovenia, my eyesight has rapidly deteriorated. I have been diagnosed with macular degeneration (wet) in both eyes and am now constantly dependent on others in my daily life. Fortunately for me, this country has a big heart. I am a grateful recipient of a number of concessions which I enjoy and which make my life much more pleasant and bearable.

Two years after our arrival in Australia our friends Paul and Katie have already saved enough money, for the minimum deposit on a two bedroom weatherboard house in Heidelberg, a Melbourne suburb. It was a basic house, no light fittings, no curtains, only two power points in the whole house. The road was unmade, no footpath, no front fence, no garage, only one narrow concrete path from the front boundary to the entrance door. The front and back yards were full of bits of timber, plaster and other building scraps, left over by the builder. The floors inside were covered with rubbish, hard plaster and other scraps. My wife and I cleaned the inside, made it suitable for living and moved in. On the bedroom windows we put up bed sheets, bought electric globes for the kitchen and

bedroom, Katie supplied the kitchen table and four chairs, all very cheap, but good enough to sit and have a meal.

To celebrate the occasion, we invited our friends, some 14 of them, we spent one Saturday evening singing, yodelling and dancing at the same time enjoying the good home made food prepared by our wives.

The neighbours came in for a drink and tasted the food, particularly the apple strudel and praised the good cooks. In those days they were still using dripping for cooking and could not believe that lard or oil can be substituted.

As I mentioned above, we bought our house four years after arriving in Australia. That house was also just a house, with piles of building scraps and rubbish. There were no light globes, lamp shades nor floor coverings. There were also no road, garage or concrete paths. It took us quite a long time to acquire those missing items. The main thing was: we had our own roof over our heads.

If I compare our beginning in this country to today's conditions and today's young couples, who "cannot and never will be able to afford to buy a house". They have different views on life, they expect to have a house completely finished, fully furnished, a car, possibly a four wheel drive, or two in the double garage, garden landscaped, even a swimming pool in the back yard.

I mention this in case any young fellow will read it, not to be disappointed or ashamed to start 'at the bottom' and work his way up through life. Then and only then will you understand and appreciate life in full. Remember, one day you will be 'on top', you will enjoy the fruits of your hard labour, you will look back on life and realize how much you have missed out, how much wrong you have done and how much you have punished your body by maybe smoking, alcohol and drugs.

O, yes, I have smoked cigarettes, pipe and cigars, which is the worst punishment your body can endure. It is just as detrimental to your health as drugs. Alcohol is not far behind. I said goodbye to the cigarettes over 30 years ago, when I had only two more years of life left in me – due to nicotine poisoning.

I said goodbye to alcohol nearly 20 years ago, when I began to enjoy drinking filtered water. Today I am still walking 5-10 km every morning before breakfast.

In 2003 I organized a charity walk from the Sunshine Coast-Kingscliff on the north coast of NSW and finished in my Slovenian Club LIPA on the Gold Coast. The short 250 km walk lasted 10 days, with two days of relaxation in Kingscliff. The collected funds were handed over to the new Cancer research centre in Nambour.

In August-September of the same year I myself organized another charity walk, again in aid of the cancer research centre in Nambour, this time from Maroochydore to Mackay, a distance of 1002 km. I finished the walk in 28 days.

Now I am beginning to realize that my age has got a stern grip on me and does no longer permit me to undertake such lengthy adventurous excursions. But knowing my own stubborn persistence... who knows...

Marijan Lauko. Sunshine Coast, Queensland

Our Uncle Simen by Franc Visocnik

Simen was born under Julian Alps while Franc der Keiser was still rulling our country. Simen lived a normal life until that fateful shot in Sarajevo; since then the shooting followed throughout Europe and even further.

Simen evaded the scattering of deadly ammunition with Soski Front; he went instead to work in the tin mine. When river Soca was no longer bloody red but again reflected the clear blue sky the three coloured flag announced the new entity: the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians

This new country wasn't a paradise but when Serb King Peter escaped from Yugoslavia, the evil forces were truly unleashed.

The devil does not usully travel alone; the first one was the Fascist-Nazi invader and the second came under the banner of the bloody red star of communism.

After the so called liberation in 1945 the terror continued, the machine gun could be heard at night, people tried to escape from their liberated country.

After the Liberation Front offered the family the taste of bolshevic goods, our Uncle Simen and his sister were forced to seek refuge in a foreign country. The escape was made easier because half of his land was outside Yugoslavia. Simen's sister eventually became my mother in law.

In Italy he shared his destiny with many other refugees, political emegrees. His dual ownership of the land made it possible for him to remain under the Mangart mountain and under St. Visarje.

After a quarter of a century the younger generation suggested that the family moves even further away. The old saying: the further you travel the more there is to see, came true for Simen.

Not that Simen knew where he was going but he agreed to join the family in the kangaroo country; so we all settled on the Pacific beach in Quensland.

Everythingh suddenly changed for 84 years old Simen. Nobody spoke Italian or Slovenian anymore. He discovered that he no longer had to shovel the snow in winter, the big water at the back of the house was salty and the big ducks-pelicans were not dangerous. Because the country was flat he got a women's bike and explored the country with his fourlegged guardian Dalmatian Booky. Uncle Simen gradually learned English but the words he learned nobody understood. Uncle Simen however said that everybody understood him and that he also knew what others were thinking. They all knew him and greeted him with a smile: Hi Simon.

Our neighbour a doctor told us a story. His patient a policemen told him about a certain old man presumably Hungarian who was traveling around on a pushbike. This old man was riding a bike on the road instead of the cycling path. The policeman explained to the man that the road is for the cars and the bikes should be on the path. The old man nodded and said Ja, Ja. The policeman continued on his way and so did the old man. Next time the man of the law again found the old man on the road and again he explained to him that he must ride a bike on the cycle path and again the old man kept nodding in agreement saying Ja, ja.

When the same policeman saw this old man riding on the road next, he got out of the car, grabbed the old man ander his arm and picked the bycycle with another hand. He placed the man and the bike on the path saying: Here Ja Ja. Since that day our Simen rode a bike where he had to and his faithful dog ran in front and later behind him. We thanked the neighbour; in the language that Uncle Simen understood we explained to him where Ja Ja was supposed to be. Uncle Simen got his first watch so he wasn't late for lunch.

One day Uncle Simen's neace noticed that he was limping. What is wrong Uncle Simen, she inquired.

Oh, nothing, really nothing, he said. But why are you limping, asked his niece. Oh,down there on the road crossing a car hit me a little bit. Did you fall down? Yes I fell down a little bit. Two women helped me up. Your leg is bleeding, does it hurt. Yes, it hurts a little bit. And what happened then? They were asking me something. And you? What could I do I just said: Ja, Ja. One of the women then talked into her mobile and when we stood on the footpath the police came and an ambulance and they talked. And you? I sat on my bicycle and came home.

We disinfected and dressed the wound which was soon forgotten.

Uncle Simen's poor English was not fateful because he had a home background where he received the explanations about this new world in the language he understood.

He was happy to receive many Happy returns when he turned a hundred years old and he enjoyed a huge torta but he was even happier when he received from Italy a new bike for his 95th birthday. It was a ladies bike with a specially low paddals so he could step easily on it. The bike had a nice sounding bell with which he warned walkers on his dayly rides.

France Visocnik

Bribie Island,15 October 2007

John Bozic

I was born in Ilirska Bistrica (IB) November 1944. My parents came from a small village of Sabonje 7 km away. My father was imprisoned when I was 3 years old and for next 6.5 years our mother took care of my brother and I under extremely difficult conditions.

I went to primary school in Trnovo which is part of Ilirska Bistrica until 9.5 years old and then we left for Italy. Interesting point was that we left with rare Yugo passports one way only and stamped on it: no return. We left under the federal law that said if the head of the family is in another country, the rest of the family has the right to follow under certain conditions. We made an extremely difficult decision but in hindsight the right one. Since my mother was born under Italy, we were deemed by the Italian Government as non refugees and classified under voluntary repatriation. We stayed in a special refugee camp in Trieste mainly for Istrians who elected to live in Italy. 6 months later we were transferred to an international refugee camp in San Saba (Trieste) with the vision of going to USA.

Interesting point is, the international language of communication in the camp was Serbo-Croat hence by the time we left Italy my brother and I were fluent yet we have never been to Croatia or Serbia. I continued my primary and secondary education in Trieste.

In 1956 we were due to leave for Usa; it was just after the Hungarian Revolution commenced. At that point USA stopped all migration until further notice. My father was very disappointed and did not want to wait any longer, hence we applied to migrate to Australia.

We were approved very quickly and in December 1957 before xmas we boarded the ship Sydney from Naples and commenced our journey into unknown.

I do recall my mother confessing to a friend that she did not know precisely where Australia was; she added that she only intended to make some money and return. I think these thoughts were every migrant's inspiration, but in reality very few people returned back home.

Arriving in Melbourne in January 1958 we were quickly transported to Bonegilla which was an interim camp for the migrants, before they dispersed all over the country.

After a disappointing attempt at picking hops, my father decided to try and get a job in the booming building industry in Canberra. He was successful hence we followed and by the end of March 1958 we settled in O'Connor, Canberra. Because of the boom, the rental accommodation was non existent. The 4 of us all lived in one bedroom and shared the facilities with others. We constantly moved around trying to improve our living standards.

In those days Canberra was small and had a population of around 30,000 people. There were only 2 public high schools and 4 private schools to choose from and my English education began at St Edmunds college which at that time was only half finished. Travelling to school by bus in those days was a gruelling 1.5 hours picking kids from all northern suburbs. I integrated into the system very quickly, mainly due to my English studies in Italy, hence with reasonable command of the language. Discrimination in those early years was common, but it somehow never worried me.

After completing my secondary education I began a 5 year apprenticeship in automotive industry and had automotive businesses in different capacities until mid 80's.

My family first contact with the Slovenian community in Canberra began very early. My parents were looking to make new friends and since there was no Slovenian club as yet, individual contact by word of mouth was essential. In the very early days I remember Mr Falez who was instrumental in raising enough funds with others to commence the building of the club's premises in Woden. I do recall Mr Falez's relentless persistence of door to door canvassing to raise money for the cause. I also remember him knocking on our door late one night and skilfully persuading my father to part

with \$20 for the building fund and making him a member at the same time. Mr Falez held many positions within the Slovenian community; to me he is a real patriot that I highly respect. Over the years I got to know all his family on a friendly terms.

In 1967, I decided to marry a young lady named Linda against mine and her parents wishes. Her family migrated from Scotland. The result was 4 wonderful children. Fiona, Vanessa, Rachael and Damien.

I always dreamed of going back to my roots and in 1974 with my 2 oldest children at that time 4 and 6 years I packed up and went on an European adventure with intent to work in Europe. My childhood memories of Slovenia were not precisely what I came back to, nevertheless we had a wonderful time visiting relatives and friends that I have not seen for more than 20 years, but above all we travelled intensively learning about the history and geography of my native country. My overall impression was sad that the Communist regime were bungling and mismanaging and bleeding the Slovenian economy. I felt the suppression in people without them saying a word. This was the first of many visits that I made to Slovenia over 33 years. From early 90's when in Europe on business I would sneak in usually for one day only and surprise my relatives, and this kept a bond between them and myself. I felt that Linda got to know Slovenia just as well as her native Scotland.

On the first visit I learned very quickly, that no matter how well you spoke Slovenian, (and mine still is very poor) people would easily identify you as a stranger; they always asked me where I came from. No matter how hard I tried, I was never successful in passing as an every day Slovenian. On those occasions I wished that my Slovenian grammar had been better.

In 1985 I decided to change direction in my life and decided to leave the automotive industry and do something different and challenging. After a 3 year stint in the commercial redevelopment and studying for my Gemmology diploma and still not being satisfied I was looking for alternatives and this led me to become a member of the Slovenian Association in Canberra. On frequent visits to the club's Saturday functions, which I thoroughly enjoyed, I slowly realized that there was no harmony and unity within the club. Different members pulling in different directions and trying to disrupt the main function of the club. This difference stemmed from the old days back in Slovenia. During my membership I made many Slovenian friends. Even after establishing my Gemstone export company and going to work in Japan in the early 90's I kept my membership going but the disintegration of the Association was inevitable mainly due to no new Slovenian migrants arriving and the children of the those founding migrants not following their parents footsteps.

In my travels people would ask me if I was a native Australian or not and by responding that I was born in Slovenia would immediately bring a 90% response of: oh yes I know Czechoslovakia. This was a usual response from the Japanese and other nationals. During the 16 years I worked in Japan, I learned about their culture and language, which was a huge learning curve in my life. During that time I met my current lady in my life and my partner Hiromi who now resides with me in Sydney

At times I sought other Slovenians in Japan without success until 2002 FIFA world cup preparations. The Slovenian team was stationed in a small city of Mimasako-cho about 200km south of Osaka where we lived. The local city council wanted to have a small Slovenian culinary fair so that all the children etc could learn about Slovenia and Slovenian cuisine. They underestimated the rarity of Slovenian people and ever more so Slovenian Chefs in Japan, but found the only chef in Japan whom I saw on television teaching a group of Japanese the Slovenian culinary art. I was lucky to be watching the program and learned that he had a Slovenian restaurant called Pika Polonca. His name is Igor Lajlar (about my age) I did contact him and arranged to come to his restaurant.

He lives in Kyoto the old imperial Capital of Japan about an hour travel from Osaka. It was a memorable visit and I learned a lot about him. He came to Japan in the early 70's graduated from Kyoto University, married a local lady and it was my pleasure to have met all his family. We had a wonderful comparison of his Japan and my Australia. I admired with a touch of jealousy his Japanese fluency. Since I was the first Slovenian until then to eat in his restaurant, he treated me

like celebrity and introducing me to his regular Japanese guests. I do recall his Gibanica which he passionately was promoting at every opportunity. I understand that he has now expanded and organises tours to Slovenia, where the Japanese tourists stay on farms and experience the real country life.

I have had so far a very challenging and fulfilling life, but I do regret not passing more of my heritage down to my children. When the parents are of different nationality, usually the mother tongue prevails; hence my children all understand the Scottish dialect with the native touch. Although all of my children have been to Slovenia at some point in time, their Slovene vocabulary is insignificant.

As the years roll on, I see my link with my relatives diminishing. I have only one Auntie left who resides in Ilirska Bistrica and my cousins who are spread all over from Europe to South America and am very lucky that I had the opportunity to visit them all.

I often ask my dear mother Paulina who is now approaching her 88th birthday and still lives in Canberra and maintains her full independence and amazingly still drives her car, whether she has any regrets of ever coming to Australia. Her response is always the same that we are lucky to be in the lucky country, because the decision was made to come to Australia at that time on the basis of urgency and not on the knowledge or merit of the lucky country. She would do it all over again. Visiting her still gives me the opportunity to speak Slovene dialect from Ilirska Bistrica. My mother still cooks those wonderful dishes that I have enjoyed as long as I can remember and my children have learned some of these skills from her too.

Coming to Australia at a child age, I have never been torn between my native and my adopted country. I know that I belong here but I still support Slovene athletes in sport and in other Slovenian policies. I love Slovenian music and songs and above all food.?

I will also continue to visit my relations overseas until the inevitable links will come to the end.

Andrej Globocnik

I was born on 10. 2 1932 in a village of thirteen houses close to Trieste. We had no land so my father provided for us working as a carpenter. Times were hard, the work irregular and poorly paid.

Trieste territory has a turbulent history; it has been a disputed territory throughout history. Trieste was a free port under the reign of Austria; this was our territory's most flourishing era. During the WWI the allies promised Italians Trieste, Primorsko and Gorisko for joining them in the fight against Austria. After WWI Austria disintegrated so allies rewarded Italians by giving them our Slovenian land. Nobody asked our people how they felt about it and what they wanted. Our dear allies bartered with our lives and our land behind our backs; they never asked about the will of our people. They pushed us into an untenable misery; we became Musolini's victims, we were and still are paying the price for their decisions. Some of the blame for this goes to our own poor leadership.

People of Primorska resisted Germanic rulers but after they were annexed by Italians they were sorely disappointed. At first Italians introduced Italian as a second language but soon Italian became official language and people were forbidden to speak Slovenian publicly. My father was often in conflict with authorities because both my parents were patriotic Slovenians.

Slovenians were discriminated against in every way. Our region is known for producing good wines and fruit but it was not worth producing it because people were not allowed to sell it on a free market and the government paid less for it than it cost to produce it. The laws on the paper were the same for everybody but the administration of the law discriminated against Slovenians. Most Primorska people simply hated Italians. Italians rewarded the few Slovenians who joined Fascist Italian Mussolini party; they gave them special privileges to encourage other Slovenians to become fascist Italians.

I was eight at the beginning of the WWII. I remember the war years being full of fear, hunger and misery. Italians picked dad for the Mussolini army. They put all Slovenians into so called special battalions so they could easily keep them under control. By conscription of young and older men into the army they made it harder for Slovenians to rebel against Mussolini or to join the Liberation front partisans.

After Italy capitulated my father returned home and joined partisans. He was shot in a leg so Germans easily captured him and sent him to jail in Trieste. Mum managed to see him once and he asked her to bring me to see him. The following night we walked 19 km to Trieste and in the morning collapsed under the huge chestnut tree hungry, cold and tired. We were afraid that we might not be able to see dad. At daylight we approached the jail entrance and mum begged the authorities to let us see dad. We cried and begged but our tears did not help; the guard's face remained unmoved, cold and hateful; our pleas fell on deaf ears. My mother was a pious, honest lady and she fell to her knees in front of a guard; she said in good Italian: mister, have you no heart? Maybe you have the family at home; maybe you have children. Look at this boy here; maybe he will never again see his father. Mum was pregnant with my sister that was born a few days later.

I believe that mum's words and her condition melted the guard's icy cold soul because he said: All right but only for half an hour. Oh yes, we saw our starved, sad dad. He knew what to expect from his captors. He also knew in what miserable situation he was leaving his family. He embraced me and said: Toni, believe that Christ lives. We returned home late at night.

Dad ended his life in a crematorium at the age of 33 with about 500 other local resistance fighters. Under the Nazi occupation, the sole extermination camp on Italian soil was constructed at the Rižarna near Trieste.

There was nothing left of dad to bury at our cemetery but I erected a place of remembrance for him like for the rest of my ancestors have so they will not be forgotten.

After WWII on April 30, 1945, the Italian anti-fascists incited a revolt against the Nazis and on May 1, Yugoslav Tito's army liberated most of Trieste from the Nazis. Intent on annexation, the Yugoslavs quickly began forming their own military administration. They began to arrest members of the population, including the Italian democratic resistance force. The Yugoslav troops were finally forced to withdraw from the city under diplomatic pressure from the Western Allies. In 1947 Trieste became independent and governed for several years by the Allied Military Government, comprising American and British forces. This state was dissolved in 1954 and the territory dubbed Zone A, went to Italy, while the southern part of the territory (Zone B), comprising Istria and some parts of the Karst went to Yugoslavia.

Zone B was divided between Yugoslav republics Slovenia and Croatia according to the majority of population; Slovenia got the territory around Koper, and Croatia got most of Istria. The city of Trieste went to Italy even though Yugoslavia strongly protested against it. We were happy that our village came under Yugoslavia. The border cut along our home.

Yugoslav government promised liberty, freedom and prosperity to Slovenians; Yugoslavia after the war became to us a new promised land of milk and honey. Our people were hopeful that their fortunes would improve in Yugoslavia. At the beginning most Slovenians wished to join other Slovenians in Slovenia although Slovenia itself was a part of Yugoslavia.

Soon Primorska Slovenians were bitterly disappointed in Yugoslavia. They saw no prospects for economic prosperity; we again felt betrayed because Yugoslavia did not fulfil its promises with which it lured us under their government. People felt controlled, scared and insecure. No resistance or criticism was allowed; people felt that they were constantly watched and listened to. They said that everyone was free to practice religion but everybody knew that people who went to church could never hope to prosper or get the positions they wanted.

The years after the war were hungry miserable years of poverty, destruction and restrictions. The consequences of the war were still visible and felt every day in every way. The faces of people were sullen and worried. It was hard to buy the necessities. As an apprentice I had to work hard ten to sixteen hours a day hungry most of the time and without the basic comforts for decent life. When I finished the apprenticeship I owed some money to the company for the meals they provided. I could not pay it so the company sued me. I arrived to Sezana court in February 1952. The kitchen administrator Janez came to witness about my crime. My good friend Janez left his wife and a baby that early freezing morning to walk twelve kilometres to Sezana so he could save the little money they gave him for the bus trip.

The judge asked me: Why didn't you pay your debt?

With my meagre wages I could not do it, I answered.

Do you intend to pay the debt, asked the judge.

I do, of course I do, I replied.

When, asked the judge.

As soon as I will have the money for it, I promised and that seemed to satisfy the judge. I was expecting something worse. That was the one promise I never fulfilled and I am not sorry. I walked three hours to Sezana and three hours back home. I had nothing to eat all day and in my misery I did a lot of thinking on the way. I remembered the afternoon my father prepared to join partisans. Mum begged him to be careful but he told her that this was his opportunity to fight against the cruel invader and seek justice for our people. He insisted that this was everybody's sacred patriotic duty. He said that even if the worst happened his children will enjoy the better future; they will have freedom and prosperity for all the days of their lives. What irony, what betrayal! How wrong he was. Luckily he did not see what was happening because he would protest and get himself in greater trouble. I returned home in the evening and my mother embraced me and said: My poor child look at you. The tears ran down her old face. Maybe our smoky kitchen brought the tears to her eyes but I think that I looked very miserable and sad to her. I was exhausted and starved.

Mother, I am going to go away, I said.

Where, she whispered.

To the other side, I said.

I escaped to Italy in 1956; after all our complaints against Italy we realised that even post war Italy offered more freedom and prosperity than Yugoslavia. I planned to immigrate to Canada for a few years to earn some money and then return home. I hoped that the situation at home would improve and we could then begin to enjoy the more carefree life like people in the west did.

The migration to Canada was unfortunately closed; I waited patiently for almost three years to be accepted by Canada or Australia. In the meantime I found casual employment so I could survive; I also sent home some money. I moved freely because I spoke Italian. Of course all this was illegal since I had no Italian citizenship; I was not willing to renew my Italian citizenship. I left Naples for Australia on 13.4.59 on a ship Fairsea. About 1800 migrants of different nationalities came with me. We arrived to Melbourne on 10.5.59 and continued our trip to Bonegilla by train. They were heating the train with hot water in tin containers under the seats. When the water cooled down they replaced it with containers of hot water. I was dismayed by the scenery; barren countryside and long wire fences stretched into emptiness. It was a cold foggy day when I arrived to Bonegilla. The food smelled terrible and I could not eat it. I never ate sheep in Slovenia and we never used beef dripping as fat.

After a miserable month in Bonegilla they sent me to port Kembla Steelworks. Wollongong became a migrant city because of the Steelworks. They provided full board in a camp but the food was as terrible as in Bonegilla; I wanted to get out. An Italian came looking for boarders and he offered me a room. He had five families in a house and he slept on the veranda so he could collect more rent. Women made a roster to cook on the one stove but it was an improvement for us to have home cooked meals. After a month I found an Italian baker who let me share his home for half the rent because I helped with the maintenance. Italians played an important role in my life simply because I spoke Italian. This was rather unfortunate in the long run because it stopped me from trying harder to learn English. I married the baker's daughter Marcela who only spoke Italian although her grandparents were Slovenian. Although Marcela learned some Slovenian I regret that both of us did not become fluent in English much earlier. It did not worry us at the time but now I can see how one could not get ahead without knowing the language. I started evening English classes but when I could work overtime instead I dropped out of school. Economic survival seemed more important at the time. I bought a block of land. I borrowed most of the money and repaid it in the following year. We enthusiastically began to build our house. Marcela and I had three daughters by the time we moved into our own home. Being a family under our own roof was the best reward for all our struggles of the past. Marcela stayed home with the children.

We stayed in port Kembla for ten years. We made many Italian and Slovenian friends and some of different nationalities as well. Those first friends remained our lifelong friends. Slovenians in Wollongong had their association Danica which we joined. We had very happy gatherings and celebrations there.

We all carried with us the unpleasant heritage of war and after the war years but we never boasted or complained about it. Slovenians in Wollongong to this day follow this line. The doors of their club were always open to everybody be it for sport, religious or social gatherings. Everybody was welcome; they have good relationship with other Slovenian associations to this day. We tried to understand each other; we knew that beside pleasant memories we carried much bitterness and pain. Nobody saw the depth of trauma and pain in the person next to him but the burdens of the past defined us. We realised that our experiences will follow us for the rest of our lives whether we wanted them or not. Despite our past we were given a chance to use our talents and energies for the common good of our people.

I stopped blaming people for what happened to us in the past. My duty is to live in harmony with people and with myself. I reconciled with the idea that all the wrongs perpetrated against us do not

give us the right to perpetuate the hatred. With goodwill and respect for human life it should be possible for all of us to live in peace and harmony.

One day we visited friends in Sydney and on the trip back to Wollongong we decided to put our house on the market and move to Sydney. We realised that Wollongong was a dirty polluted city and that Sydney offered greater educational opportunities for our daughters and better job opportunities for me. In Sydney we lived in a rented flat for the first year while I built our house. In 1972 I started subcontracting for builders. I earned enough to provide well for our family. We chose a Catholic College for our daughters because we believed that it provided the discipline and good teaching; nothing was too expensive for the education of our children. They speak Slovenian fluently and have been to Slovenia several times. My family was the greatest blessing for me and I am happy seeing my daughters on the right path. This is my greatest achievement.

In Wollongong I became a committee man of the Slovenian association. I vividly remember Simon Gornik one day standing up and walking out of our meeting. I went after him and asked him what was wrong. He said: Everything in there smells of communism and I can not tolerate it. My father was killed by communists. I said: My father was killed by Germans. Do we want to perpetuate war and foster the hatred or do we want to accept peace and live and work together?

Simon understood and we became friends. On my short visits to Wollongong I am glad to see that friends from thirty- forty years ago remain my friends to this day. We understood each other's pain but we do not blame each other for it. I never hid the fact that my father was a partisan so some people labelled me a communist. In Wollongong we realised that we came from different political background but we tolerated each other.

Unfortunately in Sydney that wasn't possible because certain individuals believed that they had a God given right to make decisions for everybody else. If these individuals really practiced Christ's teachings they would fear his judgment because they perpetrated much unhappiness to their own people. Jesus was teaching us to love each other and forgive those that have wronged us.

Vlado Susa approached me one day in Sydney and invited me to join Slovenians as they were building their clubhouse. Although I was then busy building my own home I agreed to help. I was proud that I belonged to a very small nation and to a smaller still group of very conscientious and united group of people capable of building a club home for all of us and for our children and grandchildren. I was very naïve. I fully trusted people I barely knew.

We built the club in record time. Wonderful! The Slovenian Saturday school for our children started and I brought our girls to school; quite a good number attended and their teacher was good. The club was well attended. It was exciting, interesting, and lively; we were all happy gathering every weekend after a hard week's work to spend the time with our Slovenian friends. We were happy to come together as a nation and as friends.

But not for long! It came like the lightning from the clear sky. One day I drove my daughter home from Slovenian school and she asked me: Dad what did you do that the men in the club are so angry with you.

When I later investigated I discovered that some of us were stigmatised as Reds. The club suppressed these attitudes during the building of the club and until the club's activities reached its best and most active period. If the leaders of the club honestly presented their aims and goals at the beginning many people would never join and help building the club.

Who caused these divisions?

Slovenians were always a divided nation. This division cost us at one time to lose our Northern part Koroska. During the referendum Slovenians fell for Austrian promises and their friendly invitation to remain a part of Austria. The church also contributed to this decision because they were describing Serbs as green devils. Austrians are of course Catholics and Serbs are orthodox. If all Slovenians decided through that referendum to remain in Yugoslavia we would now all be in our independent Slovenia. As it happened, Austrians don't even allow Slovenian road signs in Slovenian part of Austria.

Some Slovenians always favoured Germans; this was best evident during the WWII. After the war the people who collaborated with Germans, demanded the same victorious rights as had those that defeated the enemy and won the war. Many died for this victory, amongst them was also my father.

There was much written and said about our reconciliation but little changed in our hearts.

In the meantime Yugoslavia and communism self destructed and do not exist anymore but people still hide their party membership books just in case if they will need them again; they only changed colours; maybe tomorrow they will again get a chance to cover everything with the rag that carries the swastika. They changed their red horse for the black one. Not because of their convictions but to secure the place at the trough.

Australian Slovenians who had contact with Yugoslav embassy were labelled as communists and the others were called anticommunists. The leaders of both groups were promoting their beliefs. These divisions happened all over Australia so they must have been orchestrated by some background powers but I was never aware of them.

Slovenians are still talking only about communist terror. We judge and criticise communism; it really had caused much damage and suffering. We Slovenians who had to leave our homes and our loved ones were not immune. I hope the communism will never return because the burden of its heritage is still upon us. We had to endure the evils of the war and of communism.

As we all condemn communism it would be right to write something about the conditions that existed before communism; these conditions made communism possible. Bolsheviks orchestrated the cruel and bloody revolution. Horrible! But what about the suffering, poverty, fear and degradation of millions of people who had no rights before the communism? Did God approve of that? They were God and government fearing people. Why don't we write about that as well? Communism did not replace a perfect system; the conditions for ordinary people were rotten before the revolution.

It is true, however, that we all escaped from communist dictatorship. The foreign countries welcomed us because they needed and used our hardworking hands; we were grateful because we needed the roof over our heads and the simple comforts to survive. We worked like bullocks with the yoke around our necks.

Among us were individuals who tried to revive their old ambitions from the war years; they ostracized anyone they could not use to achieve their goals. Is that understanding and tolerance towards those who think differently? Is that the love of your neighbour? Or is that selfishness and greed for power? To think that we are all children of the same mother and have somewhere our common home country which we call Slovenia with pride! That hurts. There is no unity or understanding; there never was. And more! We bring our traumas on our children and our communities. We are forcing our ways. I feel ashamed and sad. How do you feel my fellow Slovenians?

Slovenia was a part of Yugoslavia until 1991 and Yugoslav Embassy was representing Slovenia and also Slovenians in Australia. Whoever had to deal with any kind of documents relating to Slovenia had to do that through the Yugoslav Embassy if he wanted to or not. The same rule applied also to those who applied for the pension for their parents. Did they become communists while they arranged these things? All of us who travelled to Slovenia could do that only with the permission of Yugoslav embassy. Are therefore all of us naughty communists? If I remember rightly Yugoslavia offered amnesty to all who lived in Yugoslavia from 1941 on, except to those who were actively collaborating with Hitler. And we had such people in Sydney. These people of course did not dare travel to Slovenia. They knew why. They were openly protesting against anything that did not fit with the period they mourned. They persecuted like the worst social evil those whose views they did not like.

Spomenka Hribar in one of her articles described her communist father who was an honest strong man and paid with his life for his beliefs. There were other honest good communists although more of them were greedy corrupt opportunists who blackened their red horse at the first opportunity just

to remain in the saddle. As I see it, red and black party members hold much in common, both want to govern and force their will on people; both are opportunists and insist that: if you are not with us you are against us. Both are greedy for power, wealth and influence; both want to live on the account of the honest hard working people. They work on the principle: You scratch my back and I will scratch yours or as they say in Slovenia: one hand washes the other. They are grabbing for themselves the property of the nation and our nation is getting poorer and more disillusioned. Communist did not take the national wealth out of the country; it remained in Slovenia for Slovenians.

I understand that Yugoslav embassy had to promote the symbols and interests of Yugoslav government since they were employed as Yugoslav representatives. They had to assert their influence over Yugoslavs in Australia. Slovenska izseljenska Matica SIM- the organisation working for the benefit of Slovenians abroad promoted Slovenian culture and kept in touch with Slovenians outside Slovenia. They were working under the restraints of the same communist regime. When SIM representatives came with cultural groups to perform for us I accepted them.

Slovenians at home joined the communist party for different reasons. A few were ideologically convinced communists but most were opportunists who realised that the way to advancement, prosperity and power was through the membership of the communist party. Some simply had no chance to hold their jobs let alone be promoted if they were not members of the party. They did what they had to do to survive economically and professionally.

Slovenians historically had to adapt to ever new regimes; they were forced to make themselves acceptable to foreign powers in order to survive. Most of us speak other languages and we are willing to accommodate others who do not speak Slovenian. Maybe this is a result of our smallness and of being ruled by foreigners. In Yugoslavia official language was Serbo Croatian but on coming to Australia some Slovenians resented those Slovenians who spoke Serbo Croatian with other Yugoslavs. Some Slovenians rejected everything Yugoslav; they labelled anyone associated with Yugoslav government a communist. These leaders wanted to dictate to us what to think and say.

This reminded me of the times when I was already for the second year wearing the trousers belonging to the Yugoslav army. At that time there were also people trying to brain wash me to think what they wanted me to think.

It was a freezing winter and some of us had frost bitten ears and noses; also our fingers cracked and were bleeding. Three of us slept together and pulled our blankets over ourselves to warm up. During the night the vapour of our breathing froze the edges of the blankets. When you grabbed the machine gun some of your skin was left on it. We had no gloves or socks or medical help. We were so cold that I felt the ice in my veins instead of blood. Snow in places covered the telephone poles and the temperature fell under minus 33. I was as hungry as a Siberian wolf. I must have in that condition said something my superiors did not like. How dare I? They called me for interrogation.

Don't you know that Yugoslav soldiers want for nothing?

I know, I began fearfully; I was just thinking, I started again

You have no right to think. Here are others who think for you. Three days jail in isolation!

Please, I begged, I want to explain.

Be quiet.

I would just like to say that...

Seven days jail. Turn around.

That meant that the proceedings were finished and I had to disappear. That was the harshest punishment which a commander of first battalion of 93rd regiment could pronounce. It was 1954.

Jail was 2 by 3 metres room with a wooden bench for the bed. I was allowed to bring one container. Such events made me want to leave my country and they were the reason that I am in Australia.

What irony? What similarity with Slovenian Australian leaders! They would be capable of acting like that commander if the situation arose. They were just as selfish, intolerant, uncompromising and unable to accept diversity of views. We had many examples like that in the club.

We wished for peace; we wanted to foster good relations with our home country and cooperate with SIM when the situation demanded that.

They muddled our names, they labelled us communists. That tactic was successful with those of the same views during and after WWII; this did not go well with the rest of Slovenians or with Australians. The West used these people during the cold war because they have been very vocal anticommunist and anti Yugoslav voice. Later the West abandoned them because they were no longer useful. They did not only lose the war against communism they lost against the west.

Americans and English returned Slovenian home guards who escaped to Austria, to Yugoslavia after the war. Although Churchill hated communism he hated home guards more because they collaborated with Hitler. Neither Hitler nor allies trusted them. The way the Yugoslav government had them killed after the war was not fair or acceptable but the revenge played a great role in it. The question exists: how would they act in the same situation?

Those of us who were ostracised by these so called anticommunist leaders, established our own club. Some accused Yugoslav authorities of giving us the idea and of starting our new association but I was never aware of any influence or interference. The atmosphere among us improved but the bitterness in our relations still exists. With a little goodwill and understanding and acceptance of diverse opinions and beliefs we could achieve much; especially that our children would enjoy common social and cultural experiences in the same building we built together. We could offer hospitality and friendship to all our people and our children could learn the language and Slovenian culture; we could love each other instead of barely knowing each other. Many don't even say good day to each other as they meet on the street.

I escaped from Yugoslavia and I did not like South Yugoslav nations ruling and abusing Slovenia. At the same time I like to have friendly relations with other Yugoslavs and I would be happy to live in a confederation of Yugoslavia in which Slovenia would have a total autonomy.

I think that Slovenians are going from one extreme to another; we were brought up to firmly believe in building the brotherhood and unity with South Slav nations but now most Slovenians resent anything that comes from the south.

The government nationalised the property after the war but now they are returning it to the descendants of those land owners who oppressed Slovenians in the past. Distant relatives of Germanic and Italian aristocracy that ruled Slovenians in the past are claiming the best lands and buildings in Slovenia. The church is getting their vast portions as well. At least Tito stood up to foreigners and did not give in to their demands. Whose property is it? Who are they returning it to? Why? Weren't these goods once the possessions of our ancestors?

I believe that Slovenians will find a way of surviving like they did throughout history. There have always been groups of people determined to defend our language and cultural identity. We will keep searching for opportunities; we haven't been called opportunists for nothing. A friend of mine once said: Slovenians are quietly waiting to pounce at every opportunity. Those of us close to the border are specially known to grab every opportunity.

I never had a conflict with members of any other nationality but Slovenians always find something to disagree about. Maybe Slovenians love each other so much that we can't stand it when they don't think the same way we do. Although most of us long for each other's company we can not bridge our differences. Instead of having fun in our old age we created our own hell. Maybe we argue because we care about each other. Maybe other Slovenians provide the only chance for us to argue. Most of us could not argue with Australians because we did not speak English well enough or because we did not care about them enough. Maybe we did not find so much to disagree about with foreigners.

I am hopeful that our children will find some comfort in knowing other Slovenians; they are not burdened with the events of the past; they will look to the future. Maybe they will revive Slovenian culture at home and in Australia.

Fiction

Only fiction dares to be as real as life is.

There are bits of us all in the following stories. They were inspired by and based on real people and events but I changed the circumstances to protect the identity of storytellers. It is easy to tell about our achievements but we often hide our disappointments because we are afraid that our loved ones may think less of us if our fears and anxieties, aspirations and failures were exposed. Australian Slovenians have similar reasons for being happy but we discovered many interesting and unique ways to be unhappy. Cilka Zagar

Real life is not like that.

What is real life like?

What is real life?

What is real?

Are dreams real?

Is being awake an illusion?

Is real what I touch or what touches my heart?

Slovenians in Sydney

For I, the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and forth generation of them that hate me.

The Bible.

Tina and Franc

We are here to celebrate the life of a man who has done great things, a man of integrity, who never wavered in his beliefs, a man who returned to his maker, says the priest. They are trained to say nice words.

Our children and our friends also tell the funeral assembly that my husband Franc was a well-respected and dearly loved man.

Well-chosen words inspire the mourners to sniff into their white handkerchiefs. The beauty of the words from the Bible makes crying almost enjoyable.

It is the fifteenth of June 1988, the beginning of winter in Australia. The afternoon is pleasantly crisp and sunny.

I remember my wedding day in June 1938. It was the beginning of summer in Slovenia and the day was just as bright.

We lay his body to rest but everything that Franc was, he still is. Although he is with God now, he lives on in our hearts and in our memories. Franc made peace with his maker and received his last sacraments, says the priest.

The main thing is to make your peace with God. As a child I regularly confessed that I was sincerely sorry for not praying more and for being distracted in church and sometimes being angry with my brothers and sisters. I didn't have wicked thoughts to confess yet then.

Franc and I confessed and received the Holy Communion before we got married. We wanted to have a clean start to our new life. During our wedding ceremony the priest reminded us that almighty God sees our every thought and deed.

During the fifty years of our marriage I often prayed to God to save me from evil thoughts.

After my wedding I heard a woman say that the little bitch got her claws into Franc's money. I was the little bitch.

I didn't know why people became unfriendly towards me after I married Franc. I did the right thing and mum was pleased.

Here, Tereza passes a clean tissue into my hand. In her capacity as a wife of a funeral director, she often has to deal with bereavements with the same kindness and solemnity as her husband. Tereza was also a trusted employee of my husband.

I always loved the exquisite beauty of the funeral ritual. The intensity of life and death coming together, the grief and the relief washed with tears and the people joined in a web of tenderness. We are humble and pure and forgiving as we face death. God is watching.

Even as a child I was awed by death. I walked alone on the narrow paths between the graves in the local cemetery thinking of God and angels and life and ghosts. Only children can experience the wholeness of things so thoroughly.

Death is the fulfilment of everything life was. I am next in line. That's all there is. I hope to die a peaceful death. I made many novenas for that purpose. As a little girl I prayed for a happy last hour as directed by our parish priest and my mother. I confessed every Friday and received Holy

Communion every day for months and months to make sure that my last hour on Earth would be happy. That is all one needs to pray for really.

Franc's friends stand close to me in their black funeral suits, their faces shining from the morning shave. The coolness of the day makes them cough occasionally and they wipe their glasses from time to time because the warm moisture of their bodies obscures the view. We are all next in line and that unites us. The invisible thread of life is leading us towards the grave.

I will always remember his face glowing with happiness on the day he died, whispers Tereza.

The awesome finality of death excites people. There is a rebirth in the hearts of the mourners. Smooth loveliness is spread over the funeral assembly like a veil over the bride.

Mum and dad had fifty happy years together, says my daughter Martina as part of her eulogy.

I drop a handful of dirt into the grave. There are fifty red roses on the coffin one for each year of our marriage.

Franc was 86 and I am 66. In their speeches people praise Franc and express sympathy for me, the poor widow.

It would be abhorrent to say that Franc's death came as a relief. Nobody would dream of admitting it even in their own hearts that Franc's death was overdue because he became a cantankerous and contemptuous old man who enjoyed causing misery to people around him.

People will always remember his generosity, says the priest who barely knew Franc. Funeral is a celebration of person's divinity not his frailty.

Nobody would dare say that Franc's greatest joy in life was to squeeze another dollar out of the person he did business with. People understand that you have to be prudent in business. Franc wasn't mean, he was prudent. To the last day of his life.

Franc kept telling me that whatever he did was for the family. That was supposed to make everything right. He made me an accomplice in squeezing money out of those that were weaker than him.

We learned to be grateful to Franc for keeping us wealthy despite difficult circumstances. Money helps you survive and make something out of your life. People take notice of those that made something of their lives.

Poor people dream of being rich, said Franc. They believe that all their dreams will come true if and when they will win the lottery. They wait for the winning numbers all their lives. They don't know how to make their dreams come true, so they are jealous of those that do. Even God will not help you if you don't help yourself. It says in the Bible that one has to use his talents.

Everybody seems to have moments of happiness. I wonder if the poor really dream about the day when their bank account will be sufficiently sound. Maybe the desired winning ticket, like God himself, moves a step away, with every step we make.

I remember Franc reciting the words he must have read somewhere: It's the same the whole world over ain't it all a blooming shame It's the rich wot gets the pleasure It's the poor wot gets the blame

I thank God that nobody sees the thoughts that pass behind my grieving exterior.

Whenever someone says: I don't care, they really care. When they say: Not that I am jealous, they are jealous. When people say that money means nothing to them I know that all they think about is money, said Franc.

Franc was probably right; he was an educated, experienced, older man.

Some people dedicate their lives to the poor; I said once trying to outsmart Franc.

One way or another we all gather the riches. Some of us leave them behind others get their rewards after death, said Franc.

I always believed that Franc was deeply religious although we never really talked about God. We never talked much about anything, come to think of it.

I forgot about sex long ago but these days every film announces right at the beginning that there will be explicit sex scenes, violence and coarse language. The government warns us that these ingredients may be disturbing and offensive to some and they might choose to refrain from watching. There is a lot of talk about child abuse. No wonder there is abuse with all these films showing how it is done. In my time mum just told us to be careful and to keep our legs together at all times. And cover our knees.

When I am alone I enjoy crying as I watch unhappy love stories.

Turn off that trash, said Franc. He never liked me watching love stories or sex. He chose sport or news or war or politics or crime. He read stories about Hitler and Stalin and Napoleon. They are probably less dangerous to the moral well being than sex.

I don't mind watching sex. Occasionally one gets a knot in the stomach and a sort of a dizzy fit of desire while watching sexual activities on television. Sometimes I even have a pleasant dream after watching sexual scenes.

My doctor asked me about my sex life after my menopause. I told him that there was very little sex in our marriage for the last thirty years. He suggested that I take Vallum.

During the first years of our marriage Franc liked to have sex every day and I willingly participated. I was too scared to refuse Franc anything. I had my three babies to think of. I considered myself lucky that Franc found me so desirable and that he came home every day.

Recently I overheard Franc talking about sex with his friend Jack. They were drinking red wine while I cleared the dishes after lunch. The door was ajar and I heard snippets of what they said.

It's not fair that one still think about it when the body can no longer respond, said Jack.

Sex is not everything, said Franc.

Actually it is, said Jack. You grow up to have sex. You get married so you can have a steady supply and when you have everything else, you want some extra sex. When you can no longer have sex you think about it. I believe that you die when you stop thinking about sex.

I thought that Jack was joking but I did not hear them laugh. Old men probably understand each other even when nobody else does. Maybe they were joking but did not bother to laugh.

I was rather relieved that I still sometimes thought about sex.

Jack and Franc turned to television.

Look at that skirt, said Jack.

I glanced at television. It could barely be called a skirt. If it was any shorter it should be called a belt. You could see where the legs started as the girl's bottom wriggled on top of her high-heeled legs. Long strong legs, almost fat.

I like big girls, said Jack.

Women, said Franc. A necessary evil. I wonder if he meant women generally or a particular woman like me. Sometimes I felt that I was a necessary evil. I brought it all down upon our family.

It is for the best, mum said when I married Franc.

The world needs another Hitler to bring back order, said Franc to Jack.

War and crime and violence fascinate people, said Jack.

The media glorifies criminals. If they were presented as hopeless vulgar creatures they would cease to be popular, said Franc.

They actually compete in vulgarity to escalate publicity and sales, said Jack.

I am not going to be here long, Franc kept saying to me. Everything will be yours when I am gone.

Nobody dared upset daddy because he accumulated all this wealth which he was going to leave to us so we could live happily ever after.

If only Franc was willing to be pleased.

Franc lived a good life and reached a good age, says Teresa's husband.

My son Damian and my daughters Vera and Martina are happy that they reconciled with their father and that we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of our wedding as one big happy family.

With the funeral prayers done, close friends hug me, kiss the air near my ear and tell me how very sorry they are for me. Some kisses touch my neck and others land on all sorts of places by accident in the awkward rush of sympathy and etiquette. People avoid my face because it is stained with tears. I taste the tears as I move my face this way and that to give people a chance to kiss something rather than the saltiness of my face and the bitterness of my lips. My face is respectfully left to mourn the loss of my husband. Acquaintances shake my hand and whisper their sympathies.

I last cried like this at the Christmas concert where my grand daughter Tina played an angel. She looked angelic in her wings and she reminded me of when I was young. My other grandchildren also had eyes on me as they sang and danced. I felt an intense pain of pure pleasure. There is life after death.

How great you are, God, I sing behind the mask of a crying face.

I don't remember ever crying because I was sad. Maybe people cry because they are sad, maybe they don't. What is sadness really? Or happiness? Or love? People make words and spend lifetimes searching for their meaning.

Happy marriages like yours are rare these days, says Tereza. She barely knows me. Only Franc knew me. He knew my place in the scheme of things. I was his servant and he was there to point out my mistakes. I feel alone without Franc, maybe loneliness is sadness. Maybe I am crying for Franc, maybe I am crying for myself.

I am overwhelmed by emotion like I was at fifteen before I met Franc. I want to frolic among the flowers like I used to when my father was alive.

I want to shed my old skin. I don't have to hide under the old skin any more. Why is it that only snakes can shed the old skin? The old skin is hiding my young skin. People probably wouldn't recognise me in my young skin; they came to the funeral to comfort the poor, sad, widow in her old skin.

I got used to hiding in my old skin. Perhaps it isn't wise to let people know what is underneath. Maybe they would not like who I am.

I am grateful that we all loved each other as we celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary before Franc slumped in the chair and died. We parted as a happy family. There is nothing to feel sad or guilty about. We have done the right thing and everybody can now rest in peace. RIP. To rest in peace must be the ultimate blessing. The dead seem to be under an obligation to rest in peace. That is all there is. RIP is an order.

I hope Franc will rest in peace.

I was fifteen when I met Franc.

I was singing through the woods on my way from school one day when my little sister rushed to tell me that our father died in a logging accident. I was the oldest of six children and I had to grow up fast.

My father was working for Franc; everybody in our village more or less worked for him. Franc came to see us after my father's funeral. He had shoes made for all the children, he brought a pig, and a sack of potatoes and wheat and beans. He also brought a bag of clothes his daughters grew out of.

These clothes were much better than any new clothes we ever had. Mum told me that Franc was the most generous man.

Mum often cleaned Franc's home to earn some extra for our family. Mum kissed Franc's hand when he gave her money to buy things for us children.

In spring Franc offered to take me into service as a maid in his big house so I could help mum provide for my brothers and sisters.

You are almost sixteen, said mum. You will have a good life in the big house.

Franc's wife was dying of tuberculosis; she has been bedridden for over a year. His three daughters were about the same age as me. I shined their shoes, washed their clothes and prepared their meals. I ironed girls' dresses, plaited their hair and cut their lunches before they left for school.

Sometimes we chatted about clothes and boys and toys like we were friends. In the end, though, I was always made to understand that I was there to serve them.

I felt lucky, really, because on Thursday afternoons I was free to go home and show off my new clothes and my white hands. My people worked on the land and their hands were cracked and callused and red.

There was an inside water tap in the big house and Franc had bought a big bath. Most people in the village have never seen a bath like that and the running water inside the house. I felt very lucky.

I washed the bath every morning after the girls left for school. Just before my sixteenth birthday Franc followed me into the bathroom. He put the finger on his lips telling me to be quiet, as his wife rested in a room next door. He grabbed for my breasts and kept squeezing them. I remember the smell of his breath as he kissed me. He pulled my pants down and pushed my legs apart. I leaned on the bath and nearly tipped over but he held my bottom to himself firmly. I felt little pain because the fear paralysed me. It didn't last long but Franc was breathing really hard and seemed exhausted.

You drive me mad; Franc smiled as he heaved himself away and zipped his fly. He smacked my bottom in a friendly gesture before he left the bathroom.

I saw blood stains on my panties and I quickly washed the stains and myself.

I stood there leaning on the wall. My stomach turned and twisted me into a knot. I retched into the bath. It was no use running away from it. The damage was done.

Franc came after me every time I was in the bathroom and the girls were at school.

Franc's wife died a month later and he married me before my pregnancy became obvious.

I didn't understand why Franc's daughters began to hate me after our marriage. I served them as well as I did before but they wanted nothing to do with me. Franc sent them to the boarding school and we saw little of them.

Mum was grateful that Franc married me after I disgraced him by becoming pregnant.

Franc employed most of the local people on his fields and on his sawmill. They blamed me for seducing a decent family man. I heard the village women sniggering close enough for me to hear.

They talk about me, I complained to Franc.

They don't want to admit that they are jealous.

They respect you but they are nasty to me.

Fear is the best reason for respect, said Franc.

Franc told me that people, like dogs, know when you are afraid and they attack you. I couldn't help being afraid. Maybe being afraid comes from being poor or young or weak but there it is and you can't do much about it. People sniff your fear and they peck at it like fowls peck at other bleeding fowls. The memory of fear follows you your whole life.

Hitler invaded Slovenia. Our daughters Martina and Vera and their brother Damian were born during the war. I began haemorrhaging when I was pregnant with Damien. Franc sent for the doctor from Ljubljana. I asked why he didn't call our old family doctor. He said that he didn't like dirty Yiddish hands touching me. I didn't understand his sudden concern about the doctor's hygiene but gradually I got used to him being pedantic and uncompromising.

People forgot about our family. I suppose they had more important things to think about. They talked about their children being killed and about their families being transported to the concentration camps. Some talked about the victory against the rich and powerful.

