JOHN'S STORY

My name is John Sekoranja. This is my life story from 1925 to 1999.

I lived with my parents Anzek and Terezija, my sisters and my brother, on my parent's property in a wine-growing region of Slovenia. During the Second World War, we were all in Germany, from 1941 to 1945. We returned to Slovenia after the war. I stayed on the property with the family for a little over a year, when I was drafted into the Yugoslav army which was under communism at that time. I was in the army in Prizrem, and then we were shifted from Prizrem to Dragos which was on the Greek border. I was there for three months; altogether I served in the army for eight months.

I escaped from there with seven others to Greece. We were in several camps in Greece; the main ones were Piraeus and Lavrio. All that time for the fifteen months we stayed there, we survived somehow. Eventually we were able to get away to Italy, and we arrived at a big camp, Bagnoli, where there were 8,000 refugees. It was better anyway than Greece, for food and also for accommodation.

Then, after eleven months, we were lucky enough to get away from Italy. We came to Australia from Trieste, on the ship called Dundalk Bay. It took us thirty-one days. We arrived in Melbourne and went by train to Bonegilla, which previously had been an army camp and was now a refugee camp. I stayed there for a couple of days, then we were taken to Leeton for fruit picking. Then I worked in Griffith as a milkman for five months, and after that I worked in the hospital as a wardsman, where I met my wife. We were married in 1953. We have three children, two beautiful daughters and a son, and six wonderful grandchildren.

My life in Slovenia

I was born in Bizeljsko, and I have four sisters and one brother. The oldest was Theresa, then came me, (My name is Ivan, pronounced Evon), my sister Maria, my brother Pepich, then my sisters Rozika and Tonchka.

My father served in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the First World War. He was wounded in the Dardanelles, in the leg and arm. When Austria and Germany lost the war, Serbia took over Slovenia. So when he came home after the war finished in 1918, he was straight away drafted into the Serb's army. He served in that army for about fifteen months. When he came back, he and my mother got to know each other -my mother didn't live far away, they were practically neighbours - and in 1920 they got married, and they received a property, a vineyard, from their

parents. The property had a house, a small stable, vineyards, a forest, and plenty of land for growing crops.

When they got married, they didn't live in the house, because the people who used to live there all died young -children and parents -and people used to say that the place was haunted. When my mother saw the place -my father took her there and said "This is where we are going to live." -my mother said "Well I am not going to raise my children in a haunted house." My father agreed it wouldn't be suitable because of so much bad luck. Whether it was haunted or not I don't know, but people believed in those stories in those days.
So they turned the house into a stable and turned the little stable into a house. Of course they made it much bigger, and painted it, changed the thatched roof for a tiled roof and put in bigger windows. They pulled out the bread-making oven from the house and put it into the stable. My mother baked all our bread at least once, sometimes twice a week in that big oven. While they were doing up the house where they raised all of us, they lived in my grand-father's house. This house was three stories with cellars underneath, living quarters above, and an attic.
So I was born in a stable, as they called it, and so were my four sisters and brother.

First of all, about the property. There was a big forest, some vineyards, a lot of fruit trees: cherries, apples, pears, plums, apricots, peaches -we had everything on that property. There was plenty of land too, for growing wheat, barley, buckwheat, corn and rye; and for vegetables we grew carrots, lettuce, beans and things like that. In those days we didn't buy much at all -we couldn't afford it; besides, we had everything at home -except salt and sugar. My father and mother kept oxen for work, and cows, pigs, poultry of course, even turkeys. In May the cherries would be ready, and from May for six months we had all sorts of fruit at home, and we were very busy. Surrounding our property about one kilometre around, were seven or eight springs that had beautiful water. We had a spring underneath our forest too, a couple of hundred metres away from the house, at the bottom of a very steep hill. Every day my mother would get water for cooking and drinking from that well.

My father was very strict. Every day he would give orders for what we had to do the next day. We knew what we had to do anyway. From an early age, practically as soon as you started walking, we had things to do. We never had any toys; if you wanted toys you had to make them yourself. The girls made themselves little dolls and the boys made water pistols out of wood, little wooden bicycles and wagons, and things like that. It was quite alright, we didn't miss anything because we didn't know what other children had. In the city it probably was different, I don't know.

In those days, in the villages far from the city -we were 120 kilometres from Ljubljana and about 40 km from Zagreb - we didn't have any electricity, telephone or radio. In wintertime there were no books to pass the time, no radio to listen to. We podded peas, husked corn and did other winter jobs, there was a lot to do. My mother was a very good singer, -all her family, the Zagmeisters were very good

entertainers- she knew all the songs and we would sing them in those winter days . It was nice and warm, plenty of wood and the fire going night and day.

In Spring it was really wonderful. After the snow disappeared and the grass started to grow, the pastures and fields were full of beautiful flowers. The trees in the forest started to turn green -the birch tree was the first - and in the early hours of the morning the cuckoo could be heard in the forest nearby. Some of the birds couldn't get away in time and perished. We'd always find a few dead ones around, that tried to hide under shelter beside the house or the stable. Spring was very beautiful, we looked forward to it all winter long, sometimes for six months in very cold winters. When the grass started to grow the cattle were let out of the stables. They had been in the stable for six months, and when you let them out into the fields, you never saw anything like it, they were so excited. They'd kick up their back legs and run all over the place in excitement.
In the spring the outside work started again and we worked from the early hours of the morning until late at night. We didn't mind because it was how we were brought up.

Summer was very hot, and of course, Bizeljsko was a wine-growing district and everywhere there were vineyards, cellars, plenty of wine, plenty of plum brandy and even apple cider. (In those days, 95% of Bizeljsko's people were wine producers.) They used to make the cider before the grapes were ripe to make wine.

Autumn was very, very busy because there was grape-picking, and pressing the grapes, and putting them into the barrels. That was a very happy time of year, especially when the season was good. The people worked very long hours and had hardly any sleep, because they had to get the wine in before the winter set in. That was exciting for all of us- all of us children enjoyed it; I even enjoyed it when I was grown up.

After the wine had been sold, my father would say we had all been very good. Then our parents would buy us new clothes and new shoes.

The hardest part for me was going to school in the winter time. There was such heavy snow my father had to make a trail with oxen dragging a home-made wooden snow plough, or sometimes just a log of wood, so that we could walk to school.
I loved working on the property, but I didn't like school so much because my father never encouraged me to go to school. It was very important for my father that all of us children were working. And it was very exciting at home. We had lots of animals -newborn calves, little piglets, rabbits, chickens and so on. And I loved to go out