A lot of older people wore black. There was excitement, fear and adoration, hope and horror.

Nothing much changed for our family. I was too young and too busy with my children to know what it was all about.

Hitler knows what people need said Franc.

Satan leads Russia, said mum. The Christians have to unite against the Godless communists.

I only knew what mum and Franc told me.

After the war I read the words unity, equality and democracy painted on the shire building. I had no idea what the words meant.

You won dictatorship. Democracy is never won in a revolution, I heard Franc argue with the man from the shire.

You order people to be equal; they are not free to run faster, be smarter, and become richer. They are not allowed to improve their position. They are not allowed to think for themselves. You can compensate the poor and the stupid and the lazy for being born what they are but they will never be equal.

We will change all that, said the man. We will get rid of your bourgeois mentality.

It's funny how some words stick in your mind.

The man from the shire used to work for Franc before the war and revolution. In 1946 he brought a paper that told Franc that they nationalised his property. His accounts were closed. People called Franc a traitor and Hitler's collaborator.

Jews won in the end said Franc to mum.

I heard that Jews were killed. I did not understand why and what they won. I could never work out who was who.

Jews plan to destroy Christianity. Mark my word; they will soon dictate how we live, continued Franc.

They created communist revolution to get the poor on their side. The poor are the easiest to manipulate.

People became openly hostile towards us after we lost our property. I heard a woman say that God punished my family because Franc and I had sex while Franc's wife was dying. God apparently never sleeps and he saw that I took advantage of a desperately sad man who was grieving for his dying wife. There is God, the woman concluded.

I wondered how God would have anything to do with communists since mum called them Godless but then I knew nothing about these things. Maybe God was always on the side of winners.

She brought a curse on the family, said an old woman.

The poor woman dying in the same house, said her friend.

God will see to it. He is a jealous God; he will punish into third and fourth generation. She brought a curse on herself and her children.

Apparently it wasn't enough that we lost our property.

Children learned the songs of praise for their leaders. Someone wrote a song saying how nice it was to be young in our homeland.

Privileges are the easiest way to convert masses. Communists distribute to the poor what was once mine, they never produced anything, said Franc.

People spy and report on each other to get privileges, said mum. They would sell their souls for coupons. A metre of cloth or a litre of oil means more than God.

It's a new religion. It's always religion, said Franc. They had to get rid of God so they can be God.

I have no time for politics, said Franc. The nation changed its leaders and the borders have to be redrawn and all these things take time. Nobody is willing to give anything away without a fight. In the meantime I intend to look after my family.

People on the land will be happier because they will work for themselves, mum tried to understand the way of the poor. Since I married Franc mum almost forgot that she was the poor.

Everybody loves Robin Hood, laughed Franc. I had no idea why and who Robin Hood was. They were working for me, now they will work for those who have stolen my property in their name.

A feeling of hope was in the air. There was a promise of better life. I couldn't understand it then, of course, but there was much excitement and enthusiasm. Even those who didn't believe in communism seemed hopeful.

The cream always comes to the top and the poor will always be poor, said Franc.

There was a five-year plan to rebuild the country and people were ready for the sacrifice. We were told to be generous, brave, and patriotic and to trust our leaders.

Factory workers are given rewards if their work exceeds their norms. They achieve record norms because they can't survive without them. They work harder than they ever did, said mum.

Mum and Franc often talked about the new government.

People gradually realised that working hard won't save them. Some escaped, some gave up, and some tried to get into management. But the poor remained poor. The heart has gone out of their victory, their work suffered and the production was poor. Nobody dared criticise the government or complain. They heard of arrests and disappearances. Anyone, who wasn't happy, was a traitor and had to be converted or eliminated.

Mum and Franc agreed on everything. I never saw things as clearly as they did. Maybe they saw things the same way because they were the same age. Or maybe mum just wanted to be like Franc, to please Franc, because she was grateful to him for marrying me.

Communists gave the land to the poor to work on, but the poor are allowed to keep very little of what they produce. They have to sell the surplus to the co-op for almost nothing. They realise that however hard they work they will always remain poor. The surplus they produce does not pay the cost of producing it. It is simple mathematics but our communist leaders are not good on mathematics, said Franc.

You are not allowed to buy milk from your neighbour. You can go to jail if you sell a litre of wine outside the Co-op. When you buy from the Co-op you pay three times as much, explained mum.

People only work more if they can keep more and sell more on the free market, explained Franc.

They are taking back the land they gave to the poor, said mum.

It's all a learning process for them. I could have told them, but then they would not have a reason to take my land.

They treat landowners as criminals, said mum.

Communists take private property to make people dependent on the government and stop them from thinking, said Franc.

I rarely said anything political, because I didn't know what is the right thing to say. I also didn't quite know which group of people I belonged to.

The beggar is always more greedy than the person who was born rich, said Franc who knew about those things.

They became the law and the judges, says mum.

The winners are always right. The losers remain losers until they change things for themselves and become winners again. I will never allow my children to grow up as losers. If you can't prosper in one system choose another.

Franc told me to pack our belongings because we were moving to Austria.

Luckily Franc had money in Switzerland.

Pays to be prepared, he explained.

We can't carry everything with us, I said.

I sold the house. Take what you want and give the rest to your family, said Franc.

The day we moved my whole family came to pick up what we left behind. I remember them carting our beds and wardrobes and tools on the big bull wagon. Ours were the only proper mattresses in that part of the world and people came out of their houses to see the treasures my family inherited.

Most villagers slept on bags of husks they peeled off corncocks or simply on straw. During winter they made soft doonas out of feathers.

We moved to the farm where Franc was born near Graz in Austria. The caretaker was using the old house so Franc bought a house and the property next to it.

When we moved to Austria I tried to forget about communists and especially about Franc's daughters. I tried. Luckily I had much to do and little time to think.

The border between Slovenia and Austria was tightly guarded. Although we only moved fifty kilometres north into Austria we never returned to Slovenia.

In Austria we lived much like we lived before in Slovenia. It was like moving to another village really. Half of the people spoke Slovenian; the shopkeepers and the priest were Slovenian. Franc hired Austrian workers and I quickly learned enough German to deal with any help we had on the land or in a house. Most spoke the sort of German we spoke before the war, half German half Slovenian I thought but Franc said that it was deformed, Slovenianised German.

Before I left for Austria mum told me most solemnly: Wherever you may go, you will find our people. There are invisible ties between you and your people. When you need them, they will be there for you.

I think mum felt that she had to give me something for my journey, so she gave me all Slovenian people as my people. There must be an umbilical cord holding us together.

Franc believed that people are a genetic mixture and one has to decide what one wants to be. He didn't like me mixing with Slovenians in Austria but I was happy to hear them speak in the shops. It made it easier for me, knowing that they were there.

The reasons for Slovenians living in Austria, as a minority, were as many as there were people. The borders between Austria and Slovenia were never very clear. Most Slovenians in Austria felt prejudiced against and were making demands from Austrian government.

I don't want to waste time with your useless nationalism, said Franc to a man who invited him to join in traditional Slovenian activities.

Slovenians decided in the referendum that it was better to be under Austria than under Serbs but if they had a choice to be independent they would all want to be Slovenians, the man argued.

You hope, laughed Franc. It is easy to be patriotic if it does not cost you. If Slovenians had to choose between a good pay packet and a poor pay packet they would choose money. Why come to Austria if you want to be something else? Said Franc. Anyway, I don't understand what all the fuss is about. Most Europeans have at some time been under Roman Empire or under Germanic rule and under Napoleon.

I could tell that Franc wasn't happy in Austria. Some Slovenians said that we were more Austrian than Austrians.

Franc was a powerful man in Slovenia but I think he himself felt like a foreigner in Austria. Of course he refused to be treated as a foreigner; he was Austrian by birth after all. The fact that he used to own a part of Slovenia was the only reason why he lived in Slovenia.

I also heard people say that Franc wasn't Austrian at all. I don't know if that was good or bad.

Austrians were all for Hitler but now they are scared to admit it, said Franc.

Franc's daughters were doing really well in Slovenia. They finished universities and worked in the management. One of them said that I was dragging Franc down. I wonder what she meant. I followed Franc.

Mum eventually came to live with us. Gradually most of my family moved to Austria.

We all received Austrian citizenship and our children went to school as Austrians. They never considered themselves foreigners.

I believed that everything was as it should have been.

Just count your blessings, advised mum. Think of poor people who suffer under communists.

When Franc gradually lost his desire for sex, he became grumpy and criticised me for little things I said and did. I tried harder and harder to please him but he just withdrew into himself and ignored me. We were getting older, of course. I felt a little bit sad that he didn't want to sleep in the same bed with me but I got used to it. I can't expect to have everything my way.

Franc sometimes said that I had no idea what I was talking about. People become bored with each other, I suppose. We did not want to have more children anyway so why bother with sex.

In 1951 Franc applied for us to go to Australia.

In Sydney I took care of the family while Franc organised his business. I never knew exactly what his business was, but he gradually became happier. Our new house in Sydney is overlooking the ocean and from the balcony we can see the hotel Franc bought. He never worked in a hotel but we looked down at it perched, shiny white, near the ocean. Franc was happy as we stood on the balcony and admired the evening view and the lights of his hotel.

Franc also bought a king-size bed and we started to sleep together again for awhile. Franc decided to have sex once a week. He bought a bottle of wine for those occasions and our dinners were brought in. I was relieved that Franc found me desirable again.

Franc had an office at home and Tereza came twice a week to take care of his paper work. She is German but she came to Australia as a child.

Franc began losing his memory somewhere in the seventies. I suppose people do that after a certain age. He constantly blamed me for misplacing things, losing things and forgetting things. He also accused our children of stealing things from his office.

In 1987 I went to our daughter Martina's place. I thought she would understand but she didn't.

Don't be melodramatic mum, you are both old enough to be able to talk things over, advised my daughter. She is as practical as her father.

I can't take it any more, I said.

Of course you can take it, mum. Don't be selfish; think of your children and grandchildren. We all want to see you together. Anyway, what could our old daddy have done this time, my daughter asked? I am sixteen years older and she treats me as a child.

He is convinced that I am hiding and misplacing things. Most of the time the things he is looking for are there right in front of him. If I point that out to him he says that I want to make him look stupid.

Poor daddy, said Martina patting my hand. You promised to be there for each other in sickness and in health.

I am sick of him. My rebellion frightened Martina.

Be patient, mum. We all have bad days.

I am not going back.

Where will you go? What will you do? He is eighty-five. Mum, he hasn't got long. We'll organise a big party for Christmas.

If we last that long, I said feeling suddenly foolish and guilty and unreasonable. We shouldn't be good just because we are waiting for someone to die.

Mum, you could never manage on your own. Dad has always done everything for you. You have never done a day's work in your life, said my daughter.

Funny how one can deceive oneself. I thought I did everything for Franc. He never opened a cupboard door to find his shirt or a drawer where the spoons were. His shoes were always shiny and his clothes always ironed his meals fresh and his garden immaculately weeded. His children were always presented to daddy respectful and clean. But I let everybody believe that Franc did everything for me, because he knew everything and was able to do everything. Franc was happy when I pointed out to others that I could not manage without him so I often pointed this out to others. I suppose if you hear something often enough you begin to believe it.

Mum, just be happy while you still have daddy.

Nothing makes him happy.

Humour him; he is an old man after all. I'll talk to him, if you like, promised my smart counsellor daughter.

I bought a bag of apples and one was a bit rotten at the stem. He told me how careless I always was with his money and how I never check things out. He went on and on all evening about me throwing his money away. In the morning I had to take the apple back to the shop.

Did you?

I threw it in the bin inside the shop and bought a new shiny apple while he waited in the car.

You bad woman, you, cheating on daddy, teased my daughter.

He gets angry if his every wish is not granted.

Men are like that, said Martina and I wondered what she knew about men. She worked all her life and so did her husband. They never seemed to have had time or reason to argue. They couldn't do without each other. I really don't know my daughter or her husband well. Franc was greatly disappointed when Martina married his mechanic. A hired help. I think it was then that he chose to sleep in his own room again.

He is cruel and mean and he always was, I muttered under my breath. I don't know what came over me. Maybe I watched something on television that made me behave recklessly. No wonder Franc did not like me watching television.

Dad didn't change as much as you did, said Martina, shocked by the change in me.

I had to change all my life. I don't know who I am any more, I said.

You are confused, diagnosed Martina. She is smart; she knows the law and all, working in the law office all these years. Vince, her boss, relies on her. They must be helping lots of confused people.

You fool yourself that you will change somebody but you can't even change yourself. If you are born poor you will be apologising for it all your life. Poverty is in your blood. People smell the poverty in you, I told Martina. She probably does not know what I am talking about. She was always better off than those around her.

Dad is not going to last long, said Martina.

I didn't like her implying that we were all waiting for him to die. It is not nice or Christian. Especially with Christmas coming.

He is forgetting things, I suppose. He is saying that you kids only come to steal from him; I smile to justify my anger.

Poor daddy does not know what he is saying. Senility is normal at his age.

He follows me all the time and demands to know what I am doing and why and how. He insists I peel potatoes the way he would do it. He never peeled a potato but he saw it peeled on television and he wants to change the way I peeled potatoes all my life.

He is old and bored.

He is obsessed by waste. He tells me over and over what I could do with stale bread. He spends thousands of dollars lavishly on his associates and pretends that he never considers the cost yet he checks if I threw a slice of old bread or a worn out rag in the bin. He tells me that people who never learned to save on little things will never own anything.

Our whole family arrived for Christmas 1987. The grandchildren invaded every room. Franc followed their every movement. Martina's boys wrestled on the bed and Franc told them to stop. They fell off the bed laughing. The excitement proved too much for Franc. Get out of here he growled. Damian's girls came then and used the bed as a trampoline.

You let them get away with murder, said Franc to Damian.

Oh, stop barking about it, laughed Damian. Relax, its Christmas.

I knew at that moment that the festive mood ended. You don't say that your father barks. Your father is not a dog. Of course I know that Franc used to say to anybody who complained or raised his voice, to stop barking. Damian picked the phrase and used it without thinking.

Franc stopped talking.

Vera's little toddler lay on her back and kicked the wall. The brown polish of her shoes made a mark on the white wallpaper.

You let the bastards wreck my home, said Franc.

We'd better go, said Damian.

And don't come back. Goes for all of you.

What did we do?

You called me a dog for Christmas, growled Franc.

Like father like son, Damian tried to make a joke of it.

Franc locked himself in his office.

It's all your fault, he growled after they left.

I suppose I should have reprimanded Damian but he is almost fifty and anyway he is Franc's son and not easily corrected.

A week later, on the New Year's Eve, Franc called his daughters in Slovenia. He talked to them like they were still his little girls. He laughed and joked and promised to come and see them. He also invited them over and they promised to come. I became frightened of them like I was frightened of them as a little girl. Nobody here knows about Franc's daughters; even our children forgot about them.

I realised that I was afraid of his daughters all my life. I never knew what they could do to me.

Christmas is a stressful time. Everybody tries to be on best behaviour but people get tired of smiling and kissing and wishing. Too much togetherness, smiled Tereza. She probably knew that our Christmas didn't turn out well.

Franc began to talk about his daughters' visit. He became more agreeable. I think he wanted them to see how happy he is and how well he has done.

We'd better kiss and make up, advised Martina. Your 50th wedding anniversary is coming up in June and we should make a big get together. I will hire the restaurant so the kids don't wreck dad's place, she laughed.

Martina doesn't know about her stepsisters coming. She never related to them and she always considered herself to be the oldest in the family.

For our wedding anniversary I invited Franc out for lunch and as we entered the restaurant everybody was there singing and congratulating us. Franc was pleasantly surprised. He drank the toasts and loved everybody. After lunch he slumped in the chair and his gargling breathing sound made me aware that something was wrong. Damian called the ambulance and Franc died on the way to hospital.

I phoned Franc's daughters that Franc died but they couldn't make it for the funeral.

They arrived from Slovenia when they received a letter from the solicitor saying that Franc left them most of his assets.

Franc changed his will after the Christmas argument and then forgot to change it back again.

Franc's three daughters look older, wiser and more confident than I could ever manage to look. I am a child again and they are the mistresses of my home. My children do not want to meet them and the three old women have nothing much to say to me. They book into the hotel while directing Franc's solicitor about their inheritance.

It came as a shock to all of us to learn that everything but the house we lived in goes to Franc's daughters from his first marriage. They haven't even kept in touch for years and years.

We'll let the solicitors take care of that, said Damian. We will contest the will.

We have to prove that dad wasn't in the right mind at the time he changed the will, said Martina.

Franc told us over and over that everything he had would be ours one day and we put up with things to show gratitude. I depended on the life we had and on the money Franc had invested. One gets trapped like that.

Don't worry mum, says Martina. We never expected anything from you, anyway, she adds.

I am disappointed that my children expected nothing from me. Why did I try so hard? Why did I follow Franc and his money? Nobody will ever depend on me like we all depended on him.

I wish I could be fifteen again. I hate the old skin my life is wrapped in.

Martina's daughter, Tina, reminds me of me, when I was fifteen. I am especially fond of Tina. I wonder if she knows how radiant her fresh young skin is and how her eyes sparkle.

It is rather unfortunate that only the old can properly appreciate the fresh, young skin.

Ignorance of the law excuses no man; not that all men know the law, but because 'tis an excuse every man will plead, and no man can tell how to confute him.

Selden

Martina and Vince

Martina and Vince go for lunch at a nearby restaurant. They are not as busy as they used to be so they often take a longer lunch break.

I went to Slovenia after I finished my business in Germany, says Vince.

Lucky you, says Martina. Vince seems changed since his return from Europe.

I think I will gradually retire, says Vince as they select a spot in the restaurant's garden.

Why? Asks Martina quickly; scared for her job; scared to lose Vince.

I needed to distance myself from my work and indeed from the Earth to see how small and insignificant my life really is, says Vince.

What happened?

My plane flew low over the Mediterranean coast and I looked at the little cement holes rich people built for themselves on the hills along the seashore. From the air the houses looked like swallows' nests. When I was a little boy, I could never figure out how the swallows knew which hole under the eaves belonged to which. But they knew. I don't know where I belong, says Vince looking at the blossoms in the garden. My holidays made me see how meaningless my work really is.

Your clients will miss you. I will miss you, smiles Martina.

I keep crooks out of jail while people everywhere are rejuvenated by crime. They like to watch wars and murder, poverty and violence and abuse so they can thank God for being the lucky ones who live in peace and prosperity. What would they watch if there were no crooks?

We would have to invent poverty and crime.

I spent my life making money. I believed that I owned things but these things will stay where they are after I am gone. Things own me.

That's life, says Martina suddenly scared of her own insignificance. Did you see your family in Slovenia?

My father died when I was in high school. His only wish was for me to become a lawyer. He left a trust fund for me. He left no money for my mother.

How come?

I heard that mum's boyfriend killed him, says Vince ever so quietly.

Did he?

Mum said that he died as he fell on the cement steps into the cellar. She forgot to mention that her boyfriend pushed him. People become less careful with secrets after time. My mother died when she gave birth to my half brother. I was in Ljubljana at the time beginning my university studies. I did not see her die. I lost both my parents within a year.

Did you see your half brother?

We saw each other but we have nothing in common. He lives at home and works on the land. We never mentioned our mother. His father also died.

Has he got a family? Martina tries to squeeze something beautiful out of life for Vince.

He never married. He is a bit slow. Mum was forty two when he was born.

They sit in the garden restaurant and the scents of spring bring memories of other springs.

Trees have many lives. They flower every spring, says Martina.

It will take awhile to sort it all out, says Vince. I will call on you to do work for me if I decide to take a case after I retire.

Slovenians trust you, they need you, Martina tries to convince him how important he is to them; to her.

They believe that I have the magic wand to bring back old European kind of justice. They forget that they escaped from the old Europe because there was no justice. I hear men who were political prisoners at home say that Hitler or Tito or Stalin would know how to deal with hooligans in Australia. They grew up in totalitarian system and ended up craving what they grew up in; what they escaped from.

Do you believe in life after death?

I am glad nobody knows what is beyond. If we knew we would not need religion. This makes death kind of exciting. People spend most of their lives guessing what's beyond. God must be having fun watching as we try to interpret his intentions.

Everybody is guessing what is beyond but the surprise would not be a surprise if we knew. Maybe we will meet in some other place, says Martina.

Maybe in our next life all our thoughts and emotions will become transparent and we will know everything that was hidden from us while we were alive, teases Vince.

The surprise could kill you.

Maybe that's why we have to die first. There must be a reason and a purpose for everything happening inside our minds and hearts, smiles Vince.

I wonder what we'd see if fear and shame and respect were removed. Martina wonders what secrets Vince hides.

Civil libertarians always complain about the draconian laws taking freedoms from people, says Martina.

Every law restricts personal liberty but it provides for fairer distribution of liberty. Justice system prescribes rules to make life easier. You grease the wheels so they squeak less but there is no real justice in nature or in the justice system. The world is an enemy you fight to stay alive.

It is good that everybody is equal in court.

The criminal and the victim are represented by legal practitioners who are supposed to be equal, but no two lawyers, like no two other people, are ever equal. Even if two equal boxers fight in a ring one becomes a winner and the other the loser. People are only free to hire a lawyer they can afford.

But there is a judge.

In America the judge has some power and responsibility to look like he is searching for the truth and the justice. He is the prosecutor and the judge really; he conducts inquiry into the matter. This old inquisitorial method of justice reminds people of Spanish inquisition, which presumed a person guilty until he proved himself innocent. American judge can investigate the crime but Australian judge is a spectator watching the prosecution and defence battle in a ring.

One way or the other truth comes out, says Martina.

In our adversarial justice system the court is the lawyers' battlefield. The accused is presumed innocent until the prosecution lawyers prove him guilty. The truth and the whole truth are of little importance. The accused even has the right to silence so he does not incriminate himself by his own testimony. The judge is not to interpret the silence of the accused as a proof of guilt.

The jury of reasonable people decides if the accused is guilty, says Martina.

How many reasonable people do you know? The jury is brainwashed one way or the other by the lawyers. The prosecution has to prove the guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. If one reasonable person on the jury expresses doubt that person has to be convinced or there remains a reasonable doubt. The judge is usually careful not to influence the jury.

The first thing you learn in the law school is that Justice System has nothing to do with the justice itself. It has nothing to do with finding the truth either. To win a fight in the court is much like winning a boxing match. The harder you fight the more likely you are to win. If you are not convinced in your strength you better stay out of the ring. There is no such thing as a fair fight. The fittest wins. If you are not strong you better do as you are told. I often felt sorry for those I won against. I felt sorry for the weak lawyers and specially for those that paid those lawyers in the belief that they will make them equal before the court and win justice for them. You have to pounce on every weak spot of your opponent and sometimes the blood of it all sticks to you.

It must have been hard for you.

It was extremely hard at the beginning. I had to fight a convincing verbal fight in a language that is not my own. It took me years to sound confident enough to fight convincingly enough to win. I knew how to do it but often the exact, right words failed me in critical situations. The opponent lawyer jumped on my every slip. He is paid to do that and has a duty to do. I just had to dig my heels in and never expose any weaknesses. As soon as there is a whiff of vulnerability, they pounce on you. The best weapon for a lawyer is his unwavering confidence, his arrogant consistency, his battering, and his mastery of the words. If you say something over and over in a clear, confident voice it sinks into the souls of a daydreaming jury. You have to convince their hearts rather than their minds. Of course you have to know the law and the language. I survived because I fight better than others do.

It is all up to the judge at the end.

Judges try to be seen to be just and dignified and beyond reproach or bias. Generally judges are lazy people; they do the bare minimum that is required of them. They sin on the side of failing to do what they should do. The less they do the fewer mistakes they make. They are appointed for life.

What about lawyers?

Legal representatives work harder than judges, because they are engaged for each case individually. They are thrown in a ring like gladiators and have to fight until one loses and the other wins. The criminal defence lawyer has to assume the personality of the criminal and fight shamelessly to win the hearts and minds of the jury who would otherwise go to sleep during the boring legal jargon. The lawyer has to know people's prejudices, says Vince.

Are you prejudiced?

There is not one totally impartial person in a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-national and multi-cultural society. I feel favourably inclined towards Slovenians. I understand Catholics better than Buddhists; I am white before I am yellow. I know what it is to be a minority. I even empathise with Slavs despite their communist tendencies. I like this old saying:

Me and my clan against the world;

Me and my family against my clan;

Me and my brother against my family;

Me against my brother.

Doesn't it bother you to protect the criminal?

A criminal is usually an unhappy, often abused, uneducated slow witted, cruel, savage person. I don't like senseless cruelty and arrogance but the roots of evil can almost always be explained by something evil being done to the criminal in the past. I help make an inadequate person equal.

You like to be a champion of the inadequate?

Lawyers always work hardest for those that pay best, laughs Vince. I couldn't afford to pay you if I didn't.

It is rather noble to keep the poor sods out of prisons.

A good lawyer can make an angel out of the devil and a devil out of an angel.

How can you separate your work and your private life?

I try not to let my beliefs and emotions colour my professional decisions and I try not to pass judgements in my private life, says Vince. You have to lose your innocence quickly in this job. If you don't, you better get out. You are not there to decide what is good or bad, you are only there to represent the one that pays you.

It must be difficult to calculate your every move, says Martina.

There is a thin line between good and bad, the good layer can tip the scales either way most of the time, says Vince.

You can manipulate the truth, smiles Martina.

A lawyer must never let anyone anticipate his next move. You have to surprise the prosecution and the jury and act while they are still surprised. You have to trick them into believing that you are not dangerous, that your client is not dangerous. Lawyers work with simple people who don't know how to get what they want by legal means.

Many believe that lawyers protect criminals.

I was a prosecutor for many years because I felt that I had to punish criminals to satisfy victims. I was a good prosecutor but gradually I realised that criminals are usually victims of circumstances. As defence lawyer I defend the criminals. Whichever way you go, you do some things you don't believe in. You have to be convincing even when you are not convinced that what you are doing is right or just or fair. You manipulate the truth and evade and avoid. It is easy to become a crook yourself.

Nobody likes a crook.

His lawyer must make the jury believe that there is something likeable in him. Especially when you can't prove that he is not guilty.

You represent mostly men.

I represent Slovenian friends but I specialise in criminal law and majority of criminals are men.

Majority of business people are men as well.

Every man wants to be more of a man than the next man, to impress women, so all men are greedy, laughs Vince.

Not all men, surely.

Small men are greedy for a few dollars big men are greedy for millions. They all crave admiration and hope that being bigger than the next man will make them more desirable.

You like to be desired? Martina looks at Vince knowing that soon she will no longer be employed by him and might never see him again.

I became addicted to power and money, laughs Vince. The centre stage of the court room is a lure hard to resist. I forgot my family and my friends. The wish to shine and be admired meant everything to me. The fame and money seduces you and swallows you. You can't do without it. All addicts become slaves to their addiction. There is little glamour on the battlefield. Sometimes the blood is on your nose sometimes you inflict pain to others. I have to make the jury feel the way I want them to feel even when I know that a person I am representing does not deserve these feelings and the sympathy I try to inspire. I know the bastard I am defending is a dangerous criminal but as his lawyer I become him and have to find the good in him that does not even exist.

The criminal defence lawyer also has to find something suspect in the victim to convince the jury that maybe the victim is not as innocent and as wronged as claimed. It is the duty of the criminal lawyer to make the victim at least partly responsible for the crime. I have to inspire the sympathy of the jury for the criminal.

I have to weave the web of words and create a smoke screen to trap the unsuspecting victim. You ask unrelated questions to stun him into trusting your chatter before you snap your trap.

Did you enjoy your work?

Probably as much as anybody enjoys his work. It paid well, it provided moments of exhilarating pleasure, and the adrenalin was pumping. In the end, though, there is nothing but the wages to show for it. Well paying clients made it possible for me to indulge in interesting cases in which a lawyer is seen as the hero and the champion of justice. This is good for one's image. There is no deeper, lasting pleasure or a sense of achievement. I didn't change the world for the better.

Did you want to?

I think everybody wants to make a difference. As you retire you want to look at your life and count the people you made happier. I wonder who remembers me and how.

You would like to be remembered by someone special.

Everybody has those silent moments when it is good to think that someone somewhere is praying for you. I worked hard. I was thrilled when I found an unexpected, sudden new angle to the case or a quotation came to me that summed it all up. People like clichés. Anything you hear often enough sounds like eternal truth. I was a lawyer twenty four hours a day. I forgot my family and they forgot me. We are coming to the end of the road. One more year or ten, it does not matter. At thirty you feel that forty is a lifetime away but after fifty you know that it does not make any difference what you do. The future becomes the past and the road ahead leads into oblivion.

Why stop now?

It seems easier to go while I am on top of things.

What will you do with your time when you retire?

Tidy up. Will you help me tidy up?

What?

My office, my thoughts, my feelings, habits, priorities and relationships. I am still a consultant to my close associates. If the case is interesting I like to research and help with advice. Working in the background is much more comfortable.

It was good working for you.

I couldn't do as well if you weren't there. You were my rock.

Do you see much of your family?

I let my wife organise our family. I wanted to be free for my work. I gained recognition for my work but she didn't. She left. She probably deserved acclamation. I didn't even have time to ask her how she felt. I didn't have time to be sad or lonely or angry when she left. We are divorced but we are on friendly terms.

What about your children?

I didn't have time to talk to them as they grew up and they have no time for me now.

They would probably want to know you now that they are grown up.

I am a selfish person. I don't even like sharing my time with most people.

Should I feel grateful or privileged?

Deserving.

You will be just an ordinary Vince now.

Being ordinary is fine. I never had time to be ordinary. The thrill was making more and more money. You don't spend more or need more, you can't take it with you but you are thrilled. It's really a cheap thrill. You become a prima Donna and your performance is measured by the fee you command. By the time I realised that money is everything I also realised that money is not very much. One thousand more or less to my name makes no difference.

What does?

I want to find out if anything does. It probably doesn't. All is vanity, says Vince ever so quietly.

They sit in the silence and watch the people choose their seats and their food.

Martina has been in love with Vince most of her life. As his secretary she felt that it was her duty to make his life smooth and easy. She never complained about doing his chores in her spare time on the way to work or on the way home. She carried his dry-cleaning and the flowers for his mistresses and the gifts for his children. She kept his diary neat and uncomplicated, so his life events would never clash. She knows when he needs a cup of coffee and what brand he prefers.

Martina has always been the most important person in the lives of people around her. Her family couldn't do without her, Vince couldn't do without her and neither could her neighbours. She organised the fund raising and the church cleaning and the running of a school canteen.

Men are hopeless, Martina warned her daughter in preparation for her womanhood. It is what you do that makes you what you are, Martina concluded philosophically.

Martina's husband Joe had his responsibilities around the home; he repaired the car and mowed the lawn. He also had the responsibility to punish the children if they misbehaved. He would never notice their naughtiness if Martina didn't remind him of his responsibility.

Martina got into a habit of saying: I wonder if Joe will like it or approve of it or allow it. Joe was the king of Martina's family. Martina ordered him to be the king. That's how things were supposed to be. She was meant to have a king so she made Joe a king.

Vince is a good-looking man. He is going to be an old man in a minute, realises Martina. He might die suddenly; Martina wants to protect him, she looked after him for most of her life. Who will look after him now that he is going to be an ordinary man? When you have something that is very precious you become afraid of losing it.

Why haven't you remarried after Joe died, asks Vince into the silence.

Martina wonders where Vince travelled in his thoughts.

I want a perfect husband but the man that would choose me would have to be faulty, she laughs.

Why?

A perfect man would choose a perfect woman.

Perfect is as perfect does.

Are you going to marry again?

I need a wife who does not need a husband. I'd like a woman to come along and do her own thing, I would be happy to share some of my time with her but I can't be held responsible for her happiness.

You had a lovely wife.

She is as French as I am Slovenian. I look at my daughter and she is a French Australian. My son has nothing that remind me of me. I never showed them how to be Slovenian.

Martina is toying with a little romantic idea of love.

I never want to be just a husband, says Vince.

Men still like to play the field.

I don't, says Vince. At least I don't play to win but to share. I have nothing to prove to anybody.

Martina remembers her mother entertaining dad's friends. The entertainment was always formal. The elaborate preparation for entertainment kept idle female hands away from real business. Impeccably ironed tablecloths and polished silver celebrated class, her father's class. The breeding will always tell, said her dad. The breeding sounded like a cheep perm or plastic flowers. Putting on your best manners and nicest underwear helped to display breeding, according to her mum. Martina feels sad for the times when the boundaries between public and private life were rigid and one always knew what was appropriate.

We all have our secret vices, says Vince. What is yours?

Once a month I like to go to my Chinese masseur. He is worth every cent. He takes every ache and pain out of my body, Martina carefully changes the topic.

You like Chinese men, smiles Vince.

I could never be attracted to a Chinese man so he remains an excitingly pure, neutral energy that heals my body and my spirit. He is generous with his muscle power and oils. I like the bubble bath he prepares and the way he dries my back with thick warm white towels. This man is my only vice really. I spend half a day each month with him.

I sometimes camp near the river and sleep under the stars. I take a bottle of good red wine and light the fire. The silence and the sounds of nature rejuvenate me. I tell God that he had done a fine job. I also tell him that I have no grudge against him and hope that he has nothing against me. Sometimes I feel like singing. I think we are all desperate to go feral. To let go. To get lost in the outback and get in touch with the spirits. We are craving to hear the silence and to talk to the almighty. Outside life became so interesting that we have no time to touch our inner selves. Maybe we should try it together sometimes, Vince smiles.

You would share your God with me.

On a night like that God is very big. You remember the words of the prayer: with him, in him, in the unity...

On some nights Martina foolishly plays with the idea of everlasting love. She knows that there is no such thing. There is no need these days for anything to be everlasting but she grew up with the romantic notion that love should last forever. It would be good to enjoy a day or a year with someone but the notion of everlasting was written on her young soul. Vince is one of the few friends Martina has. Should she find someone less important to sleep with; someone cheap and dispensable?

There is still a little bit of life in me, Vince laughs. I want to live that life.

What did you enjoy most in your life?

As long as they talk about real life they can skirt over the issue of their sleeping together. We know each other too well to ever sleep together, thinks Martina. Sleeping together is like an exciting introduction. You touch lips and legs and the skin greets the skin while everything that is under the skin remains untouched. Vince and Martina touched much under the skin but the skin remained untouched.

The law took most of my life.

Justice made you a wealthy person.

And hard work.

Your Slovenian background provided no precedents English speaking people rely on.

I used the knowledge Australian lawyers were not prepared for. I studied and read while I should have played with my children.

At least they had their mum. Joe and I were both busy with other things, says Martina.

Life is short. Before you know it, it's over.

They sip red wine and the bees are doing what they are born to do and the flowers are busy blooming.

Everybody has a certain numbers of years to be what he chooses to be. I am yet to find what I want to be, says Vince.

There is no danger that they would embrace in the freshness of the spring and to the buzzing of the bees.

You should write your memoirs, says Martina.

People will remember what they want to remember. Everybody writes memoirs and nobody reads them. My memoirs are deposits and debits. That's what you balance for me. You can write my obituary, laughs Vince.

There is much we don't understand about life, says Martina looking at the pigeon puffing and strutting around his bird in the park.

Migrating birds first used navigating skills pilots now use, says Vince.

I believe that God wanted us to fly, so he gave us brains to copy birds.

Everything is possible for God and those that believe in God, smiles Vince.

I wonder what God is like; maybe the souls of departed meet in some other reality, maybe they really unite to be in Him with Him etc.

Our generation of Slovenians were trained to become communists; we became a part of community, one for all, all for one. We moved away from those ideas but people at home lived on them all their lives.

Unfortunately the leaders never managed to overcome their greed. Money seduced them; it made them powerful and lovable and adorable.

They destroyed all other Gods because they wanted to be God.

Nothing changed since Adam and Eve, smiles Martina. Greed is a condition that no amount of success and power can cure.

Life is a race; nobody wins every race; some never win, some run out of breath; some keep on running forever for that one taste of victory. No one ever wins enough; everybody is waiting for one more chance to push that winning button; to open the door to heaven; one more hope fulfilled one more drop in the ocean; one more hurdle jumped over; coming ever closer to that green light of the green valley of scented white lily peace to rest forever.

When people die we pray for memories we shared with them, to stay alive, says Martina after a short silence.

We try to move the boundaries we came here to push but the boundaries are endlessly stretching. We are terrified that the boundaries will brake and we will descend into the abyss but we are still pushing and waiting for a gently scented lily of the valley with the face of heaven growing on the edge of the abyss growing alone in that forgotten far away garden of the fairies.

Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

Ecclesiastes

Ivan

It is a pleasantly fresh spring afternoon. The days at this time of the year can suddenly turn cold or hot or windy or just perfect as it is now.

Helena and Martina are standing in the shade of a huge oak as they watch the mourners arrive for Ivan's funeral. Family members are finding their places in the church.

It's going to be huge, says Helena.

Migrants are more respectful of their dead than Australians, says Helena. Some travelled thousands of kilometres.

Ivan was the heart of Slovenian community in Australia. Some hated his guts but most bought his sausages and craved his attention, whispers Helena.

To be truthful, I never paid much attention to nationality and politics, says Martina. Being Slovenian or Austrian or Australian was much the same to me. I went to school mostly in Australia but I suppose I am a migrant. I wonder when one stops being a migrant. I was born in Slovenia to a Slovenian mother but my half Austrian half Slovenian father took us to Austria after the war and I became Austrian.

You spend time with Slovenians, says Helena.

I probably feel more connected to Slovenians because of Vince.

Slovenian clients chat with Martina while they wait for her boss Vince. They trust Martina with their secrets like they trust a sexless, sinless priest in their confessions. Martina works for their legal representative to whom all secrets are revealed anyway. She is an ordinary person much concerned with propriety. Martina is not old and not young, she is neither beautiful nor ugly, she is not flirtatious but she is not shy either. Her feet seem to be firmly planted on the ground.

Ivan often came to see Vince and I got to know him a bit. He escaped because communists oppressed the church so God help you if you were not properly Catholic, says Martina.

He suspected everybody of being a communist agent, smiles Helena. Janez once said that religion is just old-fashioned politics. Perhaps he is right.

I hope Ivan did not hear him.

The fashionably dressed women in black hats and men in white shirts and dark suits stand solemnly as the flowers are mounting up. Ivan's wife, Ana, and their daughter, Natasha in their black designer outfits, are dabbing at their eyes.

Ana looks ten years younger than she is, says Martina.

When she dies they should write on her tombstone: she looked ten years younger.

Is that her greatest achievement?

I don't know if she achieved anything else, says Helena. But then I wonder if anyone achieves anything in life. Ana dedicated her life to elegance. She even changed Ivan into an elegant man. He was no longer a simple butcher from Slovenia by the time he died.

They must have loved each other.

Love is so many splendid and less splendid things. If Ana and Ivan broke a loaf of bread, he would rejoice and thank God for it while she would moan that it is either too hard or too soft, says Helena.

Natasha really broke all the rules, whispers Martina.

It broke Ivan's heart to see his daughter bashed by a man he despised. The rage killed him.

She looks like an eighteen years old.

She has her mother's younger looking genes.

Robert walks behind his mother and sister. He has an earring and a beard like a rabbit tail.

Robert is a handsome man, says Martina.

He is not half a man his father was. Ivan hoped that Robert would marry a nice Slovenian girl and produce grandchildren but he has other ideas.

People keep coming. The outdoor magnifiers are provided for those that can not fit into the church. Helena and Martina remain outside. The soft solemn church music lingers in the warm breeze.

My legs are killing me; we have been standing for over an hour, whispers Helena.

Ivan was a simple peasant boy when he came to Australia fifty years ago as a teenager with a cardboard suitcase of old clothes. He boasted that he sold blood to Red Cross in Italy so he could buy that suitcase. Most of his friends did the same, he said.

Ivan got a job with a butcher from Poland. He made sausages and hams like he saw his father make at home. His kranskies became instantly famous among Slovenians. Soon Ivan opened his own butchery and delicatessen. Slovenians came from far and wide and also asked for parcels to be sent to friends in other cities. Ivan's shop became a meeting place for Slovenians. That's where the idea of a Slovenian club was born. Slovenian clubs opened in every capital city and Ivan became a supplier of kranskies. The rest is history.

It has been over twenty years since Ivan made his last sausage but kranskies found a place in every delicatessen and many restaurants and clubs in Australia. Ivan became an entrepreneur. His meat-works employed over one hundred people. The business seemingly ran itself.

Ivan returned to Slovenia in 1970 to organise imports of Slovenian small goods for his delicatessens. By 1980 he was selling small goods from all European countries. When Asians started to migrate to Australia in the eighties Ivan began importing Asian goods. His employees told him what the market wanted and he got it.

You only have to listen to what customers want, Ivan said to Vince once.

Ivan carefully chose his employees and paid them well.

The difference between ordinary wage and good pay is small compared to the extra work and care I get from the employees. A happy employee wants to make the employer happy. If you give the employee a hundred percent, he is likely to give you a hundred percent. You get what you pay for, said Ivan to Vince.

Ivan lived for his business, for Slovenia, his family, and for his church, says Helena. In that order.

I wonder what nationality really means, says Martina.

For most migrants it means everything; it is who we are, says Helena.

My father said that no particular nation or social order is better than the other. People take for themselves what they can get away with. First they fight for power and wealth and then they fight for peace so they can keep what they have. He used to say that if you get along with people around you, you will get along with people anywhere, says Martina.

Ivan once said that we, the war babies, don't dare throw anything away although we are actually all quite well off now.

The whole world was hungry after the war.

The congregation reads from the prayer booklets prepared by the family:

This is what the Lord asks of you, only this: To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.

Eulogies are made to turn sinners into saints, whispers Helena.

They will canonise Ivan before he is buried.

It is nice that at the end of the road someone remembers who we were. We don't really know each other until we are dead.

Perhaps it is right that we are examined after we are done and not while we are still becoming whoever we were meant to be.

The ancient prayers echo over the graves: I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Ivan was such a pious flirt, Helena whispers. Women loved him and men wanted to be him.

Power is an aphrodisiac I suppose, says Martina. He had influence over his employees, of course.

And over the women he romanced, smiles Helena.

Poor Ana; he didn't flirt with her. They had a pious relationship.

They prayed together, I suppose, says Helena.

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you, the words of the priest linger over the gathering.

The first will be last; and the last shall be first.

That's what it is all about, smiles Helena. The kingdom of heaven is promised to those that missed out on Earth.

Ivan died at the age of sixty-nine. He watched television when his heart failed. He died respectfully.

You don't have to live with your shameful death but your loved ones do, says Helena.

Rejoice with them that do rejoice and weep with them that weep.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, and neither do they spin.

In their minds the mourners return to the lily white splendour of their youth. In their best funeral outfits and with solemn faces they nod this way and that as they line up to say goodbye. They nervously twist pieces of paper where they wrote and rewrote their eulogies. Ivan used to speak at funerals. Now his friends are going to say what he would have said, what needs to be said. They learned from Ivan what to say.

One day over forty years ago Ivan came to see me with the typewriter under his arm, Vince begins. He asked me to type a letter for about fifty Slovenian families. He handed me the envelopes and the addresses. This letter was the first news bulletin Slovenians in Australia had. Ivan said that Australians not born in Australia needed recognition, which only the people from the same country can offer. He said that only people of the same nation can ever be your true friends.

I often wonder how Ivan, a twenty years old peasant boy, away from home, knew, that migrants need each other's support before they could begin weaving a new identity for themselves. How did Ivan know that we had to re-establish and organise our social life in order to survive. He promoted multicultural while Australian government still insisted on assimilation. Our children assimilated but, thanks to Ivan, they also know where their parents came from.

Lately Ivan became afraid that Slovenian land would be sold to foreigners when Slovenia joined EU. We must never give up our land, he said. The land is who we are. We carry within us the memories of our mountains and valleys, the smells of the forest and the beauty of our seasons. We are able to reach each other's feelings and thoughts because we come from the same land; our identity is engraved in our land, said Ivan.

We argued a lot, Ivan and I. I liked to argue with Ivan because he always showed me the other side of the coin, says Vince after a pause.

When Slovenia demanded independence Ivan urged me to join the demonstration in front of the Embassies, continues Vince. He counted on me to arrange public and private meetings with politicians and explain to Australian public the history and the will of Slovenians.

Slovenians were reborn as a nation, says Martina excited by Vince's speech. Martina loves Vince.

Janez asked me to help him write what he wanted to say, whispers Martina. He was one of Ivan's earliest and longest serving employees. He is the closest thing Ivan had as a friend.

Ivan invited me to a Slovenian mass soon after I came to Australia, Janez begins his eulogy. Later Ivan came to visit all Slovenians and asked us all to help build the Slovenian club. My wife and I said that we had no time. We haven't built our own home yet and I haven't learned to speak English yet and my children were learning to walk and talk.

We must have a place to meet and celebrate, Ivan urged us.

We have nothing to celebrate, I argued.

Our children will grow roots in Australia but it's up to us to teach them how to be Slovenian, said Ivan. We need a place where they can learn to speak Slovenian without being ridiculed.

Our children are going to be Australians, argued my wife.

I am working six days a week, I protested.

On the seventh day you can bring your family along and we will build our Slovenian home in Australia, begged Ivan.

We all came to the piece of land that was to be a Slovenian club. Women planted flowers and served refreshments; men levelled the ground, laid the bricks and cut the wood. Something changed in all of us as we worked into the early Monday morning. We realised how much we needed our togetherness.

It seems easy for people to express gratitude, admiration, and appreciation. Ivan in his coffin isn't a threat to men any more. He made room for others to be what he was.

Ivan knew that I was a teacher in Slovenia so he asked me to prepare a cultural program for the opening of the first Slovenian club in Australia, Helena begins her eulogy.

I have no books or music or costumes, I protested.

You are the best we have so use everything you have. If you need more, tell me and I will find it, said Ivan.

Nobody will want to perform on the stage, I tried to get out of it.

Convince them that they are good and that their children need them. They sing and read and speak and some play instruments. Find them and teach them.

We celebrated the opening. Slovenians from other cities came to celebrate with us and they decided to build their own clubs. That's how we survived.

Little did I know that I will spend the rest of my life preparing programs for Mothers' days, Fathers' days, Christmas, Santa Claus, yearly concerts. I had to be prepared for an endless string of celebrations so I organised a Saturday school for Slovenian children and gave them whatever knowledge I had. Nobody ever mentioned a payment for it. Money would never give me as much satisfaction as did the knowledge that I contributed a little to a new generation of Slovenians.

In the seventies Ethnic Radio began to broadcast programs for all ethnic groups in their own language, continues Helena. Ivan said that I have a pleasant voice so would I read Slovenian programs for half an hour a week. Little did I know that I was to become a broadcaster and script-writer for the rest of my life. I had many sleepless nights compiling interesting little bits I could share with the rest of Slovenian community.

I was twenty-two when Ivan persuaded me to cook for the opening of the Slovenian club, says Mojca. I told him that I was a boarding school girl who never boiled water until we came to Australia. He wouldn't let me get out of it. Ivan taught me how to make sauerkraut and how to boil kranskyes.

He always got what he wanted. Since then I cooked for many festivities but I never felt as proud as I did on the night Slovenian club opened.

Ivan told me that he never ate strudel as good as mine, says Rozi. Her bony, tall body is erect and her features are motionless. I baked more strudels for the club in the last thirty-five years than any family could eat in a lifetime.

Rozi's husband Jim died last year. When Rozi smiles, which is rarely, her face becomes pretty with dimples forming close to her nose.

Ivan said that you could never run away from who you are. I always remembered his words. He asked me to invite a singing group from Slovenia to perform in the club, says Marty.

Who will pay for them? I asked.

We will, said Ivan. We will take them around Australia, feed them and accommodate them.

You want me to drive them all over Australia, I protested.

We all need a holiday, said Ivan.

Meeting Slovenians in other Australian cities was a great experience for all of us. Of course we complained that we missed a few days work, spent dollars that should have gone towards building our own homes. Now we realise how lucky we were that we found each other, continues Marty.

I always liked Marty, whispers Helena. He is such a nice man.

Are you looking for a nice man? Teases Martina.

Aren't we all, smiles Helena.

He is very successful and fit, admits Martina.

And alone, smiles Marta.

Martina does not speak at the grave but she was a part of the celebrations and a part of the protests along with Vince. Ivan counted on them to be there and stand for what he stood for during the heady days of Slovenian independence. Slovenia was on the front page of every newspaper, every news segment began with the news about brave, honest, hard working Slovenians who deserve to have freedom and independence. For the first time Martina became intensely aware that she is Slovenian. Even her children became proud of being Slovenian.

Toni stands near the grave silently for a moment.

Ivan and I have been pig-headed and rude to each other but we both wanted the best for Slovenia.

Ivan accused me of co-operating with Yugo embassy. I did. The ambassador approached me and offered to bring Slovenian singers to sing for us. I was happy to organise their tour. When they arrived they told me that they are not allowed to come to the club unless the Ambassador comes with them. The ambassador said that he is not allowed into the club that had the Slovenian flag without a communist star. I compromised and took down the flag. They brought cassettes, videos and books. We needed what they offered and I took it, confesses Toni.

The mourners feel compelled to confess and explain. The funerals remind them that they are old and that their numbers are dwindling. Death shakes them to the core; they would like to believe that this final curtain is really the beginning of new life. They admit that they need each other and that perhaps they weren't there for each other at times.

Eternal rest grant unto him o Lord, and perpetual light shine upon him, says the priest.

Receive his soul and present him to God the most high, they finish the Commendation.

We live in hope to meet again in the eternal Jerusalem, says the priest.

In twenty years we will all be forgotten, whispers Martina.

A group of mourners begin to sing a Slovenian funeral song about the forest that will be green again while the one we mourn will never be with us again. The words of the song *Gozdic je ze zelen* reverberate over the graves. The birds will sing again, the spring will come but you will lie under the black soil, they sing and the voices tremble and brake and people cry openly, leaning on each other. They regret their arguments and divisions as they hug and kiss.

May the peace of the Lord, which is above all understanding, echoes the voice of the priest.

Lord hear us, pray those who believe and those who don't.

Slovenian club has never been as full as it is for Ivan's wake. He had done it again, says Martina.

I believe that Ivan is watching from some corner of heaven very pleased with himself, says Helena.

Rows of tables are laden with delicacies; people are greeting each other, hugging and kissing their partners, children, friends, opponents and even enemies. They are all they have.

They load their plates with the best Slovenian cooks prepared.

Australian food looks nice but it is tasteless, says Rozi.

Flowers without fragrance, food without taste, love without warmth, says Mojca.

Australians become instant friends but they never remember you when they move away, says Rozi.

Slovenians are the only people, who really know that we are alive, says Helena.

This club is the only Slovenia our children relate to, says Helena.

We can jump on the plane any day and have our home and family and memories in Slovenia but our children have nothing there. We know where our roots are but they don't. They are more homeless than we ever were, says Mojca.

Ivan worked like mad on his own projects but he never supported anybody else's ideas, he had to have it all his way, says Toni.

He started it all and then the embassy recruited people like you to destroy it, says Helena.

A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.

Wilhelm II

Marjan

Marjan just returned from holidays in Slovenia. He invited Mojca, Rozi, Janez, Helena and Martina to dinner in Slovenian club.

Saves me telling the news over and over, he says. Marjan is slightly bent in shoulders; he seems to have bent much in life to be at the eye level with people. Marjan was a failed nineteen years old student when he came to Australia fifty years ago. He started as a labourer on the Snowy Mountains project. Single men of the Snowy travelled to Sydney on a payday looking for drink, girls and friends. Marjan met Lenka who encouraged him to do a librarian course with her and he spent his life as a librarian and Lenka's husband.

Lenka was a happy, frivolous woman who made fun of Marjan's pedantic behaviour. She drank and smoked and maybe shortened her life.

I don't want to prolong life beyond enjoyment, she reasoned. Being old would not suit me. She died of breast cancer two years ago. She just vanished from what seemed to be the middle of her life.

Marjan started publishing a little Slovenian newsletter soon after he settled in Sydney. Over the years Marjan's newspaper became political, philosophical and literary enlightenment for Slovenian migrants in Australia. They read what he wants them to read, they think, as he wants them to think they swallow words of wisdom that he finds in his library or his mind or his heart. Marjan argues that arguing is reasoning and reasoning is a human duty. He believes that there is a logical explanation for why people are as they are and why they do what they do. Everything is a part of some kind of eternal universal evolution, he says.

Marjan is the brains of our group, declares Mojca.

Since Lenka died our house is no longer a home. I decided to return to Slovenia, says Marjan after they order desert.

You'll be bored in Slovenia, says Helena.

I will find something to do. I might even do some good, says Marjan. It might take a year to sell the house and all, but I am going, says Marjan with a happy glint in his eyes.

You'll miss us. We will miss you, says Mojca.

If I don't like it in Slovenia I will come back, says Marjan. First I want to find out about my father.

What do you mean?

You know that Ivan suspected me of being an agent of Yugoslav embassy. He once saw me read a Slovenian paper and asked if I got it while I was at the Yugoslav embassy's party, tells Marjan. I refused to explain that I simply ordered it because I like to know what is happening at home.

I wouldn't worry about Ivan. He accused everybody of being a communist, says Janez. He was mad at me when he found out that I subscribe to Rodna Gruda. You are paying for communist propaganda, yelled Ivan. You forgot where you came from. I wanted to explain that I like the pictures of Slovenia in it, but Ivan walked away.

Rodna Gruda is meant to be a voice of migrants. Publishers of Rodna Gruda were in direct contact with us traitors but if they wanted to survive as publishers in Ljubljana, they had to prove it to Yugo regime that they were their true and trusted agents, says Marjan.

Ivan knew that communists are still in charge of Slovenian media. I showed him a newspaper from Ljubljana that published my observations on Australian education, says Helena. A certain Dr. Zalokar from Radovljica complained to the editor that Belogardist, religious, capitalist, western sources should not be allowed to contaminate Slovenian media by having a voice in our prestigious newspaper. Zalokar accused me of being all of the above. He added that his letter must never be shown to anyone or be used for publication but some mischievous person from the newspaper faxed me a copy and I showed it to Ivan.

What does all that have to do with your father, Mojca returns to Marjan's story.

My father was a partisan, says Marjan.

So?

He was killed in 1943.

Who killed him?

Mum once whispered that partisans killed him but I could not understand that. I told mum that she was lying. Her family was fiercely Catholic and anticommunist. They never wanted dad to be a partisan. They blamed partisans for everything. I heard my grandfather say to mum that communists were terrorists. Mum looked around and I knew that she was scared. Nothing lasts forever and I hope you will live long enough to see communism destroyed, said my grandmother. I hated my grandparents because of it. I knew that my father was a partisan hero; secretly I became afraid that people would find out that partisans killed him and that he wasn't a real hero. I was afraid that people would discover that he was a traitor and antirevolutionary. I heard a lot about the traitors and deep down I began to feel like a traitor.

While in Ljubljana now I stood at the newspaper kiosk and read the big black headline in the newspaper Democracy: Communists were terrorists. I shuddered and looked around. Someone must have put that headline on the stand to test me. I leaned on the bridge and pretended to look across the river in the centre of the capital. Nobody took notice of me or of the headlines. I expected to be punished. I expected something like God's wrath coming down on me. Nothing changed on the outside but inside of me one guilt was replacing the other. The wrath is an invisible thing. Was I guilty of reading the headlines or guilty of ignoring what they said?

How dare they? My father wasn't a terrorist.

The frightening headlines collect dust as people walk past me casually. The breeze is brushing my skin, the sun is warm, and the cars are noisy. People are rushing to and fro lugging heavy shopping bags. The shops are full, people look prosperous, and everything is as it should be.

The headline in the middle of the Slovenian capital says that communists were terrorists and nobody protests or sings or cries because of it.

We demand a decent burial for Home guards, says a smaller headline and I stand like a pillar of salt next to the news stall with my eyes on the paper. People rush to their work and to their resting places as they always did. Women try to walk straight in their high heels. Men have flat shoes and nothing in their hands. Children demand attention like they always did while my world was turned upside down.

My grandparents and my parents are long dead. I decided to find out more about my family. I think I owe them. At least I owe it to myself. I have to study Slovenian history. I have to reconcile with the past.

When I was about eighteen mum told me about her last conversation with my father. At the time Northern Slovenia was occupied by Germans. Partisans were supposed to resist Germans but instead they were killing prominent Slovenians in Ljubljana. Dad asked his commandant why they were killing Slovenians in Ljubljana instead of trying to liberate Stajerska. But Stajerska is under Germans, said the commandant. Aren't we fighting Germans, asked dad.

A week later dad disappeared.

I did not understand it then. Partisans were heroes. I wanted to have a hero for a father but mum whispered that dad was shot by partisans. I began to hate my parents.

At school I learned about the heroism and wisdom of communist leaders but I could not forget that maybe my father wasn't a real communist. I escaped from my family and from the fear and confusion of it all. I did not belong. I came to Australia.

Now I began to think about the events of the war and after the war. Bad people always whispered bad things about the heroes of the revolution. Bad people escaped because they were afraid of punishment. Bad migrants whispered against the representatives of their communist homeland. Bad people were like Ivan. He meddled in politics. We were told often enough to leave politics to politicians.

Ivan would have loved to see Catholic Church inherit the power and the land from communists, says Janez.

Nobody ever openly talked about Slovenians killing other Slovenians but the dark knowledge of the killings mingled among Slovenians, Marjan continues his story.

I was about ten in the autumn of 1945. I looked after the cows grazing on the paddock near Krka. Two older village boys came home on holidays from the university in Ljubljana. I heard them boast how they bashed naked anticommunists Home guards that marched to their death after they were returned from Austria. These older boys ignored me because I was just a little boy.

Poor sods were more worried about being naked than being dead. Some prayed with their hands covering their dicks, laughed one boy.

The one at the front cried like a baby, laughed the other. Others were stammering their prayers.

These university students were ordinary boys who believed that it was their duty to bash Home guards because the allies returned them to the communist Yugoslav regime to deal with, says Marjan.

It was funny seeing their bare bottoms move in a straight line. You would expect them to fight or try to escape, said one boy. But they just walked in the straight line.

I suppose they could not fight without a uniform, laughed the other boy.

Rudi bent over to shield himself. He put his hands over his head but he forgot his balls. I got him from the back right between his legs. He picked his bleeding ding dong and tried to walk but couldn't. They had to carry him and throw him in the pit, laughed the boy.

He squealed like a pig when they turn the knife, said the other boy gleefully.

You saved them a bullet, agreed his friend.

Rudi was their neighbour. They roasted chestnuts together as they looked after their cows in the paddocks along Krka. They walked to High School five kilometres every day from Saint Cross to Kostonjeva. They were part of Saint Cross, the village of one hundred houses. They talked about girls as they walked to church. Rudi's mother was a Godmother to one of the boys. The other boy was a boyfriend of Rudi's sister.

I wonder if he was still alive when they bulldozed the ground on top of him, said his friend.

Maybe he crawled out of the pit before they covered him with dirt and rocks, said the boy and they giggled uncomfortably like boys do just before they become men.

The two boys eventually became important men and good fathers, says Marjan. I wonder if they ever managed to forget how they tortured the boy they used to play with.

I didn't dare tell anyone what I heard. I had no idea what it all meant but I knew that I had nobody to tell to.

For years I had a recurring dream about Rudi climbing out of the pit with blood running down his legs. In my dream he begged me to help him but I kept running away.

I became afraid of Kocevje, the silence of the forest seemed filled with screaming ghosts. People whispered about the horrors that happened there. When the words Kocevski Rog were mentioned, mum lifted her eyes in fear.

While in Ljubljana now I wanted to learn what really happened. I wanted to find out who killed my father and why.

Did you?

Not yet. An old woman told me that my father had an argument with his commandant and that he was found dead in the forest the next day.

Did you find the commandant?

The old woman said that he was the friend of the family but she was afraid to tell me his name. She died while I was in Slovenia. I have to go back and search.

We should all find out what it was all about, says Helena.

There was an exhibition called the Dark side of the moon in Ljubljana, says Marjan. They exhibited documents of communist brutality during and especially after the war. The disappearances, the bashings, the imprisonments and the nationalisation of private property, the killing and intimidation, nothing happened by chance. Communists carefully planned how to make people scared and obedient.

So things naughty migrants whispered about until now have finally been proven, says Mojca.

Nobody cares any more, says Marjan. It worries me that no one cares.

They finally remembered us, says Helena.

They never forgot us, says Marjan. Ivan was right; the evil angels at Yugo embassy followed us to the end of the world to monitor our activities. The ambassador invited gullible migrants for drinks at Yugo embassy where they gave them subtle hints on how to cause feuds in our clubs.

They interrogated us when we came begging for visas to go home, says Helena. Our people are easily scared.

And readily grateful. They boasted about the invitation, they couldn't help shining in the glory the invitation meant to them, adds Mojca. They told the ambassador whatever they knew and imagined they knew. Then they felt ashamed of telling and they began to hate those they told about.

They sold out their friends for a bit of music and a bit of propaganda. Yugo embassies split every Slovenian community in every city of the world. As long as they made us hate each other, we posed no threat to them, says Marjan.

Embassy offered much to our community when we needed it most. Communism wasn't all bad, it provided medical care, jobs and education, says Janez. They looked after people.

One looks after one's tools and animals and cars and homes, but people are supposed to think and look after themselves, says Marjan.

We looked after ourselves well. We built our clubs with our own hands and money but ambassadors demanded to be invited in. Those poor ignorant sods that were the guests at the embassy became embassy's agents and voted that ambassador be invited to the club, says Helena.

How could people who love each other so much, hate each other so much?

They held the key to Slovenia. They knew that we left our hearts there, says Helena.

Everybody likes to bash communism but the system communism replaced wasn't ideal either, says Janez.

Let me tell you a bit of WWII history I learned, Marjan ignores Janez.

Hitler and Stalin agreed to divide Europe between them. Stalin instructed Slovenians: Officers and soldiers do not respond to mobilisation. Germany is a friend and protector of all working peoples. When Hitler attacked Russia, Stalin ordered communists everywhere to begin communist revolution.

Slovenian leaders were collaborating with Germans, Home guards even swore allegiance to Hitler, says Janez.

When Italy and Germany invaded Slovenia in 1941 nobody in Slovenia collaborated with Hitler. From 22nd June 1941 until 17th July 1942, communists killed 1500 prominent Slovenians who were suspected of opposing communist revolution; they killed them for no other reason but to assume power and leadership. Their killing had absolutely nothing to do with the German invasion. They took advantage of this most vulnerable time in our history for communist revolution. 1500 prominent citizens killed in a year is a lot for a nation of one million people. They had 25.000 Slovenians on their killing list. The fear of death created antirevolutionary movement. Communists created the split of the nation. They called antirevolutionary movement collaboration with Hitler. My father saw what was happening and he dared to question it. They had to get rid of him, says Marjan. The occupier, according to international conventions and practise, is bound to keep law and order in the occupied land. If the occupier can't keep the population safe, a domestic force under the occupier's control is necessary, says Marjan.

Italians first agreed in 1942 that anticommunist force called Village Guards-Vaške straže be formed. Later Slovenians under German occupation organised Home Guards.

Why didn't they join the partisans in the Liberation Front, says Janez. My father did. He died for Slovenia.

When Germany attacked Soviet Union, Moscow sent the order to Slovenian communists to organise a Liberation Front. Everybody in the Liberation force had to accept communist leadership. Prominent cultural leaders and people from other political movements were recruited into the Liberation Front but these outsiders had no decision making power. My father was one of these outsiders, says Marjan. He was a Shire official with some influence but he was ordered to toe the communist line.

The fact remains that Home guards killed Slovenians with German guns, says Janez. The whole world knows that they were Hitler's collaborators

My father wanted to resist Germans so he joined partisans but Stalin ordered that partisans' first priority was to get rid of the existing government and assume leadership and power. At that very moment Slovenians were facing imminent mortal danger from partisans, not from Germans. The only possible source of arms was the occupier, says Marjan.

Communists killed on Soviet orders with Soviet guns, says Rozi.

Germans and communists targeted the intellectuals and clergy, because they both knew that without Slovenian leaders it would be easier to subdue Slovenia, says Marjan.

Germans came and Germans went but dead Slovenians never returned, says Rozi.

Germans admitted their guilt but communists still deny it. Slovenians are not even allowed to know where their loved ones are buried, says Helena.

We became afraid to love the people we needed to love, says Mojca.

The regime wanted us afraid. As long as we were afraid of each other we would not unite against them, says Helena.

The winners eventually win the hearts and minds of those they rule, says Marjan. Slovenians are just people, rich people and those that want to be rich. The poor still believe in the common good but the rich never did.

Even now they say that we should forget the past and stop the witch-hunt. Only we are the past, says Helena.

Every killing field every other Massacre has been identified and documented but nothing has ever been said about anticommunist movement in Slovenia or about the refugees that were returned from Austria to be killed by Tito's lynch mob, says Marjan.

The tragic fate of Jews has been forever imprinted on the conscience of humanity. The hideous cruelty of the Germans was exposed and condemned. Nuremberg court heard about the atrocities perpetrated by Hitler's supporters. Solzhenitsyn exposed Stalin's Siberia.

Slovenians were always fighting other Slovenians, says Janez.

Killing your own people to please some foreign political power or ideology must scar the whole nation, says Mojca.

Maybe killing your own people in peacetime is too horrible to remember, says Helena.

European Union will force Slovenian government to come clean, says Mojca.

I doubt that anyone outside Slovenia cares if we live or die, says Marjan.

My brother was among those refugees. I need to know who killed him and why, says Helena.

It was a soldier following the order of his officer. This officer followed the order of his superior, who got the order from Belgrade who got the order from Stalin. Like Nazis they all followed orders, says Marjan. The Nuremberg excuse they call it.

Hundreds of thousands of anticommunist refugees from Eastern Europe escaped to Austria after the war. On 19th of May 1945 General Low agreed to repatriate all Slovenian refugees. As a payment Tito's army volunteered to retreat and let Austria keep Carinthia, explains Marjan.

Communists paid with our land so they could murder Slovenian anticommunist opposition, says Helena.

It was more important to communists that they kill their opposition than to hold Carinthia. Tens of thousands of anticommunists were a threat to the new totalitarian regime, says Marjan.

The West wanted to contain communism within the boundaries of former Yugoslavia so they agreed to the deal. It was more important to them to stop the spread of communism than to save our people. To me this pragmatic deal is the only logical explanation of the events. I have no proof, perhaps nobody has proof but I am determined to find out more about it.

You have a big job ahead of you, says Helena.

Tens of thousands Slovenians escaped to Argentina and other non communist countries. Twelve thousands Slovenian refugees surrendered to the Field Marshal Alexander along with hundreds of thousands of other East European refugees, says Marjan. May 1945 was a miserable wet month. Everybody wanted to get rid of refugees camping in the southern fields of Austria. The world was tired of the war; they had to solve problems quickly. Sending refugees home was practical and sensible as far as the Brits were concerned.

On May 23 1945 Field Marshal Alexander gave the order that all Yugoslav Nationals should be returned to Yugoslavia UNLESS this involved the use of force; OTHERWISE they were to be evacuated to join their compatriots at Distone in Italy.

Harold Macmillan was responsible for political decisions in British occupied Italy and Austria. Macmillan and his British officers had a task to conduct the repatriation. Macmillan knew that the refugees were likely to cause trouble if the guards told them that they are being returned to communists. He ordered his officers to lie to refugees that they were relocated to Italy. Slovenians entered the transports peacefully because it didn't enter their minds that British officers lied. Once the refugees were in Tito's hands it was too late, says Marjan. What happened was a ghastly mistake, according to the statement issued by British Foreign office.

On 26.5 1945 a Serbian Chetnik returned to Vetrinje in Austria with the news that Tito's partisans are waiting for them across the border before the Loibl-Pass tunnel. After the refugees received this information it was no longer possible for officers to carry out the transportation peacefully. Violent

force was used although the orders were that nobody should be forcefully repatriated. The Field Marshal Alexander, the British and American government deny any knowledge of deception or the violence used to get rid of refugees, continues Marjan.

Macmillan sent them back because the West considered them Hitler's collaborators, says Janez.

After Home Guards were returned to Tito there remained about six thousands Yugoslav civilians in Austria, mainly old men, children and women, continues Marjan. He ignores Janez.

These civilians witnessed the deception and the force used in the repatriation. British officers were afraid that these witnesses might bring the nature of their activities into the open. It was best to return them to Tito who was known to have effective ways of silencing these inconvenient witnesses. By 30th May 1945 everybody knew that the hand-over was a clear violation of the international law.

Canadian Major Barre was in charge of repatriation of further 2700 civilians but he refused to forcefully repatriate them. He consulted with his superiors and the order was reversed.

We only whispered about our lost generation until now, says Helena.

Macmillan became British Prime minister. Brigadier Toby Low, who was directly carrying out the assignment of repatriation, became Lord Aldington and a Member of Parliament immediately after relinquishing the post as General Keightley's chief of staff. They enjoyed the prestige and respect of British society, says Marjan.

Macmillan and Aldington are dead now. It is time to tell the truth, says Helena.

It must be abhorrent to the whole Western world to suggest that honourable British leaders are capable of knowingly assisting communists in a mass murder, says Mojca.

They share in our national guilt whether they like it or not. There were one thousand Ukrainian refugees in Liechtenstein. Russians demanded their return but Liechtenstein government said no and all of those refugees were saved, says Marjan.

It is hard to believe that anyone could shoot thousands of innocent boys tied together, says Mojca. Your own brothers, neighbours and friends. Twelve thousands dead Slovenians may not mean much to the world but Slovenia was cut in half through the heart. For every dead Slovenian there were many who mourned him or agreed with his ideas. No other nation ever called half of their people traitors.

My two cousins were in the war, says Rozi. Home Guards took one and partisans took the other. The partisan became a director in the new regime; Home Guard was killed in Kocevski Rog. When I was in Slovenia in 1994 they erected a monument in the village cemetery for Home Guards who were fighting against communism.

My communist cousin said: What a joke. My brother had no idea what communism was.

But we learned at school that Home Guards betrayed the glorious communist revolution, I said.

There was no revolution, said my cousin.

Why did Slovenians kill each other, then, I asked.

It was the war, he said.

Your brother was killed after the war, I said.

He became silent and I almost felt sorry for him. He lost his only brother and he does not know why. I think he also lost the faith in what he was fighting for.

We have Revolution Squares and the monuments to revolution in most Slovenian cities, says Mojca.

After the war Serbs moved to Slovenia to take key political and economic positions. They came to keep us under control. Now Slovenians rewarded them by giving them Slovenian citizenship, says Janez.

Serb children go to Slovenian school and the next generation will forget that their parents weren't born in Slovenia, says Rozi.

It's the same everywhere. Our children and grandchildren will forget that we weren't born in Australia, says Helena.

Serbs will never become Slovenians, says Janez. Identity is all they care about.

Your children are half Serbs, Helena reminds Janez.

After centuries of interbreeding and assimilation it is hard to say how much we are Austrian or Serbian and how much Slovenian, says Martina.

I wonder if nationality still means the same as it used to. People travel, intermarry, migrate and move, says Helena.

Haider, Austrian leader of the Freedom party is trying to be nice to Austrian Slovenians in the hope that they will forget about being Slovenian.

It is rather senseless to claim any kind of racial or national purity since our genome shows that everybody carries the genes of many nations and races, says Mojca.

In this global village all nations became diluted, says Marjan.

I wonder if nationality is written in our genes or in our understanding or in the way we look or feel or believe, says Helena.

In the New World order nationality and religion won't mean much, adds Martina.

I rather like being European, says Janez.

For a moment they silently examine who they are, who people think they are and who they would like to be in a constantly changing world.

Jews are still hunting Nazis; they are still opening the mass graves. Aborigines in Australia are seeking compensation for the wrongs done to them two centuries ago. But Slovenian leaders call us witch hunters because we demand the truth, says Mojca.

I hope that some brave film-maker will bring out this missing piece of history and produce a human drama that will transcend the politics, says Helena.

Film producers in Slovenia are busy making pornographic films, says Rozi.

The film about repatriation would offend Britain, says Marjan.

Maybe a Jewish... says Mojca.

What would the Jews get out of this story?

They might see the irony of it all. They are good story tellers, says Helena.

Do what you want with them, they are your people, said Macmillan to Tito. Pontius Pilate said the same when he handed Jesus to the Jews, tells Rozi.

Sometimes it is hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys, says Martina.

People are neither saints nor sinners they are only winners and losers, says Marjan. Those in power support the system that keeps them in power. Most have only a little power but they still protect the power they have. The system is like a house of cards. If one betrays the power the whole power structure may collapse.

They sit in silence pondering the senselessness of it all.

Are you going to Slovenia to look for a film producer, asks Martina.

I will try, says Marjan. The West should acknowledge that refugees they returned to communists died not as traitors but as anti-communists.

They should make a film of the new Slovenian history. Maybe they should begin with Christianisation of Slovenians in eighth century. Preseren's story Krst pri Savici- Christening at Savica would provide a lovely story and a beautiful setting, says Helena.

The story should finish it in Kocevje 1945, suggests Marjan.

Maybe it should finish in 1991 with the independence war, adds Mojca.

It should really. We never learned our history at school much, agrees Marjan

Most film makers in Slovenia are Serbs, says Janez. Slovenian government is paying them to defame Slovenians. Why would they promote Slovenian history?

Jews won their statehood, Germany and Japan prospered. What did Slovenians win? After independence we joined Germans again, says Rozi.

I was in Slovenia to learn new educational methods with Slovenian teachers from Argentine. These teachers were the children and grandchildren of escaped anticommunists. I was impressed with their innocent, humble behaviour, their talents, intelligence, kindness, discipline, knowledge, determination, success, and hard work. Maybe they are what we won, says Helena.

Their parents prepared them to one day live in a free Slovenia, says Marjan. They never had to pretend and hide who they are.

We published a booklet about our experiences in which twenty years old Luke says: They are all present in my being, generations and generations of Slovenians. The tree is growing within me, they are all part of me, mother and sister and brother all mine.

They never had to change their beliefs. We changed so many times; in the end you forget who you are and if you are anybody worth knowing at all, says Mojca.

They say that an honest politician is the one who when once bought, stays bought. Our politicians have been bought and sold many times, laughs Helena.

Women who sell themselves once are called wives but those that can be bought by anyone are called prostitutes. Same goes for politicians, laughs Marjan.

You will miss us in Slovenia, says Helena.

When you visit me in Slovenia we will remember Australia like we remember Slovenia here in Australia, says Marjan.

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam

Be it ever so humble

There is no place like home

Payne

Helena

I wish I could talk to Tom once more, says Helena warming her hands on a hot cup of coffee.

The bitterest tears shed over a grave are for the words left unsaid and for the deeds left undone, Martina remembers this old saying. Helena and Martina became close friends since they both lost their husbands.

After Tom died I could not watch television, read or eat or talk. I rang my best and worst friends but when their phone rang I put down the receiver. It wouldn't be polite to talk about Tom and death. I felt a huge rock of tears in my chest at his funeral but I couldn't cry. It seemed indecent not to cry, says Helena.

I felt much the same when Joe passed away, says Martina. I just kept busy.

There was so much to do only there was no one to do it with; no one to comb my hair for, no one to argue with, and no one to cook for. I needed to talk to someone; I needed to say things to my parents; I had to visit their grave; I hope that somewhere within the universe they heard my words. I wish I spoke to them before but I was so young and so naïve then. So for the first time I decided to accept the invitation to a school reunion. I saw everything in a new light; it was like for the first time I looked at myself, says Helena.

School reunions spoil the memories, says Martina.

My reunion was much nicer than my memories. I laid the ghosts to rest. I am no longer ashamed and afraid.

What were you ashamed and afraid of?

It was towards the end of the war. I was about four, begins Helena. Milan, a boy next door and my brother Emil went to school together. I admired these two seventeen years old men who sometimes let me walk behind them. They were best friends; both so handsome and smart.

When the war started partisans took Milan and Home guards took Emil. One became communist and the other anticommunist. I doubt they had any idea really of what they became really.

Soldiers rarely do.

I will never forget the day Milan came looking for Emil. He seemed so much bigger in his uniform with a bayonet down his leg and the gun on his shoulder. He asked for my brother. Dad ignored him and headed for the house. Milan hit him on the head with the butt of the gun. Blood sprinkled the snow. Mum tried to help my father as he fell on the ground but Milan pushed her down with his boot and spat into her face. He yelled that he would shoot us all if we didn't tell where Emil was. I was kneeling in the snow next to my parents.

There, I chirped pointing up hill. That was my first lie. I suppose that was where I learned how to survive, says Helena for the first time becoming aware of the truth.

We lie when we are scared or ashamed of the truth, says Martina.

It was like I was born and became aware of my being in that moment. Milan tortured and humiliated my parents and they could do nothing. They represented all the power in the world to me yet they

were obviously powerless. I became afraid. The memory of my parents kneeling there and the drops of blood on the snow, this first real memory; is brilliantly clear.

We never forget the moment when we lose our innocence, says Martina.

I never stopped being afraid of Milan; maybe Milan became a symbol of all men; maybe he became all people. I learned that I had to lie to get through. I forgot what the truth was or should be. I covered my insecurities with lies that pleased people. I told them what they wanted to hear. They loved me when I told them how unique and wise and beautiful they are. They followed me not because they loved me but because they wanted to hear more good things about themselves I covered my guilt and my fear with a flowery blanket of lies, laughs Helena surprised by her own discovery.

It is rather liberating to grow old, isn't it? When we were young we were terrified that somebody would sniff out our jealousies and weaknesses, says Martina.

There is no love for a neighbour. There never was. We worship God because we want to be almighty like he is; because we want to be not afraid.

People carry Jesus wisdom like a sword; they believe that their Jesus will make everything right for them. They threaten others with their personal version of Jesus.

There are little Hitlers all around us threatening to kill the weak.

There are weeds in every garden threatening to destroy the gentle plants, says Martina.

Maybe god created us so we will keep on weeding his Garden of Eden. To kill the vermin and save the planet, laughs Helena.

We will start a new religion if we are not careful, laughs Martina.

As an immigrant teacher I became ever more afraid of not being good enough. I was to teach children who were not going to amount to anything. They called them challenged. I was challenged to make something out of nothing. I wasn't afraid of those children because they were powerless; they had physical and mental disabilities, which caused behaviour problems, learning problems and life problems. In the past these children attended special schools, they were called spastic, problem children, troubled children, handicapped, disadvantaged and culturally different. Now they are challenged. The students and I began overcoming challenges, we changed together; holding hands we empowered each other and reinvented ourselves.

I was challenged to find the students' talents and shine them for everyone to see. My happiest memories are of the times when I discovered a talent in a child and showed that talent to the child and explained to the child what can be achieved with a talent like that. Sometimes a child said I can see, I got it, now I know, and both the child and I became enveloped into the warm glow of being special and being special to each other because we both became a little stronger together as the child suddenly knew that he knew what he was supposed to know and do; we both felt happier and stronger. I began to trust myself.

You started to tell me what happened to your brother, Martina reminds Helena.

I remember the All Saints day soon after the war. Mum looked through the window as people walked past our house towards the cemetery to put flowers on the graves of their dead. She called dad for lunch but he refused to come. She cried as she lit the candle next to the statue of Virgin Mary in the corner of the house. Dad later told me that they heard about Emil being killed at that time. They had no grave to put the flowers on, says Helena.

The war changed everybody.

My father was an influential man before the war, the pillar of the church they called him. My parents owned the only shop in the village. I could not understand them being powerless. One day after the war two men in grey suits came with a search warrant. They found a bale of black cotton my father had in the attic. Black cotton was popular after the war. Women wore black because they lost their sons. They arrested dad because he did not declare it. They accused dad of being antirevolutionary

so they could confiscate his property. We had to move out of our home and eventually a shire official settled there.

Revolution changes the social order, says Martina. Milan's family became powerful and yours became powerless. Maybe everybody deserves a go at being in charge.

I started school and learned that God no longer existed and that private property was something to be ashamed of. People began to believe in the common good until they noticed that the leaders drove cars and lived in better homes. Ate better. The leaders noticed that people noticed. They had to punish people who noticed. Some people escaped, some learned to prosper, others learned to get along. Everybody, who was anybody pretended to be a communist, only my stubborn parents refused to pretend. I was ashamed of them. They did not understand the brotherhood, equality and common good.

Where did you go when you lost your home?

We went to live with my mother's brother, Miha. People laughed at uncle Miha, because he claimed that God and saints and spirits of the dead appeared to him in his sleep. We all felt laughed at because of Miha.

If he was rich he would be called eccentric or maybe a clairvoyant, laughs Martina. We might even see him on television.

People considered him mad. Not dangerously mad, of course, but just someone to laugh at. I hated being related to the man who had a knack for interpreting dreams but wasn't able to provide a decent living. Mum's family was never good at making money. I suppose I am like Miha. I lack ambition.

What happened to Miha?

His mother wanted him to become a priest but his father persuaded him to study medicine. Miha failed his medical exams and returned home to work on the land. He was never much of a farmer either. He was never much of anything. I once asked him why he did not try again but he said that life is too short to repeat things. I never really knew my relations or why they did what they did.

Did you like uncle Miha?

I loved him in some part of me but in the main part I was ashamed of him. He made me ashamed of myself. We soon moved from Miha's house though. Dad's uncle Franc became a widower and mum came useful as his maid. Mum cooked and cleaned, my father worked in the fields but all the time we felt that we lived on charity.

You didn't like Franc.

Franc was well respected; men lifted their hats when they passed him. I liked that. Dad's family was respectable. Emil was so like me, dad once said. I believed he was disappointed because my brother died instead of me. I dreamt about dying to save him. I wanted to die so my father would be happy again. Emil was an only child until I came years later. I was a plaything rather than a serious heir to the family name. I was afraid of uncle Franc. I think mum passed her genes onto me. We were all rather ashamed of mum's family. Nobody ever said so but we all knew. Mum told me about the lives of the saints. I wanted to become a saint because mum made it clear that this was the highest aspiration one can have. She made me believe that greatness comes through pain.

It usually does, says Martina.

I was eight, continues Helena. We had no milk that winter. Mum liked milk in her coffee. America provided milk powder so the children received milk for lunch at school. I poured my cup of milk into a little bottle to take to mum. A boy bumped into me on the steps, I fell and the bottle broke. The boy fell over me and cut his hand. The milk soaked my books. Everybody laughed at me and crooned over the boy whose hand was bleeding.

They probably did not mean to upset you.

I would do anything to make mum happy but she died the following day. Dad said that she died of a broken heart. After mum's funeral I cried hidden in the dark corner of the church. I looked at the Virgin Mary and felt that she wanted me to come closer; I touched her blue shawl and her cold hands; I put my head in her lap and my tears warmed her cold plaster hands. I looked into the blue paint of her eyes and believed with all my heart that she became my mother. I felt her caressing me. I have never been as close to anybody in my whole life as I was to that plaster lady waiting for me faithfully on the altar in the dark side of the silent empty church. My tears washed that statue every day after school as I went to tell her things I could not tell anybody else. People had sad, worried faces after the war but mother Mary was forever smiling a gentle smile of understanding.

How did your father cope?

Dad ignored me while mum was alive. After mum's death he told me about poor Cinderella every night until I believed that Prince Charming would come to change my life as well. I looked for a frog to kiss so it would turn into a prince charming, laughs Helena.

And then you met Tom.

I knew Tom all my life. People made fun of Tom's family, because they had nothing but a house full of children. Tom's father walked ten kilometres each way every day to work in the brickyard. He had a bad leg and could barely walk but he walked. Tom's mum took over a paddock of land from a rich farmer. She had to give half of the produce to the farmer for the use of the land. She took her children with her in the field so she could look after them. Tom was the oldest and had to help carry babies after his mother. After the war communists took the land from the farmer and gave it to Tom's family. Tom often told me how hungry they were; every time he painted the times before the war a little grimmer and communism a little sweeter.

Life is all about money and people who have it, says Martina.

After the war Tom became the president of the local branch of the Communist party. The Shire sent him to a communist management school. When he returned, he became a director of a bike factory. He had the power to hire and fire. Everybody did favours for Tom. People were grateful. Tom liked grateful people.

People adore the powerful, says Martina.

Power-mad dogs, said my father. He blamed Tom's people for the death of my brother. Tom's family and Milan's family were one and the same to dad.

To an outsider it seems that the poor just turned the tables, says Martina.

Things surely improved for Tom's family. Tom became aggressive. Maybe he was scared that someone will snatch away his power or possessions. He never trusted people. He was like a dog guarding his bone.

He stood up for himself.

I turned him into a monster. Maybe I never loved him; maybe I was afraid of him; maybe I was just too lazy to stand up for myself. Maybe our relationship was meaningless and so I never bothered to make anything out of it. I think I was scared. I have never been much of a fighter. But I always trusted Tom strength. I knew that he needed me; I knew that he would never leave me because I was his possession.

You had a good family.

You let others walk all over you, Tom yelled sometimes. Nobody ever walked over me, I protested. But they will, I guarantee that they will because you are stupid enough to let them, he said.

Tom shouted, I cried, he called me worthless and I cooked his favourite meals, he flirted with other women and I tried to be a better lover, he smashed things and I cleaned up.

Why?

Because I was stupid. I can't even claim ignorance as my defence. As a teacher I rewarded children's good behaviour and they behaved better. I rewarded Tom's bad behaviour so he became worse. I let him grow bigger while I grew smaller. It was easier to move a step backwards than to stand my ground. It was all my doing.

Were you ever unfaithful to Tom, asks Martina.

Only in my mind, says Helena. I was forever in love. I needed love so I imagined loving men around me. I pretended that they loved me. I often escaped into my private little romance with David.

Who is David?

David was my first love. I should say my only real love. He came to the Teacher's college dance. We kissed and life was never the same again.

I walked all night in the fields telling the moon that I love you, said David the next day.

We both felt enormously loved. On my nineteenth birthday we walked up to the top of the hill where cattle was grazing. We could see people moving in the valley below but they could not see us. We made love on the haystack. Our world turned into a fairyland. Everything was right and in place. The universe and the eternity and God were part of us. Lovemaking was only a small compliment to the wholeness we felt. I don't know how I would survive without the memory.

What happened?

David's late father was a war hero so the shire paid for David to finish university. David neglected his studies so his mother asked the shire president to tell my principal to order me not to see David again because I was interfering with his studies. She also told David to stop seeing me.

So you left David.

I was annoyed with David for listening to his mother. Tom invited me to the opening of the new shire building. I had my first taste of champagne. He walked me home and put a necklace with a locket around my neck. Look inside, he said. In the locket was my name next to his. He said that he loved me. That's how I became chained. Maybe I felt that I had to pay Tom for attaching me to himself.

I can not even claim ignorance because my heart spoke to me but I refused to listen. We had more champagne and we kissed and the lines between right and wrong became blurred. That's when I took the wrong turn. I blamed Tom all my life but maybe it wasn't his fault at all, maybe he also chose the wrong road. I never felt that he was good enough and I never felt good enough with him. Later I wanted out of the relationship but Tom said that he was going to kill us both rather than live without me. At the time I believed that this was the highest expression of love. I was a heroine in the love tragedy. How stupid can one be? I believed I owed him because he loved me so much. I owed him because I failed to love him. I did not resist anymore. It was easier. He walked into my life and I just moved back and made room for him.

Girls are impressed by an undying love.

It wasn't love. He just had to have me. He got used to ordering people around.

What happened to David?

I told David that I was going to marry Tom. We felt fragile and vulnerable. We kissed goodbye. David did not ask me to leave Tom. He did not offer to escape with me or to marry me. He didn't even say that he loved me. He just cried. We both cried. We were two kids out of a love story. I wanted him to ask me to stay with him. I would do anything for him but he never asked me to do anything. Maybe he did not love me enough. I was leaning on the tree and David was leaning on me when Tom came and pushed me away; he hit David to the ground. He kicked him in the face until it was covered in blood. He spat on David, grabbed my hand and pulled me along.

I tried to explain that we were saying goodbye but Tom said: forget it, he won't bother you again. I will kill him if I find him near you.

I became afraid of Tom.

The strongest bull wins in love battles, laughs Martina. It enhances the species or something.

David's eyes followed me. I wanted to hold him and make him strong. But I wasn't strong. What David and I had was a little rose bud while Tom was a strong tree determined to subdue or kill anything that would dare grow under his shadow. We never mentioned David again. I didn't dare.

Over the years I created David into a hero like God created Adam out of clay. I needed to be loved by a perfect man so I created my perfect David. He became my secret refuge. I escaped to this fantasyland whenever I felt threatened. David was my lifeline. Tom could not reach us inside my shell.

David was never given a chance to hurt you, says Martina.

I suppose the memory of David replaced that plaster Virgin Mother, laughs Helena.

A girl never forgets her first love, says Martina.

Tom took me to the jewellers and bought me an engagement ring and our wedding rings. Dad told me that I sold my soul to the devil. He died of a broken heart just before I got married.

I wonder if people really die of a broken heart.

What you believe is more important than what is. I felt alone. Tom took me to Venice for a honeymoon. I cried in a hotel room while he checked Italian shops for goods he could smuggle to Slovenia.

He was a practical man.

I was pregnant by the time we got married. I wished it was David's baby but it wasn't. Tom often looked at different parts of Vesna probably checking if David was lurking in any part of her body. Vesna could not look more like Tom; sometimes I blame her for staying with Tom. He loved and spoiled his little princess until she became a rebellious teenager and began to backchat him.

Tom opened a shop close to the Italian border. I never knew why he dropped out of the communist party and joined the private sector. Other teachers accused me of betraying the communist ideals. Marrying money was the lowest thing a teacher could do; specially money from the rotten branch of socialism; money with the rotten west capitalist exploitation flavour; money on the border between good and bad.

I left my job to manage the shop while Tom travelled and organised the business. People told me that they saw Tom dining with elegant young women but Tom told me that women were the clients and business associates.

I need a car, Tom told me. His friend bought a car in Germany and when he came home girls admired him and hoped that he would take them for a ride.

A car was a symbol of prosperity in those days, says Martina.

Tom gave the money to an Italian acquaintance to buy a car in Trieste. I was to tell the custom officials that my aunt sent the money from America to my relation in Italy for me to buy myself a car. That made it tax exempt. By then I became an accomplished liar. I just followed in Tom's footsteps.

People tell lies to get through the system.

Tom became as desirable as his friend who took girls for a ride. He bought a house. He bought a television set even before Slovenia began to broadcast. I had nothing to complain about. I was the best dressed and housed woman I knew. Right there on the border between virtue and sin.

With a successful handsome businessman husband, says Martina.

Tom said that in his position he had to dress well. He spent a lot of time dressing; he spent a lot of time in front of the mirror; he bought new scents and ties and suits in Italy. I found expensive perfumes and nylon stockings in the car. He told me that he bought them in Italy for the wives of his business acquaintances.

Synthetic fabrics and parkas became popular and Tom carried samples of those in the car as well. Everything was as it was supposed to be. We lived a life of luxury for a few years while our children were born. I look at that time as my happiest because Tom was happy.

Rich people always sing better.

One plays a fiddle, the other dances. It does not really matter who does what. I almost loved Tom. He ignored my mistakes and my faults; he almost forgot that I existed. His demands for sex and attention also diminished.

I realise now that Tom was preoccupied with his girlfriends. In his euphoria he forgot that I was his wife and treated me with the same charisma he used for customers and business associates.

One late evening about a month before I was to have a baby I saw Tom arguing with a girl in front of our shop. They were leaning on a car and did not see me behind the curtain of our second floor apartment. I did not want to be seen. I convinced myself that they argued about some business transaction.

Don't even think about it, Tom raised his voice and there was a sharp threat in it.

If you don't, I will, the girl slammed the car door. Tom looked up but I stood in the darkness protected in my secrecy. I will go to the police, yelled the girl as she walked away. My eyes followed her enormously high heels. Her legs almost reached up to her long blond hair falling straight and bouncing on her back as she walked. I almost felt sorry for the girl and for Tom because they both seemed unhappy. Gradually I made myself responsible for Tom's happiness.

Tom was in a foul mood when he got in. Leave me alone, he said and drank his whisky in one gulp. He changed his mind then and became very attentive. He patted my enormous stomach and put his head on it and I was grateful for his love. Our baby needed us. We went to bed and he very gently initiated sex but for the first time his body did not respond. He kissed me all over and whispered to the baby in my stomach. Next day police arrested Tom. I forgot about the girl with long legs. I had to think about our business, about Tom and about our baby. Tom was everything I had.

The Italian who smuggled Tom's money, confessed and they accused Tom of all sorts of impropriety. They closed our business and our accounts. Currency smuggling was highly immoral and illegal. It came next to spying. We were traitors. Tom betrayed his communist ideals.

Tom was free again a day before Vesna was born. He paid to have the charges against him dropped but he became weary.

You can only bail yourself out so many times, he said.

Tom became very attentive to Vesna and me since his arrest. For awhile we had sex for breakfast, lunch and tea. I really became sick of it. I almost wished that he would have sex with somebody else, laughs Helena. Soon I was pregnant again and his demands decreased. He opened a shop on the Italian side of the border.

My father used to say that whoever pays you, buys a part of you. If nobody is prepared to pay, you have no value, says Martina.

Ben was an intrusion into our happy family. Tom became annoyed with his crying and his demands for attention.

Your children have done well despite of Tom or maybe because of him.

Ben became a doctor to please Tom; he is a pleaser like me. Vesna became anthropologist; she is confident, ambitious and manipulative.

You get nowhere without ambition.

Tom often complained that I changed but I insisted that I was still the same silly little girl he married. What an attention seeking little idiot I was. I knew that he loved that silly girl that said yes to please him although she wanted to say no. I felt that I had no right to grow up, says Helena.

You are too hard on yourself. You were young and had no family.

Tom decided to go to Australia. He seemed to be running away from something but we never really discussed it. Australia sounded fine to me. Tom became a real estate dealer and I started teaching again.

And you lived happily ever after.

I wish I reconciled with my life while Tom was alive but I didn't. I believed that I was a victim and acted like a poor innocent me who missed out on her entitlement of love. That's why I imagined myself in love with men around me. Now I realise that we are all victims. Tom was a victim.

We are who we grew up to be. Maybe Tom ran away from being that starving boy who carried his mum's babies after her in the paddock.

Helena and Martina sit in silence with their memories.

What were your school mates like? Martina returns to Helena's reunion.

Old, laughs Helena. Twenty retired teachers looking back and saying nice things about each other. They grew smaller. Young brave heroes of my school days turned into benign benevolent senior citizens. Soft grey hair with dentures shining friendly smiles in their efforts to camouflage old age. They wanted to know about teacher's wages and what you can buy for them in Australia. Dollars are tangibles; the borers that drilled holes inside of me are imaginary. They asked about the price of petrol in Australia but nobody asked about the price I paid for freedom and redemption. For the first time I felt big and strong.

You look so young, said my school friend as we tried to recreate the intimacy we once shared. I wonder what signs of my aging were visible to her.

Some remembered my father giving them lollies when they came with their mothers to our shop. Some remembered my mother teaching them to sing in the church choir. I was grateful for their attempts to restore my parents to their rightful position. Nobody mentioned that my parents were traitors and had to be punished. Maybe they never really looked at me the way I looked at myself. Maybe they did not even know that I was scared.

Did things change much?

God was restored and politicians go to church on Sundays. The church is getting back the property communists nationalised. These born again Catholics are the same people who were proud of their communist party membership when I was there last. They have seen the light. Religion became a national tradition. Almost as popular as a folklore. Cultural heritage. I don't feel like going to church anymore.

You grew up at last, laughs Martina.

Everything that was, shrunk while I grew to be more than the things that shrunk. I wasn't less any more. It seemed that everybody noticed that.

While I was home Milan sent his son to ask me to visit him. Milan was dying, Helena continues. I remembered something I locked away since I was ten.

One spring day I prayed to Virgin Mary on my way from school. The newly green branches of the forest met on top of the road. Through the greenery seeped specks of yellow sky and I felt very close to God.

Milan came behind me with his horse-wagon and asked me to sit next to him. I would have taken a ride with any person from the village but I knew with the knowing of some primordial wisdom that my parents wouldn't be happy if I went with Milan. He jumped down from the wagon and tried to scoop me up. I said no no no but he said don't be silly I don't bite and we wrestled and then I fell into the grass and he fell on top of me and pulled my pants down and put his hand between my legs and then he smelled his hand. He put one hand on my mouth so I could not scream. Then he lifted his hand and with his knees on the ground on each side of me he tried to unbuckle his belt and then

with some supernatural terrified strength I pushed myself backwards from under his bottom and ran into the forest fast with my last breath. I ran and ran and never looked back until I fell into a hollow on the moss and laid there under the magic of the spring forest and the yellow sky and there in the stillness I could hear God speaking the words of comfort.

I never told anyone about this because I was ashamed of it. Who could I tell anyway? Dad was himself bleeding there in the snow when Milan hit him and he could not even defend himself. Mum just died. I never took a short cut from school through the forest again.

You came, said Milan and he opened his eyes a little. He was gasping for air. I said nothing, he had things to say; it was his dying. Impotent and pitiful and ugly and yet there was life saying goodbye.

A thought came to me then that I could take down my pants and stuff them into his nostrils but I was not angry anymore and even my pain and shame disappeared. Milan closed his eyes. Death is death. There is something holy about dying. Maybe the good and the evil angels come to fight for the soul. I could almost touch the spirits hovering over Milan's body.

Sorry, he whispered.

It's all right, I said and touched his hand.

Thank you, he wheezed and his chest stopped rising. I almost felt the good angel rejoice as he carried Milan's soul and my shame. God was right there in the silence of dying. It was one of the greatest moments of my life. I could laugh at my fears, my shame, and my guilt. Milan was grateful to me. I was humbled by that. In the end I had the power over him, the power to forgive. I carried the shame but he carried the guilt.

I went to the river. The branches of the weeping willow and my tears touched the water. I cried for Tom and for the opportunities we missed. I sang songs others sang when I was young and ashamed.

The river is old now; it does not remember the bodies I saw floating on it. Or the cross with Jesus on it face up floating on top of the river. Or my blue, wet, cold feet as I walked in the morning dew. What happened, happened. Not even God can change what once was and is no more.

We have to look forward.

I cried for Tom. I wish I could give him the love he missed out on as a child, says Helena.

The love you don't share is the pain you carry, smiles Martina.

I think Tom blamed me for not finding whatever he was looking for in life. Actually we blamed each other.

Will anyone one ever find a formula for living, laughs Martina. It's not fair that one has to start life so ignorant and stupid.

I visited uncle Miha while on holiday. I found him sitting next to the window in a nursing home. He was ninety-six.

He likes this window. They get funny like that with age, explained the young nurse, who held uncle Miha's hand. She probably did not know that uncle Miha was funny like that all his life. The nurse put her arm under Miha's neck and lifted his head.

She is my angel; uncle Miha patted the nurse's bottom as he pressed his face into her chest.

I can see her better near the window, he coughed a little laugh. I believe that he opened his eyes a crack.

I'll leave you alone now. Just ring the bell if you need me, the nurse smiled.

I told uncle Miha how afraid I am of loneliness and old age.

There is a little child in you that needs to be hugged until the day you die, said uncle Miha. We all grow old if we live that long but the child still needs hugging. Don't let the child be afraid. Love is love, it is all there is. Take it as it comes.

Miha died a couple of weeks after I left.

I am glad you found what you were looking for, says Martina.

I only wish I could share it with Tom. We both needed to be hugged so desperately.

Death must be distinguished from dying, with which it is often confused.

Sydney Smith

Janez

Janez came to see Vince about his divorce. Vince was in court so Janez invited Martina for lunch. He needed to talk to someone. When you are nobody in particular there are few people willing to listen to your story.

If I had a wife like you I would be a millionaire, says Janez as they settle in a nearby restaurant. Martina has no idea how to respond to the compliment. Janez feels very alone. He always felt alone. Other men come to Slovenian club with their wives and children; Janez feels out of place with families; he drinks more to overcome the feeling of being out of place.

Look at me. I am an old man and nobody knows that I am alive. I left home and my friends and have nothing to show for it, Janez begins at the end. Maybe the end and the beginning tie together the cycle of life.

What would you like to have done?

I worked for Ivan for over twenty years but Nada convinced me to take a job closer to home; she wanted to keep me away from Slovenians. Nada never liked Ivan because Ivan never liked her. There have been just Ivan and Nada since I came to Australia. Now Ivan is dead. There is only Nada.

Janez tells the fragments of his story as they eat. He has to tell someone. So much has happened recently. They laugh in places when they feel awkward or sad. Janez tells his story and Martina nods patiently as they eat.

Janez is stunned when his boss paid him redundancy money. With a cheque for twelve thousand in his pocket he feels free. I can pay for the repair of my car now; the happy thought makes him smile. He sits on the park bench smoking. In the middle of the day! Losing a job comes as a relief. It makes it easier for Janez to admit how he hates Nada. He carried this hate like an invisible burden for years. He had to report and justify things to Nada. Ivan and Nada were two Gods in his life.

He hated both of them.

Janez notices spring flowers open before his eyes, the new leaves, soft and green tremble in the branches of the trees. The memory of spring and home and wonder and love is in the air as he draws on the cigarette. Free. Like a bird out of the cage with nowhere to go. Without a real friend.

Janez was stunned when Nada paid a deposit on the house for their daughter's twenty first birthday.

Surprise, Nada squealed as the picture of the house was revealed on the birthday card.

Nada did not even bother telling Janez that she took all their savings out of the bank. Janez planned on going home for a holiday but the trip was postponed year after year. Nada did not want to go to Slovenia.

The thought comes to Janez, the immoral, horrible thought. How simple life would be if Nada was to die suddenly. Maybe an accident, a heart attack, something quick and clean like losing a job. Half of Janez prays for forgiveness of sinful thoughts and the other half enjoys the vision of Nada's death. Janez would no longer be a failure if Nada disappeared. He hated going home but with Nada gone his home could become his castle. He can not do anything to make Nada disappear but he hopes that God would somehow do what has to be done.

Janez feels that Nada stopped him from being what he could be, what he wanted to be. He almost forgot what he wanted to be but he knows that who he is, is not good enough. He blames Nada for being who he is.

If Nada died I could get drunk, the thought cheers Janez.

Janez wants to get drunk so he could cry without shame. People understand bereavement and grief.

Nada and Janez met on the ship going to Australia. Young and homesick they celebrated their newfound love when they ended in the Bonegilla migrant barracks. Janez forgot all his problems as he looked at this vivacious girl with black curly hair tied into a ponytail. Nada's lips were red as cherries. The promising future was theirs for the taking.

Nada offered to do the washing for Janez, she invited him to her room for coffee because the canteen only served tea. The aroma of freshly ground coffee beans brought them closer. Nada baked cakes and the familiar food made those first days in Australia excitingly joyous. Nada brought neatly ironed clothes to Janez and he felt enormously grateful. Nobody ever fussed about his clothes like that. Nobody ever fussed over him. After a couple of months Nada announced that she was pregnant. She washed and ironed their best clothes for the wedding in the registry office.

Janez felt enormously lucky to find Nada in a camp full of young European men. There were a few families but Nada was the only single girl from Yugoslavia where they both built brotherhood and unity. It never bothered either of them that Nada was Serbian and he was Slovenian. Since neither Janez nor Nada attended the church their different religious backgrounds didn't matter either. Nationality and God and politics had no place in their cosy togetherness.

I barely remember my father, Janez turns to Martina. He died in German concentration camp when I was six. We heard whispers that Germans made soap from the fat of people dying in the concentration camps. Someone found a finger nail in the bar of soap, they said, and it horrified us. Mum began to make her own soap after the war. There was tremendous fear of Germans. I hated them.

I was seven when mum remarried. I had two stepsisters in the next two years before my stepfather injured his leg in an accident. I had to work for the family of five by the time I was ten.

Mum's new husband was a former partisan whom mum converted into a Christian. He hobbled with her to church early every Sunday and after mass he stayed in the nearby hotel. He returned late and he often cried, prayed and cursed before he dozed off. Mum didn't mind him drinking on Sundays as long as he went to the Holy Communion first.

I went to a ten o'clock mass so I didn't have to sit next to them. Sometimes I sneaked out halfway through mass. Sometimes I didn't go at all and the priest reported me to mum. The priest had no real power after the war, but he exercised all the power he had over the souls of the true believers like mum.

In the evenings I had to kneel with the family as mum prayed for the forgiveness of sins and for the conversion of the communist Russia.

The shire made it possible for Janez to get an apprenticeship and become a butcher. There was always something left over in the butchery that he could bring home. You will never be hungry, said his mother. Like a girl who married a miller. Never without a crust.

Janez was conscripted at the height of communist indoctrination program. It was a relief for Janez to get away from home. The soldiers' life was scheduled to the minute. There was no time to think; the soldier had to follow the rules, the lessons, and the officers.

On Sunday afternoon soldiers were given two hours freedom to do what they liked. Janez went with boys to the nearby peasant where they bought wine and drank it sitting under the tree. He liked Serbian hospitality. The girls liked Slovenian soldiers. They hoped that they would take them to Slovenia, which was much like America in their understanding. They just wanted to get away from

poverty and frustration of their own lives. Slovenia made their eyes shine. Close to the West with the forbidden fruit of the rotten west just over the border.

While in the army Janez could not go to church even if he wanted to. There were no masses on Sunday afternoon. Anyway he only had his uniform and one could not go to mass in a uniform.

On the first Sunday night in the army Janez felt an enormous guilt for not going to mass. Maybe he was just homesick for his mother's preaching and scolding. He was also drunk. When the lights went out Janez prayed with all his heart to Jesus and his mother and all the saints and angels to help him get back on the right path to God. His pillow was wet as he cried himself to sleep.

For a few weeks Janez prayed every evening. Gradually he prayed less and less and almost never cried again. By the end of the first year the praying and the crying stopped. He liked friendly Serbian people, their food, their drink and their girls.

Janez forgot the teachings of his old ignorant mother and totally accepted the teachings of his officers. He became fluent in official Serbo-Croatian language. He learned to believe that the brotherhood and unity with other Yugoslav nations was the only way to peace and prosperity. The army officers helped soldiers forget that their ancestors were Slovenians, Serbians and Croats. They became Yugoslavs along with Montenegrins and Macedonians. The last year in Serbia was the best time of Janez's life. He firmly believed that nationality, language and religion are obstacles to unity. Janez felt lucky to live in the socialist republic where every kind of work was honourable and nobody exploited the worker. He learned to fear rotten capitalist West that took so many Slovenians.

When Janez returned home he found a job in the abattoir. Jaka, a friend from the army, let him share his basement room in the city. Janez hated his work and his dark, damp accommodation. Jaka told him that he was going to escape to Germany to join his brother. Janez knew that he was supposed to report Jaka. Escaping was treason; it was the ultimate betrayal of the communist ideals. Janez also felt sorry for Jaka because he knew that capitalist employers squeeze the blood out of the worker. Not like in communism where everybody was equal and every kind of labour honourable.

Sometimes Janez wondered why the workers from the West didn't try to escape from capitalism to enjoy the equality of communism.

With Jaka gone, I would be without accommodation, Janez tells Martina. I joined him; we were caught on the border and beaten by the guards. They sentenced us to six months hard labour. I began to hate the police and the system. As soon as I came out I tried again.

In the abattoir I met a friend who worked with cattle transports to Germany, tells Janez. He cleaned the train wagons and put hay in the middle for cattle to eat on the way. One day we hid under that hay. Yugoslav and German inspectors checked the wagon before they sealed it. When they opened the wagons again we were in Germany. The stationmaster called the police so they took us to a refugee camp. I applied to go to Australia. Nada was in the same transport.

Nada was close to having a baby when Slovenian Franciscan priest sent Janez to Sydney to see Ivan about the job.

Ivan was a church going man so Janez felt obliged to follow his boss and become a small pillar of the same church.

Nada came with Janez as they began to build the Slovenian club. Janez spoke Serbian with her and most Slovenians followed.

Why did we bother to escape from Serb communists if we are going to speak Serbian in Australia? Said Ivan. Speak Slovenian; we are building Slovenian club.

Nada doesn't understand, they defended themselves. Janez felt guilty.

There are twenty of you speaking Serbian because one person is too stubborn to learn Slovenian.

Nada pretended that she did not understand but she left soon after and never returned to the club.

You keep your sausage friends and I will keep mine, said Nada.

Ivan and his wife Ana made Janez welcome in their home. He gradually became more a member of Ivan's family than of his own. Janez saw Ivan's children Natasha and Robert grow up.

Natasha drifted from one unhappy relationship into another. Ivan and Ana introduced her to many eligible families with sons of marriageable age but she eventually settled with Steve, a divorced man twice her age with daughters her age. Shame and horror and sin.

Ivan is dead. Things became less important and sinful since he died. People divorce every day. Janez believes that it would be easier if his divorce could be bypassed by death. Nada might develop some mysterious sickness or she might have an accident; an accident would be most tragically convenient.

Janez sits on the park bench after he lost his job. As by some magic he sees Natasha coming towards him, her fair curls moving in the wind. Natasha seems so alive and lovely. What will she think of Janez sitting on the park bench in the middle of the day? Janez doesn't want anyone to intrude on his thoughts; he wants to enjoy the spring and his imagined grief over Nada's death. He pretends that he is searching in his bag for something but he only wants Natasha to pass without noticing him.

Janez first met Natasha when he got a job in her father's butchery almost thirty years ago. She was a primary school girl then and Janez was newly married. He still remembers Natasha's platts neatly inter-woven with red ribbons matching her maroon catholic school uniform. Janez always liked Natasha, she was eager to please and she never looked down on him.

Janez once saw bruises and cuts on Natasha's face but she explained that she fell off the ladder while pruning a cherry tree.

You should find a single man and raise your own family, said Janez.

Men my age are either married or determined not to get married, Natasha laughed. Divorced men cry for their ex-wives and children, Natasha said more seriously. Some become depressed and impotent and they frantically search for a woman to restore their self-esteem. Many return to their ex to have sex with because they can't break the habit of having sex even after they separated and divorced in every other way.

You know a lot about men, said Janez a little afraid of her knowing. He was like an uncle to Natasha. She told him things she would never tell her father.

Everybody talked about Natasha when she was taken to hospital to have her jaw stitched together. Ivan brought her home and asked for the restraining order against Steve. A week after Ivan died Natasha moved back with Steve.

What are you doing here, smiles Natasha as she sees Janez on the park bench.

Nothing, smiles Janez.

They look at each other like that with nothing more to say or do. Their smiles fade away and the sadness meets in their eyes.

Natasha sits on the bench and rummages in her bag for a cigarette. Both smoke like that in silence.

Lovely day, she says.

Beautiful, he agrees.

Are you busy, she asks.

No, he says and becomes ashamed of not being busy.

Come for a drink, she says simply. Her house is in a mess. Natasha pushes the clothes on the couch to one side for Janez to sit close to her.

You moved back with Steve, says Janez. He hopes that she would deny it but she only smiles.

It's my house, she says placing a bottle of scotch and two glasses on the coffee table.

Why don't you throw him out.

Don't worry about him, Natasha gulps down her first whisky and then pours another.

Where is Steve?

Let's forget Steve for today. I'll change into something more comfortable, says Natasha. She returns and sits close to Janez. Her fluffy white dressing gown is half open. She has nothing underneath.

Both smile awkwardly. Neither of them has any idea of what should be done next or what they want. They have seen scenes like that on television. There is no sexual desire; they just need to be comforted. There is a huge gap between uncle Janez and little Natasha.

Hold me, giggles Natasha. Her eyes are brimming with tears, her whole body is trembling.

Janez was separated from Nada's bed for years but Ivan's God did not allow him to look at another woman with lust while he was still married. In the eyes of God one of them had to die before the other could resume sexual activities with another person.

Natasha put her head on Janez's chest.

Confused and excited Janez kisses Natasha's hair and then they just can't stop kissing and touching. There is a great need for comfort. Janez carries Natasha to bed. He caresses her body; she undresses him and runs her fingers over his legs and arms. Her eyes are full of tears. Janez strokes her hair. She is a little girl again. Her hair covers his face as they hold onto each other without saying a word. She smiles at him. He turns her under him and can't wait any longer. She smiles to tell him that it is OK. Janez feels closer to Natasha than he ever felt to another human being. He wants to cry with Natasha. He never cried since he was in the army. Nobody saw Janez cry before. Nobody ever cried with him. There is a mutual desperation that needs to be cried about. He is looking at the ceiling and feels tears running down his cheeks. They hold onto each other without speaking.

Natasha cries herself to sleep in his arms and he covers her up and kisses her hair before he leaves.

Janez wants to begin a new life. He suddenly knows that there is a new life. If only Nada would die. Janez often wakes up in the middle of the night and the thought of Nada's death is always present. Nada and their two children are the only family Janez ever had. Now the children left and Janez wants to be free. He imagines Nada dead in every possible way. Sometimes he finds himself crying at her grave and he has to wipe real tears running down his face. He prays for forgiveness of sins because he is afraid of his dreams and of his God.

Rozi

Rozi invites Martina for lunch before they are both going to the club to see a new Slovenian film.

Jim was an attractive man, says Martina looking at Rozi's wedding picture proudly displayed in the lounge-room.

He died a day before his sixty sixth birthday, tells Rozi. A gipsy told him when he was fifteen that he will die at the age of sixty-five. Jim never forgot her prediction. I often told him that gipsies know nothing. At his sixty fifth birthday party Jim told everyone not to believe gipsies.

He was a good man, says Martina. She wonders if Jim really believed the gipsy. Maybe he just wanted to die.

After I married Jim he urged me to go to evening school to become a qualified cook. I never went to school after the war. Dad taught me to read and write using a mass book. He didn't want communists to contaminate my mind. I worked and cooked and paid bills. Jim depended on me for everything. He never once touched housework, remembers Rozi.

You had a good marriage, says Martina.

Jim asked for an early retirement. Not so early after all. He worked hard enough, poor man, says Rozi.

He earned his rest, says Martina.

He did, poor man, says Rozi. Jim enjoyed being at home for the last three years. A king of the castle, he used to say. He retired because his lungs were troubling him. All that dust at work, he used to say. He became annoyed every time I mentioned smoking.

My home was heaven until Rozi stopped working; now she stands behind me waiting for me to do something wrong so she can lecture me, Jim told Martina's husband Joe not long before he died.

Jim liked gardening; Martina tries to find something nice about the dead man.

He did that, says Rozi. I suppose he had to find something to do when he wasn't fixing the car. He would fix everything in the house if I let him. In the end it is always cheaper to call a professional.

Some men can't hammer a nail into a wall.

Jim tried, poor man, says Rozi. Martina is tempted to tell Rozi how Jim hated being called a poor man. He told Joe, Martina's husband. I wonder what Joe told Jim about me when I wasn't listening, wonders Martina.

I miss a man around the house, says Rozi.

I do too.

You should marry your boss now, laughs Rozi. She almost never laughs so the idea of Martina marrying Vince must be very amusing to her.

Vince and I are just friends, says Martina evenly.

Jim wasn't eager for me to retire.

Martina is glad Rozi returns into her own story.

Your husband was very quiet, Rozi turns to Martina's family only because it is polite to include her in remembering.

Joe was a good worker and husband, and father, Martina pays respects to her husband.

Jim was a cool person, says Rozi. Not warm and not cold, that kind of cool. He worked and came home reliably at five every day to watch news, relax, have dinner, read the paper and potter in the garden. I could never fault him. He dressed well, shaved religiously and spoke clearly. We planned

our lives and holidays and retirement and children's lives. I didn't like his smoking but I only rarely mentioned it. I am glad he retired early. At least he had three years of freedom. He received the sacraments before he died, thanks be to God, Rozi is making an inventory of her life.

Jim and I were virgins when we met, adds Rozi. We never looked at other people with lust. Low libido, they call it, I think.

You had a good life, says Martina to give recognition to Rozi's testimony.

Janez reminds me of Jim, says Rozi. Her long, bony fingers dance on the table awkwardly like she is searching for something.

Rozi does not worry about Janez drinking and smoking. She dealt with that before with Jim. Men like Rozi; she reminds them of their mothers who kept them on the path of righteousness.

Rozi has a still in her kitchen to extract alcohol out of the fruit Jim grew in their large garden. She made gallons of schnapps and everything else that can be distilled under that name. Jim would spend money on whisky if she didn't. Rozi didn't let Jim out of her sight.

It was illegal to distil alcohol in Australia without licence but Rozi considered it her duty to stop her husband from sinful temptations of the pub. What else could she do with all the fruit?

Schnapps always comes handy for medicinal use, of course. Waste not, want not, says Rozi as she picks buckets of plums and apricots and grapes Jim so carefully nurtured.

After lunch Rozi dresses carefully and sprays all her secret places with perfume before going with Martina to the club.

I hope they didn't bring more pornography. They can't make a film these days without pornography, says Rozi as they find seats in the hall.

They want to shock the world with vulgarity, agrees Martina.

What are we drinking, asks Janez.

I'll have a beer, it's such a hot day, says Martina.

Rozi has orange juice. She abstains from alcohol; she abstains from almost everything in order to gain eternal life.

They watch the film in silence. The story gives them nothing to take home in their hearts or in their minds.

The usual. Sex, violence and coarse language, says Rozi.

You see naked people having sex a couple of times and then it becomes boring, agrees Martina.

Since Jim died, Rozi devoted her life to God. She invites Janez to the Slovenian mass on Sunday. Janez dropped out of the church lately and Rozi hopes to make him a pious man again. After all it is her Christian duty.

Rozi's back remains straight as she kneels at the altar. She wears the assurance of the self-righteous who has nothing to regret, nothing to feel guilty about, or be scared of.

Janez meets Rozi in the aisle of the church as she is coming from the Holy Communion and he is going up to receive it. They lift their eyes as they pass each other and their souls meet. It is a miracle. Janez and Rozi knew each other for years but in this moment everything changes for them. Both feel the warm aura of love like a Holy Ghost descending on them. The knowing comes while the holy bread is still sticking to Rozi's tongue and Janez's hands are ready to receive it.

Rozi and Janez are painfully aware of the fact that Janez is still married to Nada. They decide to talk to the parish priest about their predicament. The wise old priest tells them that God wants everybody to be happy. The priest can't forbid or condone sex outside marriage but he is sure that God would understand and forgive. Janez and Rozi feel blessed; they decide to make the most of the years they have left.

The priest assures Rozi and Janez that it is possible to annul Janez's marriage so their union could eventually be properly blessed in the church. Especially since Janez was only married in the registry office to someone outside the church.

I am going to move in with Rozi, Janez tells Martina. I will arrange for the divorce with Vince.

Rozi must have prayed to the Virgin to intercede and let Janez move in with her even before they became joined in the Holy Matrimony.

Janez can't bring himself to tell Nada that he is leaving. He never told her that he lost his job. Eventually he found other employment and he goes home dutifully every evening. At weekends he mows the lawn and cleans the garage. He gives Nada his pay and she gives him back his pocket money. He sleeps in his single bed in his single room. He needs more time.

Janez and Rozi abstained from sex for years so their union becomes almost as joyous as the first love should be.

Rozi does her evangelical work wherever she goes. Since her love union received the priest's blessing she feels even more obliged to embark actively on spreading the Good News of the Gospel. She has a prayer group coming to her home every Wednesday and they collect money for the poor. You have to show God that you mean well.

Holy Virgin urges us to give up sinful ways and begin the life of prayer and good deeds, says Rozi as she brings to Slovenian club books of messages our Holy Mother gives to her seers.

There is a pilgrimage to Berrima in Penrose Park, Rozi announces.

Is that some new religion, asks Helena afraid to stray from the ways of her parents.

I will always be a Catholic, Rozi reassures her. Our Holy Father allows the publications that deal with private apparitions and revelations as long as these revelations contain nothing contrary to our Holy Father, our Holy Church, morality, and our Holy Faith. Anybody is allowed to tell their story about meeting with Our Mother Mary and her Son, Rozi explains as she distributes the booklets.

Janez becomes preoccupied with thoughts of becoming a respectable widower. He could fix the brakes of Nada's car or take her to the mountain and push her over the cliff. It would be murder; he shakes all over; he couldn't commit murder. He prays that God himself would organise his freedom. He is afraid of losing his home and family. That's all one has.

We are going to Berrima on 26.8. Janez tells Martina.

What is Berrima? Martina wonders if the date and the place have some significance.

Berrima is in Penrose Park between Canberra and Sydney. Polish Fathers and Brothers of the Order of St. Paul, the first Hermit, built a Shrine to the Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Jasna Gora. People express devotion to Our Lady there, according to the Church's teaching, explains Rozi.

Come along, invites Janez. He picks Helena, Rozi and Martina.

They look over the Penrose Park valley where thousands of people confide in the Virgin Mary. Most have nobody else to confide in. Most of the congregation are old migrants and their grandchildren. Thousands of pious people with rosaries. There is despair in their eyes as they surrender their hearts to Mary. Some are widowed some are separated, some are sick. Most probably have panic attacks in the middle of the night. Thousands of old migrants on their knees begging Holy Mother to intercede for them with her Son and let them find peace and be holy and loved.

Janez knows that it is not appropriate to pray for Nada's death but the thought follows him. Her death would mean a new life for Janez; a new life with everything he ever dreamed of.

Only one thousand can fit in the church so monthly devotions are held in the open, explains Rozi.

Rozi walks with Janez from shrine to shrine and they kneel down piously as they cross themselves. They don't hold hands but their togetherness is obvious.

Janez hopes that by becoming pious he will make up for the lack of faith. Following Rozi who is a true believer gives Janez hope that God will do something about his situation.

Groups of migrants gather around their own shrine in the forest under the banner of their homeland.

One in ten Australians is an old migrant who never learned to speak English well enough to feel at home with the rest of the Australians. These old people can not return to the country of their birth because their children are born in Australia. They can only return to the God of their parents to make sense of their lives. They are strangers in a strange land with no hope left that they will ever feel at home anywhere. Their mission is to die and provide a sacred site for their children.

They listen to the nervous, young Polish Prior proclaim in a broken stuttering English the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary's humility, her chastity, her generosity and willingness to surrender to God's will, should inspire us all, says the prior.

A few brave Slovenians walk to the pulpit to say prayers to the Virgin in Slovenian like Italians do in Italian and Portuguese and Filipinos do in their own tradition.

Rozi often prayed for me here and placed flowers at the feet of our Virgin Mary, confesses Janez, sentimental in front of the holy images of the Slovenian shrine.

Janez drops Helena and Rozi to their homes. Martina is the last so he stops for a cup of coffee with her. He wants to confess his weaknesses and his fears and his anger. He does not have to impress Martina or hide his secrets. Martina is the only other person who knows about his divorce plans.

I wake up in the middle of the night and feel really bad, starts Janez.

The demons of the night scare me like that sometimes. My doctor diagnosed these sensations as panic attacks, Martina tries to comfort Janez. People don't like to talk about panic attacks. Some take sleeping pills to overcome the midnight wanderings; others have a drink of milk or alcohol. Many pray.

It is a scary feeling, says Janez. He seems closer to Martina since she also has demons visiting.

It gets worse every night, says Janez. I feel my heart racing and chest pain makes it hard to breathe. When I get up, I feel dizzy.

When you cross the magic age of fifty, you begin to ask yourself what is over the mountain.

Life is so short. I have nothing to show for it, says Janez.

We are all fading away, Martina laughs at the predicament. The lines on my face settled in, like my dentures and my bifocal glasses and the natural colour the hairdresser chose for me.

Even the jokes I hear I heard before, smiles Janez.

The jokes I tell, everybody heard before, laughs Martina.

Laughing at themselves helps them forget how scared they are.

I told Vince that I am moving in with Rozi, says Janez.

Did you tell Nada?

Nada knows. I will be dead if I wait any longer. My doctor said that I only have two months if I continue like that.

Like what?

He didn't say.

Didn't you ask him?

He will tell me when he gets the results. You are the only person that knows. I don't want anyone to know. I want to leave peacefully.

They sip their coffee in silence.

Nada is poisoning me, says Janez abruptly. Even my doctor said that there is an unidentified substance in my blood. I have to leave or I will die. Don't ever tell anyone. I did not even tell Rozi. I don't want a scandal; she is the mother of my children. I just want out.

Martina wonders if this is his imagination. Of course it is his imagination. Janez became paranoid about Nada.

Why don't you ask your doctor?

I don't want my children to know. It is enough that I know, he says. I can smell it, I can taste it; I don't feel well.

Janez hopes that God will forgive him if he moves out and leaves the house to Nada. Maybe Nada wants to make certain that the house stays hers.

Nada wouldn't want to lose half of the house, thinks Martina. Of course she does not believe that Nada is poisoning Janez.

We didn't have sex for the last five years, says Janez. He has to confess to someone.

Martina wonders what Janez did with his sexuality for five years. Doesn't sexuality die after years of neglect?

The nights are the worst. I turn the light on but even the light does not help, says Janez.

Statistics show that people act differently during the full moon, Martina tries to turn the scary feeling into a frivolous superstition.

My thoughts scare me. I want to start a new life but I know that my life is finished, says Janez.

You are going through a difficult time.

I want to rub out everything that happened the last thirty-five years, says Janez.

A few days later Janez dies in his sleep respectfully at home.

A stroke, says his doctor. His blood pressure was dangerously high.

Drinking and smoking killed him, was the verdict in the club.

Did Nada poison Janez? Martina can't shake off the question. They would think her silly if she said anything. She has no evidence. He saw the doctor. If his doctor found nothing, why does she have to think about it in the middle of the night?

It is enough that I know, said Janez. I don't want to cause a scandal for my children. I only want out. His words ring in Martina's ears. He would not want to cause the scandal now that he is dead. Maybe he couldn't bring himself to leave Nada so he willed himself to die.

Nada is sobbing and her children are supporting her during the funeral.

Rozi's face is grey. Maybe the Holy Virgin did not approve of her love after all.

The club provides a simple wake but neither Nada nor Rozi come.

A few days later Rozi invites a few of her friends to her place.

Pictures of her family surround Rozi but there is no picture of Janez. Rozi does not mention Janez or her loss.

Let's drink to Janez, says Toni emptying a little crystal glass of schnapps as we sit in Rozi's gleaming kitchen.

In the olden days kitchens were stuck at the back of the house. Now everybody wants to sit around the stove, Helena tries to lighten up the mood.

These days kitchen appliances are white to match the white bride who becomes a new kitchen appliance, teases Toni.

You wish, says Helena.

Food and cooking means nothing if you are on your own, says Toni seriously.

Eating together is as important as sleeping together, agrees Helena.

You eat until the day you die, says Toni.

Just like a man, thinking only of his pleasures, says Helena.

Men are all the same, decides Rozi as she pours more slivovic.

Martina wonders if Toni will one day soon look after Rozi's lawn and prune her fruit trees. Toni needs someone to tell him that he is ruining his health by smoking and drinking. Maybe men really are all the same. Maybe people are all the same. They chat to fill the silence and readjust their lives after the loss of Janez.

To everything there is a season; and a time to every purpose under heaven

Ecclesiastes

The Club

On Sunday friends celebrate the Mass for Janez in the Slovenian church. After the mass they stop in the club for lunch.

I haven't seen you in church for ages, says Mojca to Toni. He is not a regular churchgoer but he came to pay respects. Rozi invited him. She paid the mass for Janez.

I've been overseas, explains Toni.

That's where we would all like to be, says Helena.

What is stopping you, says Toni.

I sometimes wonder if we emigrated because we were unhappy or we are unhappy because we emigrated, says Marjan.

We couldn't resist the opportunity to get rich, says Toni. I like Australia. Nobody forced me to come here and no one is stopping me from going anywhere I want to go. At last I am a free man.

What do you mean?

He is divorced, says Rozi.

I wish divorce was this easy when I was young, says Toni. Some people should never stay married. Like my parents.

Why?

Dad bashed us when he had too much wine and when he did not have enough.

Must have been terrible for you, says Rozi.

Marriage should not be a life sentence.

When we had partners we blamed them for being miserable; now we blame loneliness, says Helena.

When we were poor we blamed poverty, says Mojca.

You don't know what you want now that you have everything you ever wanted, says Toni.

Toni still has that larrikin boyish charm. He is tall and broad shouldered but lean and wiry. He hasn't shrunk yet with age. He asked Martina to write his application for compensation because his family was in a German labour camp during the war.

When we returned home in 1945 our house was burnt down. We had nothing but rags on our backs. Dad was very bitter. We stopped with relations while dad and mum looked for work. I was fifteen and started working in the factory, Toni told Martina.

Everybody loved Dad; he was a happy person; he was drinking more every day. I don't know if he was sad or if he just got used to drink. Mum begged him to stop drinking but the more she nagged the more he drank. A few years later I was taken into the army. In the meantime dad hung himself on the linden tree in front of the house. He had liver cancer. Mum had a stroke and died soon after.

My home was gone so I escaped, laughs Toni. Martina wonders how he turned out to be much like his father; always happy and popular with men and women. He is a good dancer and women love dancing with him.

Betty his Scottish wife has never looked happy. She used to sit long faced and thin lipped in the club; she pretended not to see how Toni pressed his dancing partners to himself. Betty is much like Rozi, all bones and muscles. Betty told everyone that Toni is an alcoholic.

Toni knew that Betty and her family frowned every time he had a drink or a smoke. They made him feel worthless so he distanced himself from them until Betty suggested a separation and eventually a divorce.

Half the world's population would want to live where we live. We are better off than ninety five percent of people on Earth, says Marjan.

I still miss my home, smiles Mojca.

You would still be old and miserable at home only much less comfortable, says Toni. Here we have sunshine three hundred fifty days in the year.

We want something more, smiles Helena.

We left home because we wanted something more, says Toni.

Now we know that there is no more, says Marjan.

If life offers you lemons you learn to make lemonade, Rozi picked this Australian saying somewhere.

If your husband plants plums you make slivovic, Helena laughs at her.

We come to church so the priest fills us with good thoughts then we come to the club so our women fill us with good food. They win our hearts and minds, says Marjan.

People left church in droves since the fear of God was taken out of religion, says Mojca.

We are still scared, says Marjan. We make sacrifices. More sacrifices less fear. But there is always fear that our sacrifice is not sufficient. There is always fear of death. And fear of losing what one dares to love.

If you believe in God and life after death you have nothing to fear, says Rozi.

Underneath it all, tries Mojca. She is like that, always searching for some comforting fundamental good.

Underneath it all is a whole heap of insecurities, says Marjan.

Marjan is our philosopher, says Martina.

And you are our Switzerland, says Marjan.

What do you mean?

You are always neutral, explains Helena.

The spokesman for the Vatican said that there would come an evil generation, which will not believe that God really exists unless he gives them a personal sign, says Mojca.

The signs are all around us, says Rozi piously although she hopes that God will reassure her with a personal sign.

Television evangelists made a proper circus out of God and faith and prayer, says Martina.

Australians don't even know to which God and for which country to pray. Is it Jesus or Allah or Budda or Krishna or Osiris or a host of lesser-known deities? Is it the country they were born in or any other country they lived in? To me the idea that everything self-assembled is just as miraculously mysterious as believing in a particular God. In the end it doesn't matter one way or the other, says Marjan.

We keep recreating God in our own image, says Helena.

God or Big Bang by any other name is all the same to me. Planets are like bubbles floating in the infinite time and space. New bubbles coming and old ones bursting without the beginning or the end; and beyond our understanding, says Marjan.

Scientists never discovered anything that wasn't created before. I am Alpha and Omega, says Rozi.

Religion is the story about Alpha and Omega. Perhaps it does not matter what name we give to the almighty, says Mojca.

We just guess his reasons and his plans, says Helena.

Blessed be the poor in spirit because they find it so easy to believe, laughs Toni.

Blessed are those that have been tamed into believing. The creatures that gave themselves up for domestication prospered, while the wild ones became extinct, says Marjan

Man's greatest achievement was domestication. We tamed wild animals to do what we want them to do, says Mojca.

Men tamed wild women to make them do what they want, says Helena.

Global economy domesticated men and women, says Marjan. Multinationals want to synchronise, standardise, and monitor the masses. Soon we will graze like sheep in the paddock.

The more common you are the more you fit in, says Helena.

Since Pavlov noticed that his dog began to salivate when he rang the bell, the whole world market rings the bells. They advertise, we salivate, adds Martina.

We get what we want by pressing the right buttons so everybody is pressing buttons, says Helena.

People who don't press the right buttons have to break the doors to get where they want to be. Jails are full of people, who didn't know the right buttons, says Marjan.

Domesticated animals consume tons of antibiotics to grow our meat faster and cheaper, says Mojca.

Technology will kill us, warns Rozi.

Technology makes it possible to produce more food on less land with less labour. Developed countries have cleaner waters, improved soil, improved health, longer life, more animal species, more trees. In the West they plant trees while developing countries cut them down. People in the West live longer and are healthier, says Marjan.

When I arrived to Australia the mighty Murray River was still surrounded by the lush rain forest, tells Mojca. For million years the river ran. In the last two hundred years farmers overused the water for irrigation, the river almost dried and the salt rose up like a ghostly white death. The natives did not do it, the Western settlers did.

They hang there in silence for a moment travelling their own road in the changing world.

There is not even sentimental value attached to anything. Nothing reminds you of anybody, says Helena quietly.

Art one day and trash the next. Films and books and music get out of fashion at the end of the season, says Mojca.

People give unwanted things to people who don't know what to do with their unwanted things.

We replaced God with trash, says Rozi.

Our garages and homes are full of trash, says Marjan.

If we don't support mass production and the global market there will be unemployment and drug abuse and war, reasons Helena.

You have to buy something when you go shopping and sell something when you have a garage sale. That's life, says Martina.

You see unwanted gifts still tied with the ribbon at the trash sales. I sometimes buy these gifts and give them to people who give me their unwanted gifts, says Helena.

Multinationals are trying to divert our attention while THEY are destroying the planet we live on, says Rozi.

They are genetically mixing components of different species. Soon we won't know who we are. How many fish genes do I need to become a fish? Helena takes them into another line of thinking.

How many human genes does a fish need to become a human? Asks Mojca.

We never knew who we are or why we are as we are, adds Martina.

Soon babies will come in a bottle like everything else, we won't need to worry about having sex, laughs Toni.

What will we watch on the telly then, says Helena.

Men prescribed sexual taboos for women to make sure they were feeding their own offspring. Women always knew, says Toni. With DNA men will always know.

The next generation will have a computer chip implanted under their skins, says Mojca. They will shine a light on your DNA structure to see who you are.

You won't be able to hide behind the pretty face, says Toni.

I will never let them plant the mark of Satan on me, says Rozi.

Global economy gathers information about our most intimate secrets so they can predict our desires and our impulses to target us with their advertising. Computers know us better than we know ourselves, says Helena.

The shops are open non-stop to tempt us to buy what we neither need nor want, says Rozi.

Maybe it is safer to shop than meddle with the meaning of life, smiles Mojca.

The devil never sleeps, says Rozi.

They are chatting to forget Janez, they are exchanging bits of themselves because there is nobody else wanting any bits of them.

Helena's daughter Vesna took her family to Slovenia for a year. Helena reads her letter.

Now I am in the same position as you, mum. I will never again be completely happy in Australia because there is a hole in my heart that can only be filled in Slovenia. But when in Slovenia there is an even bigger hole that can only be filled in Australia.

My children loved the spring and the summer, they enjoyed the changing colours of autumn but they fell totally in love with winter. They experienced hot and warm and not so hot in Australia but to live in the crystal white of the freezing winter is a real fairy tale for them. I grew so much that what I became can no longer be contained on one continent.

Australia is like a huge mirror that hasn't got my soul, says Marjan.

One day our children might return to Slovenia, says Rozi.

Or to Scotland or Japan or Greece. They married the children of other migrants, says Marjan.

We live and learn but not the wiser grow.

Pomfret

Marty

Marty always comes alone to the club; he is the only Slovenian sheep grazier I know of, says Martina.

What a waste of a good man, says Helena.

You could change that, teases Martina.

I like Marty. He looks so energetic, says Helena.

Marty told me his story once as he waited in my office to see Vince, says Martina.

Slovenians tell their story to each other as a way of introduction. Most of us travelled the same road; most of us are connected to the same people and places. We only have to activate the connection that was there from the beginning. We really are the most important people to each other, says Helena.

During the fifties Australian government paid Marty's passage from Austria to Australia. In return he had to work for two years anywhere they needed him. They sent Marty on a large sheep station near Sydney.

Marty was born in a little village near river Soca as a fourth child to a subsistent farmer. Their ten acres of land was a rocky mountain slope that had to be tilled by hand.

For me, the vast, flat Australia was a paradise. The land was rich and after the rain the luscious grass grew wild, Marty told Martina.

I knew straight away that one day I would become a sheep grazier. I saved every dollar and after two years I had a deposit. After the drought the land came cheap and I bought a farm near Sydney well stocked with merino sheep.

In my first two years in Australia I learned what I needed to know to be a grazier. The suppliers told me what I needed to buy, the shearers told me what to do with the wool and the abattoir told me about the meat. I subscribed to the farmer's newspaper, Land, and listened to other farmers. I learned about drenching and crutching and mulesing and shearing. I bought well-trained sheep dogs. I kept asking questions and never took offence when somebody corrected me. Knowledge is money and money is everything else.

People told me how hard life is on the farm but they knew nothing about making a living on our rocky paddock at home. How can one go wrong with sheep? The wool grows while you sleep and it grows on something that you eat.

Soon Marty no longer had to work on the vast green paddocks. He was marketing his stock and the men who know about sheep produced on his paddocks what sheep is supposed to produce.

Marty comes to Slovenian mass occasionally. He also goes to his local church to meet with other graziers and hear the farming news.

Marty is not an intellectual; he just likes to do his job thoroughly. He was one of the first farmers who used Internet for his business. He said that in the marketing you have to keep up with the bastards. Marty doesn't swear, a bastard can be a competitor, a mate or a nasty individual. A poor bastard is any individual who doesn't know how to manage his affairs.

Few Slovenians ever visit Marty's home. There are rumours that his Irish wife doesn't like Slovenians.

Can't blame her really if she feels left out when Marty speaks Slovenian. He loves to speak Slovenian, says Helena.

How would you like to be a farmer's wife, asks Martina.

It might be fun, says Helena.

Marty is an intelligent man. He does not agonise about the meaning of life. He says that problems are there to be solved; when you get stuck you have to figure out how to get unstuck, tells Martina.

He has a great sense of humour; he seems genuinely contented, says Helena.

Marty lost his hair when very young and hides his bald patch under the big Akubra hat that became his trademark. Other Slovenians try to make fun of his boldness but he laughs it off saying: God was just and God was fair; to some he gave brains to others he gave hair.

Marty comes over to their table and offers them a drink.

Now that you gave up teaching you can come to help with shearing, Marty invites Helena.

Will you teach me, says Helena.

You start as a roust-about and the shearers tell you what to do, laughs Marty.

Wouldn't you rather have me as a housekeeper?

The shearer's woman keeps my house.

When are you going to retire?

Never. I want to live.

Is work all there is? Martina enters into the conversation.

Work offers you a chance to win.

Win what?

Anything.

Like what? Asks Helena.

Money.

Is money important?

Money is everything.

What does money do for you?

If you have no money you think about money all the time, smiles Marty. If you have money you think of how to make more money.

Making money is one way of escaping life, says Helena with eyes on Marty.

And family, says Marty.

I don't want to win any more, says Helena.

When you don't want to win any more, you are dead, says Marty.

I like to remember, smiles Helena.

We can remember together, says Marty.

We worked long enough.

I worked since I stood on my back legs.

Were you four legged for long? Teases Helena.

Maybe I was too serious all my life, says Marty. I taught my kids how to make money but they never learned. They are drifters. Maybe I should learn to laugh with them. After all we saved and worked so our children can spend and enjoy.

I would like to go home again, says Helena.

Where is home.

Where I grew up.

I was forever hungry when I grew up.

Is your family still there?

I lost touch with my brothers and sisters. Dad tried to escape the war. He pretended to be a partisan when partisans came and when Home guards came he pretended to be a Home guard. In the end Black Hand shot him.

Who was Black Hand?

Nobody ever knew. It was some secret organisation of executioners. Anyway, mum was left with four little children and couldn't cope. She was labouring for farmers and she found places for us to do the same. She married again, had more children, so she never had time to worry about us.

It was hard for everybody after the war.

I started work when I was eight.

Didn't you go to school?

Sometimes. I quit in second grade during the war. I never learned to read and write properly. I had a good excuse not to write home, Marty tries to make a joke.

Couldn't you go back to school after the war?

I was a big twelve years old farm labourer by then and nobody told me that I could. They had more important things for me to do when the war ended. I slept on the hay above the stable and worked on the fields from morning till night. Nobody knew that I could not read or write. Or cared. Later I wanted to find a job in a factory but I was too embarrassed to tell them that I can not read or write. It was easier to escape. Lots of people of my generation missed out on education.

You have done well in Australia.

It was different here. They knew that I did not read or write English so they made it compulsory for me to attend English classes in the evening. I loved learning. In the first two years I learned to read and write and speak and run the farm. They were the best years of my life. I was really proud of myself. When I learned to read I just did not want to stop. Everything I read helps me.

I suppose every cloud has a silver lining.

If I wasn't that dirt poor I would never learn as willingly or earn as much as I did.

You should go home. I am a different person since I went, says Helena.

Maybe, smiles Marty.

It is good to take a look at what we escaped from.

I don't remember ever sleeping in a proper bed until I came to Australia. Or eating at the table. I was a stable boy.

Wouldn't you like to see your relations.

The only relations I said goodbye to were my pigeons. I knew they would miss me.

Tell me about them, begs Helena.

I raced pigeons. At an arranged time every Sunday morning the owners of the pigeons released groups of up to five pigeons from their homes. Some stayed up in the air for up to 8 hours. They placed bets on whose pigeons will stay longer in the air and make more summersaults. Some pigeons raced in circles and others flew high; they did up to ten summersaults going down.

I let my pigeons circle up and when they came close to the ground again I whistled to them to make them go up again. The ones that stayed in the air the longest won the race. I made my first fortune as a pigeon breeder.

You were a businessman from way back. You should visit the grandchildren of those birds.

Maybe we could do it together, says Marty patting Helena's hand.

We did not see Marty for awhile. What happened to him, asks Toni a few months later.

Didn't you hear? Says Rozi.

Hear what, says Helena.

There are rumours that he is broke, says Toni.

He got divorced or something, says Rozi.

I have to find him, says Helena to Martina. Maybe he needs a friend.

A friend in need is a friend indeed, Martina recites the old proverb.

I want to be there for him.

Why don't you ring him?

I ring from the public phone every day so he can not trace my calls, admits Helena. I don't want him to know how anxious I am. He is never home. His answering machine speaks to me all the time and I am happy to hear his voice.

Why don't you leave a message?

Maybe he does not want to hear a message.

Go and see him.

What would he think?

Maybe he is waiting for you.

Would you go to a man you liked? Asks Helena.

If I knew that he needed me, says Martina.

How do I know that Marty needs me? Says Helena.

One always needs a friend.

He might reject me.

He can only reject the expectations you have.

I want to help.

He might not want help but he might want to have someone to talk to.

A week later Helena comes to Martina's place bursting with excitement. She tells about her search for Marty.

I have been to more hotels and clubs in the last week than I saw in my lifetime, says Helena. I found Marty standing at the bar in the Workers club. He was one drunk man talking to another drunk man.

Have a drink, Marty offered as I approached.

I only wanted to buy a bottle to take home, I lied.

You are not going without a drink, Marty staggered towards the barman.

I really shouldn't, I am driving. I'll give you a lift home if you like.

It was easy to say that to a drunk person.

If you promise to come in for a drink, Marty slurred his invitation.

If you insist.

I helped Marty into his house and he opened a bottle of red wine. He drank too much and the wine turned into tears. He was embarrassed and quickly wiped his cheeks.

I wanted to surprise you. No, I wanted to surprise myself and I did, sniffed Marty.

You always drank beer, I said.

In my other life, smiled Marty with tears rolling down his face.

What are you talking about?

Let's drink to us, said Marty with his arm around my shoulders. We emptied the first glass in one go as if to seal our friendship. The strong red wine washed away the tension and we both laughed through tears.

My family was my biggest disappointment. I suppose I was their biggest disappointment. When my wife and the boys left, I had to prove it to them that I am strong.

You have done well, I said.

They were never really my family. I wanted us to go to Slovenia but they had no time. I haven't been home for over forty years.

Now is as good a time as any.

I sold the farm. I wanted to retire in Slovenia.

Maybe you will find there what you are looking for.

I wanted you to come with me, he said as I snuggled on his chest.

I invested with Smetana and Smetana investment firm. The old man gave me a lot of good advice in the past and I trusted him. His sons run the firm in Sydney, you must have heard of them.

I think I've seen his name in the paper. I am sure you made the right decision.

The bastard left the country. Interpol is after him. He has taken over ten million dollars with him.

Your money?

And the money from other stupid old migrants who invested with him.

They'll find him.

I don't think so.

His sons are here.

They say that they know nothing of their father's dealings.

How much did you invest?

Half a million.

How could you, I said and regretted the words.

Because I am stupid. Maybe I was greedy. I like making money and I never failed in business. I invested only for six months with the option to renew and/or increase.

Smetana introduced me to all his politician friends to impress me and I fell for it. He said that he will invest off shore and earn eighteen percent interest, tax free. He paid me interest for the first six months up front and then he disappeared.

They'll catch him, I tried to bring some hope.

He is a bloody German Jew. I have always defended Jews. I like smart people. I insisted that people are jealous because Jews are smarter. I was right, the bastard was smarter than me.

Every nation has crooks. I am sure the authorities...., I tried.

Authorities work for money. I don't want to waste what I have left.

You still own this lovely house.

I hate the place and this country and the system and the whole bloody business. Most of all I hate my greed and my stupidity.

It's your money, you earned it and you can do with it as you like.

I wanted to leave it to my grandchildren so they will know that their Slovenian grandfather made it good in Australia.

You have done good.

Let's drink to that.

Let's have something to eat, I suggested.

We haven't kissed yet and I was already organising his kitchen, smiles Helena.

In the fridge was sour milk and stale bread.

We'll have to call room service, I laughed, almost as drunk as Marty.

I don't think that the bell works.

We both roared with laughter.

I might find some nuts, he remembered.

I can see two, I said. We sat on the lounge room floor laughing like two naughty teenagers.

Can you order pizza while I open another bottle of this beautiful wine.

Marty mumbled about his Jewish grandmother. Her family disowned her because she married his gentile grandfather.

We cried and laughed until we fell asleep fully dressed.

When you are sober, you hide the parts that even you can't like. A bit of wine helps you be who you are, says Martina.

We are going to Slovenia, says Helena. I need to show Marty where I grew up. I think he does too.

He might break your heart.

Maybe he will put the pieces of my broken heart together, says Helena.

You can't go wrong, agrees Martina. Without love the whole process of living becomes the process of dying.

I might make a fool of myself but who cares. We might move in together when we come back.

Women are like that. We begin weaving love stories, says Martina.

Ask Vince to come to Slovenia with you.

I don't think so.

Why not?

I am not as brave as you.

Don't think of it as a great love affair, take it for what it is. Marty and I will revisit our own memories. I might even see David again.

Why would you want to see David with Marty?

Nostalgia, I suppose. To see where we have been and where we ended up. You need something to look forward to and something to remember.

Wouldn't you rather do that on your own?

I feel stronger with Marty. Travelling together like that will be fun.

He is a lucky man.

We are both lucky.

How is he taking it? We are both thinking about Marty's lost money.

I hope that he is not going just to look for Smetana.

I wouldn't blame him if he does.

He has many addresses in Germany.

What if he finds him?

I don't know Marty well enough to know. I hope that we might have something going for us by then. I will try to make him forget.

Is he talking about Smetana?

Only when he is drunk.

Does he drink much?

When he drinks, he drinks too much. He tries hard to dismiss his losses but when he is drunk it all boils over.

After two months Helena returns from Slovenia alone and sad.

Where is Marty?

He is chasing Smetana somewhere in Germany. Marty's life was making money. He showed the bastards that he could do it. Now he will die chasing Smetana.

Give him time.

I told him not to worry about money. We still have more than we will ever be able to spend. Why can't he forget Smetana?

Marty used to say that every bludger gets a pension in Australia but if you manage to save a bit, you get nothing. Now he might be eligible, says Martina.

It isn't the money. Half of his life was snatched away.

Did you argue?

No. We are what we always were. Friends. He rings from Germany.

Are you sorry that you went?

I am sad but not sorry. I finally said goodbye to the two men, who were my life, says Helena. I said goodbye to Tom. I realise now that no marriage is perfect.

While Marty was in Germany I visited David's grave, says Helena. The flowers were still fresh. I placed a bunch of forget me nots in the middle of the grave where I hope his heart is. I wonder what his family will make of them if they notice them at all. I was again a young girl there kneeling on his grave.

You never had a reason to fall out of love. You will build a Slovenian village in some corner of heavens, smiles Martina.

Close to Jesus and Virgin Mary, laughs Helena.

Don't joke about those things.

I met David's cousin Sara in the cemetery. She must be close to eighty and sees David through motherly eyes. I told her that David was my friend from school so she invited me to lunch and told me about David's misspent life.

Poor David could never sort out his life, said Sara. Women always liked him, I suppose they wanted to mother the romantic, sad man. When he finished school they sent David to work in a remote little town. He rented a room in the inn. The wife of the innkeeper came to clean his room. She was twice his age. She spoiled David like mothers spoil their favourite child with sweets of all sorts. She became David's lover. Her husband was an alcoholic.

David had his first child with Irene, his boss's wife. Irene wanted to leave her husband but David was scared of losing his job. Irene left and had the baby on her own.

David became sick. His mother sent a good village girl to look after him. He made her pregnant and married her to please his mother. He had a decent little family but he felt obliged to visit the fat innkeeper's wife from time to time. They never wanted more from each other so they never disappointed each other.

Ten years into his marriage David was called into the army reserve training in Serbia, continued Sara. A Serb general invited him home. David felt so honoured by the invitation of his superior that he slept with his daughter Gojka, who became pregnant. Gojka's father was transferred from Serbia to Ljubljana and he provided David with an important job in the army. David shared a beautiful apartment with his father in law who was also his boss. Life was good for the general and his daughter's family until in 1991 Slovenia became independent and the general lost his position. David lost his boss and then his job.

Gojka is a fashion designer. She worked for the big fashion house before she established her own little business in the new capitalist Slovenia. She provided jobs for her father and her husband but David and her father couldn't make a go of it. David felt more and more vulnerable. His father in law was no longer an important man but he still had power over David because David lived in his apartment and worked for his daughter. David began to drink. He caught pneumonia and died alone in a nursing home.

It was always women, mostly other men's women, said Sara. I don't know why women had the need to love him but they did. Maybe they rebelled against their husbands who had affairs with their young secretaries.

Poor David, says Martina. Maybe all those other women said the same.

My David was only a figment of my imagination, smiles Helena.

He probably believed that if only you two were together you would be eternally happy. Maybe you would or maybe you wouldn't. You were each other's first love so you were both searching for the feelings you inspired in each other. They say that one falls in love with the person who has the same faults.

People say that one should not dream about the past but dreaming about David helped me survive. Maybe I wanted to rebel against my husband like all those other married women David slept with.

We all need to believe that somewhere somebody loves us.

Drinking when we are not thirsty and making love all year around, madam; that is all there is to distinguish us from other animals.

Beaumarchais.

Mojca

Men never go shopping like that with a friend, says Mojca as she and Martina wander through the shopping mall.

They would look peculiar shopping with a friend. Shopping is entertainment for women. I don't really need or want to buy anything, says Martina. Pepi loved going to Revolve. It's a modern rubbish tip where people dispose of things they didn't really want or need. Revolve sells these items for a fraction of the price. Sometimes Pepi would come from Revolve with a brand new gadget beaming happily like he won a lottery. Finding a bargain made him really excited.

Everything revolves around money, making money, saving money, agrees Martina. She first met Mojca and her husband Pepi when they opened a little corner grocery shop in her street. Over the years they expanded and employed other people to work for them but at the beginning it was just Pepi, Mojca and their two children.

We followed our husbands all our lives, says Martina as they stop for coffee in a little Austrian style cafeteria.

I don't know if I followed my husband or he followed me, smiles Mojca as we settle at the corner table.

What do you mean?

I was very happy to escape. I suppose my hormones interfered with my common sense at eighteen. I just wanted to break free. Those were pre-pill, pre-sexual harassment and pre-social security days, says Mojca. There was a great pressure on girls to have sex. A girl only hoped that the boy, who impregnated her, married her. Unmarried mothers were not popular yet.

Were you pregnant?

I was pregnant. At eighteen I just finished high school. My parents had great hopes for me. I knew that I was a disappointment to them but I was so proud of my rebellion.

You loved Pepi.

We couldn't keep our hands and eyes off each other. I wanted him; maybe I made him do it, as they say. First time we made love on the moss in the forest. When I returned home I discovered that I was bitten by ants all over. Mum demanded to know how I got bitten. What was I thinking falling asleep in the forest like that? Anything could have happened to me. I could catch something nasty on the damp ground.

I can still see the first spring leaves swaying in the air above me as Pepi laid me on the moss. I never noticed ants. I was in heaven. I would easily risk my life for one more time on the moss but dad advised me to take a cushion to sit on, if I felt like it, as I went to look for mushrooms and wild strawberries.

That was my last summer at home and I picked mushrooms every day. Dad said that the fresh air made me look healthy and beautiful.

Pepi was an electrician and engaged to be married. He told me that he wanted to come to the city with me but he didn't know how to break the news to his family. His fiancé was hoping to get married before she had the baby.

I knew that I was pregnant the moment it happened. Maybe every female knows. I knew. I changed. I became instantly jealous and wanted Pepi for myself. Once women get impregnated, they follow their impregnators like lambs, laughs Mojca. I did. I refused to admit how stupid I really was.

What about his fiancé?

I didn't even think about her until I became pregnant, says Mojca. Let's escape, said Pepi a week before his wedding. Those were the most romantic words I ever heard.

Pepi's friend lent us a small boat and we paddled all night before we reached Italy. Anything could have happened to us on the open sea but the only thing we were afraid of was that our parents would catch us.

In the excitement of our escape we clean forgot that one can not live on love alone. Starved and exhausted we reported to Italian police and they placed us in a refugee camp. I was single and could not stay in the same barrack as Pepi. I was penny-less and could not speak Italian but I was desperately infatuated. We were young and stupid but we were also excited and felt heroic about our adventure.

Pepi went out in the evenings with other boys to pick cigarette butts on the streets, they unwrapped them at home and made new cigarettes. They sold some and smoked some. At night they went to green grocers' shops and picked cases of half-rotten fruit and vegetables that was left for garbage collectors. They sorted and refreshed what could be salvaged, they sold some, ate some.

Being scavengers was a new experience for both of us. Pepi came from a respectable working class family and I was a terribly spoiled child of a local vet. I couldn't see past Pepi's deep blue eyes.

We were so happy that we never even considered other people. We did not realise how stupid and selfish we were.

You were in love.

It was better to escape than watch my parents suffer the condemnation of the village. It was always a girl asking for it when a boy became overcome by his sexual urges. It was a girl's fault that she let herself get pregnant. Of course it made the girl's family look bad.

Why didn't you just get married?

My parents did not want me to get married at eighteen. Marrying a simple electrician would be a disgrace, marrying a simple electrician who made another girl pregnant would be a disaster. Being a single mother at eighteen would be a disgrace for the whole family.

Pepi's wedding invitations were out and gifts were bought. He just couldn't tell everybody that he changed his mind.

We got married a few weeks before I had our first baby. By the time we boarded the plane to Australia I was nineteen with another baby on the way. When in Australia I went to see a doctor about my pregnancy. The receptionist wanted to know my husband's name.

I am pregnant and I am paying for the visit, not my husband, I told the receptionist but she wasn't interested in me. She insisted that the bill goes in my husband's name. Just as well that we married, says Mojca.

Times have changed.

I knew nothing of the feminist struggle for equality but I was angry because this woman receptionist demanded that I signed myself as my husband's wife rather than by my own name.

Society demanded that we lived by their rules.

My father once said that every prisoner's duty is to escape. He was talking about the war and soldiers but I took it personally. I rebelled against the captors that oppressed women. I rebelled against government and religion and fashion.

Someone once said that establishment of truth depends on destruction of falsehoods continually, says Martina.

Most women willingly submitted to the propriety rules to be more acceptable and lovable. They smiled all decorated and fragrant when I demanded to be heard rather than be seen.

They were not strong enough to curse the rules, laughs Martina.

We came to Australia in 1961 with rags we wore and we didn't speak a word of English. They took us to Bonegilla migrant camp.

The officers found jobs and accommodation for migrants but Pepi heard that on the Snowy Mountains one could earn quick money. We packed our baby and left for Cooma. Pepi got a job and we got an old house. Pepi started working five days after we arrived in Australia. He worked until he died, my poor darling.

You were lucky to get a job and a house, I say.

We felt lucky that we had a roof over our heads. We found some old pots and crockery and cutlery abandoned in the shed. We found an old mattress and some clothes people left behind. People from old Jindabyne down in the valley moved up on the hill into new houses in new Jindabyne. The old abandoned houses in old Jindabyne were made available to workers on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. When the project was finished they flooded the old town and covered up all the dirt with beautiful blue water.

The refugees these days demand to have a choice of the carpet and the furniture in the house they get from the government. They even ask for mobile phones to communicate with their families overseas. People are getting sick of refugees, says Martina.

What did we get? And we came legally. We were qualified, young and ready for any work. We did everything for ourselves. Everybody thinks we were born millionaires, says Mojca. We were well off at home, of course. Here we made our own luck with hard work.

Did you ever go home?

When Pepi was diagnosed as a diabetic, he retired from work and we decided to take a holiday in Slovenia. I thought he should see his other daughter and make peace.

Did he?

He saw her but he never spoke to her. She grew up as another man's daughter.

How was his girlfriend?

She is an ugly, old, fat woman. His daughter is a middle aged fat woman.

Were you jealous?

There was never anything to be jealous about.

That's good, concedes Martina.

One day I saw Pepi sitting in the park looking at the boys playing soccer, continues Mojca. The ball was kicked sideways. Pepi caught it and passed it to one of the boys. The boy stood there facing Pepi for a second and Pepi smiled at him. The boy was a spitting image of Pepi. Pepi was watching his grandson. A girl came and sat next to Pepi. She was waiting for her brother to take her home. Pepi talked to her. Blood is thicker and all that, you know, says Mojca. I became jealous of his grandchildren. I was jealous because he did not tell me about meeting them.

After we returned to Australia Pepi began to drink more. He began hiding his drinking and his blood sugar results. He was playing bocce the day he collapsed. He did not eat all day.

Maybe he wanted to keep his sugar down, says Martina.

He did not tell me. That hurts. I think he was afraid to tell me that he spoke to his grandchildren. He gave up everything for me.

You gave up everything for him, smiles Martina.

He was everything I ever wanted. I will never know why he did not tell me.

Millennium

The club used to be always full for New Year's Eve, says Martina.

Maybe we are getting too old for dancing, says Helena.

Someone said that we don't stop dancing because we grow old but we grow old because we stop dancing.

Clichés, clichés, they all come true in the end.

Mojca comes late.

I love your gown, says Helena. Remember how we used to rush through the shops to find that most amazing dress for New Years Eve.

Now I can afford any dress I want but I have no one to dress for, says Mojca.

We were in love so we had to decorate ourselves. I don't feel alive if I am not in love, laughs Helena.

I suppose being in love sounds more romantic but all we wanted was to be noticed, says Martina.

Toni brings his cousin Stan, who is on holidays from Slovenia.

I think this is the beginning of the end for Slovenian clubs in Australia, says Toni.

Rozi thinks that it is the end of the world, says Stan.

Happy new millennium, Toni raises a glass. People pray for happiness so they can abstain from it.

Without a drink it is hard to remember how to be happy, says Stan.

I am happy, says Rozi raising her orange juice.

Love makes Rozi and Toni almost beautiful as they dance cheek to cheek. Tall and slim they make a handsome couple.

I feel comfortable with our own people, says Rozi.

We no longer have to pretend otherwise, says Helena.

We are like a drop in the ocean, our ocean. We only live in each others' thoughts; we can't even share with our parents or children the lives we live. Other people do not sing the songs we sing. Of all the millions of other Sydney residents we are the only bunch that remembers Slovenia.

Even this little bunch is on its way out. We meet more and more often at funerals, says Rozi.

To the new millennium, says Mojca.

Jesus knew why he made wine as his first miracle, says Toni.

Out with the old and in with the new, toasts Stan.

I had my own funeral the other day, says Helena. I burned my collection of teaching aids and strategies and qualifications.

Why didn't you leave them to younger teachers?

Like myself they were out dated. I could almost hear my colleagues counting hours for me to go, so everybody could move a notch higher to use their own experience and wisdom. Every time someone said that they won't be able to do without me, I became tempted to withdraw my resignation. They must have sensed it because they tried to be nice by saying that there will never be anyone like me, says Helena.

To the third millennium, Martina raises a glass.

There is a phone call for Helena. She takes it outside and returns quite changed. An aura of absolute bliss surrounds her as she squeezes Martina's hand and whispers: Marty is coming home.

Great.

I hope Smetana rots in hell and Marty forgets about him.

So Armageddon has been cancelled, says Marjan coming late.

Maybe postponed, says Rozi.

Whatever, says Helena.

Vince walks in at midnight. Martina had enough wine by now to laugh at anything. He takes her to the dance floor and she surrenders into his arms without hesitation.

I am sorry we couldn't go to my little mountain stream and catch that trout, he whispers into Martina's ear. She is certain that there is nothing sweeter than Vince whispering into her ear.

Can you swim there, she asks into his neck.

There is a bend in the stream where it is really deep and you can dive in.

That would be fun, she purrs into Vince's hair. In the euphoria of wine and the loveliness of the moment they dangle their feet in the imagined loveliness of the mountain coolness. A part of them wants to merge with the blue of the water but the rest of them holds onto the safety of the riverbank. They know the riverbank. Nobody knows how far down the force of the stream would carry them or how far they want to go. Vince is holding Martina firmly and they can feel every fibre of their bodies for the first time.

The lights go out; everybody kisses everybody. The magic moment of 2000 is here, new life is beginning; the world hasn't ended.

There is a song coming from the corner of the club. With arms around each other they raise their voices and everything seems to be as it is meant to be; how it used to be a moment ago when they came to Australia young and believing in the better future. Someone starts Preseren's national anthem that toasts the wine, Slovenian boys and girls, Slovenian history and future. It does not matter how different they are because in essence they are the birds from the same nest. They feel at home as they sing about the same little speck of land called Slovenia. A handful of Slovenians in the middle of the city of five million people, who are not even aware of Preseren or them; singing the words of the national anthem written by this most important Slovenian whom nobody else in Sydney ever heard of.

There are little pockets of people like us all over the world representing the two million Slovenians to six and a half billion people who don't know or care about our history or our future, says Helena radiantly happy.

My Beautiful Sister

No place like home, says Stan as we return from a holiday on the Gold coast.

Home, beautiful home, I agree. Autumn leaves covered the lawn while we were away. Canberra changes colour every season.

It's the phone, I rush into the house.

Are you ready for another holiday, I say as Stan comes in. I am actually bursting with excitement.

What do you mean?

It was Hana. She is begging us to come home.

Why?

Toni is running for parliament. If he wins we will have our own politician.

Toni always wins.

Stan is not over the moon about my sister Hana or her husband Toni.

Freddy persuaded him to run.

Freddy and Toni always ruled the roost, says Stan.

We could, really, couldn't we? Go home, I mean.

What about your job?

I could take a month off, I suppose.

Why not stop working all together? Stan decides out of the blue. We don't need the money. You always said how lucky Hana is because she does not have to work.

Maybe Stan does not like me thinking that Hana is lucky. Maybe he thinks that I want to be Hana and be married to Toni. Maybe he wants to be Toni and rule the roost.

I would be bored without work.

Something else will come along. Something always does, says Stan. Why work, we have more than we will ever need.

Why indeed? We were mad to work so hard.

Someone had to.

I am excited at the thought of the change. Stan was afraid to go home while Yugoslav regime was in power but going home was always at the back of my mind

They might still get me, says Stan.

Not likely. Everybody has been home since Slovenia became independent.

Your work always held us back.

Stan is a self-employed builder; he can take time off when he wants to. He slowed down lately. Our boys left home and we are preparing for an early retirement.

I feel bold and brave as I tell my employers that I wish to retire.

Whatever will be, will be, I say to Stan on the first day of my retirement.

Now you can do whatever you ever wanted to do, smiles my faithful old Stan.

I am simply not used to not being busy. I was never alone before either. Stan and I did everything together. During our work hours we were with other people but we spent our free time together. Stan and I mean everything to each other. I hear the silence of my home now. I feel the aloneness

and the distance. My life is spinning into an unknown. I have to search for the new purpose and establish a new routine. I watch the bird pecking at her image in the window. I watch the leaves falling. The garden will appreciate some rearranging. Stan and I, we both like gardening.

I don't know how to sit without work. Keep busy is the best I can do. Keep busy and don't think about it. Thinking gets you nowhere. Working and saving and getting rich used to make me feel essential. There is no need to save or to work any more.

I always kept the filing cabinet for Stan's business and our home accounts neatly organised but personal papers roamed around the house until they ended in boxes in the attic to be sorted out one day.

For ages I wanted to put our photos in a chronological order so people could come to look at my life neatly framed in the slots of the album. I wonder if anyone would really want to look at our life. Stan and I know other Slovenians in Canberra but I doubt any one of them would really want to follow the events of our lives.

I look at yellowish old bits of paper. Much time has passed without ever taking time to remember. Here is a picture of Hana and I as we played with home made dolls. I always thought of Hana as beautiful. Everybody always knew that I was definitely ordinary.

Mum used to make our clothes until she became too sick. I was about thirteen when I first ventured into a dress shop. My little brand new breasts started pushing forward into my little girl school dress so I needed a new one.

Try it on, the man in the shop urged me. He held the curtain of the dressing cubicle open for me. When he dropped the curtain I put the dress on. The salesman squeezed into the cubicle and smoothed the dress over my chest. His hands were shaking uncontrollably. He became red in the face and began stuttering. Another customer entered the shop so the salesman left my cubicle. I quickly got out of the dress and out of the shop. I was shaking. I had no idea what I did wrong but I became ashamed. Since then I never liked dressing rooms.

Being the oldest I was privileged to wear crisp new garments but my sisters wore mostly hand me downs. When Hana became a teenager our relations let her choose her own bits of clothing because she was so obviously different, exotically fragile and hauntingly beautiful.

Mum's sister moved to Vienna soon after the war. When Hana was thirteen she invited Hana to stay with them for awhile. Hana was a different person when she returned at fifteen. She learned to play the piano and the steps of ballet. She wrote poetry, knew about arts, was introduced to German and Italian and she sprinkled her speech with French expressions we never heard of. She looked rather vulnerable but maybe they taught her how to look vulnerable so she didn't have to pull her weight when any manual tasks had to be done at home.

The photos of mum and dad remind me of the love they had for us and for each other. It's not like me to cry over photos. It's the change, I suppose. Life is so short. Suddenly I am back where life meant so much more and the future looked so rosy.

It is no use wondering if I made the right choices. It would be useless to go over all the reasons, yet in my aloneness I wonder about the meaning of it all. Was the life I had my destiny? What is the essential me if there is any such thing? Am I just a reflection of unplanned little events and people I met?

I was sixteen. We were swimming in the river when I got caught under the branches of the willows. Toni rescued me. He carried me onto the riverbank and placed me into the tall flowery grass. As I recovered he kissed me. Just a playful kiss but I almost drowned in happiness. Since then I followed Toni from the distance. In a daze. Was this first kiss a kiss of life? It marked me for life.

Toni became my hero. He was my whole life. Two years older he seemed a wise grown up man. He bought me a beautiful shiny copper hairpin from the stall when we went on a pilgrimage to the little church on the mountain. I wore that pin like women in love wear their engagement rings.

I was in love with Toni. One can only be so totally hopelessly in love once in a lifetime. My love for Toni was all in my head until for my seventeenth birthday Toni invited me to see a play in the town hall. It was to be our first real date. I was breathless with excitement. I waited for Toni to kiss me again and finally declare his love. I think everybody knew how much in love I was with Toni.

Then there was Hana.

Mum insisted that my little sister come with Toni and me to see the play. Hana came out in a silky pink dress. Her hair was tied on top of her head with a huge matching pink ribbon. She wore red sandals with slightly raised heels. My little sister took our breath away. Even Toni seemed stunned by Hana's beauty. There we stood, my seventeenth birthday forgotten, as we admired the blossoming of my fifteen years old sister. Hana's childhood ended and suddenly she became a beautiful young woman.

The picture of my beautiful sister standing there all newly grown up and pink remained with me forever. Toni came to our home frequently since my seventeenth birthday. We became firm friends.

When Toni came Hana found some excuse to get away. She did not like Toni. Sometimes she teased him about the girls that wanted to go with him.

One day I saw Toni kissing Hana under the flowering cherry tree. They looked like an enchanted couple from my father's fairy tale. I couldn't move. The bitter pain of jealousy was mixed with sweet pain of admiration. I knew that it was inevitable that Toni would choose Hana. I was almost happy that Toni would become part of my family and so stay close to me.

Nobody was surprised that Toni chose Hana. Her long blond curls, her forget me not blue eyes, and her shy smile enchanted him.

When Hana and I walked to school, boys tried to catch up with us to be with Hana. I was just one of Hana's sisters. Nobody took notice of me. Are you Hana's sister, people used to ask me in total disbelief.

I am also Emil's sister and Teresa's sister but nobody ever mentioned that. We are ordinary and we married ordinary people. We are not beautiful or talented but everybody knows that Hana is all those things.

Stan must have sensed my feelings for Toni but he never said a word. There was no reason.

I sometimes wonder if Hana really belongs to our family. There is certain preciousness about her.

She will never grow up. She will be cute and charming all her life, complained Tereza.

Hana displayed her childish playful coquettishness in a flirtatious way that would make me look stupid but then I don't look the part. I was never precious.

I never told anyone about my crush on Toni. Nobody ever knew about my first kiss, hidden deep in my subconscious like photos in this shoebox. My first puppy love. I pretended that it never happened. Even years later I sometimes dreamt about Toni. I woke up with a strange tingling sensation. I kept my eyes closed for a few more minutes to recreate a dream.

I could never compete with Hana. I admired Toni as much as I admired my sister. Hana was glad that I liked Toni because I was the only family member that liked him.

I could not understand why my parents worried about Hana's marriage to Toni. Maybe Hana was just so precious to my family.

Nobody worried when I married Stan.

Stan was twenty and I was eighteen when we started dating. I was grateful to good old Stan. He loved me and I felt safe and whole with him. There was never another man in my life. I don't think there was ever another woman in Stan's life either.

Stan was an ordinary carpenter at home. In Australia he became a builder which is much the same thing. Stan is a hard working, faithful man and we have everything we need. Stan drives his utility because he is delivering material for his buildings.

I do Stan's accounts in my spare time so he never has to worry about bills or money. We know exactly where every dollar goes. We are contented with our arrangement. We are comfortable. We don't have to agonise about other people.

I was the oldest of four children so I learnt from the very beginning to be sensible and act responsibly. Even my name, Maria, seems common and sensible. At the age of six I became a chief baby sitter for my two younger sisters and a brother. Emil was the youngest. I suppose my parents had to have a boy before they stopped reproducing.

Mum and dad married just before the war. Dad's parents were rich respected farmers then but for an unknown reason after the war landowners became despised in communist Yugoslavia. People working on the land were considered stupid peasants. Communists took most of my grandparent's land and distributed it among the poor. Dad's parents were the pillars of the church but the new regime considered church going people backward and superstitious. Dad's parents blamed mum and dad in some way for the new government.

Dad became a war hero during the communist revolution. He was badly injured and has spent much of his time in bed or in hospital. Mum and dad never talked about the war or about the revolution. Not in front of us children.

I never knew how mum and dad felt about the church or the government. I sensed that they did not dare talk about politics or religion. I wish I asked them. I wish I knew them better.

Mum's family did not want to have anything to do with us either. I heard mum's mother say that her daughter deserved better but not once did mum complain about hard work on the land. She took us kids to the field with her; she spread a rug under the tree and left us in my care while she worked. Once I heard a woman say to her friend as they looked in mum's direction: About time the high and mighty dipped her dainty fingers in the soil.

I really know nothing about mum being high or mighty.

I suppose mum was a bit dainty though. She was a shire secretary when she married her handsome rich farmer but neither the handsome nor the rich lasted long. Dad could barely walk with a stick since he became a war hero.

You better do as mum tells you. She is the clever one, dad often said.

I believe that mum was much like Hana once. She became sensible, of course, but she actually encouraged Hana to be a bit precious. Dad admired Hana. I think she reminded him of mum.

I felt protective towards mum from the beginning. I took care of mum's children and of our dad; I gave mum a chance to provide food for us. She gave some of the remaining land to poor people to work on and they gave her half of the produce.

I believe that dad was the love of mum's life. It was plainly written in the way they looked at each other and touched each other. When all her work was done mum would sit next to dad's bed and hold his hand.

During the winter before I started school dad taught me to read. He had nothing else to do in the long winter months, I suppose. I sat on his bed and read every evening. Other children listened to my reading and we all cuddled around dad while mum fed the pigs and the cows and the chooks. I still remember the smell of this closeness. Dad said that we were his bunch of wild flowers. I can still hear dad's voice as he lulled us away into the magic land of his stories.

Dad loved to make up stories and we listened, mesmerised by his words. He taught me to write and encouraged me to write down the stories he made up. I think dad trained me to take over from him and become a man of the house.

I fed the kids and brought food for dad but mum and I ate whatever was left over. It was understood by everyone that mum and I had a duty to take care of the family.

Hana was a delicate baby and we all admired her first smiles and words. Everybody was chirping over Hana.

Tereza was a real disappointment because mum and dad must have sorely wanted a boy by then so they could give up having children.

Emil was a cry-baby. As the only boy he became a spoilt brat but he quickly had to grow out of his preciousness after dad died.

Mum cried a lot after dad died. The light has gone out of her eyes and she eventually got sick. I was eleven then and there was much to do.

Mum began going to church regularly after dad died. She spent more and more time praying. Dad's family became very kind to us and I believe that they finally accepted mum.

For Sunday dinner a chook had to be killed and plucked. Mum did it without fuss and we enjoyed the smells of a roasting fowl.

As Mum got sicker she asked me to kill a chook. It had to be done.

I had a certain air of importance taking mum's place at the age of twelve. I almost felt heroic; at least I tried to look heroic. If you want to eat the Sunday roast you better kill the chook. If mum could do it so could I.

Hana could not even watch the killing so it was useless to pretend that I was brave. Tereza and Emil expected me to be a deputy parent for them since I looked after them from the beginning.

I held the chook between my legs, its head in one hand and the knife in the other. Mum said that the chook dies quickest if you turn the knife into its eye. I poked the little sharp knife into the chook's eye, closed my eyes and turned the knife to squash the chook's brain. I opened my eyes to catch the splattering blood into a pot so we could bake it for breakfast. Even Hana enjoyed this delicacy.

There was an awful pain in my stomach as I stuck the knife into the eye of the chook for the first time. I had to pull myself together.

When the blood stopped dripping in the pot and the chook stopped struggling I dropped it on the ground but the chook began to run away with its head to the ground. I panicked and grabbed it to have another go at killing. As I held it between my legs again, it slowly went limp and I knew that it wasn't only pretending to be dead.

Sometimes mum dropped the chook into the boiling water for a minute to make the plucking easier but this time she wanted me to pluck it dry and save the feathers. During long winter months we picked the feathers for doonas and pillows.

When the chook was ready for roasting I filled it with spicy stuffing and placed it in the oven. Soon the sweet aroma brought admirers to the kitchen. Hana couldn't wait to peel off the chook's golden crunchy skin.

The smells of my childhood follow me.

Stan heard from other migrants that one could earn good money in Snowy Mountains. Just before Christmas 1964 Stan began to work in the tunnel. I remember those heady days in the Snowy Mountains. This great engineering project fascinated Stan.

In 1949 the Australian Prime Minister fired the first plug of dynamite to commemorate the start of The Snowy Mountains Scheme. The water from mountain streams was first directed through a series of tunnels to power stations where it generated enormous amounts of electricity. The water was later made available for irrigation.

The first wave of non-English speaking migrants from Europe came to work on the gigantic hydro-electric project. Cooma, the sleepy Anglo-Saxon rural town at the bottom of the Snowy Mountains,

soon became the multicultural metropolis of Australia. The smell of the cappuccino and salami wafting in the air on the main street was a welcome reminder of Europe for lonely men who had left behind their country, family and sweethearts. In Cooma one could hope to meet someone from home or at least from the same continent.

Snowy Mountains' project became a memorial to migrants of the sixties and most of those involved in it remember it with pride. Men reminisce about the wild freedom of the bush, the drinking in the pub, the hunting and the fishing. Many travelled to Cooma or Sydney on their paydays to find girls, grog and gambling.

Early migrants had their travel to Australia paid by Australian government. In return they had to work in Australia for two years. Most non-English speaking migrants were sent to the factories and shipyards or to work on the farms. Many stayed in their first job until they retired. Very few ever left Australia.

More adventurous quickly discovered that they did not have to go where they were given a job. As long as they could provide for themselves or find their own employment they were free to roam the vast continent.

When the project finished in 1974 the Snowy Mountains national parks made attractive tourist destinations.

The man made mountain lakes, scattered through the Snowy Mountains are overgrown by native fauna and look like they were there from the beginning.

I wrote a diary then and now I read the yellow pages of many years ago. I remember writing the diary as I sat under the poplars in Tumut. Stan and the boys went fishing along the mighty Tumut River, which was rich with trout. Sometimes we camped on the riverbank. The chirping birds in the poplars and the sound of the river rushing by made me feel quite homesick for the river and the village I left behind. In the evenings we sat on the riverbank and watched the moon's reflection in the water and the stars in the brilliantly clear sky.

We fell in love with the wholesomeness of the untouched bush. We tuned in with the sounds and the silence while watching the birds build nests on the riverbank protected by raspberry and rose-hip bushes. The ducks scattered as we approached, but the platypus could be seen wading unperturbed in the deep of the cool clear water. The bush around Tumut created a sanctuary for platypus. The huge white gum trunks hollowed by termites were teeming with life. Termites rarely killed the trees; the birds nesting in the hollows fertilised the shell of the tree with their droppings and the tree survived. The young trees surrounded the healthy mature ones and saplings grew out of the dying trunks. In an everlasting undisturbed cycle of reincarnation they swayed in the breeze. The wallabies and wombats looked for food and white cockatoos and galahs screeched into the silence without disturbing anyone.

Gradually ambitious hard working Europeans created their little Europe around Tumut. The hills became orchards of apples, pears, chestnuts and walnuts. The sheep paddocks along the Tumut River were ploughed into the fields of corn and other vegetables. The weeping willows along the river and the poplars along the road were planted by Europeans who built houses in the valley nestling among the hills. In the last century they made a stamp on the land where Aborigines lived for thousands of years without disturbing or changing anything.

Only the few scattered trees were left and their branches were eaten by stock to a metre off the ground. These trees looked like lonely ballerinas dancing over the dead logs that farmers ring barked to clear the land for more cattle and sheep. The farmers cut deeper and deeper into the bush. The clearings, scattered with fallen trunks, looked like a battlefield with massacred tree bodies.

In dry summers sheep and cattle ate into the roots of the new growth and the hills became brown and desert like as the wind lifted the soil that accumulated there through millennia.

During the last two hundred years many back-packers walked along Tumut River in search of riches. In the middle of the nineteenth century the nearby Kiandra and Adelong yielded tons of gold. The abandoned mines now blended into the eternity of the bush and add to the picturesque beauty. The waterfalls and over two hundred caves provide the mysterious, sacred spirituality for the countryside.

The hills covered with snow in winter protected the valley from cold and wind. Skiing in Australia began in the middle of nineteenth century in Kiandra near Tumut. The European gold miners first used skiing as a mode of transport but later it began to be the main entertainment for gold diggers during the long harsh winters.

We liked the smell of the wild rosemary; we watched the daisies of all colours and sizes with their open unspoiled smiling faces looking for the sun. Exotic scents of shrubs were mingling in the untouched mountain air. The moss-covered ground was sprinkled with tiny flowers; the bigger ones grew up over them. The longer we looked the more varieties of flowers we found.

The trips to Tumut became our yearly pilgrimage. We are rather sad to see developers cash on the natural beauty of the virgin bush. The mighty Tumut River is still cool, clear and deep but the riverbank is covered by tents, caravans, cars and people. The surrounding lakes also entice the tourists who enjoy water skiing, wind surfing, boating, yachting and fishing.

Everything changed. The bush walkers trample the bush flowers, the birds and wallabies are scared away, the platypus is hiding in the water holes.

"Tumut offers fun for the whole family all year round," says the advertisement.

In 1965 we got a letter from Toni. He sold our home in Slovenia. All we had to do was sign a contract of sale and verify our signature at the Yugoslav Embassy in Canberra.

I wrote in my diary at the time: It seems that Toni guides our lives with an invisible remote hand. He deposited the money in our bank account.

I was happy that Toni sold our house so we could finally rebuild our lives in Australia. The trip to Canberra was a catalyst in our lives. Stan and I fell in love with Australian Capital Territory. To us it was definitely a promised land. The cool orderly modern design and the clean, symmetric beauty of Australian capital city overwhelmed me. I believe that Canberra is the most beautiful city in the world.

Forget Sydney, I want to live here, I said to Stan right then and there.

You could do worse than buy a piece of land right next to the Australian Parliament House, he agreed.

We had about eight thousand pounds from the sale of our house in Slovenia and we saved another two thousand. Land was cheap. Ordinary blocks of land in the suburbs could be bought for a pound each but Stan wanted to buy close to the Australian Prime Minister. This was the most daring thing Stan ever did.

I don't know anyone in Canberra and I have no idea which suburb is best but what is good enough for the prime minister is good enough for us, Stan said.

So for Christmas 1965 we paid four thousand pounds for the magnificent block of land from which one could see all over Canberra. It was the most expensive block of land in Canberra ever sold until then.

Our name and picture was in Canberra Times so all Canberra Slovenians read about us. Every Slovenian in Canberra also found out that we were at the Yugo Embassy and that we bought a block of land in the same street. We were totally unaware of what role Yugo embassy played in Slovenian community in Canberra. Stan never had time for politics and I had no reason to become involved in it.

At the Embassy we met Ivan, the first Slovenian in Australia. We felt close to him immediately after he said dober dan. To hear an ordinary greeting in your own language sounded miraculous. Ivan

was at the Embassy to get a visa for Slovenia because his family wanted to return to Slovenia. Stan was surprised that Slovenians had to ask permission to return to the country of their birth but that's how it was then.

Stan believed that the land close to the Australian parliament would be a good investment. He built a beautiful mansion because the land was expensive and surrounded with beautiful houses. We took a loan half way through to complete the six bedroom three bathroom place but we could never really afford to move into it. We rented it to an African Embassy so we could pay off the loan.

We didn't even realise that most of the streets around Parliament house were known as the Embassy district. Unbeknown to us we ended up closer to Yugoslav Embassy than to the parliament house.

Stan did carpentry works for other tradesmen who built our house. We never saw any money from his work for years. After Stan finished our magnificent home as owner builder it was easy for him to get the building licence and the loans from the bank.

We lived in a rented backyard flat of the house owned by a sick old Polish migrant. I had to clean and cook and garden for him so we did not have to pay rent. Times were tough. I had three young children at the time and people weren't keen to rent places to families with little children. I heard that Australians did not want to have anything to do with foreigners. I believe that they were a bit scared of foreigners although we were as much foreigners to them as they were to us. One never knows what to expect from a foreigner. It was probably easier for them since they were in majority.

Australia was full of foreigners in the sixties. Even Slovenians in Canberra seemed foreign to us. They came from other regions, different background, different religions or political persuasion.

Slovenian Franciscan priest came from Sydney once a month and most Slovenians came to Slovenian mass. We wanted to see each other; even those that disliked each other and those that did not really believe in God came to mass to see each other. I suppose just seeing a group of Slovenian faces was comforting.

During the mass the priest told us to offer a sign of peace to each other. We sat next to Joe, a very pious man. When the sign of peace was to be offered Stan extended his hand towards Joe but Joe ignored Stan and turned the other way. We later learned that Joe was spreading rumours that we were Embassy's spies. Where else would a young couple with three children get the money to buy the dearest block of land in the city, reasoned Joe.

Ivan invited us home to meet his wife Ada and his family. We became instant friends. Ivan was also a builder. I learned much later that Ivan was spying for Yugoslav Embassy. Apparently his time expired.

We heard a rumour that Stan took Ivan's place as a spy and that Yugoslav Embassy paid for our house so we would spy on the activities of other Slovenians in Canberra.

We did not dare tell anyone that we were ourselves scared of the Yugoslav Embassy. We were also afraid to tell anyone how we came to have the money.

Slovenians were suspicious of us from the beginning because we became friends with Ivan's family. Apparently anyone on friendly terms with the ambassador or Ivan was a communist.

We were forever known as the owners of that magnificent, expensive block of land with that pretentious mansion on it.

Slovenians in Canberra never fully trusted us. Few of them trusted each other. I learned that the two opposing political groups of Slovenians even sat far apart in the strategic positions in the church so that they did not have to shake hands with their political enemies at Easter or Christmas.

Someone found out that my father was a war hero and that my sister's husband was a police chief. Our fate was sealed. We were forever Embassy's agents. The pillars of the church never trusted us and we did not trust the friends of the Embassy.

After the children started school there was no need for me to be home during the day so I began looking for a day job. Luckily all my children were born in the first half of the year so they were allowed to enter school at the beginning of the school year in February before they turned five. Children born after July had to wait until they were over five. It saved us money on child minding.

Before Ivan and his wife Ada left for Slovenia they invited us to a farewell dinner.

Paula lives next to your new house, Ada introduced me to her friend.

What a coincidence, said Paula. We will be neighbours.

We never became neighbours because my family never lived in our magnificent mansion but Paula and I became lifelong friends. Paula is an elegant, confident lady, about ten years older and much more educated than I am. Paula was born in Australia a year after her parents arrived from Austria. She remembers how difficult life in Australia was for her parents before they learned English.

European migrants brought skills, culture and ingenuity to Australia after the war, said Paula confidently.

Paula never worked. Her husband Ron is a parliamentarian and he probably earns enough. Paula buys the best quality clothes. Her son Daniel is older than my boys so my boys wear his expensive hand me downs.

Paula told me about the shop in Manuka, where Embassy ladies buy clothes of international designs.

They need a sales assistant, said Paula. Working in this shop will be a good experience for you. Most of the customers are from foreign embassies so your European accent will make no difference.

Paula introduced me to her friend Eva, the owner of the shop.

Eva will tell you what to wear and how to walk and talk, Paula smiled. You listen to Eva, she knows what she is talking about.

You don't have to be beautiful but you must always be perfectly groomed, Eva said in a firm German accented voice.

I carefully followed Eva's instructions. Gradually she introduced me to her important clients in a whispering but clear voice. Later Eva told me madam's name, the country madam represents, and what colours and designs suits madam.

I wrote down all the information and later at home tried to find further information about madam's country of origin and the place of her embassy in the Red Hill Embassy district. I asked Eva how to spell madam's name and I practiced its pronunciation.

People are particular about their names and their home countries. One should not mix Slovenia and Bosnia just because they were both part of Yugoslavia, said Eva. In the same way you must never mix Thailand and Taiwan because people of any country think themselves a bit better.

I asked madams questions about their countries and their fashions. I am getting to know the customers, I told Eva.

They are not customers, they are clients. In a supermarket you have customers but in a place like this we have clients, Eva corrected me.

I still do not properly understand the difference but I understand that it is important.

In my old diary I read an entry I wrote in 1970:

Every day I drive my little Ford to the boutique where I sell clothes to the rich old ladies. I smile at them because they are the only women that can afford the dresses I sell. I tell them how appropriately elegant they look. I know that nobody cares how they look but they have to maintain the status of rich elegance even when nobody takes any notice of them. These ladies would not touch anything made of synthetics or made in China. Natural fibre is like a mark of respect to them.

Their clothes carry designer labels and different designer labels suit them for different times of the day. I have to remember what they believe suits them so that I can tell them what suits them and then they appreciate my good taste and knowledge. They change for dinner and for coffee and for casual visiting.

Eva chose a designer dress for me to work in to show these ladies that I know what is appropriate. I feel more like them in a designer dress. Eva lets me have these dresses at a fraction of the real price.

You are the right size, said Eva as I tried the dress on.

I am an unnoticeable size with a civilised body that is not too big or too small in any particular place. The same goes for the rest of me. People have a better chance to remember the dress I wear than my face. I never put a foot wrong in a real big way.

I earn a reasonable salary so we moved into a two bedroom flat where we stayed until in 1971 Stan built another, much more modest four bedroom home for us on a cheaper piece of land in the suburb of Deakin. Gradually Deakin also became a prestige suburb.

I just love the spacious simplicity of our home. We can see most of Canberra. I believe that they chose Canberra as a capital because it is surrounded by hills. The rich people like to look over the valleys where poorer people live.

Apparently Australians could not agree if Sydney or Melbourne should become the capital after Australian states united in 1901 so they decided to find a suitable place between the two cities and build a capital.

Canberra is spotlessly clean. Some say that it is a cold, unfriendly, boring place but to me it is refreshingly cool. People also complain that it is an impersonal, sterile environment but I love sterile and impersonal.

Flies bother people even in Canberra. I suppose they are left over from the time when the land was a sheep and cattle paddock only a few years ago.

Stan is sub-contracting many building jobs to other Slovenians. They finally cautiously accepted us but I know that they don't really trust us. They can't figure out where we got the money and we can't tell them.

In 1969 the government gave Slovenians in Canberra a beautiful block of land to build their club. Stan spent many weekends building the club with other Slovenians. They rewarded Stan for his work with life membership to the club but they never elected him as a president.

Since the club opened we had many wonderful nights dancing and singing there. Slovenian music created a magic feeling of being at home. Women dressed in their finery, teased their hair into a balloon like hairdos, painted their eyelids blue, their cheeks pink and their lips red. On the dance floor we were the actresses as well as each other's audience. Women were careful never to wear the same outfit as any other woman. It is all right for men to wear the same clothes as other men, I suppose, since they all look like identical penguins in their dark suits and white shirts. Men expressed their individuality with their political views, their work and hobbies.

Slovenian club became a place of our rituals and celebrations. It was our second home, our little Slovenia. We blossomed there; we provided the recognition that we were alive at the time when we barely existed in the minds of other Australians. We never knew any other place where we could dance and sing, flirt and remember, and specially be recognised for who we were.

Canberra is a family town with monumental public buildings and beautiful family homes. There is no nightlife in Canberra because Canberra families sleep with their children at home and go to work in the morning.

Everybody in Canberra seems ordinary except perhaps the foreign embassy people who frequent Manuka prestige shopping centre where they can drink real coffee and have food that reminds them of home.

Migrants from all over the world built Canberra and they provide services for the politicians whose parents or grand parents came mostly from Great Britain.

During the Independence War in Slovenia in 1991 Slovenians at home and abroad united. I suppose common enemy is the best reason for unity. Canberra Slovenians celebrated the independence united in our club.

Most migrants worked hard and saved and never wasted time. We cleaned and sterilised ourselves, our homes and our gardens to impress each other.

I believed that cleanliness and purity was an essential part of civilisation and culture; much like a baby formula that came in the fashion when my boys were born. Most young mothers began to shun breast-feeding as old fashioned. Young people follow fashions. I was so young in so many ways.

You ironed and washed and wiped all the time, my son tells me. I never remember those ironed shirts but I like to remember going fishing with dad and getting dirty.

Perhaps I valued cleanliness more than games our children wanted me to play. God forbid that another Slovenian would run a finger over my furniture and find it dirty. Cleanliness was very important to mum. It was a sign that she was better than those around her.

Most of us are slightly sorry now that we didn't waste a bit of time on our children and their activities. Perhaps we really should have gone to watch their games and admire their trophies and be there on school presentation nights. But most of us didn't. Most of us never talked to the teachers our children spent years with. We couldn't waste time.

Now we have all the time we want but our children left and they lead their own lives. I want to spend time with my grandchildren but they live far away and when they come they would rather play computer games and chat on the Internet. I am a virtual stranger to my own grandchildren. I send gifts for birthdays and Christmas. I want to grow closer to them; they are polite but not interested.

Young people talk mostly to strangers these days. I find it amazing that children can sit at the computer for hours chatting to American friends one minute and then turn to Europe the next. This is a new kind of friendship for us who were taught never to talk to strangers.

My sister Hana would like us to come home, I tell Paula.

I wish I met Hana, says Paula.

Everybody liked Hana. She had the nicest boyfriend and married him. I suppose one perfect life in a family is enough.

She sounds special, says Paula.

She is.

I hope she knows it.

I am sure she does.

Were you jealous?

More proud than jealous. She made our family special.

I did not have to impress Paula. To her I could say things I would not say to Slovenians.

During 1999 Paula's husband Ron developed Alzheimer's disease. I was not at all familiar with this disease. To me it was just old age forgetfulness.

He can't swallow food or medicine. He won't last long, said Paula.

Why doesn't he go to hospital?

He doesn't like hospitals.

Can I help?

I have a nurse visiting every day. He is incontinent and she helps to bath and change him, says Paula.

At Ron's funeral many dignitaries speak glowingly about Ron's life. Elegant mourners express sympathy to Paula. They praise her for her excellent care.

I feel guilty because I never did anything to help you with Ron, I say when we meet after the funeral.

You have always been my refuge, Paula hugs me.

I envied you because you did not have to work but I am really grateful for the job you found for me.

I wish I had your job but Ron would never hear of it, says Paula. I suppose I wanted to work so I could be with other old ladies who observed propriety. The right dress, the right manners, the right place, the right words. Only old ladies still observe propriety.

I like things in the proper order too.

I searched for order and perfection all my life. Perhaps death is the only perfection. Only God knows why things are as they are and why we try so hard to perpetuate them.

I suppose we want things the way they were as we grew up.

Marriages used to last forever. Family traditions were passed down, there was a sense of continuity. I am frightened of the changed world. The chaotic confusion eats people.

Paula and I bake a birthday cake for Stan.

On the radio talkback they are discussing the pros and cons of private and government nursing care.

It is not right that rich old people pay for luxury nursing care while the poor have to be grateful for whatever the government provides, says a caller.

They want to punish me because I saved for my old age while others spent on pleasures of their youth, says Paula. They ate their cake and they make me feel guilty for saving mine.

The talk back host is going to be on the side of the poor, because the poor are a majority of his listeners, I smile.

He gets a million dollars a year to be on the side of the poor and talk about equality.

He will hire a nursing staff and be nursed at his mansion.

I nursed a man who forgot my name and his name. I didn't ask the government for help. I saved the government a lot of money, says Paula. I changed my kids' nappies and then my grandchildren's and for the last six months I changed my husband's. Now they insist that I wear the same nappies and be fed the same mash as everybody else to prolong my misery.

The same nurses will be telling us how young we look and how much better we are every day, I laugh.

I cried all night when they finally had to take Ron away because he couldn't swallow or pee or poo any longer. He couldn't help it, poor darling.

You were a real angel to him.

I cursed his senility and his demented Alzheimer's and Ron himself. Then I felt guilty so I nursed and nursed to make up for my cursing. He used to hit me in the end when I wiped his bottom. He spat at me the food I tried to push into his mouth. Daniel urged me to have him put into a nursing home earlier but I would never forgive myself for not caring for him.

Paula changed since Ron died. We never talked about Ron before. Maybe I never really knew Paula.

Sometimes I just want to die, smiles Paula. I am not depressed or even sad about it; I just think it is time for me to go. I have done what I came here to do.

I need you.

I wish the world would stop long enough to give young people time to attach themselves to something. I believe that God shaped a special hole for himself in every person's soul. When that hole is empty people become desperate, says Paula. She has never been religious but since Ron's death she often talks about God.

Have you heard from Sonia, I ask. Paula's daughter Sonia ran away from home at sixteen and she never returned.

She did not make it to the funeral. I told people that she was not well. I lied all my life; I suppose you have to when you are the one that has to cover all the shit that goes on in a family. My daughter never forgave her father. Serves him right, the pig, she said when I told her that he got sick.

Daniel's family came.

Daniel always did the right thing, he has to, I suppose, being a lawyer. People would talk. It was the worst for Daniel really. I have nightmares about Daniel pleading with me to protect him from his father. He was a tiny boy and Ron belted all the rebellion out of him. I think we all prayed then that the bastard would drop dead. I didn't dare admit it even to myself but I wanted him dead. I felt guilty and sorry for wishing him dead so I nursed the bastard until he could not poo and pee any more in his nappy.

There is a lot of poo in every family, I try to soften Paula's memories.

It was almost a relief when Ron no longer recognised me.

Christmas is coming and everybody will be here to cheer us, I change the subject.

Daniel and Julie are going through a difficult time.

I am sure they will make up for Christmas, I say.

I hate Christmas, says Paula after the festive season. Everybody eats too much and farts too much. Kid's ears are plugged to the portable electronic machines. At least I don't have to listen to their crappy music.

People act civilised all year round so they can turn feral at Christmas, I try to reason.

On Christmas Eve I watched a television show: The meaning of life. A man said that happiness to him means being able to tell everyone to fuck off. For Christmas. That really depressed me, says Paula. Later on I realised that finally I can myself tell everybody to fuck off. That cheered me.

I can't get over the change in Paula. Swearing became a part of most television shows but to hear Paula say the f word seems like blasphemy. Paula is no longer a proper lady.

Paula's son Daniel and Julie have been married for eighteen years. Since I resigned from my work Paula comes every day and we sit with our cups of coffee and I listen to Paula's reports on the Daniel-Julie saga which became more intense than Bold and Beautiful soap opera on TV.

Julie told me that she wants Daniel dead. How could she tell ME, Daniel's mother, that she will never be happy until Daniel is dead, says Paula.

I think people who are wanted dead, live the longest, I try to soften the blow.

Julie told me that Daniel found his soul mate on the Internet.

Funny thing, the soul, I say. As illusive and mysterious as God. When I was a little girl alone in the fields I felt an overwhelming awesomeness of God and soul.

My grand daughter told me that mum does not like daddy because daddy has cyber sex, Paula continues. I didn't even dare ask her what cyber sex is. I am appalled that a nine years old girl knows the word sex, let alone cyber sex, says Paula. I am too shy to ask her what she means.

What is cyber sex?

As far as I know Daniel wrote to a girl and Julie found messages on the computer.

The world has gone mad.

I asked Daniel about it. On the Net I feel free to say exactly how I feel and nobody bites my head off, said Daniel.

But they are not real people.

Maybe when you are not face to face it is easier to be who you want to be. You relate only to the part of the person you want to know, reasons Paula. Maybe neither Daniel nor the girl are who they say they are.

Maybe Julie should find herself a cyber friend.

I wish I had a cyber friend, smiles Paula. I buried my essential self so it wouldn't interfere with propriety and with what Ron was and wanted me to be. My body was doing the appropriate stuff with Ron but my soul wasn't.

You looked happy.

There was decorum to be observed and the duties to be fulfilled, says Paula. In my time one was only allowed to fantasise about being who you are.

Computer chats are essentially a fantasy.

Romance is essentially a fantasy. Marriage on the other hand is a contract with duties and rights.

You have to give and take, I say.

People these days feel entitled to more love than they give or deserve, says Paula.

I believed that your family was perfect, I confess.

My job was to keep us looking respectable. We had to look contented. Since Ron became impotent and then lost his mind he became an impossible grumpy old man. I wished him dead and that bothers me more than what I went through. The guilt and the fear of punishment. I served to atone for my evil thoughts. Maybe it was wrong or maybe it wasn't.

I suppose we are all killed off in someone's thoughts sometimes.

I will never be able to forget that Julie wants Daniel dead. Her words are my punishment. I hate Julie for hating my son.

Nothing I do is good enough, says Daniel. She keeps telling me how unhappy I make her. What does she want from me?

Divorce is never pretty.

Julie says that Daniel always has one foot out the door. I am on my own all day, she complains. This is not good enough and I won't have it. The girl on the computer does not have to deal with naughty kids, blocked toilet, runaway dog, dead lawn mower or a plague of spiders. I cry myself to sleep most nights. He gets his titillation on the computer, and then he wants me to enjoy sex.

Nothing I do is good enough, says Daniel. I am under attack all the time so I stay at work. She makes me feel guilty for whatever is making her unhappy. I am not happy.

I suggested to Julie that part time work might give her a chance to meet people, says Paula. She is a trained nurse.

Daniel would want me to go to work so he would not have to pay maintenance, says Julie. I am going to make it really uncomfortable for him to strut around with any other woman. I was there for him when he needed me. Why should some girl, who has never lifted a finger for him, spend his money? I hate him.

She tells the kids that they are no better than their father, Daniel tells me, says Paula..

I can't go on like this, Julie says. It is better that he moves out of the house and out of my life.

I am never home anyway, says Daniel. All she wants is to deprive me of my children and my home.

The lawyers and judges make sure that the wife of a lawyer loses everything, says Julie. They don't let one of theirs lose. They would collectively stone a woman who would dare to sue a lawyer. I know I will never be happy while he is alive.

Who is this other woman, I ask Paula.

There is no other woman, said Daniel. There are several people I chat with on the computer. Actually a girl asked me to make a clean break and come to her. Julie found her message. There is nothing clean about breaking the family, leaving the children and the home. How can I break away from the business that I built for twenty years? What will I do in Perth? I can't keep two homes. I will have nothing left by the time I pay the maintenance and child support.

Perth is thousands of kilometres away, I say.

I don't know what Julie does all day. I really don't, says Daniel. She can't cook a simple meal without moaning about the sacrifice she made for her family.

I am sick of doing the same thing over and over, says Julie. Daniel never notices if the place is clean or filthy. He just moves into his office and writes to his sweetheart. He doesn't even bother to argue.

I argue in court all day so I want to give it a rest at home, Daniel told me, says Paula.

I have to do my work properly to get paid, why can't she do hers? Our house is a mess, our garden is overgrown with weeds; we don't call friends over because we are ashamed to invite anyone to see how we live. She should get off her fat behind, says Daniel.

He calls me fat. For the first ten years I was either pregnant or breast feeding so I ate for two. I still eat for two. I hate myself. I am fat. I couldn't be bothered with housework. Kids enjoy the mess we live in and Daniel is never home anyway.

Sonia and Daniel are lucky to have you as their sounding board, I say.

This sounding board is worn out. I wish they were like Stan and you, so perfectly sane and calm, smiles Paula.

We don't expect too much from each other.

Is that your secret?

It's no secret. We are realistic.

You go to church, says Paula. What do you believe?

I believe that there is someone somewhere who knows why we are here and where we are going. I believe that there is a reason and a purpose for everything. I also believe that it isn't given to me to understand God's plan and purpose.

I am getting clumsy. My leg is in plaster, Paula rings me from the hospital.

I bring Paula home a week later. They had to operate on her ankle and insert a bolt to hold it in place. She tries to smile but I can see that she is still in pain. I realise that my friend became a frail old lady. I visit her every day, cook for her and tidy her house. I am happy that finally I can do something for her.

The pain is not even where they operated, it feels like the vein under my knee is hurting, says Paula. I take her for a check up at our new Woden Valley hospital. They find a blood clot and prescribe medication. It is going to be fine. Blood clots happen after operations, the doctor assures us.

I haven't been to hospital so much in my entire life, I tease as I visit Paula.

I hope that I won't have to return the favour, says Paula.

You have never been sick or in hospital before either.

Actually I had a mastectomy fifteen years ago. I did not tell anyone. Maybe I hoped that it didn't happen if nobody knew about it.

I don't even remember you being in hospital.

I told you that I was visiting my sister in Melbourne. I couldn't stand anyone knowing. Or being sorry for me. Or feeling smug because it didn't happen to them.

Did they take it off?

They took both of them. I had a complete breast restructuring and you can hardly notice it. After the therapy I never had any problems.

You never told me.

Maybe I was protecting Ron. I didn't want him to have to deal with it.

How?

A wife with no breasts. Pity, I suppose; Ron couldn't cope with pity. Actually he suggested that we keep it to ourselves.

Paula comes home and is ordered to rest. Julie offers to stay with her.

Two days later Julie rings to say that the ambulance took Paula for a check up again. The pain didn't go away as promised.

I pass the hospital cafeteria on my way to Paula. I see Daniel and Julie. Daniel's face is cupped in his hands and Julie is running her fingers through his hair. I don't want to intrude. No doubt Paula will tell me what happened. Maybe underneath the pride and anger and jealousy there is also love and caring and forgiveness.

I saw Daniel and Julie in the cafeteria, I tell Paula.

I had to break my leg to get them sorted, smiles Paula.

I hope they will remember not to do it again. You are not used to all this pampering, I tease.

So much vanity and nonsense.

We are going for a drive to Tumut on Sunday and you are coming with us. Fresh air will put a spark into your eyes.

I don't know if they will let me out.

As soon as you are better then.

I don't know when I will be better. They made tests.

What tests?

The blood clotting medication did not work so they tested for cancer. It has spread. I only have months. If that.

Why did they check for cancer? I try to blame the doctor for finding Paula's mortality.

Apparently the blood clotting should have stopped and when it didn't, they knew that it was cancer. Deep inside I was expecting it anyway. You see once you have it you carry it in your mind.

But they cut it out, I try.

They cut it out of my body but not out of my mind.

What can I say? Do I complain that it is unfair that my best friend will be snatched away from me because she broke her leg? Paula never asked for anything, she just was there. Only now I realise

that she was the central part of my life in Canberra. She took me under her wing and became my surrogate mother, my sister and my friend.

Time to go, smiles Paula patting my hand.

No, you can't just go, it's not fair. You only broke your leg.

Paula is the same strong sensible lady I first met. I expect her to tell me what to do and say. Her eyes are sunken and her skin is transparent. How come I did not see that straight away? I hear words but I do not look at things with my eyes. Maybe I am my dad's daughter after all. He didn't look at things with his eyes. Close your eyes so you can see the magic land, he said.

I was in remission for fifteen years.

You recovered, I argue.

One carries the torch until someone else takes over. There is always someone else.

You will get better. You must get better.

Everything makes sense when you finally surrender. You orbit for awhile with the rest of the universe and then you change into dust and orbit some more. Someone created these orbits. The smallest and the biggest mirror each other. The biggest is as essential as the smallest but we don't know either. Someone must know why things are as they are. God calls us one by one and the chain of life continues in heaven.

There is a reason for everything.

Daniel and Julie made up. Maybe they realised how lucky they are. Perhaps the reason for my life was to persevere in my imperfect family.

No family is perfect.

I am glad you are going home to see your family now.

Daniel is holding Julie's hand as they come in. Their eyes are red.

I walk into the cafeteria. There is an enormous aloneness inside of me. I need to cry but can not cry alone.

The priest just left, says Paula the next day. I made my peace with God. I never bothered with religion much but the words attributed to Jesus make sense now. I am the way the truth and the life. If Jesus did live and if he was a son of God and if he said these words, then I am on the right path.

I don't think Jesus would have lied.

It seemed senseless bothering God but when you have to prepare to meet your maker you better pray, says Paula. I shouldn't blame him for not making me more perfect.

You were always perfect, I say to Paula.

I chose to concentrate on my miseries.

Maybe it is easier to concentrate on miseries.

The priest told me to put my life in the hands of Jesus if I want it to count for something, smiles Paula.

Stan and I once watched soccer and the spectator called out: The ball in his hand is worth a million.

The same ball in my hands would be worthless, laughed Stan.

Perhaps we should all place our lives into the hands of the almighty.

I ring my boys that Paula died, but they barely knew her. She was just that Red Hill lady when they grew up. Children only notice other children because they are at their eye level. We only see our own size. People like us. I have no one like me. Maybe even at home there is nobody like me any

more. It has been so long yet it seems like yesterday. In retrospect one's lifetime becomes a fleeting adventure.

I am alone in my mourning. Stan was never close to Paula. Maybe he is close to someone I don't even know. Maybe men don't need this kind of closeness.

In Australia people become friends while they live close to each other but then they move or die. Never to be remembered. I panic when I think that nobody will remember me after I am gone. I have lost myself somewhere. I am not connected to anyone.

By the time we finally made arrangements to go home Toni rings that he and Hana are coming to Australia.

When? Why?

We might stay for good if we like it, said Toni.

What about the election? Asks Stan.

He dropped out.

Was probably kicked out, says Stan. Maybe former communists aren't so popular these days.

Stan was never thrilled about Toni or Hana. He just can't see what is so special about them. Men are jealous and petty. I need Hana. I need to be close to someone. I wonder what Toni is like now.

Toni dropped out of the party ages ago, I defend my brother in law.

Communists now infiltrated other parties to cause trouble, says Stan.

Toni was never a real communist.

None of them were ever real communists but they will always be opportunists, says Stan.

Stan is a reasonable man but there is something that irks him about Toni. I hate it when he is so negative but now is not the time to argue. I want Hana and Toni to admire our life.

I don't know if communist party still exists, I try to remove obstacles from our future.

Old friends still share old habits regardless of what party they are in at the moment. They probably became born again Christians to suit the new fashion.

I have to contain my excitement. Maybe God arranged Hana's visit to ease the pain of losing Paula. Hana is family; she will never stop being my sister. It would be just great if they would stay in Australia.

They might not like Australian food, I say to Stan.

They can buy whatever they like and cook it the way they like it.

Stan can't understand why I am worried. Stan and I hated Australian food at the beginning but it has improved with the influx of international cuisine. We can order anything at the restaurants but Stan still likes my old-fashioned cooking. I think he really likes the food his mother cooked in our village when he was a little boy. I am only an extension of his mum. I cook what she got him to like.

We are waiting at the airport. Stan must be excited because he doesn't even notice that I am crying as we see them coming through the customs.

Hana is as beautifully elegant as ever. There is something glamorous about both of them. They say that the beauty is in the eye of the beholder but I believe that everybody would notice how radiant Hana and Toni are. Hana's hair sways as she walks. Half of her face seems covered by her blond curls.

Toni hugs Stan and congratulates him on his good looks before he sweeps me off my feet and tells me that I haven't changed at all. No wonder Toni is so popular.

If Mohamed doesn't come to the mountain the mountain comes to Mohamed, laughs Toni. Everybody is coming home for holidays why not you.

We were planning to come. Actually I retired so we could come.

Stan always needed a little push, laughs Toni slapping Stan's shoulder.

At the beginning we had no money, later the babies came, then school and weddings and grandchildren and everything. There is always something going on, I keep explaining because I know that Stan heard the words: needed a push. He would not like that. One becomes sensitive to the person one lives with for forty years. Toni pushed us out of Slovenia. Maybe Stan does not like being pushed.

We wanted to go together but we could never all agree on the right time, says Stan.

I am so happy to see you again, whispers Hana. I feel her tears but her face is serene. My face is a mess as I sob openly.

We drive over the hills of Canberra and they seem suitably impressed with my favourite city. I think both are speechless looking down on Canberra from our place.

I don't know if you will like our food, I apologise, as I serve dinner.

Stop fussing, you are the best cook, says Stan.

I will have to be careful not to cause friction. We keep talking about the trip and about the reasons for their visit and we tell each other over and over how delighted we are to be together.

I will leave you to settle down and freshen up. Come down when you feel like it. I show them their room and the bathroom. Stan and I bring up their luggage.

Toni comes down but Hana wants to rest.

How come you dropped out of the election, I ask Toni as we sit down with a drink.

I never had time for my family. It's time to get my priorities right, says Toni.

Before it is too late, I say. Stan and I have been thinking the same. We have always been too busy; we never took time to be with our boys. Maybe we can make up for it with our grandchildren. We were going to visit them but then you invited us home.

Are you a grandfather yet? Asks Stan.

It's not so easy these days to become a grandfather, laughs Toni. Young ones have too much fun without children.

I always get up early to prepare breakfast for Stan. After Stan leaves for work next morning, Toni comes in the kitchen with a finger on his lips. Hana likes to sleep in, he explains.

Have some coffee?

Could we go shopping instead. I would like to buy a few things for Hana.

What are you looking for?

We'll see what they have.

In the grocery shop Toni selects a box of Swiss chocolate and a few bottles of wine. He picks a bottle of vodka and reads the label. Hana likes a bit of vodka in her orange juice, he says. She stopped smoking so she needs something to relax with. He puts two bottles of vodka in the shopping trolley. As we move through the shops, Toni picks a sexy looking nightie and runs his fingers through the silky material. Do you think she will like that, he says as he takes it to the cashier. What is your favourite scent, Toni asks as we pass the cosmetic counter. He buys one for me and one for Hana. That will cost you a fortune, I protest. This is for being my guide, he squeezes my elbow. On the way home Toni stops at the florists and picks a bunch of white roses. White is Hana's colour, he smiles.

When Stan comes home he opens a stubby of beer to relax with. He has one stubby every day, on rare occasion he has a couple. We have a glass of wine on festive occasions but I usually drink coffee.

Toni bought these for Hana, I point to the roses.

You have the garden full of roses, laughs Stan. I wonder if he feels chastised. Stan never buys me flowers. We grow our own, I suppose, but it would be nice to be surprised with a bunch of roses. Stan is becoming irritable. Maybe he is jealous. He knows that I would like what Toni does for Hana. Maybe he wants me to be like Hana.

I decide not to tell Stan that Toni bought me the perfume. I feel a little guilty. Irresistible, says on the heart shaped bottle.

Hana sits in the big armchair like a kitten. Her eyes are half closed like she lives in another world. Dad was like that. He never raised his voice or lost his temper or become moody. He said that there is another wonderful world if you only closed your eyes.

Toni pours Hana a drink and she sips it slowly. She smiles as Toni pats her hand. She is like a mirror; smiling when others smile. She is like a sponge that soaks up everything around her. I wonder where her thoughts are and how she feels. Perhaps she is not bothered with feelings and thoughts. I feel obliged to keep the conversation going but Hana just nods this way and that. Toni speaks for her.

Stan invites Toni and Hana to our Slovenian club but Hana does not feel like going.

I want to catch up on things with Hana so we stay home. It isn't easy to become intimate with someone you didn't see for close to forty years.

I ask Hana about the tablets she takes with her drink. She explains about hormonal imbalance and arthritis and calcium and iron. She is surprised that I never take anything. I just put up with things.

I am less anxious since I began taking the happy pill, smiles Hana as she passes a bottle of Prozac to me.

I was always so proud of you; you were our shining star, I say.

I always wanted to be like you.

No, you didn't. Nobody ever does. Everybody wants to be like you, I insist.

You had a common sense.

Everybody has common sense that's why it is called common. When you have nothing else you remember your common sense and use it.

You are in control while I agonise about my problems.

I suppose it is easier to be ordinary like me than to shine like you. I put up with things and pay my dues, I smile.

I think I will take a nap. I am still a bit jetlagged, says Hana.

I roast and bake and shop to give the best I have to my sister. Stan is tired of my admiration and subservience.

You changed. You are not yourself, says Stan. I don't know what you want to prove to them.

You don't try so I have to, I defend my behaviour.

What would you like me to do? I drive them around, buy drinks, and introduce them to Slovenians. What more do you want from me.

When Stan and I disagree, we compromise but now I feel the wedge coming between us.

Toni and Hana are as much in love as they were at the beginning, I say to Stan as we kiss good night.

It's all a show, says Stan. I think Toni is a clown.

Toni and Hana have cast a shadow over our ordinary lives.

The more I try to be neutral and natural the more self-conscious I become. I feel like a proverbial centipede wondering which foot comes after which.

Stop acting like a mother to everybody, says Stan when I ask Toni if the bed suits him and if they slept well.

She is just being kind, Toni defends me.

She is not your mother.

Does Stan feel isolated or jealous? There is nothing to be jealous about.

I am amazed how well your boys speak Slovenian, says Hana when Stan junior and Mark and Joe arrive to see their famous relations.

Stan insisted, I explain. He also arranged that they all have Slovenian citizenship just in case they ever want to go home.

The more they know the better, explains Stan.

Dad wouldn't speak English so we had to learn, says Mark.

They speak only Slovenian with Stan. I suppose it became a habit, I give a pat on the back to the man that made it possible for boys to know their mother's tongue.

They actually learned everything from Stan, I add. They finished uni, of course, but you don't learn there how to fix a shelf on the wall or repair a leaking tap.

When they grew up I bought them an old car each so they learned how cars work. Now they can all put a car to pieces to check which piece is faulty and repair it, says Stan.

I am glad Stan can boast about his success with his boys. He deserves to be proud.

These days everything is electronic and replaceable. Nobody repairs things any more, says Toni.

There are still heaps of things one can do in a home, I stand on Stan's side.

Most things are best left to experts. It's cheaper in the end, laughs Toni. Maybe he is right. No doubt Toni knows best, he always had the best from cars to homes to women. Toni makes Stan look insignificant. My family seems less successful. I feel put down.

Toni and Stan are like two bulls in the same paddock. Small paddock. I don't know how to fix their relationship.

Maybe nothing is worth fixing any more, I say for no reason at all.

I remember meeting an old man who knew our boys when they were little. And how are the boys? Are they in or out of jail? The man asked. I was shocked and offended at first but later I felt relieved because our sons have never been in jail. They get along doing what boys are supposed to do. There is nothing wrong with my family.

Stan and Toni often go to Slovenian club. Slovenians have taken to Toni immediately and wholeheartedly. He has a knack of being everything to everybody. He buys drinks and pays compliments to men and women. They tell yarns and sing and remember.

Toni tells me that Slovenians teased Stan about finally getting permission to come for a drink. Toni looks at Stan for reaction. I know that Stan didn't like that.

Like I would not allow him, I laugh.

On Saturday night we go to the club for dinner. I want Hana to meet our people.

You two look like twins, says Zinka.

Like cheese and chalk, I protest.

The thought that I look anything like Hana seems absurd. My hair is straight and short and brown while Hana's wild long honey blond curls are bouncing off her shoulders.

Wrap your hair in a towel and look at yourself in the mirror, says Zinka.

I wouldn't dream of comparing myself with my sister. While home alone Hana and I gradually return to our childhood. We have to pick up where we left a lifetime ago.

We all looked up to you when we grew up, says Hana affectionately.

I suppose Mum trained me early to put up with you.

You have your life beautifully organised.

Organised is the best I can do. We get along.

Toni said that people who get along never make a mark. You have to take risks and break the rules. He says that the fighters rule the world, tells Hana.

We live by different rules. Comfort and peace mean a lot to us, I say feeling slightly offended.

I really like your life and I love Australia, says Hana.

People are literally dying to come to Australia. There are boatloads of Asians and people from the Middle East risking their lives to get in. Australia is like America to them.

You are lucky to have two countries to call home.

I am.

You should be proud of your boys, says Hana.

I am. I bring out my albums and begin the story of my family. Just as well I got the photos sorted so my sister can admire my life.

Joe is the youngest but he was the first to get married. He has two gorgeous daughters. Marko married a year later and has three children. Stan junior has a girlfriend. Have you any photos, I give Hana a chance to tell about her family.

Sofija and Janez are very independent and career minded. Hana picks a family photo from her wallet. Toni loves his family. Sometimes it frightens me how protective he is, says Hana. I think he would kill to protect us.

You are lucky, I say.

Kids think that he is bee's knees.

I am happy for you.

I wish I was more like you, Hana's voice suddenly breaks. She is on the verge of tears. You were always so sensible and cool. You always made sensible choices. I let others run my life, says Hana with her eyes half closed; sipping her drink.

I didn't have as many choices as you did, I smile.

I am waiting for the big event called life. I want to remember one moment and say: this is my life. I feel like my soul has been disfigured and pushed aside. What was your big event? What made life worth living?

The little things were as important as big events. Family, coming to Canberra, new experiences. It was exciting to relearn your whole life.

I don't know what I am waiting for but my life feels like serving a life sentence with no parole in sight.

We are all paddling in the same canoe. Serving.

I am wasting time, says Hana.

You can't put time in the bank, I joke. Seriously though, I never wasted time. Since I retired I can do what I like but there is so much to do and see and experience.

Toni and I nurture this fragile relationship that is like a millstone around our necks.

I had a wonderful friend Paula. I keep looking at the door hoping that she will come like she did almost every day. I believed that she will be with me forever but she died suddenly. One way or another relationships die. Even love dies.

I am sorry to bother you with my miseries, says Hana.

You are not. Paula shared her miseries with me.

I want to punish Toni but I don't even know what for. He had affairs but they never meant anything to him or to me. I could have left him but some other girl would be only too happy to grab him. Toni lived on the edge; he likes big houses, big cars, big parties. He is a real daredevil. At the beginning I was attracted to that.

Men are like that, I say but what do I know of men. Stan is not like that.

I will never be myself while I am with Toni.

They have this famous saying here: You can't have your cake and eat it.

Toni solves my problems; he never needs my help or my opinion. I wish he disappeared from my life.

Paula wished her husband dead and her daughter in law wanted Paula's son dead, I remember. Both also loved their men. They just didn't feel loved enough at times.

I am trapped in Toni's life. Toni is the king and I am his shadow. I never know where I am going but I follow.

It is easier to follow than to choose your own path. As long as you don't make the rules you have no responsibility, you can not be blamed.

Leave it all to me, is Toni's favourite saying. Once we were out dining and he said to Sasha: don't worry your pretty head about it. Leave it to me. Sasha laughed into Toni's face: if I leave anything to you, I might find you hanging on the end of your own rope.

You'd be hanging on the other end, laughed Toni.

Sasha likes to tease Toni but he takes notice of what she says. When I express an opinion, Toni smiles at me, messes my hair, tweaks my nose, pats my hand, buys me vodka or roses or lingerie.

He is generous.

It amuses him to see people notice how generous he is.

You trained him to be who he is.

I always blamed myself for who he is. At the moment everything seems to be against him so I don't want to make it harder for him. He is the father of my children. I have a premonition that something dreadful will happen.

What is meant to happen will happen.

I have recurrent dreams about a woman who tries to hit me with her walking stick. I try to escape but I get stuck in the mud and can not lift my feet. I turn off the road and hide in a tunnel. The tunnel turns into a tarpaulin bag squeezing me until I can no longer move. I am suffocating. I wake up from the agony of my struggle. Something is going to happen. The woman with a stick keeps following me.

Hana sips her drink and smiles as if she was telling a fairy tale.

Dreams are dreams. I have weird dreams during the full moon but I know that they will go away.

Everything becomes more intense in the silence of the night. I hear the sounds of my heart beating. I become afraid of the world closing down on me. Swallowing me. I think of death. Am I going mad? Hana tries to smile but I see real fear in her face.

When the world goes to sleep, the dream-world wakes up. God lets his angels hover over the world at night, dad used to say. I wonder what he meant.

I can put up with Toni and Sasha but I can not put up with what's going on in my head.

What is in your head?

Toni is suffocating me with gifts and compliments. At home he lived his life and I lived mine. Now I am all he has and he wants me with him all the time.

Maybe he really put his priorities in order. There is a time and a reason for everything. Paula's son Daniel and his wife Julie were heading for a divorce when Paula became sick. Paula said that she had to break her leg to sort them out. Maybe we have to break something to mend something else.

Do you like Australia?

You give up something so you can have something else. Stan says that we would never see Australia if it wasn't for Toni.

Toni also arranged your life, smiles Hana.

We were so young then. Stan did what Toni told him to do. Toni made an offer and Stan couldn't resist it, I smile.

I feel that Stan resents Toni. Maybe he never forgave him. Are you sorry for leaving Slovenia?

I sometimes wonder how things would be if Toni wasn't in our lives.

Is Stan happy in Australia?

We manage.

You managed well without Toni all these years.

Toni was there in the background all this time. Everything started with Toni.

It was a lifetime ago, sighs Hana.

Stan and I have only been married a few months. I was pregnant with Stan junior when Stan decided to go to Germany for a few months to earn the money for a car, I turn the clock back. I hated being on my own.

After six months Stan returned with an old car. Toni offered to buy it from him at a profit. Stan returned to Germany by train and brought another car and another. Stan brought fourteen cars for Toni in two years. Our two boys were born while I lived virtually on my own. The cars Stan brought for Toni were full of other stuff like radios and cameras and clothes, which Toni sold to his friends.

Toni and Stan made plenty of money, says Hana. Toni was always good at making money. He is happiest when he makes money. Dealing and wheeling gives him a buzz. He makes money for the thrill of it.

We would never be where we are without Toni.

Our family wasn't ambitious, our lot has not half the drive Toni has, says Hana. At the beginning I enjoyed the prestige and wealth but then I just accepted whatever happened. I suppose I gave up on myself.

Toni had what it takes.

He bulldozes anyone who stands in his way. He makes people feel that he is smarter than they are and if that doesn't work he reminds them of the risks they are taking in trying to outsmart him. If nothing else works he loses his temper and makes them ashamed of their stupidity. I have actually seen his eyes turn green as he lost his temper with the man who tried to outsmart him, says Hana.

The last car Stan brought for Toni was a new Mercedes and it came to the attention of the police. We just settled in the new home with our two boys when Toni brought our passports and plane tickets. He told us to pack up and go to Germany. UDBA began investigating our incomes. From there we applied to migrate to Australia.

Toni sold your house and placed the money into a German bank account before the government could confiscate it. I wonder if Stan ever forgave Toni for sending you away.

We came to Canberra to sign some papers in order to collect that money. When we got the money from the house we bought a block of land close to the Parliament house in Canberra. I think Stan forgave Toni then.

You became very successful.

Slovenians were suspicious because we had money and came with a passport. If the government gave us passports we must have been spies. We felt very isolated at the beginning. They called us UDBA. We were too scared to tell them that we escaped from UDBA.

They were jealous, says Hana.

Slovenians here cling to each other. We are the only important people to each other. Foreigners have nothing to remember with us, we have nothing in common with them. They did not hate us or love us or admire our efforts. They weren't jealous or envious. We weren't a part of their life and they weren't a part of ours. It was nobody's fault but that's how things were.

I am sorry.

Stan spent many days building Slovenian club in Canberra but Slovenians kept their distance. They forever connected us to Yugoslav embassy. We became regular churchgoers and we did not make friends with the ambassador but Slovenians still kept the distance. We tried to keep neutral in their political squabbles but our neutrality did not please anyone. I did not dare tell anyone that we were afraid of Yugoslav government, Yugoslav embassy and UDBA. Or about the cars Stan brought from Germany.

Toni fixed everything at home and you were quickly forgotten, says Hana.

Paula became my only real friend. You wouldn't understand what it means not having anyone of your own. Everybody around you is your friend at home.

Toni left the police force soon after you left. He became a director of the petrol service station and became known as the man who could get you anything from cars to chocolates to tractors, radios and televisions. Nobody asked where Toni got those things. He had connections.

As a policeman and a director he knew who was worth knowing.

Toni could supply anything from the East to the Middle East to the West. Trafficking goes with traffic, said Toni's friend Freddy. Toni can get you jewels and girls and cars and clothes. People who travel have to stop at the petrol station to get information and fuel. Western tourists sold Toni currency and he sold that currency to people travelling to the West.

You never had to go to work or worry about money, I say.

Soon after Slovenia became independent Toni retired from the petrol station and dedicated himself to politics. People liked him, they owed him favours and expected more favours.

Why did he drop out?

It's a long story, sighs Hana. I only know little bits I hear and read about it. The place is full of rumours, lies, intrigues and half truths. I don't know what to believe. We escaped to Australia in the hope that people will forget us.

Tell me all about it.

Everything changed after Sasha's husband, Freddy, was murdered.

Who are Freddy and Sasha?

Sasha and I were in the same class at school. I think Sasha had a crush on Toni even then. When Toni and I began dating, Sasha began ignoring both of us. When she started going with Toni's friend Freddy we became friends.

Is Sasha your friend?

People used to say that Sasha was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Her father was the director of Plastika, the only factory in town. Just before Slovenia won independence in 1991 the factory was going broke. Sasha's father bought it at a fraction of its value for his daughter. He retired and Freddy became the director.

What is Freddy like?

Toni and Freddy did a lot of business together. We dined together, we even went on holidays together in those heady good days.

Are you still friends?

There are rumours that Toni murdered Freddy so he could marry Sasha.

Is Toni having an affair?

It's complicated. Freddy's BMW car was stolen. Freddy claimed the loss on the insurance. Freddy told them that his key is where he always had it hanging in his bedroom. The factory checked his key and told him that it wasn't the original key. Someone stole his key and had a duplicate made and hung it back on Freddy's wall. The makers of the car informed the police that the car could not be driven without the original key. A special coding in-built in the car also monitored the car's movements. I don't understand how it works but they traced the car.

If Ted had anything to do with it, I will kill him, Freddy said to Sasha.

Who is Ted?

Their only child. Ted admitted that he took the key. He hoped that his father would be able to claim the car on the insurance. He did not know that police could trace the car.

Why did Ted take the key?

Ted left school and became involved in illegal activities with other dropouts. There were wild rumours about his activities. He became a truck driver. I heard that police caught him smuggling Iraqi refugees. The refugees apparently paid him to take them to Germany but he left them in Slovenia. I heard that they threatened to kill Ted if he did not provide the car.

Why did Ted drop the refugees in Slovenia?

He parked the truck in front of his house and the refugees were asleep in the garage. The police searched the truck and found money and drugs. They arrested Ted for drug trafficking. They did not know about refugees at the time.

Ted claimed that he was only delivering things for his boss and did not know anything about the money or the drugs. Anyway Ted was bailed out soon after Freddy's murder.

Who was Ted's boss?

His friend Jan hired Ted as a delivery driver. After Freddy was murdered Sasha hired Jan as a new director for her factory.

Who is Jan?

Jan's father was a Serb general or something. After Slovenian independence in 1991 the family moved to Serbia. Jan, Freddy and Toni were friends or business associates.

Why did Ted drop out of school?

Sasha and Freddy led their separate lives for a long time but when Freddy's girlfriend, Vivien, became pregnant Freddy spent most of his time with her. Maybe Ted felt neglected.

Is Toni involved with Sasha?

She says that Toni wants to marry her. I believe Sasha is blackmailing him.

Is that why Toni dropped out of the politics?

There are enemies everywhere when you stand for a political office. They dig dirt. Slovenia has more political parties at the moment than ever before.

Toni was always so popular.

Sasha leaks bits of information about him through her confidants but when the police question her about it she denies it. There is a rumour that Toni sold Sasha the gun Freddy was shot with.

Did he?

Toni had no reason to shoot Freddy. They really liked each other. Freddy was much like Toni, popular and powerful, says Hana. Freddy also promised Toni full backing if he entered politics.

I sip coffee and Hana sips her orange and vodka.

When did you start drinking vodka? I ask.

When I stopped smoking.

I am glad you stopped smoking.

I began taking pills but it annoyed Toni. I switched to vodka, smiles Hana. He is very generous with vodka.

You are not taking pills any more.

Actually I do but Toni does not know that. They help me pass the time. I like to be aware of the time passing. I am more aware when time walks with me slowly.

You don't sound happy.

I am Toni's wife. I have no friends. I am nothing. I am afraid, says Hana. There comes the time when the big questions have to be faced. I have no answers.

What questions?

Why am I here, what have I done, who am I.

Avoid such questions. There are no answers.

Our marriage died long ago. I don't know why we are going through this charade of married bliss.

Toni seems in love with you.

He acts like a lover, he was acting like a lover all his life. Only to different people. He seduces people so he can manipulate them. At present he needs me on his side so he is seducing me.

Maybe he wants to turn a new leaf.

I want to kill both of them.

Are they worth it?

I am worth it.

Everybody pays for their ups with their downs.

I will never be happy as long as he is alive, Hana whispers. I'd rather die.

Happiness sneaks on you when you least expect it. Maybe happiness has nothing to do with beauty, wealth or talents. Maybe we all receive a few moments of happiness to distract us while we keep busy with the miseries of life.

I think you need a holiday in Slovenia and I have a deal for you, announces Toni when Stan comes home.

What do you want me to smuggle this time? Laughs Stan.

News, says Toni. Seriously, I need to know what is happening at home. You don't have to do anything, just listen. You were planning on going anyway. We'll look after your roses for you.

Move into our home while you are there, adds Hana.

Was it your idea to send us home? I ask Hana.

I always wanted to swap my home and my life with you, smiles Hana.

This is an offer too hard to refuse, I say.

Tell Sasha that we will be back soon, says Toni.

The bitch is dangerous, whispers Hana to me.

Who does Toni think he is? We can pay our own way, says Stan as we prepare for the trip. It actually comes as a relief to both Stan and myself to be on our own again.

Good things happen to those who wait, I smile as Stan and I board the plane.

Perhaps we both needed the push, says Stan. I knew Stan would remember the words: needs a push.

Emil and Tereza are waiting at the airport. I barely recognise them. We wrote and exchanged photos. At least for Christmas. At least a card. They were the children I looked after. Now they are old people. I haven't had time to come to terms with age yet.

Emil takes us to Hana's home on the outskirts of Ljubljana so we can unload our luggage and freshen up before we meet everybody. Stan and Emil are chatting in front as we travel to Ljubljana. I sit at the back. The silence brings back fragments of memories that touched me. I remember mum's words: Just do whatever you have to do and you will get used to it. You get used to anything. Almost anything. It might be hard at first but it gets easier until it becomes a habit. Even the most unpleasant things become a habit.

I am grateful for the silence.

Don't even think about it, just do it, mum used to say. When you come to the river to swim, jump in and let your body get used to the water. No use thinking about the temperature and whether you can swim. Thinking about it makes you wonder if you can do it or not.

I remembered my father often but I hardly ever thought about mum before. She did what had to be done.

I am not sensible at all. I cry for the years I spent away from home. What is this thing called home, anyway? Home is where the heart is, they say. Right now my heart listens to the words of my parents. I wipe my eyes.

Useless and romantic, someone once described my dad. Who was it? Why? Dad was a story spinner but what else could he do being bedridden. I never knew dad apart from his story telling and being bedridden.

I wish I could speak to my parents. Dad never explained and never complained about his health or his destiny. He died before I was old enough to ask.

I heard rumours that dad left the seminary when he met mum; so it was mum's fault that dad did not become a priest. Is that why his parents did not like mum? I will never know if my dad was a communist revolutionary, a sinner or a saint. I wish I knew what mum and dad loved in each other.

Mum brought dad the sweetest fruit and the best pieces of meat and the crispest salads. He held her hand and kissed her fingers. There was a sacred secret magic between them that made me feel warm and safe.

I realise how important my parents were to me. Their words made imprints on the lily white pages of my soul. I wonder if anybody else remembers what I remember. Their words must be written on my soul because they appear in my memory whenever I need them.

We are given a one way ticket and nobody can turn back the clock, said dad. Mistakes can never be erased but experiences help you grow. Always count your blessings and never your costs.

Dad loved me, the thought suddenly brings tears to my eyes. He loved me in a special way. I looked after his other children. I was sensible like mum. He needed me like he needed mum. Mum and I took care of his family.

Every story is an unfinished story, said dad. You will add another chapter. You are my next chapter.

Most of dad's stories ended with the prince kissing the princess and then they lived happily ever after. The magic of his stories lingered over us and provided sweet dreams as we fell asleep most nights. I wanted to be the princess and live happily ever after in my castle. But I always knew that Hana was the princess.

I don't think we would have survived without dad's dreams. Not long before he died dad read a handwritten story to us. I noticed that he closed his eyes as he read. He must have known the story off by heart. It was like a poem only I didn't know about poetry then and had no imagination. I just loved the sound of dad's telling. And the smell of our togetherness.

The fragments of dad's words come back.

With your eyes closed you can make any wish come true. You can walk on the velvety path of the forest, see the fairies dancing and hear the music in the branches of the trees. In the magic land you can be anything you want to be. Imagination is your greatest treasure. It is your own magic land and it is with you wherever you go, wherever you are. Things around you happen as they do; good and bad, they happen without you and despite of you. When you open your eyes you see fences, walls and barricades but when you close your eyes you can walk on the velvety path of your choosing.

But magic is not real, I said in my childish innocence.

Close your eyes and your magic land will be real, said dad before he died.

There is magic scattered on the way into my childhood. It seems that every bush on the way home is burning with memories. I look at what I once saw with the eyes and the heart of a child. Perhaps dad's fairies illuminated the path. Only a few people and words and events ever really touched me and none touched me as did my growing up.

Dad never spoke about the injuries he received in the war. He did not like to speak about the war at all. I wish I could ask him what he was fighting for.

When I started school I got a new pair of shoes from the shire. Only three children from my class got new shoes. We also got free lunches. I wondered if we were especially good or especially poor. There were other good hungry children without shoes. The president of the shire told me that my father was a hero of the revolution. Maybe the fathers of other poor children weren't heroes.

Mum was numb with grief when dad died but I helped her by looking after the children. She kept busy but she never fully recovered. After Hana and I got married I think mum wished herself to die and be with dad.

We arrive to Hana's place. Flowering bushes surround the white brick walls of her home. I wish I could touch Hana's life like I touch her home.

I never really knew Hana. Hana and I changed. You can not visit the same memories twice. Memories and people change. Maybe dad knew us. Nothing much happened in his life, he had time to close his eyes to see.

We unpack and return to Emil's home where my relations are waiting. I am again a cousin, an aunt, a sister; we are family. We hug because we know that we are family. My nieces and nephews bring flowers to welcome us; home made slivovic is offered to settle the dust and kill the germs. The strong spirit makes me cough but I have to swallow it as this is my welcome home drink. They pour another and I forget that I don't have to swallow it. It brings tears to my eyes and the tears seem appropriate because my relations like seeing me so touched by their welcome. They propose another toast and say words that bring tears to their eyes. One is easily touched by one's own words and slivovic. It would take me a lifetime to know these people. They never walked with me through life like Paula did. I have no time to really know them. I came to find out about Sasha and what people are saying about Toni and Hana. I have to do what has to be done

Here is to Stan and Maria, says Emil. We could always count on our Maria.

She was our second mother, Tereza tells with tears in her eyes.

Stan and I never expected to be so overwhelmed with emotion. We distribute little souvenirs from Australia.

Slivovic and the welcome make me warm and weepy. I remember my children and want them to share the closeness and warmth of the family and the friendliness of my home. Everybody in Slovenia seems connected and intimate; they are interested in us and in each other. I am sorry that I took my boys away from all the people that would love them and share their lives with them. Stan and I are all the family they know.

I want to stay here forever, I say to Stan. I wish our children could see what we left behind.

If it wasn't for Toni we would never leave, says Stan.

If it wasn't for Toni we might never return, I say.

Our children only know one home and it is in Australia. You can't ask them to start a new life because we changed our mind, says Stan.

I suppose one has to be sensible about these things. I can see how hard Stan is trying to be sensible. We have everything we need in Australia.

Stan loves to walk in the wilderness of Australian bush but Slovenia has no wilderness. The forests and fields, the parks and the gardens are carefully groomed private land. Stan walks for hours along the river with his fishing rod. Maybe he is remembering his childhood and collecting memories that will last for the rest of his life.

Our boys ring us almost every day and we tell them about the family.

Must cost them a fortune, says Tereza.

It is cheap to ring from Australia. Everything is cheaper in Australia only in Slovenia people appreciate things more. Everybody in Australia can buy a house and eat good food but we fail to appreciate these things. I suppose appreciation is everything. Precious is what one considers precious.

Toni and Hana, Sasha and Freddy are the talk of the town, says Tereza. The media is spying on everyone who is connected to them. No doubt the journalists will want to talk to you if they find out that Toni and Hana are staying with you in Australia.

Tell me about Freddy and Sasha.

Everybody is only too willing to share the rumours, says Tereza. They are careful when talking to me though, because I am Hana's sister. Sasha is apparently spreading vicious gossip about Toni.

What is she saying, I try to collect my store of information. I feel like one of those under cover agents collecting evidence.

The scandal is like a breath of fresh air, people forget their little lives while they speculate about the big news, says Tereza.

What news?

They say that Toni escaped because he killed Freddy and that Sasha will follow when she sells the business.

Everybody is buying papers in the hope that some new little detail about them will emerge. Freddy and Sasha have put us on the map, says Emil.

They want to bring the high and mighty down. People want Sasha lynched, says Tereza.

Sasha is running the factory now, says Stan's niece Diana, who is working in Sasha's office.

What is she like? One can ask a relation. Blood is thicker and all that, laughs Stan.

Sasha is elegant and smart. She would never do anything that is vulgar or disrespectful or cheap. She is convinced that Toni will leave Hana and marry her.

How do you know all that, I ask.

I hear things. Everybody knows.

Was Toni going to leave Hana?

Never. Toni loves his possessions and his family is his most precious possession. His wife and his children are untouchable, says Stan's brother.

Did Freddy know about Toni and Sasha, asks Stan.

Maybe he did or maybe he didn't. Sasha and Freddy were business partners, polite to each other in the office but in private they lived separate lives, says Diana.

Were Sasha and Toni lovers, I ask Emil.

Whatever that means, says Emil. They might have had sex but Toni never had any intention of leaving Hana. She was his anchor, his conscience, his icon, the mother of his children. I think Sasha became more and more frustrated and demanding. She believed if she got rid of Freddy, Toni would marry her.

When Toni became involved in politics, he began to avoid Sasha. He had to present an image of a clean, devoted, family man, says Tereza.

Toni said to Sasha that it would be too dangerous for him to keep seeing her, says Diana.

Toni used to provide girls for Freddy, says Emil. Maybe he entertained Freddy's wife in the meantime as a favour to Freddy.

Would he jeopardise his family like that?

Toni is no saint. He had other girls, he picked them and dropped them and they still kept coming for more. He was generous, but he was never attached to any of them, says Emil.

I heard them arguing in the office, tells Diana. Sasha demanded that Toni leaves Hana and marry her. He said that he couldn't do this to Freddy. He would kill me if he found me with you, Toni argued. Kill him then, said Sasha.

Did they question Toni?

Toni was still a respected politician and a man of great influence. He knew the local police and the judge and the politicians, says Emil.

He dropped out of politics to avoid his family being smeared by the scandal, says Tereza.

Have they any clues who killed Freddy?

They questioned Ted.

Why would Ted, Freddy's only son, kill his father, asks Stan.

Since he met Vivien, Freddy had no time for his son, says Emil. Sasha told Ted that Freddy will disinherit him and give everything to Vivien and her children.

Vivien is Freddy's girlfriend. She had twins only months before Freddy was murdered, says Tereza.

Ted meant everything to Freddy, he spoiled him rotten until he met Vivien, says Emil.

Freddy never spoke to his son after he learned that Ted was involved in stealing his car. Ted tried to explain that those Iraqi refugees would kill him if he didn't get them the car.

What did Sasha do after Freddy was killed?

She went to the police station and reported her gun stolen, says Tereza. She told them that she placed the gun on her dressing table for self-protection since Freddy's car keys were stolen. When I woke up the gun was gone and Freddy was dead, she sobbed.

She told the police that Toni supplied the gun, adds Emil. Toni denied ever seeing the gun but he admitted that someone delivered a parcel to him and asked him to give it to Sasha. He did not know what was in it.

When police found the gun in the river, they arrested Ted. Jan came to the police station and testified that he and Ted were watching videos on the night Freddy was murdered, adds Tereza.

Toni came to Sasha's office and begged her to keep away from him until the investigation was over, says Diana.

What did she say.

You bastard, she yelled.

Toni's friend Adam invites us for dinner to get news about Toni and Hana. Adam is a director of a prestige Bellevue hotel. Stan and I are awed by the grandeur of the hotel's interior and the views over Ljubljana.

How are my friends going, says Adam. I miss them.

They enjoy Australia, says Stan.

I can't understand why anyone would want to leave this beautiful place but they adore Canberra, I add.

You left, smiles Adam.

We had to, says Stan.

You do what you have to. I am going to retire soon. I'd like to travel, Adam tells us.

We might see you in Australia, says Stan.

It is very quiet here now compared to what it was like, says Adam. Political elite dined and wined and slept with their mistresses in this hotel. If the walls could speak..

You should write a book.

I used to get orders from Belgrade for ballerinas and strip dancers and film stars. Everybody pretended that the actresses and dancers and singers were cultural performers for political functions but they only came on the stage so politicians could choose who they wanted to sleep with. It was done openly and nobody thought anything of it. That's how things were in good communist times. We had to be in good books with politicians. Toni sometimes helped me.

He would, says Stan looking at me. I believe that Stan enjoys Toni's misfortunes.

Sometimes men wanted younger girls and they invited university students to sing and dance. I wouldn't have dared to whisper about it until Slovenia became independent.

Is it still happening, asks Stan.

It has gone underground. Men are much more careful and no, it does not happen much. Our politicians are too close to home here.

Was Toni sleeping with girls here, I ask.

Toni was too busy wheeling and dealing, laughs Adam. He was also too much in love with Hana.

You don't have to protect him. I know everything about Toni and his girls, I blab. I am immediately sorry. I came here to find out what others know.

I didn't think that there was anyone who knew everything about Toni, laughs Adam.

Hana mentioned it, I say with much humility.

Toni said that Freddy was divorcing Sasha to marry Vivien, Stan changes the subject.

Oh, Vivacious Vivien. You will probably meet her. Everybody likes Vivien, says Adam.

Except Sasha, I suppose.

Sasha is not worried about Vivien. She found her own saviour in young Jan, the new director of her factory.

What is Jan like?

Charming, says Adam with a mysterious smile hiding his real thoughts. Clever and charming. He is a dashing bachelor who knows what he wants and how to go about getting it.

What does he want?

Jan helped Sasha keep young Ted out of jail. He also saved the factory from bankruptcy. He might even push Toni into divorcing Hana, says Adam.

Why would he want to do that?

Sasha wants it and what Sasha wants she must have.

What is in it for him?

There is always money.

Whose money?

Sasha and Ted rely on Jan. Excuse me for a moment, says Adam as he is called to the phone.

I have no idea what this is all about. People only tell us what they want us to know and think and feel, I say to Stan.

You can't get close to people in such a short time.

We are simply not used to intrigue, we never had to deal with this kind of people. Everybody sees things from a different angle.

Where does Jan come from? I ask as Adam returns.

His father Milos was a big shot in the Yugoslav army. A colonel in KOS, I think. He was a frequent visitor here in the olden days. He was Serb of course.

What is KOS?

Contra intelligence service.

A spy?

He was catching spies, I think.

Where is he now?

There was a big gold affair years ago. Jan's mother Francesca is a Slovenian born in Italy. She often came and talked to me. The rumour had it that people sent her things from Italy through Milos. They questioned Francesca and searched their home but they found nothing. Milos had some kind of immunity. Eventually an order came from Belgrade to search his office. They found about ten kilos of gold in his locked office desk.

Is he in jail?

They were transferred to Serbia and we never heard of them again.

When did Jan reappear? Asks Stan

He has been around most of the time, I think.

How old is he? I ask.

Jan is about ten years younger than Sasha. In his forties, handsome, smart, smooth.

Sasha must trust him to let him take over her factory, I say.

She is a shrewd operator. Jan has a degree in chemistry and economics and he has connections. He is also very popular with workers.

Why didn't she give a job to her son?

She wants Ted to go back to uni. He has no qualifications. He never held a proper job.

Is Jan married?

Nobody is quite sure about his personal life. He seems very close to Ted.

I have to pass Toni's message to Sasha, I say to Stan on our way home.

I am a little self-conscious as I ring Sasha's office. I heard of Sasha even while still at home but I never spoke to her.

How nice to hear from you, says Sasha. I don't know if you remember me at all but I heard so much about you from Hana and Toni. Can you drop by my office for a coffee and a chat?

It was easy, I say to Stan.

She will want you to think so, says Stan cautiously.

Sasha is coming towards me and my first impression is that she is an ordinary, friendly, middle aged woman. People made her sound formidable but she seems very down to earth sensible. She has clear olive complexion and bright green eyes. Her long fingers play with expensive looking pen. We are both eager to break the ice. I decide that I don't have to hate Sasha.

Would you see that we are not disturbed, Sasha says to Diana.

I am delighted to meet Hana's Australian sister, she hugs me. Her voice is warm but with a school bell clarity.

Toni and Hana wanted me to say hello, I smile.

How are they? I really miss them.

Fine, they like Australia.

Sasha is waiting for more information.

I really don't understand why they would want to be in Australia at this time of the year. It is very hot there now, I try to prolong the small talk. I hear that Toni dropped out of politics.

When are they coming home?

Toni said that they are coming soon but they didn't say when exactly.

I suppose you know that Toni and Hana are getting a divorce and that Toni and I are to be married.

I am stunned by Sasha's directness. She is searching my face for tell tale signs of shock and disbelief. Once the mask is off, it is easier to be sincere.

Nobody told me, I say.

Their marriage has been dead for a long time. Toni was waiting until children finished their education. Then came this dreadful business with Freddy.

Have they found the murderer?

My son Ted was apparently the intended victim but he was away with a friend.

Why would anyone want to murder Ted?

Ted got mixed up with the wrong crowd since his father lost interest in him.

Why did Freddy lose interest in his son?

Freddy got involved with Vivien, laughs Sasha. He could not marry her of course but she became pregnant and had twin daughters just months before Freddy got shot.

Why couldn't he marry her?

It wouldn't be good for his business. You see, I own the business. Fred did not know that I was willing to give him the divorce and have him continue in his position as a director. I wanted to tell him so as soon as Toni would say that he is ready to leave Hana.

There is something cold and calculating in Sasha's words.

So Ted is in the clear? I ask.

Ted wouldn't hurt a fly. He was scared of his father but he loved him. He was crushed when Freddy turned away from him.

Sasha's green eyes are steady reading my responses.

You love Toni?

We love each other, yes. We are two of a kind, Toni and I, we thrive under pressure. Toni feels protective towards his family but he has nothing in common with Hana. She never had to work so she is not interested in business, says Sasha.

Does Hana know, I ask.

I don't think she worries about it. She will be looked after. That's what she always wanted. Someone to take care of her. I know that she no longer loves Toni. Not in the same way I do. We have been lovers for years.

Did Freddy know?

Toni and I provided girls for Freddy to play with. As long as he had enough fresh meat for sex and enough power in the factory, he was happy. What else can a man ask for anyway?

The way Sasha says fresh meat hurts me. I don't like Sasha any more.

You think men only care about sex and power, I try to smile.

What else is there?

You said that Freddy became involved with Vivien.

Poor man had midlife crisis. A temporary bout of insanity. It often happens to men before dementia hits them, Sasha tries to make a joke of it.

Excuse me, says a handsome young man entering Sasha's office.

Meet Hana's sister, says Sasha. Jan is our new director. Would you join us? Sasha turns to Jan.

Pleased to meet you, Jan throws a glance in my direction. I am busy at the moment. I just wanted to ask you about that Hungarian account but we can do that over lunch.

Jan leaves the room. He has no time for an elderly woman who is wasting Sasha's time. I feel that he does not like me but maybe I don't even exist in his conscience. Maybe even Hana has no meaning for him.

Hana's daughter, Sofija, invites us for drinks on her thirtieth birthday. There is a small crowd of young elegant people mingling and chatting politely. Stan and I definitely don't belong but we make the best of it.

Sofija looks like Toni. Her long bony limbs communicate in elaborate gestures. With her short wisps of hair she looks like an overgrown elf in boots. Words like elegant and sophisticated come to mind.

Where is the lucky man who will make you an honest woman, Stan tries to joke.

Don't start, says Sofija. Mum told me for years not to let any man make me a baby before I finish my studies.

Are you still studying, I ask.

I finished uni only last year, admits Sofija. Now I am busy studying life.

Your body clock is ticking, I warn.

I think I will let it tick away. I don't feel the need for the baby right now.

I am sure if the right man came along, says Stan.

I am not even looking for the right man. I have too much fun being single. I don't want to be tied down just yet.

Your parents would love to become grandparents, I say.

I'll let Janez look after the succession and the family name, laughs Sofija looking at her brother who is a handsome image of his mother.

With his blue eyes and blond hair he would make beautiful bambinos, laughs Sofija.

What about it, says Stan.

You start with disposable nappies and end up with disposable self-esteem. I am not rich enough yet to invest in Barbie doll industry.

Don't you plan on getting married? I ask astonished at this new generation.

Why should I? I like my freedom. I like meeting people. Maybe one day I will want to build a nest but not yet. Life is much too precious to spend it all with one person. Once married, you are stuck.

Don't you want someone of your own, I ask incredulous.

I want to remember people I like, with kindness. People who go through divorce become bitter and never forgive each other for not being in love any more.

Most people never divorce. They make a commitment.

I am committed to freedom. You don't own people, you like them, maybe even love them but then you let them go.

But the children need daddy and mummy, I argue.

Maybe they do and maybe I will marry the woman that has my child but at the moment I am not sure that it is necessary for me to have a child, says Janez.

He likes cyber girls, teases Sofija.

What, says Stan.

I'll explain later I whisper to Stan. Just as well Paula told me about cyber dating.

Have you ever been really in love? I ask.

I am in love all the time. Since I was a baby I was in love but I don't crave love like some sick addict. People get addicted on love and chocolates and drugs and alcohol and cigarettes. I am not an addictive person, says Janez.

You just want to enjoy your little affairs, says Stan.

One can have an affair with a bottle of wine or a good meal or a chitchat on the computer, laughs Janez.

I don't understand, says Stan.

I don't expect you to.

Wouldn't you like to have a permanent relationship, I ask.

As much as I would like to have an everlasting life. But I don't believe in ever after or in heaven. What is on offer here and now sounds good enough to me, laughs Janez.

We have six grandchildren, I say to Sofija.

How boring and predictable, she smiles. I am sorry, she corrects herself, but this is not for me. Different scene. Different continent.

You are a dying breed, laughs Janez. Sorry, I don't mean literally.

You would like to live forever but you are too lazy to have babies, says Stan.

I will have to let my soul slip into someone else's body, laughs Janez.

Transcending is in, smiles Sofija.

What, Stan makes a face.

They believe in some kind of reincarnation, I guess.

Simple people like making babies but I am willing to offer them my spirit, teases Janez.

How do you propose to do that, I ask.

The silver thread that keeps my soul in this body will break when my body dies and then my soul will become free to roam the cosmic universe.

You are dreaming, says Stan.

In your dreams the silver thread is only temporarily broken because on waking up you return into your body but when you die your soul is released permanently.

In your dreams you get a taste of astral level of living, helps Sofija.

You ARE dreaming, says Stan.

And who is to say that events of my dreams are less or more important than events in my physical life.

What are they on about, Stan turns too me

I met Jan in Sasha's office. He is a very handsome man, I change the subject.

You like Sasha's new toy boy, smiles Sofija.

Is he Sasha's lover.

Looks like it.

When did Jan come into the picture?

I didn't know that he existed until Sasha appointed him as a director.

Do you like him?

I barely know him. As long as Sasha likes him.

Did Toni like him?

Dad is a bit jealous of anyone getting too close to Sasha.

I think Sasha wanted to make dad jealous, says Janez.

It irks dad because Jan is so much younger and so handsome, smiles Sofija. Anyway why such interest in Jan?

Toni and Hana asked me to find out what is happening.

Ask Diana, she is Sasha's personal secretary.

I don't understand the young generation, says Stan. They are so different but then maybe it is because we lived so far from each other.

I begin to wonder who is right. Maybe I am not as lucky as I believed. My children are as ordinary as I am.

Young people of today never grew up, says Stan.

They want new toys but as soon as they bring them home they lose interest and push them out of sight and out of mind.

Normal person wants to have a family, says Stan. It's only natural.

Emil's and Teresa's children are married and have babies, I say.

There is Diana. Talk to Janez while I have a woman to woman with Diana, I say to Stan.

Are Jan and Sasha lovers, I ask directly.

Jan brings her flowers but then he brings flowers to other girls. He is very generous.

Does he buy you flowers?

And other stuff.

What stuff?

When he travels interstate he brings souvenirs.

Isn't Sasha jealous?

I think they are just good friends.

Has Jan got a girlfriend?

I have never seen him with anybody.

Do you like him?

Everybody likes him.

Except Toni.

He is jealous.

What about Ted?

You should ask him.

I think Diana is hiding something. She is twenty-six and has no boyfriend. Maybe she is hoping to marry Jan. Or Ted.

I never met Ted. He was born after I left. What is he like?

Ted is in and out of court. Jan is busy keeping him out of trouble, offers Diana.

While shopping in Ljubljana I find Jan and Ted sitting in a garden café.

Small world, I say and sit myself next to them before they could stop me.

Ted, you met Hana's sister, says Jan a little annoyed with my intrusion.

I saw you with mum but we were never properly introduced, says Ted. His handshake is limp, his voice is high and apologetic. His eyes are darting in all directions like he was afraid. I realise that Ted is vulnerable. Both men seem uncomfortable and obviously waiting for me to come to my senses and vanish. I know that I am pushy but I came here to push for information.

Cakes look delicious. What do you recommend, I turn to Ted.

I like Black Forest myself but mum goes for cream slices, smiles Ted. Cakes seem to delight him. His grey eyes become animated. Let me get you both so you can see who is right.

If you promise to eat half of each, I strike a deal. It's easy to like someone who likes cakes.

Jan does not order cakes. He excuses himself. He has things to do.

Tell me about Australia, says Ted. I always wanted to go to Australia.

Why? I become exited.

I never told anyone about it, says Ted. Not even mum or dad or Jan. It has to be our secret.

The shared secret means an instant intimacy.

I wish you came, I say sincerely because we created an instant likeness. My boys would love to show you around, I offer the services of my family.

I actually wanted to stay in Australia. I asked at the Australian Embassy but it isn't that simple.

Perhaps you should come for a holiday first to see how you like it.

I would like it because it is far from where I am, says Ted.

You don't like it here.

I wish ... Ted brushes away an idea.

I like Black Forest torte best too, I say. What kind of coffee do you drink?

Vienna black, long and sweet. It is the only one with real coffee aroma.

I must try it. Can I get us two viennas, I offer.

What are your boys doing? Asks Ted.

I make a brief itinerary through the successes of my boys.

I feel slightly uncomfortable boasting about my boys who have families and go to work and pay into the superannuation. My family is following some universal pattern of life. I hope that by boasting about it I will not jinx it. I don't like drama.

They are very ordinary, I say. Easy to get along. You would like them, I promise. I must be insane to invite Sasha's boy into my family. I am glad that he will never come. It isn't that easy. What am I doing here with a drug pusher and smuggler and possibly a murderer? I don't owe Toni and Hana that much. Maybe Hana would not like it. Or Sasha.

How is your coffee, asks Ted.

Fine, I like it. It is hard to find a really good coffee in Australia. There is a little continental café next to where I used to work. Embassy ladies meet there. That is the only place that has real continental cakes and coffees. Very expensive but first class. European people appreciate delicacies.

I wish there was a way to get to Australia, Ted still wants to escape.

We might find you an Australian girl to marry and then you can stay.

Why am I offering girls I haven't got to a man who is the son of the enemy? A man of a questionable past. Perhaps I feel sure that emigration people would investigate his criminal past and refuse him anyway. I lure him knowing that others will reject him. There is something irresistibly gullible and likeable about Ted.

What would you like to do in Australia?

I don't really know what I want to do with my life. I just need to have a new start.

Would you go back to uni, I ask.

I started chemistry but I hated it. I would like to study art and literature but there is no money in that.

Do you need the money? Couldn't you get some casual work in the factory and go to uni part time.

I might do that.

Gives you a sense of independence and achievement, said my son when he did the same. He was mowing people's lawns at weekends while he was doing economics at uni. Mowing lawns gives me all the exercise I need and I get paid for it, he said.

I think I will have to go away and start my own life, decides Ted.

Ted is in his late twenties. He is not at all like Sasha.

Have you seen your baby sisters, I ask casually.

I see them almost every day. They are gorgeous. They are beginning to talk.

Parents can't wait for babies to start walking and talking but as soon as they do, they tell them to sit still and be silent, I repeat the joke.

Vivien is an excellent mother. She talks to the girls all the time and she calms them down when they get excited. She has the touch for it, or something, says Ted. They are very lucky, my sisters, I mean.

Vivien is your age, you must have known her from before.

She arrived a few years ago and I met her at dad's funeral.

Did dad tell you about your sisters.

Mum did. Dad and I didn't get on at the time.

What was your dad like?

I never thought about it, says Ted after a short silence. What was he like? I don't even know what I am like.

We try all our lives to find out what we are like, I laugh with Ted. Like they say, you are one thing to one person and something quite different to another.

I don't even know what I am to myself. A friend or an enemy, he laughs to cover up the shared intimacy.

Often we are our own worst enemies, I say and we chew over this.

I wouldn't mind Ted coming to Australia. I am being my own worst enemy. What would I do if Ted actually arrived at our door? He could be the worst influence on my boys but somehow I feel that he could not influence anyone in any way. But then he influenced me to have Black Forest cake and Vienna coffee. Sometimes a weak person has more influence than someone aggressive. Jan is aggressive. I felt that. I would always be on guard with Jan. But Ted is likeable.

That's what Vivien says. She said that about my father actually. Ted must have thought about it for a long time.

Why would she say that?

She wanted him to quit his job. He wasn't happy but could not decide to give up what he had.

Until you are prepared to give up what you have, you can't make a new start.

I can see it now, says Ted.

I don't know what he sees.

When you put thoughts into words things become more clear, I say. I find that I discover who I am when I talk to others. I was very lonely in Australia until I found a friend, Paula. She died.

Why am I telling this to a young boy I just met?

You would like Vivien, says Ted.

I am glad you do. She is your family now.

I would miss Vivien and the girls if I went to Australia, says Ted.

You could come together.

I suppose, says Ted. She is doing well in her business.

Jan seems capable and helpful, I say pretending that I know Jan well. Where did your mum find such handsome, smart man?

Jan and I were friends for years, says Ted.

Did he always live in Ljubljana?

He comes and goes. He was in Bosnia for awhile.

What did he do before he become a director of Plastika.

He was in export and import, says Ted. I actually worked for him sometimes. After I dropped out of school.

Ted and I are not close enough yet to ask him what Jan imported and exported.

What did you do? I try to sound naive and innocent.

Driving, delivering and collecting. That sort of thing.

I want to ask about the keys Ted stole from his father and about Freddy's murder but it is too soon.

You meet all sorts, Ted volunteers more information. That's when I came across those refugees.

What refugees, I play ignorant.

Iraqis. They wanted to go to Germany. They said that they knew Jan so I gave them a lift from Macedonia to Ljubljana.

How many? I ask carefully.

Eight. I barely saw them. They were in the back of the truck with the stuff I delivered for Jan.

What did you deliver?

Parcels.

What happened when you came to Ljubljana.

They wanted me to drive to Austria. I parked in front of our house. Dad was away and we needed rest. They were sleeping in the garage when police arrived and searched the truck. They found drugs under the seat and a parcel of money in the glove box. I knew nothing about it.

Did they find the refugees?

They must have escaped while police searched the house.

Did your father know?

No way. The Iraqis said that they will kill me if I don't take them to Austria. They said that they paid to be taken to Austria. I don't know who they paid.

So you gave them the keys to your father's car?

They arrested me on the possession of drugs. Jan paid the bail and got me out. I gave him the key and he gave me back a copy of it to hang in dad's room. Jan sorted the refugees out in the end. Next my father got killed.

Any idea who killed your father?

No idea, he says after a few moments. Oh, is that the time, he adds and gets up. I am late, he apologises.

I made a mistake. I became an investigator.

I am in Ljubljana with questions unanswered and time on my hands so I call on Adam again.

I just had coffee with Jan and Ted, I say casually.

Oh, says Adam. Aren't they a bit young for you?

Ted told me that they were friends for years.

With friends like Jan you don't need enemies, says Adam.

Why?

I think Jan is behind all the trouble Ted has, Adam leans towards me. Smuggling came to Jan through his mother's milk. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. I have no proof, of course, but knowing Francesca and Milos...

Adam is an old man now. He likes to bask in the glory of the days when he was a confidant of the Yugoslav hierarchy. He knew the Yugoslav elite intimately.

Are Jan and Ted... are they smugglers or murderers or lovers? I laugh to make it sound like a joke.

Nobody knows exactly. No evidence. Even if there was, it wouldn't change things. People with friends in high places can afford to do what they like. Jan's father was transferred to his home in Belgrade when they found a cupboard full of gold in his office. Nothing happened to him. He was actually promoted.

Who do you think killed Freddy?

They are pointing a finger at Ted but I know that Ted could never do it. He idolised his father.

But he stole the keys of his car.

He did not want to end dead.

What about Jan?

Jan and Ted were together. I don't think we will ever know who did what. There is a ring of desperate people who are capable of anything.

Toni is scared.

As long as he keeps low and out of the politics he will be alright. Nobody wants anything to come out. He better stay out altogether. Australia seems just far enough.

Sasha told me that they are getting married. She won't let him stay in Australia.

They are both shrewd operators. Only I happen to believe that Toni does not like shrewd women. He wants to stay with Hana. She is the untainted part of his life. Toni likes to come home and be a loving head of the family. Why should he go home to a wife of his murdered friend?

I hear that Vivien comes in the morning to organise her business so I make a morning appointment at the hairdresser's.

I introduce myself to Vivien and give greetings from Toni and Hana.

How nice to meet you, says Vivien with a naturally husky voice. Can I offer you a cup of coffee.

Perhaps we could go for coffee in town later, I suggest.

I like to do Hana's hair, I like Hana, says Vivien without reservation. She tells the girls what to do while she is away but she is neither pushy nor subservient. She seems guileless and direct.

Ready, she turns to me. I'd just like to check on the girls and then I am all yours. Would you like to see my twins, she says.

I would love to, I say genuinely.

Vivien's baby sitter is tidying the two bedroom flat on the second floor of the block of flats nearby.

Freddy bought this flat for me before he was murdered.

There is warm cosiness in the flat. Mind if we have coffee here, says Vivien. I can let the sitter go and keep an eye on the girls while they are asleep.

I like that, I say. I like everything about Vivien. She seems the most open and unafraid person I met at home. There is no anxiety, conspiracy, shame or cunning.

We peep at the two pink bundles sleeping peacefully in their cots.

Freddy was besotted with the twins, Vivien says simply. I don't want to miss a minute of being with them, he said. He kept bringing tons of toys and clothes and books. I think he searched the world to find something to surprise me with.

The room looks like a fairyland, I smile.

We were going to get married as soon as he got the divorce. His marriage was long finished anyway. It's not like I broke a happy family.

Of course.

He filed for the divorce a week before he was murdered.

What a tragedy. I heard rumours that Ted murdered him, I say.

No way. Ted adored his father and he adores his little sisters. Ted is not a baddy some would have you believe.

I like Vivien. Why are young people so much easier to like? Maybe they still believe that the good will prevail over the evil like it does in the fairy tales. My boys believed in the justice and as students they protested for all sort of courses. They grew out of it now, of course. Old people become wise, cunning, conniving, shrewd and suspicious. They lose their innocence and ideals. It is so difficult to know the truth. In Australia we take things at their face value. People have no reason to be evasive or careful to hurt someone's feelings. Here more is hidden than revealed. I hear the words, I see the faces but I am only guessing the meaning of it all.

Here we go, says Vivien, placing Vienna coffees in front of us. Did Ted learn to like Vienna coffee here or did Vivien learn to make it to please him. I wonder if Vivien knows that I spoke to Ted.

I hear that Sasha is going to marry Jan, I lie.

I believe that Jan has some kind of a hold over Sasha and Ted. I don't like Jan, says Vivien.

Ted should get married and start a family, I say.

I don't think he is a marrying type, smiles Vivien.

Why not?

I suppose he needs to find out what he wants, who he is, that sort of thing, says Vivien.

I suppose we all do, I concede. Sometimes we rush into things and then regret it.

I think I can hear the twins, says Vivien.

We chirp over the waking toddlers before I excuse myself.

Hana rings as I come home.

Toni and Hana are coming back, I rush to tell Stan.

What happened, says Stan. Why couldn't they wait another couple of weeks for us to return.

Hana rang that they want to spend some time with us here. I can't wait to hear what is happening at home.

You wanted to come home to Slovenia now you call Australia home, says Stan.

Don't you? Maybe we have no home.

We have two. Going home from home.

Only Hana comes down from the plane. She seems composed but under her serene exterior I sense a raging torrent of emotion.

Toni has some business to attend in Vienna. He will be here in a couple of days, says Hana.

That will give us time to catch up on the news, says Stan. He takes Hana's suitcases and opens the doors with his elbow.

Your son Joe came over to stay in your house until you get back, tells Hana.

You must be tired, says Stan. Would you like to go straight home or stop for a drink?

I want to go home, says Hana.

At home Stan again opens the car door to let Hana out. He hands me the smaller bags and takes the suitcases himself. When he opens the front door he lets Hana in and follows after her. I come last. I am happy that Stan is finally nice to my sister. He barely tolerated Hana in Australia. Even Stan is not completely immune to Hana's charms. I suppose Stan is the only bull in this paddock now and he feels free to display his charms.

Stan is a cavalier like Toni, the thought makes me smile. I am not jealous, of course, I am not. It would be absurd. I realise that in Hana's presence men simply display their plumage like courting birds.

Sit down and I will get you a drink, offers Stan while I bring things in. I notice that Stan is generous with vodka. Toni was generous with vodka. Maybe Stan has a chance to be Toni while Toni is away. He never competed with Toni but now he became Toni.

Put your feet up and stretch on the couch. It's not easy being cramped on the plane for twenty hours, says Stan as he smooths the cushions and Hana lifts her feet off the floor.

I am glad you are still here, says Hana.

We love the way you decorated your home, says Stan. He pours himself a little vodka with orange juice and sits next to Hana. He never drank vodka before.

Stan is actually flirting with my sister. I never knew this flirtatious side of him. I smile at the thought that even my sensible husband can be as charming as Toni. Things are never what they seem.

Maybe I tried to be Hana all my life. Maybe I wanted to inspire men like Hana does. Maybe both Stan and I admired what Toni and Hana had.

I feel quite homesick already. Tell me what its like in Australia now, I sit on the other side of Hana.

Is her bed ready, Stan turns to me.

Of course it is ready.

What would you like to have for dinner? Maybe you would like to eat out.

There must be a romantic trait in my Stan, I smile to myself. We always took each other for granted. There was never a cause for jealousy. There isn't now either.

If you go to the restaurant around the corner they prepare take away meals. You can pick something and bring it home, says Hana. I think she wants to get rid of Stan.

How come you decided to return so suddenly? I ask Hana when we are alone.

Sasha rang Toni to come urgently.

What does she want?

She did not say. At least Toni did not tell me.

Are you all right?

I don't want to go on like this. It might be better if they married and left me alone. I don't need either of them. I am tired.

Toni loves you, everybody says so.

I don't love Toni any more. I don't even like myself. I just want to sleep and forget the whole nightmare.

You are tired.

I am tired of life. I was on a roller coaster for too long and I never knew how to get off.

But you enjoyed the ride.

I did at the beginning and then I just went along.

That's life, I smile.

Toni lies. Everything he says is a lie, he lies without a reason. He is addicted to lying. I can't listen to his lies any more.

Why would he lie?

The lies seem more exciting than the truth. He feels like an artist creating fiction. The ordinary, mundane reality does not satisfy him. He says what people want to hear. He needs to be admired and loved by everybody so he lies to everybody. I am sure he lies to Sasha.

Did you tell him that?

One way or another he managed to convince me that he is telling the truth. If I don't appear convinced he gets into a rage. Or cries. Real wet tears. He is acting like a romantic lover but it is all an act.

Why now?

I am tired. I used to cry alone when Toni was away. He gave me unbelievable excuses for being away. He begged me to believe him and I did.

I suppose nobody is absolutely truthful, I defend Toni's behaviour.

Toni should be home after tomorrow and I don't want to face him, says Hana.

Did you argue?

He lied to me, to my children, to Sasha and Freddy and everybody else. Nobody knows where they stand with Toni.

Maybe that is the secret of his success.

You never lied. We relied on you, Hana returns to our childhood.

We admired you, I smile. If we could only go back in time. I think about mum and dad often. I remember dad telling us stories. Close your eyes and you can be anything you want to be, dad used to say. Your magic land comes with you wherever you are.

I lived my life with my eyes closed, smiles Hana as Stan brings in a banquet of food.

You are a good man, Hana pats Stan's hand.

It's the least we can do, beams my husband. Hana eats very little.

I slept and ate on the plane, she says. To me it feels like morning.

It will be soon. I better leave you two to chat, offers Stan and goes to bed.

We had a wonderful time, I tell Hana.

I wish we could swap our lives permanently, smiles Hana.

What did you like about Australia?

It is so far away from everything.

We got used to it, I say.

I think I need some fresh air to clear my head, says Hana. She has been steadily drinking all evening.

It's almost midnight. Take a sleeping pill instead to get a good night's sleep.

I took several but they don't help.

I will come with you.

I'll be fine. I need to be on my own. I am used to it, smiles Hana.

The police wakes us at dawn. They tell us to sit down.

I have bad news, says the policeman professionally sad and respectful.

It's Hana. She was found dead on the side of the road.

How? What happened? When?

When did you last see Hana? Policeman ignores my questions. They came to express sympathies and then investigate the circumstances of her death.

My beautiful sister is dead. Left in the ditch beside the road. Found by a dog. A little boy rushed to the police station terrified. I should not have let her go on her own. She wanted to be on her own.

We were talking late last night. It was close to midnight when I went to bed. Hana wanted to go for a walk on her own. I went to sleep without checking if she returned.

I wish I knew where Hana travelled in her thoughts as she walked on the dirt road along the river. A car hit her and the driver did not stop. Her body wasn't moved.

Where is her husband?

He had some business in Vienna, says Stan. He should be back tomorrow.

We are in shock. Tereza, Emil, Sofija and Janez were notified and they come over to the mortuary to identify Hana's body.

Janez tries to contact Toni on his mobile but Toni's phone isn't on.

I have a number of his friend David. Hana left it on the bench there. The police try to contact his friend David. I leave a message on David's answering machine for Toni to come immediately. I do not say what happened. By late afternoon Toni arrives and goes straight to the police station.

I wish I was dead instead of Hana. I will never forgive myself. I should have come with her, says Toni. He cries openly. Sofija and Janez comfort him. People gather around them. Our town is on the map again. TV cameras follow us, reporters are asking questions. People look sad and ashamed of their imperfections in the face of death. Everybody is watching everybody else for reactions. Everybody is appalled and bewildered.

A couple of days later they arrest Toni. Traces of Hana's blood were found under the mudguard of his car. The forensic experts demand Toni's clothes and shoes.

Nobody knows why the police came to check Toni's car.

The news about Hana's death spreads like a wildfire. The rumours are alive and spreading fast. I find from the newspaper that forensic police established that Hana was hit by Toni's car. Her body was thrown on the side of the road. There was a heavy rain after the accident and the road was muddy. The autopsy shows that Hana was drunk. She also took tranquillisers. She probably wandered onto the road.

Sasha and Ted come to the church service for Hana. We don't know when the coroner will release the body for burial. People watch each other as they express their sympathies.

I am so sorry, says Sasha. I liked Hana.

I can not be rude to Sasha at the church service so I accept her condolences.

Sasha invites me for coffee. I have a feeling that she wants something. Perhaps she wants me out of her life. I am determined not to give her anything.

How long are you staying, she asks as we sit down in a little café.

Have you seen Toni? I reply with the question.

His friend David is coming from Austria to testify that Toni was with him when Hana died, says Sasha.

David can prove that Toni did not murder Hana, I rearrange her statement.

In the good old days they used to stamp your passport every time you crossed the border. It would be so much more simple, smiles Sasha.

I am sure they will establish his whereabouts at the time of Hana's death, I say.

In my heart I hope that they did stamp Toni's passport and he is holding the proof of his innocence. I don't want to believe that Toni is a murderer.

Someone must have told the police about the bloodstains under the mudguard of Toni's car, I say.

I am sure the police will clear the mystery, says Sasha.

I visit Toni in jail. He looks like a caged lion, handsome even behind bars.

You believe me, he looks straight at me. You know that I have nothing to do with the accident.

I look at him for a long time. His hands are on the glass partition reaching for my hands. Something tells me that he is innocent. Maybe I am the biggest fool but I would bet on Toni's innocence.

What were you doing in Austria? I ask.

Business.

You could prove it, I say.

David is going to the police to tell them that we were together.

I am looking for a sign of Toni's guilt.

Do you think that I killed Hana, asks Toni looking straight through me.

I don't, I say without hesitation. I haven't even thought about it properly. How did I make up my mind about his innocence? I want him to be innocent. Is that the effect Toni has on people?

Maybe there is a minute romantic reminder of the romantic me hidden in my sensible cloak, maybe part of me still loves Toni; maybe even a tiny loving renders you blind; incapable to see the truth.

He is a habitual liar, Hana's words ring in the background. He is the most convincing liar. He lies for no reason. If you don't believe one lie he tells you another. He tells people what he thinks they want to hear.

Did they stamp your passports when you crossed from Austria to Slovenia?

They don't do that any more. It means a lot to me that you believe me, says Toni.

You will have to convince the jury and the judge.

Sasha got it into her head that I will marry her. I never said that I would.

Do you think she killed Freddy?

She wanted to get rid of Freddy to spite Vivien; and to force me to marry her.

Are you going to marry her?

Never.

The loss of my beautiful sister is like a stone in my chest. I can not even cry to melt the sadness away. I remember the pain when I lost Paula. Part of me died. Paula and Hana. Both of them shone in my life. The light went out. I am less alive. I hope Toni is innocent.

I go to church more or less regularly, I repeat the appropriate words but I did not talk to God since Paula's funeral. Now I need God; I have to reach Hana and Paula; I wish to reach my father and my mother. If there is an after life they will remember me. I will live in their memory. We only live in someone's remembering. Hana made our family special. Paula was my guardian angel in Canberra. Mum taught me to be sensible. Dad gave me the magic land. They made me who I am.

I hope that Toni and David were in Austria when Hana was killed. I have to find David before he goes to the police. He has the key. At the airport I introduce myself to the only man of Toni's age that comes on his own. We sit in the airport cafeteria.

Was Toni with you when Hana was killed, I ask.

David hesitates.

Toni had to see Sasha before he went home.

He was with Sasha.

I only promised to cover up so not to upset Hana. I am not covering up for murder. I have to go to the police now and tell them the truth.

I go to see Toni again.

You lied to me, I say.

I was with Sasha on the night Hana died but I don't know who drove my car, Toni confesses. If you don't believe one lie he tells you another; Hana's words ring in my memory.

You did not have to lie to me, I say.

Sasha gave me an ultimatum.

What ultimatum?

She rang me in Australia and vowed to testify that I killed Freddy if I didn't come immediately.

Did you kill Freddy?

How can you ask that?

Did you?

I had no reason to kill him. He was my best friend.

Who did?

I am going to find out one way or another. I will clear my name.

You could have stayed in Australia.

Everything I have is here. In Australia I am nothing. My family is everything to me.

What about Sasha?

I told her that I love Hana. I would do anything for Sasha but I wasn't prepared to leave Hana.

What did Sasha say to that?

She is a cunning bitch. I suppose she is much like I am.

You must have an idea who killed Freddy and Hana. Could it be Jan.

He was with Ted.

What about Ted?

Ted would lie and cheat but he would not kill. Could it be an accident? Or a suicide. She was drunk. They found tranquillisers in her blood.

Someone killed her; she died very conveniently for you and Sasha.

I should have been with her. She wasn't thinking straight, says Toni.

I still can not believe that Toni killed Hana. He wouldn't do it to his children. Everything he says is a lie, I remember Hana's words. I have no idea what a liar could do.

All I ever wanted is to make Hana happy. She was a much better person than I am, says Toni.

One is happy or one is not, mum used to say. You can not make an unhappy person happy.

You are the only person that really believes me. You know me. You are the only person I have now.

I see real tears running through Toni's fingers as he covers his face. Is he crying for himself or for Hana? Is Toni crying to convince me that he is telling the truth? Real wet tears, said Hana.

I am sure your friends will help you prove that you are innocent.

I returned a couple of hours after Hana. Sasha and I spent the night drinking and arguing. She is a vindictive person.

Do you think Sasha killed Hana.

She was with me when Hana was killed.

Did she get Jan and Ted to kill Hana?

Jan is after Sasha's money. I hate the cunning bastard but he had no reason to kill Hana.

Hana had a premonition that something dreadful was going to happen. She was running away from a woman with a stick.

I tried to make it up to Hana, I really did. Maybe I should have never married her. She was too good for me.

Who else knew that you were with Sasha?

Ted knew. Possibly Jan. I don't think that Ted would cover up for anyone. I don't know if Sasha told anybody else. Ted became a pawn in Jan's schemes.

Would Jan frame you to get rid of you?

Hana probably recognised the car and wanted to stop it. It makes sense. Whoever was driving for whatever reason simply did not stop. She was thrown off the road and he went on his way. He had no way of knowing that Hana would be on that road. But why my car?

The driver of the car must have told the police about the bloodstains. He wanted to frame you.

That's it, we must find out who informed the police, Toni cheers up. It shouldn't be too hard. It must be someone we know. It must have been done on the phone. I have to talk to my lawyer.

One way or another, the truth will come out.

Please stay with me, begs Toni. I need you now. You understand me. I should never have let you go. I never forgot what we had.

We had nothing.

If we could only turn back the clock. Toni looks at me with tears in his eyes. It would be so easy to comfort him. I place my hands on the cold glass to cover Toni's hands. There is a cold barrier between us, there always was. Just as well we can only touch the glass partition. Toni once saved my life. He once kissed me. I have never experienced anything like that again. The light was turned on and my life became illuminated. Everything had a miraculous glow until I found Hana and Toni kissing under that cherry tree.

For a brief moment Toni and I returned into that moment when we were still so undamaged.

I am going home. I wish you all the best, I say. He must not see me cry.

You were the best thing that happened to me, he whispers.

I did not happen.

I am glad to leave Toni behind. I do not have to agonise whether he is telling the truth. Nothing will bring back my beautiful sister. He is welcome to say whatever he wants. He is not real. A sense of freedom overwhelms me. Toni is nothing to me.

Toni and Hana were the prince and the princess who lived in the magic land happily ever after. I lived in the safety of Hana's shadow. Maybe Stan lived in Toni's shadow. We were the spectators of their heroics and shared in their glory while we plodded on with our ordinary lives. My father told us that one finds the magic land within himself. Perhaps my magic land is my family in Australia.

I will never know what was going on in Hana's head and heart. She took all her thoughts with her.

It's time for us to go home, says Stan.

The whole family comes to say goodbye. There is a family likeness, the names are familiar; there is a common language. The places we created in each others hearts and homes will be quickly filled with other things. Something old and something new and great empty distances in between.

Stan is homesick, I tell my family.

It will be good to leave all this behind, I say to Stan.

Our past is here but the only past for our children is in Australia. Stan and I are the only family they have. Deep inside I carried regrets because I deprived my children of their rightful home and family but now I know that home is where you blossom. My children blossomed in Australia.

I wonder what my children remember. Maybe I should have taken time to get to know the people that touched my children with words and actions. Maybe I should know the secret, sacred places they remember in their silent intimate moments. Maybe I should walk into their magic land. Or maybe I shouldn't. This is their chapter of life, their blossoming. I only provided the nourishment for them to blossom. Everybody only has one chance to experience the magic world of becoming.

I provided the house and the garden where our children may have found whatever home is meant to be. My blossoming produced fruit to sustain theirs. There must be a familiar corner in my garden where my boys stored their memories for safekeeping; where they left bits of themselves and of

their childhood. They carry with them the words that were part of their becoming. I wonder what part of me they carry to pass on to the next chapter of life. Stan and I were a family and a nation for our children.

Something old and something new.

Chinese carried the bones of their ancestors so they would not be strangers in the new country. I carry memories. I will tell my grandchildren about my father's magic land. Perhaps they found magic land on the computer.

With your eyes open you see distances and obstacles, dad said, but close your eyes and you become a part of the tapestry of life where every colour and every fragment is equally important.

It does not matter what part I play because all the parts are equally significant in the tapestry of life.

I visit Hana's grave before we leave. She rests next to my father and mother.

Hana had everything to live for, says Tereza.

The bastard should rot in hell, says Stan.

Nobody asks which bastard.

Until we meet amongst angels, mum had inscribed in the stone on dad's grave.

Nothing ever touched me as much as the words of my parents and the beauty of my sister. I have to believe that there is another life, another chance to be whatever we are meant to be. Redemption and afterlife is all we need to believe in.

I am glad we came, I say to Stan.

Maybe we would never come if it wasn't for Toni.

I still hope that he is innocent.

Don't waste your sympathies on Toni.

I think he loved Hana.

He had a funny way of showing it.

Janez and Sofija believe that Toni is innocent.

There is a chance that Sasha and Toni were in the car that killed Hana, says Stan on the plane. Maybe they only intended to tell Hana that they will get married.

Perhaps it was an accident.

We will never know.

The truth finds a way to the surface.

I love Australia, I say as our plane circles over Canberra again. The tranquillity of the Australian Capital Territory feels good after the hustle and bustle of Europe.

It is great to be home again, says Stan.

This is home, I say as my eyes embrace the city we helped build and change. Canberra grew up with us.

Can you imagine that this was a sheep paddock when we were born, says Stan.

Canberra is spread into the hills and valleys around Lake Burley Griffin. The valleys are a perfect basin for this artificial lake so people can choose to have water views from their homes. The hills give people an opportunity to build their homes high up and enjoy the view over the city.

Canberra was good to us, I say to Stan as we fasten the seat belts for landing.

We have everything we need here, says Stan

This city is a monument to builders like you.

It needed to be built so we built it.

Wherever you drive in Canberra you are likely to spot a house Stan built. European non-English speaking tradesmen built the city for English speaking public servants employed by the government. When we arrived most Australian married women did not go out to work. Migrant women joined the work force and their children grew up almost unnoticed.

I am sorry Paula is not here to look at my snapshots and hear my tales. I realise that I have nobody to tell about the tragedy of Hana's life. Comedies and tragedies on television are more colourful. It is different at home in Slovenia where everybody is related, connected and familiar; they want to know. I got used to my solitary life. One really gets used to anything.

Australians are distracted with the Centenary celebration of the Federation right now. One hundred years of Australian nationhood. We look at the road we travelled and the changes we have seen and made.

Much of Australia was built and changed by the young, eager Europeans. The winds of war scattered us all over the world.

Snowy Mountains Scheme is one such monument to new Australians. Canberra is another, says Stan.

We were part of both.

I am proud.

People listen politely as I tell my travel stories. They are mildly interested in the video we made in memory of our once in a lifetime experience. Our children only took minutes to go through hundreds of snapshots of their relatives and other people who would love to meet them. They barely knew Toni and Hana. They were never touched by Slovenia.

People share world news about terrorism and dangers of new diseases. Wars and threats of wars. Bible groups warn that the end of the world is near.

Tereza writes about events that are still alive in our memory.

The forensic experts checked the car again. They found fresh unknown fingerprints and hair and fibre that did not belong to either Sasha or Toni or Hana. They still did not find the person who drove Toni's car. They let Toni go.

Toni rings from America. He and Sasha are travelling around the world.

They might come to visit, I tell Stan.

I hope not. I had enough of them.

I don't think I could face Toni and Sasha. They mean nothing to me.

Jan and Ted are running the factory, writes Tereza.

Diana was interested in Jan, I say.

I think Jan is interested in Ted, says Stan.

It scares me, I say but Stan does not even ask what it is that scares me.

Nothing to do with us, says Stan.

People are fascinated with crime.

And with criminals, says Stan.

Especially with criminals who get away with murder.

Someone is going to find out the truth, says Stan.

Do you believe that Toni killed Hana?

It makes no difference what I believe. Criminals, politicians, policemen, lawyers, and judges always come out smelling of roses, says Stan.

Sometimes men play dangerously to attract attention, I smile.

Maybe Stan sometimes dreamt about being Toni, about living dangerously and about being admired and adored. Perhaps all we want is to be noticed and loved. Dreams are dreams. Stan would never have done anything dangerous if it wasn't for Toni. Toni pushed him. We are in Australia because Toni sent us here. Maybe ordinary life is something to be grateful for. It gives us a chance to dream about living dangerously and being noble and heroic and different.

Imagination is your greatest treasure, said dad. We can all imagine ourselves being chosen, outstanding and exquisitely unique. In our dreams we create the magic land. We remember. Perhaps remembering is everything.

Nothing lasts forever, says Stan.

Underneath everything else, never spoken about was always the longing for home.

One longs for something and when he gets it he becomes afraid of losing it, said dad. The flower dies but the memory of it's flowering lives on. The magic land is the time of my blossoming and the memory of it is with me wherever I am; a memory of Toni and Hana and my first love.

Like a bridge across the ocean I keep turning back towards Slovenia and look forward to Australia.

I wish I could introduce our children to Slovenia.

Why not, says Stan. It will be something to look forward to. How about that trip around Australia first? We could spend some time with our grandchildren, says Stan.

It's time we really came home, I smile.

The letters from home keep coming. Ted is finally in prison for drug trafficking and people smuggling. Jan disappeared. Toni and Sasha returned from their trip and Sasha took over the business, writes Emil. Toni retired. He had a beautiful monument made for Hana. Ted's friend Robert confessed that Sasha paid him to kill Freddy. They arrested Sasha. Robert also confessed that Sasha told him to check if Hana was home while she and Toni were together. Killing Hana was an accident. Sasha is out on bail. She denies ever seeing Robert. There is no evidence that she was involved.

I am glad it is all behind us, says Stan.

Every day these events seem less important and further away.

Walk lightly into the world, said my father, because the world is constantly changing. Let it pass and change. It changed in my lifetime beyond recognition. It will change in yours even more and faster. There is a reason for everything that happens; accept the reason and what happens. Change as the world changes, but hold onto the magic land within where your favourite blossoms are kept.

Nobody took any notice of my father because they knew that dying people become strange. I wonder if his words follow anybody as they follow me. Maybe he spoke them for me. Maybe he had nothing else to give me so he offered me the legacy of his words. Going to Slovenia was really returning into the enchanted world of my childhood.

What memories are my children carrying from their growing up in the untouched vastness and timeless sameness of Australian countryside? Who knows what their children will remember in the changed future. One only carries a memory of change.

God sees and knows all, mum said. She found God after dad died.

Of course he does, humans only do what God intended them to do. Ants do the same. Do other living things crave love like people do? Do they wonder about the meaning of life during sleepless nights?

With my eyes open I see the beautiful creation but when I close my eyes God settles into the place he created for himself in my soul.

We follow our partners and then our children and then our grandchildren. In the end we hope that they will follow us.

My father

I've known Marie and her husband Henry for years. Henry and my husband Jack have a successful Information Technology business. Jack wanted me to work in their office but I am not an office girl; I like to negotiate and sell rather than push paper. To be truthful, I don't like to take orders from anybody.

I have a real estate business so I can choose my hours. It gives me time for my adorable husband, and our three lovely daughters. Michele is finishing high school. Eliza has another year to go and then there is baby Natasha in kindergarten.

My back, my back, moans Jack in agony lying on the floor of our bedroom. I call to the girls to help me get him to bed.

What happened?

I was putting a sock on when my back snapped.

Michele calls the doctor. I ring my work and Jack's work to tell them that we won't be in.

Michele takes Natasha to school. She became a deputy mother to her baby sister.

It's been a week now and Jack is still bedridden. A chiropractor manipulates his back and tells him about the sciatic nerve pressing on the muscles sending pain down his leg. It is hard to believe that my six foot tall forty five years old husband can't get out of bed but it is rather cosy being in bed with him in the middle of the day.

Marie and I are both in our thirties and we feel free to say to each other what we think. She came to cheer Jack but she stays to chat with me. We sit with a cup of coffee for about fifteen minutes most days to catch up on the news.

These days you go to buy milk and you have to choose: soy or coconut, cow or goat, full cream or skim, long life or short, pasteurised or not, cholesterol reduced, flavoured or enriched, recites Marie pouring skim milk into her cup.

By the time you choose the one you want, you become worried that you made the wrong choice. We came a long way since we had one kind of milk one kind of man and one kind of God.

Do you believe in God, asks Marie suddenly.

God almighty! Doesn't everybody?

But how do you know which God is the right one?

The one you believe in.

Sonia brought some papers for you to sign, I call to Jack a few days later.

Bring them up, yells Jack.

Sonia is waiting in the lounge room.

Would you like some coffee or a cold drink while you are waiting, I say as I return.

Coffee would be nice.

Sonia is like a wildflower. Her green eyes are dancing under the long curled eyelashes. I see no trace of make up on her face. She seems as natural as a dewdrop. I know how hard it is to look natural. Women notice other beautiful women. Men become attracted to something in a woman but I don't think they ever appreciate the whole symmetry of her features.

Sonia has been my husband's secretary for over a year but we only met on a few occasions.

Here we go... A stabbing pain in my chest stops me in the mid-sentence as I lean over the coffee table. I almost drop the cup.

Are you all right, says Sonia?

Fine, fine... A bit of pain in my back as well. Must have pulled a muscle as I hauled Jack to bed.

I am trying to keep my eyes from Sonia's heart shaped pendant with a small opal in the middle. Sonia's long fingers twirl the pendant absent-mindedly and finally drop it to rest under the loosely open navy silk blouse.

Are you sure?

I will be fine.

Nice coffee.

Thanks. I like the design of your pendant.

Sonia caught my eyes following its disappearance between her slightly exposed breasts.

Oh, thanks. It's a gift. Sentimental value.

From your boyfriend?

Sort of.

It matches your eyes.

He said that opal represents hope.

What is he hoping for?

To live happily ever after I suppose. Isn't that what we all hope for?

To get you to sleep with him, more likely, says a voice in me but I try to smile sweetly for now.

Ever been married?

Marriage is not my priority. It used to be in your time, I suppose, smiles Sonia.

Well, marriage and family, yes, it was. It still is for most.

The bitch is telling me that I am an old woman.

Men try to talk you into things you don't want, smiles Sonia. If they think that you want to get married they run but as soon as you announce that you are not a marrying type they pester you about the body clock ticking and the time to make babies.

Do you want to make babies?

If the right man comes along.

There must be someone very special.

There always is, special for different reasons.

Sonia's eyes are cold and sad. I want her to be scared because I just decided that I am going to kill her.

Men don't like independent women, I smile. How dare she parade my opal in front of me?

I don't worry about what men like; Sonia sweeps her wildly bushy blond hair back.

Jack loved my hair when it was bushy and long like yours, I compliment Sonia. But when he pulled a hair out of the cake I baked, he said: Your hair is not my piece of cake. He now prefers short hair.

I am not trying to impress anyone, says Sonia.

The bitch is lying, of course.

I think I saw a pendant like that at the jewellers, I lie.

Keep talking, keep saying things. I have to convince myself that there is a heart shaped pendant with an opal waiting for me on my birthday. I saw it in Jack's pocket before he injured his back.

I am turning forty in a couple of weeks, I smile.

You don't look it, says Sonia but I know what she thinks.

Would you like to join us for a little celebration?

Are you sure?

It is a surprise party really.

I'd love to.

Bring a friend if you like.

I hope to poison the bitch with my birthday cake. It will also give me a chance to gather evidence. I am going to keep a close eye on Sonia.

Henry phones to reassure Jack that the business is doing fine. With seven other employees it almost runs itself.

I am sick of staying home, says Jack as Sonia brings more paperwork.

Give it until my birthday at least. It is only a couple of days.

I lost all sense of time, says Jack. I have to get you a gift.

Leave it all to me and pretend that you arranged it.

I love you, says Jack. We cuddle up and make love but I hear a worm of suspicion noisily chewing my brain. This man, Jack, whom I know so intimately gave his secretary the pendant which I believed was to be a surprise present for me. I want to strangle Sonia's neck. I want any unfaithful thought cut out of Jack's heart with the razor. I have no idea what I am going to do when the time comes. Jack and I love each other. My three girls adore daddy. They know how to make him laugh and sing and dance. They take notice of daddy. When he is not pleased they want to please him. They don't know that Jack betrayed us.

I try to convince myself that there is an explanation but I am afraid to ask for it. I am afraid that Jack will tell me that he does not love me any more. I am also afraid that he would deny it and I would always know that he lied. Maybe Jack is waiting for an opportunity to tell me that he is leaving.

Jack and I took each other for granted.

I remember when Jack and I were swimming, daring each other to go further into the surf. The ocean used to be our playground until the day the undertow caught us. The waves tossed us into the sand bottom and lifted us onto another wave. We were toys the ocean played with. It could do anything with us or to us. Jack and I were drowning. I called God. I am not a praying person. I just called God. When I finally collapsed on the beach I thanked God. Jack also collapsed on the beach. He could not save me. We could not help each other.

We shouldn't take the ocean for granted, said Jack.

Or life, I smiled through tears of relief.

I am drowning again.

I should never take happiness for granted. Or love. Or family. Why has Jack stopped loving me? What have I done? I try to rub out the memory of Sonia's pendant but the knowledge surfaces regularly like a knife stab.

Henry brings a bottle of champagne and Marie gives me a beautiful cup with European spring flowers on it for my surprise birthday party. She knows I love cups. When one has everything one wants, one begins to collect certain items just for fun.

Sonia brings me an abstract painting.

I smile and kiss everybody like the opal pendant never happened. Smiles camouflage all sorts of catastrophes.

Damian brings chocolates and a bottle of champagne.

I haven't seen Damian since I was thirteen, I introduce my childhood friend. He came into my office a few days ago. We went to school together.

It has been a long time, said Damian.

A lifetime, I said as we hugged.

My daughters baked an exquisite cake. They decorated the house with love heart balloons and flowers. I am so lucky. The intensity of happiness brings tears to my eyes.

I light the candles and then blow them all in one huge blow while my friends sing happy birthday. Jack and I hug and kiss. Our girls join the circle and we kiss each other. Henry takes a photo. A picture of total bliss.

I look at Sonia for a reaction. She is talking to Damian. The bitch is pretending.

The bell rings. There is a young man at the door. A special delivery for the birthday lady, he says. A bouquet and a small parcel with the card. I breathe deeply into the scented roses.

Don't keep us in suspense. Open your present, calls Henry.

How beautifully romantic, says Marie.

Who is it from? Says Damian.

I read the card: Happy birthday darling. I love you.

Who do you think?

I open the tiny parcel. In the black velvet box is a platinum heart shaped pendant with a ruby.

Oh, darling, just what I always wanted, I kiss Jack.

Life begins at forty, says Marie.

I am determined to make that true, I laugh.

I am glad nobody knows about Sonia's opal. I simply can't put into words what I know. I shudder.

Can I have a look at your opal, says Damian to Sonia after my ruby passed inspection. Damian takes Sonia's pendant into the palm of his hand and turns it this way and that so its colour moves and changes.

I love opals. They fascinate me; no two opals are the same, says Damian.

They say that opal brings bad luck, says Marie.

Only to those that don't have it, laughs Damian.

What do you mean, says Marie.

Miners rely on luck in Lightning Ridge. The unlucky don't find opal and remain poor.

I heard that it cracks, says Marie.

The pure Lightning Ridge black opal does not crack. If it isn't pure or if it does not sit on black backing, it might crack eventually.

Or if you hit it with a hammer, laughs Marie.

It's fragile like most precious things, says Damian. With care it lasts forever.

Damian tells us that he studied gemmology and has spent time in Lightning Ridge, the home of black opal. He would eventually like to become an opal miner/collector/buyer.

Tall, blond, and adventurous. Where did you hide him? Whispers Marie as we look at Damien and Sonia connected with her gold chain.

We went to school together.

Maybe opal pendant will bring Sonia and Damien together. Damian is an eligible bachelor. His boyish figure and mischievous smile make him desirable. I invited him on the spur of the moment. Maybe I hoped to make Jack jealous. Maybe he is jealous of Damien and Sonia. I must play this right.

My ruby pendant is forgotten. I am forgotten. Sonia has stolen my attention. I need attention. This is my birthday. I arranged my own party and my own gift but I can not give myself the attention I deserve. I need a double dose of attention. I don't feel loved enough.

Damian, Henry and Jack become instant friends. They are about the same age, they share the interest in electronics; they are businessmen. They begin discussing sport and games.

Damian comes to see me a week after my party. He wants to buy a house.

What made you choose Rovena?

I have to settle down somewhere. It's not too far from Linden and about the same size.

Another little satellite to Dubbo. I show him what is on the market. We drive around and stop for coffee in my favourite cafeteria. The flood of memories brings us into the enchanted kingdom of our childhood. Our homes, games, friends, dreams, first flirtations and all the pre-kissed fantasies. Damian reminds me of who I was and where I came from before I met Jack who changed my life. For the better.

Damian is a couple of years older; he used to be my prince charming. I dreamed little girl's dreams of living happily ever after with Damian.

How big is your family, I ask as we inspect the houses.

At least three children. I would also like to have a wife.

Forty-two and not married. That's amazing.

I lived with a girlfriend for a few years but she wanted to get married and I just could not make up my mind. She left and married and had three children in three years.

You missed out.

I am glad she left because seeing her so happy helped me to decide to get married.

Who is the lucky lady?

I am in between as they say.

Not for long I am sure.

We must catch up on the old times and Linden.

I haven't been back since I left. I am rather homesick all of a sudden, I admit. Linden will always be home although I have no one there now.

Those unforgettable days, says Damian.

I forgot about Linden. No, I packed Linden in the soft tissue paper and put it away like brides store their wedding dresses. Sealed in the plastic bag taped over in the box forever. Never to be used again. A treasure in the memory bank.

I wonder how many wedding dresses lay forgotten in the attic. I found a wedding album on the rubbish tip the other day. How many wedding albums end there? Much of life ends on the rubbish tip. There is no room for sentimentality.

You left suddenly, says Damian.

Mum enrolled me at the boarding school in Sydney.

Everybody comes home from time to time to reconnect. We might organise a reunion, says Damian.

For the first time I hear temptation knocking. To be a child again at the beginning of this journey; to do it again. While there is still time. Before aging.

Damian does not know why I left Linden. Even I don't know. Dad left. I saw tears in dad's eyes as he kissed me goodbye. How could he abandon me so suddenly without explanation? I cried for my father. He has been there for me every step of the way. He read me stories, he bought me toys, and he played with me. He was my hero. My dad was the best dad any girl could wish for.

After dad left, Frank and his dog moved in with mum. Frank was my father's German friend. Mum eventually married him and they moved to Sydney. I have little contact with them.

Years later I told mum that I want to find dad.

You are big enough now to know that he is not your real father, explained mum. Your dad is a man I met while I worked in the Bank's Canberra branch.

I felt betrayed and abandoned. I packed my childhood in a soft tissue paper then and never discussed it with anybody again.

I finished high school and an interior decorator's course when Jack came into my life like a welcome drop of rain from a clear sky. We met at the dance and I married him in a state of euphoria six months later and three months pregnant. Jack became the best husband any girl could wish for. And the best father to our three girls. I love Jack. Our girls adore him. Everything was right with the world until Sonia appeared.

I might open a business here; Damian brings me back to the present.

What sort?

Selling, I suppose. I always liked buying and selling. I have some knowledge about art and antiques and hardware and even jewellery.

What's the occasion, calls Jack because I spent an eternity dressing and undressing, arranging my face and my hair.

Have nothing to wear, I say. How is your back?

Much better. Give me a hand to get up.

You smell delicious, says Jack. He pulls me down and we laugh. He pulls the doona over our heads and breathes into my ear. He knows my body; he discovered every spot that excites me. I try to move out and we struggle playfully until I could no longer resist.

Phone, says Jack.

Let it ring, I say. I touch every spot that excites Jack. We work like a Swiss clock, said Jack once. I hold onto Jack after we both made it on a well known road to heaven. The wellbeing of our union still brings tears to my eyes.

It's been too long, says Jack.

I taste his hard salty body as he holds my head tight on his chest. I feel him coming alive again. This time we go slowly using every trick of our favourite game, as Jack used to say long ago. I pretend to fall asleep and he goes over my body in search of the wake up button. When I can hold out no longer Jack says goodnight and I begin to wake him into action. We enjoy our fresh new romance, a fragrance of spring almost. That's how life should be. Cover up the past with the doona and start

again and again and again. Like the spring that comes again and again. And the cherry blossoms. And the future all bright in front of us. I love this boyish man who makes me feel beautiful and a little naughty.

You better get this, says Jack as the phone rings for the third time.

I will be right over, I say into the phone.

Damian wants me to help him choose the curtains for the house, I say at the door. I feel guilty leaving Jack.

I believed that Jack and I had what is called a solid marriage. We give each other freedom to do what we like during the workday and in the evening we are happy to come together and tell each other everything. I never had secrets. Now I have a secret. Jack's secret.

You look radiant, says Marie. Must be your childhood sweetheart.

Damian and I were children when we last saw each other.

That's what I said. Childhood sweethearts.

Jack has an affair, I blurt out.

Never.

He doesn't know that I know.

It did not happen. You could bet on Jack.

I would die if he told me that it is true. It would destroy us.

Who is she?

I don't want to name her until I am sure but she is ten years younger. How can I compete?

How can he compete with young boys that will want to sleep with her? A time will come when he will question his potency and his looks.

I saw him looking for grey hair. He was flexing his muscles in front of the mirror.

I don't want to confront Jack because I don't want it to be true. Maybe divorce is in the genes. Like mother like daughter. Nothing happened as long as Jack and I pretend that it did not happen.

Sonja's pendant is dangling in front of me as soon as I close my eyes.

Were you ever unfaithful, asks Marie.

Maybe in my mind. I don't dare tell Marie that I fantasise about Damian before I go to sleep. I force myself to think of something other than Jack and Sonia. I know that one day soon it will all come out in the open and hit me.

It's good to let the bastards know that you can be tempted.

I never played games with Jack.

Games are a distraction on the way to old age.

Maybe Jack needs to be distracted from aging.

I see aging in Marie's face. She has no grey in her blond hair, her skin shows no wrinkles but the aging is obvious. Marie's lips seem thinner; her blue eyes turned grey, her skin is tired. We are the same age. Aging. Like flowers before you throw them on the compost heap.

Maybe Jack has noticed aging. There is a panic light flickering. Did we achieve everything we wanted to achieve? Did we succeed? Were we loved enough? Are we loved enough?

Women paint their faces to cover despair. Nobody cares what is underneath the gloss and powder.

Pamper the skin, stretch it, tighten it, cleanse, moisturise and hide the blemishes, says Marie.

However tight the bum, however big the boobs, however small the waist, once you are old nobody cares.

We laugh, very close to tears, both of us for different reasons.

I can't believe that you never married, I say to Damian casually as we shop for the furnishing for his new house.

I was waiting for you, he says with a laugh.

Oh, right. For thirty years.

One true love, he mocks seriousness.

We go from shop to shop, sit at different tables and on different couches.

We look like an old married couple, says Damian. He rolls on the bed and pulls me playfully to test it with him.

Look at the time. Almost lunchtime.

Let's go home and get something to eat; I'd like to show you something, says Damian.

You must have had it all planned, I tease as Damian brings out a lovely platter of goodies from the fridge.

Always prepared is my scout's motto, smiles Damian. He puts on the video he made when he was last in Linden. My home, his home, the tree where we built a cubby house, the riverbank. It almost brings tears to my eyes. Damian remembers what I remember.

Damian opens a bottle of wine. Here is to Rovená, our new home-town. Damian kisses me playfully with his lips still tasting of wine.

What was that for?

I always wanted to do that.

Why?

I wanted to know what it feels like.

What does it feel like?

It feels like what I thought it would feel.

We remember the places and people. We laugh at silly things we did. We travel into our childhood. It is a glorious childhood; safe and warm. There is no Jack and no Sonia.

Damian does not know that I am scared of losing Jack; that I want to kill Sonia. He does not know that I don't feel loved enough. Or maybe he does. His hand is over my shoulder, his lips are tempestuously close. I like the smell of Damian. I remember that smell. It is part of my growing up. He used to hold me when I cried because I had to leave Linden. We never kissed before.

I am glad Damian does not know why I left home. He knows nothing about my father. He doesn't know that I do not know my real father.

Damian puts the music on and like in a dream I hear the song we used to sing when we were young. Seasons in the sun, I whisper in his ear. We begin to hum the words and stand up to dance. Half intoxicated we hold onto each other; our cheeks hot and our bodies melting into each other. We see the world from up high.

Those were the days, whispers Mike. His lips are brushing my cheeks. I can not move away. We are in our enchanted world.

Skinned our hearts and skinned our knees, I remember the words of the song.

I was the black sheep of the family, sings Damian.

We had joy, we had fun we had seasons in the sun, we both sing the chorus.

But the stars we have reached were the starfish on the beach.

We had joy we had fun we had seasons in the sun but the hills that we climbed were just seasons out of time.

Goodbye papa please pray for me I was the black sheep of the family; you tried to teach me right from wrong; too much wine and too much song; I wonder how I got along.

We had joy we had fun, we had seasons in the sun but the wine and the song like the seasons have all gone.

Damian is kissing the tears running down my face.

Too much wine.

To seasons in the sun, toasts Damian.

Too much wine and too much song I don't know how we got along.

To wine and song.

I haven't heard the song since I left Linden.

I often hear it in my mind.

We both liked it.

We were both very different people then.

We travel on a memory lane to our other life. We are back home. We hold hands and giggle like children do. We revisit the people we once were. We only know each other as we were then. The many other persons we became are forgotten. Tears of joy are running into our kissing as we give in to a desire to make love.

We are still in bed as the brick breaks through the window.

I jump up in a terrified panic. The curtains are drawn but the glass from a smashed window is all over the carpet. I look out and see Jack's car leaving.

You didn't even lock the door.

I never lock the door, says Damian.

Did Jack come in and see us making love. Did he hear us giggling in bed intoxicated by wine and lust and nostalgia?

Damian offers to come with me but I don't want Damian. I have to find Jack. Jack is my life, my soul mate, my family, and my best friend.

I ring Jack's office. Nobody answers. I ring Jack's mobile. It's switched off. I ring Henry. He says that he and Sonia are waiting for us. Jack went to get me.

I drive home and pray out loud: I beg you God I beg you. I promise it will never happen again. Please God help me. I played my triumph ace and lost. I can not cry. I shake uncontrollably.

Girls are home from school. They giggle as they spread things on toast. Hi mum. They don't look at me. They don't know that the world ended.

I need a shower. I need the solitary confinement to scrub away the last hour. I want to die. I deserve to die.

What have I done? I went to bed with Damian for no reason at all. It wasn't me; it was a girl from Linden who never met Jack. Damian and I don't know each other apart from Linden. He is nothing to me. It was just a game, a drunken orgy. How can I ever explain that I had sex in the middle of a sunny day; in the middle of a happy marriage?

Dad is late, says Michele.

He had to go away; I say buying time before my execution. I want to be dead. I have a splitting headache.

I don't feel well. Can you get some dinner for the girls? I ask Michele.

I take two sleeping pills and wake up at three in the morning. Early morning hours are sobering. I walk into the garden and sit on the bench doubled into a foetal position. I need my mother. Like mother like daughter. The sins of the mothers. I have to find my father. Which father? I need to know my father.

In the morning I ring my mother. Micka who, says the sleepy voice in the phone. My mother obviously forgot my name and my voice. Maybe she forgot that I exist. Sorry for waking you. What time is it? Six. Is everything all right. What happened. Mum is becoming awake to danger. I need to see you. Tell me what happened. Not on the phone. Are girls all right. Can you come over. Frank left for work. My car is in the garage being serviced. Who is my father? Not that again. I have to find him. I have no idea where he is. Give me his name. I want to know everything you know about him. I need him. He does not know that you exist. He couldn't even speak English when we met. What language did he speak? Slovenian. He is probably dead. What was his last address? Maybe someone in the Slovenian club in Canberra knows about him. I called him Mick. In the club they called him Mirko Gornik; Or something like that. I only knew him for a short time while I worked in the bank's Canberra branch. Did you always know that I was his daughter? Toni could not have children. Should I be grateful to mum and this man Mick or whatever his name is. I would not be here if they didn't, if it did not happen. I have to find Mick. Maybe it was meant to be. Maybe life is preordained. I hope someone is in charge. Once long ago mum said that she named me Micka after my father's family but I never asked what family. So she turned Mick into Micka.

Michele gets breakfast for the girls and walks with them to school. Thank God they have no idea. I want to buy time before they realise that their lives have changed forever.

I feel paralysed. I need my father. Dad loved me; he kissed me goodbye although he didn't talk to mum. Only he knew that he wasn't my dad. Was mum jealous? Did she love him? She knew that he had no right to love me.

I ring mum again. What did dad say when you told him that I am not his daughter. Pause, silence. When did you tell him? Forget it. Forget Toni. He is nothing to you. You are lucky I got rid of the bastard before he could really ruin your life. What did he do? Thank God I stopped him. Actually Frank stopped him. What did you stop him from? Frank caught Toni touching you. Frank told me. I threatened to go to the police if Toni ever showed his face around you again. I don't believe you. I want to talk to dad. I want to hear it from him. Toni didn't bother denying it. He just packed his bag and I never saw him again. So Frank moved in. We should all be grateful to Frank. I hate Frank. I want my real father.

Mick returned to Lightning Ridge years ago. Haven't heard from him for ages, says the barman of the Slovenian club in Canberra when I ring.

He hasn't got a phone on because he lives on the field, says Lightning Ridge postmistress.

I feel a little stronger knowing that somewhere on the Lightning Ridge opal fields is a man who is responsible for my being. Just knowing that my father exists is a comfort. I try to convince myself that he will be delighted to meet me, his daughter.

I ring Jack's office. Henry wants to meet me after work. We have to talk. Where is Jack? I will tell you everything when we meet.

I think Jack slept at Sonia's, says Henry as we settle in the café. I almost feel relieved knowing that Jack and Sonia cheated before I did.

He was heartbroken so Sonia offered him her spare room.

I know about Jack and Sonia, I tell Henry. I saw the opal pendant in his pocket before he gave it to the bitch.

He didn't, says Henry. He kept it for me. I gave it to Sonia. I didn't dare bring it home because Marie would raise hell if she found it. Sonia and I went away on business for a couple of days. I wanted to thank her for the extra work she did.

Oh, sure, did she do overtime in bed?

Sonia told me that she loves Jack. She always wanted Jack but he loved you.

Where is Jack now?

I suppose he is recovering at Sonia's. Yesterday we decided to go for lunch so Jack went to get you. When he returned he was in shock. He got drunk so Sonia offered to drive him home, says Henry.

To her home. He is with her, I confirm the fact to myself. I have to hear it again and again.

I don't think they are sleeping together or anything like that. Jack is heartbroken. What exactly happened? I couldn't make any sense of him, says Henry.

Nothing. Nothing happened. It was nothing, I keep on rubbing out the isolated minutes of my life.

I ring Sonia and ask to speak to Jack. There is a pause. Just a minute. I hear whispers from the other end. Jack does not want to talk to you.

I am coming over, you fucking slut.

Look who's talking. Bring Damian along as well. Sarcasm, cold mocking condemnation. The bitch is victorious.

You will never have Jack. He loves me, I yell into the phone.

Don't worry about me, Sonia hangs up.

I have to pick the pieces of the family I broke in an insane moment. I have to beg for mercy from the one I believed wrecked my family.

Damian comes to my office. We stare at each other like we have never seen each other before. Damian hugs me as I cry for Jack.

I have never done it before, I plead but it isn't Damian I should be pleading with.

Did he?

I thought he did.

We'll work something out.

What could we possibly work out?

I thought you liked me.

Of course I like you. I always liked you.

Maybe it is for the best then. It's like I was waiting for you all my life. It was meant to happen.

What about the children?

They will get used to it in time. Children do these days. They grow up and go.

I should be telling Damian to go away but I need someone to share my guilt. How many stupid reasons are there for people to stay together?

We share so much, says Damian.

We remember the first buds of love that never had the opportunity to bloom; we reignited that first chapter of our lives with such ease. I am scared that our story will end as abruptly as it began.

I ring Sonia again. I have to talk to Jack about the children. It is urgent

I'll ask him, concedes Sonia. I am waiting. He has nothing to say to you.

He will miss his daughters. We are his family.

I just decided that it is my time to make babies, hisses Sonia.

My daughters will curse you for the rest of your life. You stole my family.

Jack's children will always be welcome in my home.

I will kill Sonia. I need my father.

In the afternoon I find Jack in his office. I ask for a few minutes of his time. I beg him not to tell the girls. They don't have to deal with it. Don't punish them. Do anything you like to me but don't punish our girls. Should have thought about it before you spread your legs. I am not used to horrible words from my darling Jack.

People these days don't take sex as seriously as they used to. It was only sex, for God's sake. I love you Jack. Yell at me, hit me, talk to me, I beg you, talk to me, we have a family. No, we have no family. We don't exist. What about the girls? What will you tell them? I'll leave it to you to tell them whatever you like. They'll hear about it; eventually they will figure it out. Nothing remains hidden forever so you better own up soon or you might lose them as well. You want to take my children? They can decide who they want to live with. Talk to my solicitor from now on. I beg you to forgive me, it meant nothing, it will never happen again, please forgive me. Give us some time. It was nothing. You risked our family for nothing? I am sorry. Give me some credit. I love you. You surely are not that callous. I believed that you gave Sonia.. Oh, spare me the details. So you wanted to punish me before I had a chance of defending myself. My conscience is clear. I suspected. If you can't trust me after twenty years... You didn't tell me about the opal. You didn't ask. I was tempted, surely I was tempted but I would never do it to you. Now I can do as I like.

The exchanged words are dancing on my grave. How could something so meaningless destroy everything we had. Sex is everywhere, it means nothing. Men can say that it meant nothing but women can't. What about equality? It had nothing to do with our family.

I tell our girls that mummy and daddy have problems and that daddy found a room at Sonia's.

My girls mope around the house. I read it in their eyes that I am the criminal who wrecked the family. I want to pack the suitcase and escape. What would I put in a suitcase?

Daddy came to see me at school, says Michelle. He wants us to stay with him for the weekend.

He can come home to be with you.

He does not want to, thanks to you. Michele slams the door on my reasoning and the girls leave with an overnight bag.

What did Jack say, what does Michele know, who told her? I will have to explain one day but not now. There is no explanation just a guilty plea. Will Sonia tell them? Maybe Sonia is smarter than I am. Maybe she learned from my experience.

Damian comes every day. I am grateful for his support. I have no sexual desire, no desire for personal survival, no need for wealth or fame or power. I am not swayed in any particular direction. It meant nothing. It was nothing. I wanted to be loved. I did not feel loved enough. Jack was everything to me. We were everything to each other. Jack needs to be loved and Sonia loves him. I love him.

The empty weekend is staring at me. I am not used to an empty house. I am not used to not being loved. I am glad to have Damian.

Meditation is a survival technique, I read somewhere. I go to bed and read the instructions.

Close your eyes, relax, think of your toes and fingers relaxing, breathe deeply, become aware of breathing; become alive within. Become an island happily nesting in the ocean, merge with eternity,

let peace descend. Become a part of a whole, wrap yourself into the blanket of the universe; of womanhood; nationhood, race hood, human hood, motherhood. Shield yourself against individuality.

I believed that Jack loved Sonia. Now he does.

I take a sleeping pill. And another. To make the time pass. Dreams are blurred thoughts. I am awake with my eyelids shut. I create visions of green valleys and birds and clear streams. Keep my eyes shut. No embarrassment, no anger, no jealousy no guilt. No Sonia. Clear streams and birds and blue of the sky and the ocean behind my eyelids.

I see mum and dad laughing, splashing in the ocean. Dad puts me on his shoulders to swim with him. Put her down, yells mum. She likes it, says dad. I said put her down. Mum's voice is angry. Why doesn't she let dad swim with me. Dad swims to the shore. The pictures are blurred. I open my eyes.

Come home Jack. It was nothing. I didn't mean to hurt you. I love you. I always loved you.

Damian is comforting me. He was comforting me before mum took me to Sydney boarding school; when she got rid of dad. She wanted Frank. Toni is not your real father, said mum. He is, I argued. I love daddy. Frank will be your father now. I hate Frank. Behave yourself.

I started smoking when mum left me at the boarding school. I smoked hiding in the toilets. Jack did not like me smoking so I stopped. Now it does not matter. I don't matter. I hold onto the packet of cigarettes like children hold onto their teddy bears. Damian smokes.

Smoking is a sign of deterioration of one's life. Shame. Like adultery. Sin. Sex. I hide my sins. I pat a packet in my pocket. A promise of a better future. In the isolation I inhale and exhale and do it again and again until I become congested with the feeling of being OK. There is an unhappy person behind every cigarette.

I need counselling; I need an anonymous stranger to take away my guilt. The receptionist schedules my appointment.

I started smoking again, I confess to Miss Smart counsellor of pouting lips and sexy voice who smiles professionally, patronisingly. Cool smile to fit her cool professional suit and stilettos. I hate her. Oh, be sensible, how can I hate a stranger? She makes notes. I have to be careful. Can the councillor recommend the removal of my children from my custody? I haven't been to a confession since I left Linden. I need to confess. Careful. I must not cry. Stability, control, balance.

I pat the pack of cigarettes in my pocket and think of the rosy future when I will puff again.

I want to find my father, I say.

I came to confess infidelity. Everybody's infidelity. I need to repair my family. Be cool and in control.

I always wanted to find my father. Why did I change my mind?

Have you ever met your father? I had a father but he wasn't a real father. Mum was unfaithful to him. When did she tell you? When she packed him out of our lives. Why? I don't know. She wanted Frank. Do you like Frank? We hate each other. You are lucky that Frank saved you, said mum. Frank told me. Did your dad harm you? He loved me.

Why now?

I need him. Now.

Why now?

My husband left me. He is with his secretary, I begin to cry. It is easier to confess Jack's sins. Mum's sins. Frank's sins. Dad's sins.

The perfectly young attractive, intelligent, successful psychologist hands me a tissue box. I sniff hard, take a deep breath, and recover control and balance. What would this perfect stranger know?

Is she only pretending to be perfect? Are we all pretending all the time so the world can only see perfection? Do we all hide our flaws?

On the way home I think about Jack. He is my husband, my friend, my lover, the father of our children, a breadwinner, a storyteller, a driver, a holiday-maker, a gardener, a comforter, a cheerleader. Jack is the proof of my perfect marriage, my loving family. I want Jack to protect our warm nest for our children's children; I want him to have Sunday dinners with my grandchildren's families.

I only had sex with Damian. Jack only had sex with Sonia. If he did. It was a fling if it was, a dare, an adventure... Insanity. Shooting star, shining one minute and dead the next.

I buy a bottle of vodka on the way home.

I don't know what hurts more; Jack with Sonia or him not loving me.

Jack was in shock. He would wrap himself around a dead cat for comfort, said Henry. He probably fell asleep in Sonia's arms.

He should fall asleep in my arms.

Vodka gently obscures the respectable public life. I am a tiny speck within the universe. My senses are dulled into oblivion. Life is more than my senses. I believe that I have a purpose greater than I can perceive with my senses. My body and my soul are greater than my understanding of it. The perfection of my hands, the vision of my eyes, the enormity of my dreaming, longing, knowing... My soul is reaching into dimensions unseen by human eye. I feel emotions not caused by my humanity. I hurt less.

I sip vodka. There is nothing to be afraid of. God of my childhood visits. My father tells me fairy tales. It does not matter who is my father.

I hover above the meaningless events. Sinful, calculating world disappears. Jack and Sonia don't matter. Sober I separate myself and become afraid. Sober I become a mother, a wife, an unfaithful wife, an undeserving mother. Irresponsible and unreasonable. Afraid.

I abandoned my respectability for a moment; I have to pay the price.

The girls go to school, I go to work, garbage has to be put out, toilet flushed, washing hung up, dinner cooked. Wipe, wipe, stir, stir; I turn on automatic; I fit in the scheme of things.

I escape into the garden to smoke so the girls would not have to deal with a bad role model.

I am going to Lightning Ridge for a few days, says Damian. Want to come?

Damian does not know that Lightning Ridge is a place where my father is waiting for me. I should not touch this last fantasy.

What's there, I balance my words.

Actually it is quite unique place with adventurers from all over the world. You only need luck to get rich overnight in Lightning Ridge. Miners believe that they are due for their fair share of luck, Damian continues his advertisement speech for opal fields. Dream on.

Get rich so everybody will love you and want your money, laughs Damian.

People might get the wrong idea, I say. I am deep enough as it is.

Isn't it best to be up front with the situation? Life goes on.

It is a school holiday and my girls are staying with Jack and Sonia. I might as well go. The people I love have to readjust to the changed situation. It happened so fast. So unintended. Unplanned. Like it happened to someone else. The cut into my family left us hurting.

Let me think about it, I promise Damian. People, who loved me, changed. I only knew Jack that was in love with me; Jack who was a part of me and my family. Jack who lives with Sonia is a stranger. I

don't know Jack who hates me. The magic of love seeped through our fingers. We are left with clenched fists.

My children try to please Jack and Sonia.

My mother sent me away because I loved Toni, my father; the man I believed was my father, the man who loved me. Who is my father? What was in the seed that joined my mother's egg on that fateful trip to Canberra? Did the seed of that sinful adventure plant a dimension of himself into me?

Did the man who loved me until I was fourteen know that I wasn't the fruit of his seed? Did he love me despite not being his seed; or because I wasn't. More than he should? More than my mother would allow him to? More than was appropriate for a father that wasn't a real father? Did he try to convince himself that he was my real father? Or my lover. Did he want to become a part of me?

Did mum get rid of Toni because he loved me? Or because she loved Frank.

Was I conceived in lust or love? Did mum have sex with an unknown man to give her husband a child to love? Did she want a child? Did Toni want a child? Did mum fall in love with the man in Canberra? Did that man reject her?

Is there anything called love? Being loved. Loving in return. Mutuality of feeling. Paid for. Returned. Exchanged. Did God prescribe the formula? Every living thing is competing for the right to mate and multiply; for the right to create and be God. Is desire always at the same distance as I travel in my orbit unable to change the course?

Maybe one day my daughters will understand and forgive. I don't blame my mother any more.

The drive to Lightning Ridge is monotonous; mirages of great waters stretch into the vastness of the flat land, desolate trees look like a forest in front of us but as we come near we realise how lonely the trees are scattered in the dry land. The water was a mirage; the countryside untouched, almost barren; a ridge; white mullock heaps of clay opal dirt greet us at the end.

So you call this a tourist resort.

People relax in the bush. They like that about Lightning Ridge.

We stay at the Black opal motel right in the middle of the town. We settle into the basic room within a hearing distance of Digger's rest hotel.

I feel so free here, says Damian next morning as we speck for shiny bits of opal. There are white clay mullock hills in the desert-like countryside. Maybe it's the distance and the vastness.

Distance from what?

From constraints people place on each other in close proximity. Here you don't have to dress up or behave in any particular way.

Nobody to impress.

Miners escaped from those they had to impress.

Could you live like that?

I would like to try.

An isolated cloud sprinkles the white opal dirt.

Just what we need for opal to shine, says Damian. It saves us licking the dust off the patch.

Do you know anyone here?

Nobody knows anyone here. Not really. I met a man when I was last here. He was born in Holland, grew up in Indonesia, married in America, and got divorced in Sydney. Everybody is different here. Even if you spend years with a guy, you still don't know what's going on behind the colour of his eyes. And that's just how I like it, said the man.

Makes everybody the same kind of different.

Multiculture.

Refuges must have a common bond. Like Aborigines.

You don't owe anyone anything. You don't even have to like or be liked. It does not matter.

Tell me about your family, I say.

Dad died a few years ago. You remember my mother. She was the important person in my family. She was the principal of our school and the sergeant of our home. You are the same as your father, mum was scolding me once. Dad winked at me. I was glad. I loved my father.

Men against women.

We learned from dad to please and obey.

Dad loved me, I say without thinking. Damian does not need to know that Toni wasn't my father; Toni loved me while he was my father.

Mum was never happy with dad and me, says Damian. Mum was German, proper and industrious. I was afraid of her; maybe I didn't get married because I was afraid of women.

We grew up almost like brother and sister, I say as I pick another shiny opal chip.

I always liked you.

I worshiped you.

Why?

You were older, stronger and wiser. I felt that you liked me.

I think I was in love with you. You were so soft and cute.

I never thought that we would meet again.

Life is full of surprises. Hardly worth planning.

What is meant to happen and all that...

We travel in our thoughts silently. If only I did not go to bed with Damian. If only I never found that opal pendant. If mum did not sleep with that man Mirko I would never know life. My soul would have no body. Is there a reason for everything? How could mum betray my father? He would never know the joy of being a father if she didn't. Maybe I should be grateful to mum. Maybe mum was afraid of dad's loving me. Maybe everything is as it should be.

So much unknown. My two fathers and my mother complete strangers now.

Jack knows me; he knows what gives me pleasure, he knows how to love me; he stopped loving me.

Lightning Ridge certainly is different.

People of different colours speak different languages but they smile the same friendly smile.

The colour of opal is the only colour that matters here.

Miners claim that they have equal chance to find opal. That gives them an equal chance to be equal, says Damian.

Aborigines swagger aimlessly on the street, women with children, lots of semi black children. White women rush with urgency; miners are covered in opal dirt, fat women in shorts are miners' wives. The slim women work in offices and dress elegantly. It doesn't matter how you dress. Nothing seems to matter if no-one knows you. You don't expect anything from anybody. People who don't matter can't hurt you.

To me mum was always this sensible, old, practical grown up; clever and well respected. Dad must have loved her enough to accept another man's child as his own. I never heard mum and dad

argue. I never saw mum cry. Do men cry? Mum must have been young and beautiful and loveable once. We had a loving home until Frank came and loving became inappropriate. We were a happy family until mum told dad to go. I was cut clean away from loving until I met Jack. I was grieving in that boarding school when Frank moved in with mum. Frank and his smelly saliva dripping mongrel dog. I hate Frank.

I am glad I caught him in time. Mum's words follow me. If it wasn't for Frank the bastard might still be around. Ruin your life. I told him that I will go to the police if he ever showed his face again. We should all be grateful to Frank.

Mum and dad loved each other. Dad knew that I loved him; he felt my love although he knew that I came from another man's seed. Maybe mum and dad agreed for mum to be inseminated by another man so they could have a child. Did they do it because they loved each other?

Did Frank decide that dad loved me inappropriately so he and his dog could move in with mum?

Mum once said that Frank paid more attention to his dog than to her. Frank and mum laughed at that so it must have been a joke. Loving a dog is funny but loving another man's child is evil. Was mum ever jealous of that saliva dripping mongrel? Did she feel loved enough?

How can I explain to my daughters how and why I had sex with Damian? They don't know that Damian and I share the first dreams, the first loving, unspoken yet and unknowing yet but forever written on the lily white pages of our childhood. I did not feel loved enough; I was afraid that Jack loved Sonia. I needed to attach myself to something for protection. It just happened that Damian was there.

Let's go to the pub. I feel like an ice block melting in the heat, says Damian.

We go to Diggers Rest hotel. The motel maid tells us that respectable patrons drink at the other end of town but we don't care.

Can you lend me a couple of dollars? Says an Aboriginal girl as we step into the dark smoke filled bar. I stop in surprise. I never spoke to an Aborigine before. Bold and defiant dark woman-girl. Fairly drunk. Obviously in need of another beer. I am intrigued. I have never been approached by anyone like that. Is she of legal age? Begging. Sunburnt hair-ends split, lips chaffed, hands fidgeting. Grey blue eyes. Skin the colour of milk coffee. Her strong long teeth shine out of the dark face. Yellow teeth really from up close. Clothes smelling from moth balls. Vinnies shop. Not washed. Second hand. Not ironed.

Have a seat; I'll get you a drink. I volunteer out of curiosity. What will you have? The girl seems suspicious of my unpredictable generosity.

My name is Micka, I offer my hand.

Mira, says the girl, shy all of a sudden. She is clearly not comfortable with my friendliness.

Lovely name. Where does it come from?

After Pop.

How old are you, I ask. You can ask the girl who is begging for money. She is way down in the abyss. Do I feel an affinity with the people in the abyss?

Twenty-two, says Mira lifting her eyes to see if I believe her. She looks seventeen but then Aborigines may age differently.

All on your own?

Kids are at school.

You have children?

I had my twin girls when I was fifteen and I have two boys. That's it for me, she suddenly cheers up expressing her decision to take control of her fertility.

Your husband with you, I try to get to know this unusual person.

No, she quietly dismisses the father of her children.

Where do you live?

Got a house from Aboriginal housing. Four bedrooms. Twins like to sleep in the same room.

Mira is shooting glances at a group of Aborigines at the bar; she probably wants them to rescue her.

Damian brings three more beers to prolong company. He winks at me.

Where you from?

Rovena, I say.

This is my pop, says Mira as the man with a walking stick comes to our table. With the beer and her pop at the table she relaxes.

Damian gets another beer for Pop.

Pop offers us opal for sale. Direct from the miner, the lowest price, will not get it cheaper anywhere, will take us to his mine tomorrow to show where it was dug out from, will make a BBQ, will tell us all about mining. All this within the ten minutes of our meeting. Instant like sex.

Some say that opal brings bad luck.

Only when you lose it or brake it, says the man.

Mick, calls a man from the bar. Wanted on the phone.

Mirko Gornik come to the phone please, comes through the speakers.

I forget to close my mouth.

There are people and voices and movement around me. I feel stunned. This is my father, my origin, the invisible semen joined with my mother's egg in a night of illegitimate lust or love or oblivion. Is this what a father is supposed to be. Would I ever be able to feel something for this old man hobbling with a stick so people take pity on him and buy him a beer. Would this opal miner know what love is? I don't think so. Would it be appropriate for me to put my head on his shoulder and listen to him reading fairy tales. If he can read. Probably not.

It was just one night, mum dismissed my inquiry about my real dad. I wonder how that one night came about. Could she explain how she chose a man to become my father

Want to come down the mine tomorrow, my real father invites Damian.

I'd be real grateful for a chance, says Damian.

Damian and Mick are making arrangements for tomorrow's mining partnership.

Have to go, says Mira.

I look at my niece.

Are you OK? Mira looks at me.

Maybe a slight sun stroke, I say confused.

We'll be going after breakfast. About eight. See you tomorrow then, calls Mick as he follows Mira.

Did my real father invite us to mine with him and eat with him because he loves me? Does blood call out and tell who to love appropriately.

New in town, says a barmaid as we are about to leave.

Just passing through.

Don't bet on it, says the miner at the bar. Opal bug gets you and you get hooked on mining.

Did Mick sell you a claim yet, says another man.

Is Mick selling claims? Asks Damian.

He is always dealing and wheeling. He'd sell his own daughter to make a buck.

Really, laughs Damian.

Where does he get claims, asks Damian.

He has his ears to the ground. When there is a new rush, he pegs and registers. When someone drills and finds opal nearby he sells. You can only have two claims registered to your name but Mick has a tribe of Aborigines and uses their names. He convinces tourists that there are millions in his claims, says another miner.

Is he a crook?

Somewhere between a gambler and a crook. Capable of just about anything to make a buck.

Ever been in jail.

Not that kind of a crook. He'll sweet talk you into deals that pay for him.

Mick never misses on a tourist. The locals are harder to catch.

Was mum was in love with this man once? Was Mick in love? Are men in love the way women are? Maybe being in love is just an urge to make babies. Maybe they were both drunk. Like mother like daughter

Have a chop, you'll need the strength for digging, says Mick as we arrive in the morning. Lamb chops are grilled on a grid iron. People with bread in their hands stand around covered in smoke.

Have some brekkie, says Mira.

I never eat in the morning, I say.

You never go mining either. You have to eat for strength.

You'll need proper shoes to go down the ladder, says Mick. He brings worn out boots for Damian and I.

You have to have a helmet these days as well. Regulations, you know. Not like in the olden days. We used to go down on a rope; didn't even have ladders.

These are my boys, Mick introduces two middle aged semi black men.

Peter nods an introduction. He is tall and good looking man but definitely shy.

Sam, the smaller of the two moves his head in acknowledgement. He seems scared, hiding behind Peter. Smaller and darker. Both older than I. Both blue eyed like Mick. Like myself. Dark as their mother.

Want some old jeans, a woman comes from the house next door.

That's Olga, Mira's mum, says Mick.

Russian name? Says Damian.

Olga, my older sister. Curly sunburnt blondish hair and olive skin.

I'll be right, I say.

You can put them over so as not to get grease from the ladder on your slacks.

I don't want to offend Olga so I accept.

How many children, says Damian to Mick.

About ten as far as I know, laughs Mick. I think he is boasting. And then there are about fifty grandchildren and more great grandchildren.

Must be two hundred of us when we all get together, says Mira.

Who knows how many strays dad left all over Australia where he was working, winks Olga. As if she knew that I was one of those poor left behind children-strays.

I am an only child, I tell Mira. My parents came from England.

I was a centre-stage and never dethroned by siblings. No rivalry. Totally loved, totally abandoned. No compromise, no middle way, no hand me downs, no giving way, no comparing.

I always envied big families. Now I have one huge family. They will never know that I am one of them. We have nothing in common. I am still an only child of Scottish-English parents. Mum and dad must have loved each other very much once. They eloped and escaped to Australia to be together. I wonder why they had to escape to be together.

Strength in numbers. Kinships are important to Aborigines. Minorities usually multiply more. Migrants and Aborigines, says Damien.

I am neither of the above, I am an isolated event. Not even a minority.

We chip into the clay wall and become excited when the glassy sound tells us that we hit silica.

I found it, I squeal delighted. Mick hands me a screwdriver to dislodge a purple glassy stone from the clay without breaking it. He sits behind me on the ground almost touching my back as he guides me into gouging. I am mining in my real father's opal mine. His arms are around me guiding me towards the fortune. This is as close as we will probably ever come.

Dirty and exhausted with pockets full of worthless nobbies we return to Mick's place.

Damian brings a carton of beer. People gather under the cedar tree. My brothers make the fire to sizzle sausages for lunch. My sisters bring salads and garlic bread and dips and finger food. Where did they learn to arrange the food so well? Boys and girls run around; they fight and swear at each other. My nephews and nieces, great nephews and nieces. Nobody ever swore in my home.

Mick tells about the opals he found and the money he spent.

He could've bought half the town at one stage, says Olga. I don't know if she is boasting or complaining.

He put it on horses, laughs Peter. I notice that Peter's shyness evaporated with the beer. They put the music on loud and begin singing with the old westerners. What have migrants and Aborigines to do with the songs written and composed by Country and Western singers? Maybe romantic, sad love songs and beer go together in any language.

Easy come easy go. I found it one day and blew it the next, explains Mick.

You are a bit of a gambler, Damian turns to Mick.

Dad would never let any of us go hungry. He always put the food on the table, says Olga to me.

I am half drunk from a stubby of beer. Relaxed and sisterly. Have another. I look around. Others are on the way to oblivion. Perhaps the slur of their voices is an Aboriginal dialect. Second beer tastes better. Olga puts her arm around me and we both sing.

Is your mum with you, I ask.

She lives in Bourke. Got a rich farmer now, explains Olga.

How many children did she have with Mick?

Mum and dad married proper in church, says Olga. They were both very young. I am the oldest and then there is Peter and Sam. Justine was the youngest named after dad's mum. She is an Aboriginal art curator for the national gallery. Her picture was in the paper.

Did your parents get divorced?

Not really. Mum moved in a caravan after Steve was born. She moved in with Martin, dad's best friend. Actually mum had Steve with a German bloke and then she moved in with Martin. Mum and Martin had four boys but they all kept dad's name. Mum's niece Rachel then moved in with dad. Rachel later died in an accident. Mum had three more children and dad had four with Rachel. He also took Rachel's two children from before as his own. We have always been friends, all of us kids.

I can not follow the numbers or the names or the events.

So many mouths to feed, says Damian joining us. Maybe Damian does not feel like one of the boys quite yet but he might. He is an adventurer. I don't know a grown up Damian. I only know the boy Damian who was my friend.

It was hard when we were young and without welfare but dad always found a way. Sometimes he took us on the farm where he was cotton chipping or stick picking or fence mending and he made sure that the farmer fed us all. Later he organised Aborigines to work for him and he made contracts for fencing and grid making. They built water tanks hundreds of kilometres around. Dad would bring boxes of grog and they would drink until they spent every dollar they earned. Aborigines weren't allowed to drink in them days but dad brought drinks for them into the bush and they loved it. They played cards and lost whatever money they had left. Aborigines loved dad.

Have you ever met any of your dad's relations?

He has a brother Janez, a big shot in Canberra. Janez is a builder and sometimes he would give dad a job to tie us over. Sometimes dad would be gone for months but he always sent money to us.

And on one of those trips he slept with my mother. He created me, a stray. How did he meet mum? How could mum go to bed with this complete stranger? A man who didn't even speak English! People these days pretend that colour does not matter; that all races and cultures are the same. But mum knows that she is better than others. To her being English is like a seal of approval. She corrected my words every day so I learned to speak properly but she slept with a man who still does not speak proper English.

Dad looked after us real well. There was always food on the table, Olga repeats herself, perhaps all drunks do.

Have you ever met your uncle?

Dad had an accident in the mine a few years ago. I went with him to the hospital in Canberra. I saw his brother's family.

What are they like?

Real stuck up. They never spoke to me but they gave dad some money. They think that their shit does not smell. Janez has a wife and four children. They looked at me like I was a monkey in the zoo.

Have you been to their home?

They never invited me but dad was. Very rich and posh they are. They don't want to know us; they are ashamed of us, says Olga. Big-noting themselves. Wogs.

So I have cousins in Canberra. Will I ever meet my uncle? Dad always finds a way to put the food on the table, Olga's words follow me. I never associated food with luck or love or goodness. I never knew what it was like not to be able to pick and choose my food. I was considered a good girl if I ate my food.

We all look out for each other, says Olga, my black drunk sister. What is a sister? How lucky I am that nobody knows that Mick is my father. I don't have to know this weird family. I don't have to remember all the ins and outs of their relationships. My black family. I wonder if mum ever knew what family she connected me with. I am happy I am not like them. People laugh at drunken Aborigines. Nobody laughs at me.

Did Mick ever go back to Europe?

Once. Brought back a video. Real nice place. Like a postcard. Lots of mountains and rivers squeezed in between. So green. Not many people know where Slovenia is.

I looked it up on the map. Alps. Why do I feel jealous? My father never showed me the video and explained where my Slovenian relations live. I will never know how they live and think. My father will never know that I am his daughter. I don't want to be his daughter. I am ashamed of him and his family. I can go to Slovenia if and when I like. I'd rather go to England and visit mum's family. Only she tells me that she lost touch with her relations.

Since the accident dad has a bad leg, continues Olga. When he is on opal he forgets about it but when he is broke he takes a stick and hobbles to the pub. People buy him a beer, laughs Olga.

No shame in begging or hobbling. No pride. Mum would die of shame if she saw a man she once slept with.

He would do anything for his family, says Olga. When mum left, dad brought the food home and cooked it for us.

It is obvious that all these people love Mick. They are actually proud of their dad.

I think Damian is already hooked on opal, I say to Olga.

We all grew up with opal. We started specking as soon as we started walking, says Olga.

Where did your parents meet?

Mum was born here. Dad came as a nineteen year old from Slovenia.

Why did he come here?

He did not speak a word of English so it was easier for him to work on his own. Or with his own people. He escaped from Hitler or Tito or something. We've all been baptised because they Catholics where dad comes from.

Olga's voice is Aboriginal, I decide. She leaves out the unnecessary words. Is this from her migrant father or from her Aboriginal mother.

Do you go to church?

Dad never either.

So Mick is Catholic. I am Anglican brought up by Catholic nuns. They all teach Jesus love. They all pray Lord 's Prayer. What is the difference? So many branches of the same Jesus. So much politics. Do they all believe in God. What do I believe? I call on God in my despair, I thank him for exquisite joys. Mick had his children baptised; he will need a priest for a funeral.

You are lucky to have such a big family, I try to be positive.

Dad is very proud of all of us.

I wonder what there is to be proud of.

Your family still in Slovenia, I turn to Mick, my father.

Can't keep track of where they are.

His mum was shot, tells Olga.

How?

In 1943 my school friends and I became partisans, Mick begins his story. One night we sneaked out and went into hiding. Mum reported to German police that partisans took me during a curfew. We were occupied by Germans then, you see. Mum was scared. Germans found us and shot two of my friends. They captured me but let me go as a favour to mum who reported us.

Was mum working for Germans?

She was more scared of Germans than of partisans.

Where was your father?

He was taken into the German army a few days earlier.

Was he supporting Germans?

It wasn't like that. Men were taken. They had no choice. Some were taken by Germans others were taken by partisans. I had no idea who was who. Or what we were fighting for. Mum was a pious woman and the priest told her that partisans were communists who hated God. She was terrified of Germans because they burned homes and shot the families that supported partisans.

She was between the brick wall and the hard place, I smile listening to my father. How old was she?

She was thirty nine. Anyway, continues Mick, Tone, my sister's boyfriend, escaped from Germans. The next morning he came to our home. Mum showed him a chair at the table. She didn't even know that he was with me when Germans caught us. Tone stood there for a moment without saying a word. I remember him looking at me as I lifted my head and carried the beans and sauerkraut to my mouth. We locked eyes somehow before he pulled out a gun from under his coat and aimed. We froze; it was unreal; nobody moved or said anything. I still keep seeing it all in a slow motion. He shot mum in the chest. Her blood sprinkled the food and our faces. I sat next to mum and I wiped mum's blood from my face in an automatic movement. Tone made a step forward and shot her again in the head. Mum's head fell on the table. Tone was gone before we began screaming. I ran for the doctor but she was dead, of course.

Tone hung himself from a cherry tree a few days later. We all loved that cherry tree and waited to get cherries from it every spring.

Did your father return from the war?

He was probably killed on the Russian front. We never saw him again. He probably never knew what happened to mum.

And the rest of the children?

Relations and farmers took them as servants to earn their keep until they were old enough to look after themselves. One of them, my brother in Canberra, even became a carpenter. He is a top man in Canberra. A builder. Built half of Canberra I believe. Whenever we were short I'd go to Canberra and he'd find work for me.

Do you write home?

I used to send money to them when they were little but later we lost touch.

What else do you remember about home?

I remember being hungry before the war and during the war. We ate fast because we were scared that there will not be enough. Mostly we ate beans and sauerkraut.

Now we eat fast food fast and feel guilty because we eat more than is good for us. We work less and eat more and we can afford to eat what we like. We are growing fat and unhappy, I say.

I look at this strange, old, blue eyed, blond, greying, tall and slightly bent man, my father. He must have been handsome forty years ago. I recognize the shape of the face. I inherited his eyes and his eyebrows. I watch for little familiar gestures. I spy with my little eye; I am looking at my self image. I am afraid that somebody will spot the resemblance.

I am surprised that you did not marry a Slovenian girl, I say to my father.

What Slovenian girl. When I came to Australia migrants were men. Twenty men to one woman. Fifty Slovenian men to one single Slovenian girl.

Lucky women, I smile.

Men were so jealous they would not let their women out of sight.

Poor men.

We were so young and no girls. English girls were so up themselves. They laughed at us because we didn't speak English, says Mick.

I wonder if Mick ever spoke of these things with anyone before.

Many men have Pilipino wives, I add.

They do now but in them days Pilipino girls weren't allowed to Australia. White Australia policy. Pilipino did not count as white. They are lovely women, Filipinos; polite, hardworking; religious and obedient. A lot of lonely old men go there now to find a wife.

What about your brother.

He brought a beautiful Slovenian girl with him. She cried every time I came down to Canberra.

Why?

My brother treats her like dirt. I think he is scared to lose her.

Why doesn't she leave? More fish in the sea.

They have a family. Kids have no other relations so they stuck together.

They have you.

They don't really want to know my family. Not good enough for them.

I feel sorry for my father. Mick convinces Damian to stay a few more days. He might find red on black. I am glad that Damian and Mick get along. You never know what's behind the clay dirt, says Mick. Stories go on and on about someone who left only to leave the gem just centimetres from the surface.

Damian convinces me to stay a few more days. It is going to be Mick's seventy fifth birthday and everybody will be there. There is something for everybody. I bet Mick hopes to sell a claim to Damien. Damian hopes that eventually we will become opal miners. Opal with bad luck attached. I want to know more about my father.

What can I bring, I ask Olga the day before Mick's birthday party.

Men bring drinks.

What would he like as a present?

You mean a cake or something? Olga considers my question.

Anything.

You don't have to though. Women bring food. We all pitch in.

What sort of cake?

It does not matter. He'll probably let little ones have it. That's how he is.

They all come; men carry cartons of beer or bottles of wine; women bring food. Nobody takes notice of Damian and me or our donations. We blend in.

How will I ever be a daughter to this strange man who has a family of two hundred? There is no time to get to know all that life connects us with.

Part of me wants to escape while the other part wants to attach itself to Mick's family.

We could start our new life here, smiles Damien.

I have a business and my family in Rovena.

We'll see how we go, says Damian.

Lightning Ridge is truly multicultural, I venture. There is hardly a reason for prejudice where one is as different as another.

What do I know about prejudice; I never had a reason to feel prejudiced or discriminated against. Damian finds an opal. He wants me to have it for an engagement ring. We are not engaged but I accept his expression of love.

We decide to stay in Lightning Ridge for another week. I rang Jack and arranged for our daughters to stay with him and Sonia. Will I ever stop aching for my family? Will they get used to live in a broken family?

The events follow an invisible script. I spend a morning in a motel room watching erotic videos. I can not sleep so I take a tranquiliser. I feel balanced until the effect of the tablet wears off. I have to find a substance that will keep me permanently cheerful. I want to dance and sing with total abandon like Mick's family does. I don't really want to be like my Aboriginal sisters who begin a day with a stubby of beer. Maybe their happiness only lasts as long as the beer. Mira begged for money from a stranger. How low is that? She did not know that I am her aunt. She will never know. I have never been asked for money from a complete stranger. I am ashamed of my family.

Damian tells me that he loves me and I tell him that I love him. We make love. I took a bite of the apple I might as well eat it. I ache for my family.

I join Mick's children under the cedar tree. We smoke and laugh and tell yarns. I don't have to impress anyone. Nobody cares what I do. Nobody cares if I am a bad woman. A rotten mother.

Mick and Damian return from work and grab a beer each before they settle in a family circle.

Next morning I watch the evangelists on television.

Jesus will prepare the table for you among your enemies, promises the elegant, eloquent preacher. The evangelists are prospering from the misery of people. People buy Jesus manuals. Millions of books are written about Jesus. Video, audio and donations to Jesus merchants who love themselves in their spotless preacher outfits driving their faultless preacher's limousines.

Does Satan work in mysterious ways like God? How do I recognise him? Avoid him?

The more I panic the more I subscribe to Jesus and then I blush and then I try to love my neighbour. And make a fool of myself all over again. I hate Sonia.

Jesus will give you cities and houses of all good things because he wants your enemies to see how prosperous his chosen people are. You will be the envy of all who despise and hate you. He will take the wealth from your enemies and give it to the righteous who are his sons and daughters. Jesus will destroy the enemy and give you power over them because you are his chosen one. You will sit at the head of the table in the best house in the biggest city admired by the multitudes forever and ever. Loved. Like God. Do we all want to be God? Is that the only sin that matters? Wanting to be loved and worshiped forever?

Are people afraid because they know that other people's greed is as great as theirs? Greed is the enemy; other people's greed. Other people want to come first, be recognised and worshiped and loved.

Your sin will find you out, said the lord.

My sin follows me into my dreams. Love your enemies, says the preacher. Sonia is my enemy. I dream of an ideal world in which Sonia is dead and people love me.

Vanity of vanities. Greed of greed.

Why did God create greed? Greed and guilt, the Siamese twins follow. And the fear that somebody will see my guilt and my greed. I hope they are afraid of their own guilt and greed.

Jack and I were in heaven until sin tore us apart. Has the definition of sin changed? Is sex outside marriage still a mortal sin? Why is sex so tragically important?

I never stopped loving Jack; I just gave in to nostalgia.

When a queen ant dies the colony of ants moves without direction until they choose a new queen. Is keeping life alive the only purpose of life? I move but do not feel alive.

You will find Jesus when he brings you down to your knees, says the preacher on TV.

We met. Jesus and I. I am suitably scared. I smile into the mirror. People smile to cover the murder in their hearts. Nobody knows the mistakes I made. I was born as a mistake.

Opal bug got Damian, says Mick when they return from day's mining. Why don't you stay? I have a spare room until you find something.

Damien stays but I return home. I need to decide what kind of future I want.

I love Jack and Damian. Can one woman love two men? Can Jack love me and Sonia?

Sex became a national sport yet one moment of sex destroyed the lives of everyone I love. A mad moment of sex? Is there a way to erase this event? People commit crimes while intoxicated and the judge takes their intoxication in consideration. Damien and I were intoxicated by the wine and memories. I plead diminished responsibility.

Michele began university studies in Sydney. Eliza wants to live with her and do year twelve in Sydney as well. Natasha seems as happy with me as with Jack and Sonia. Jack, Sonia and I compete with affection and Natasha laps it up. She cried at the beginning but she adjusted. She is loved enough.

Jack and I decide to put our house on the market. I remember the heady romantic days when we bought it. I was twenty and heavily pregnant with Michele. We spent twenty happy years in this house. Neither of us needs a reminder of the past.

Twenty years ago a letter came from a solicitor informing me that my English grandfather left me a small fortune. Michele was a year old and I was pregnant with Eliza.

Why did Granddad leave everything to a grandchild he never met? Jack and I did not need the money so I put the money in the trust account for my girls. Maybe that's how generations get linked.

I told mum about the money. I know, she said flatly. Why didn't he leave the money to you? He punished me because Toni and I escaped to Australia. Escaped from what? The bastard. What did he do? Forget him. Tell me about him. Nothing to tell.

So much unknown in one family.

Mum and Frank must have been furious. People insist that they don't expect to inherit anything but one can't help to feel jealous and angry and sad when left out. Is the size of inheritance a measure of love? Maybe mum did not feel loved enough or loved appropriately. Are we ever loved enough?

Marie and I go Christmas shopping as I return from Lightning Ridge.

People spend money they don't have to buy things they don't need to impress people they don't like, Marie quotes someone.

I have no-one to impress.

Always a missing ingredient. Life is like that, sighs Marie.

Life is an enemy.

Sexually transmitted and terminal, laughs Marie.

Keeps the food chain unchanged.

Every link is bent on destroying the chain.

Nobody is safe.

It is imprinted on every living thing to multiply and fill the earth.

People call this love.

We don't know what animals call it.

An eye meets its image and the romance is born.

Romance is a high. Nobody is high all the time. The higher you are the harder you fall.

Everybody wants to be loved more than they are and more than they deserve.

Maybe one should not wish to be the shiniest star.

But one does.

Damian rings that he and Mick are on colour. Opal fever really got my easy going adventurer. He never opened a business in Rovenia. He let his house out and went opal mining.

Maybe opal really brings bad luck. It all started to go wrong when I found that opal pendant in Jack's pocket.

Damian once said that he wants at least three children. How can I have three babies at forty? It is so unfair. Men can have babies into the old age but women have to be young. Was Damian joking? Was he joking about waiting for me as well? Did he think I wanted to hear him say that he was waiting for me? Am I so naive? How many times did Damian say those words to how many women? How many times did he make love to different women in the middle of a sunny afternoon? He is used to being single. He was single all his life. He survived on take away food and take away sex? Is he sleeping with my black sisters or their daughters now? Does he buy them a beer before they consent to have sex with him?

I don't know how to be single. I have never been single. I stopped being a child when I became a wife and mother.

Mick and I finally found a nice patch of opal. We are going overseas to look at the opal market, says Damian on the phone. He rings every day.

Lucky you.

Mick wants to visit his sister in Slovenia as well. She is dying apparently. I might stop in Germany to see where mum was born. Would you come with us?

Have you forgotten that I have children?

Would they like to come as well?

They go to school.

Eliza and Michele are boarding but Natasha should come.

She would miss school.

She will learn more on the trip than at school. I would also like to go to Disneyland. I missed out when I was little. She would keep me company.

Don't tempt me.

Hawaii is nice this time of the year.

I am not prepared.

What is there to prepare. Think of it as a business venture. You can keep us organised. Say you will come. Consider it my Christmas present.

When?

We have this trace. Gem colour. As soon as we dig it out we will start cutting. Come up and we will celebrate together.

Maybe after Christmas.

We can plan the itinerary while you are here, says Damian.

Going home with my father! The idea excites and frightens me. It is not my idea. Plans are man's, odds are God's. Do I just follow the script? Was it written? Was my infidelity part of the bigger plan?

People who loved me don't love me anymore. I need to be loved. I need Damian.

Girls spend Christmas Eve with me. We go to the evening mass like we used to when we were a family. We were not regular church goers but Christmas Eve mass became a tradition. The magic of growing up and Jesus born every year. The girls hum Christmas carols. We drive through town to look at the lights and the decorations before we go home to open presents and pretend to be delighted. We remember the excitements of other years, the Barbie dolls, the first bikes, the Nintendo, the first make up.

We are going to Sydney tomorrow, says Michele. They are going with their daddy and Sonia. I don't want to know about Jack and Sonia's plans.

I will go to Lightning Ridge, I announce.

Nobody is interested in my plans. I spent my whole life building fences around my home and then in a moment of madness all the boundaries collapsed.

There are new adventures in front of my daughters; they don't want to look back yet.

We might as well spend what we found, says Damian. What you can enjoy today never put off until tomorrow. That's my motto.

I am going home with my father. I tuck my little secret safely away from prying eyes. My father and I will return home to meet our family. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may never happen. It is my turn to draw that magical line in the sand.

We muddle along, I say to Marie. My parents muddled along and produced me. I am a product of a blunder.

Life would be dull without the blunders, says Marie.

Sometimes life offers you a second chance.

Do people ever really forgive; do generations ever meet? Will my mother and father ever know each other? Should they?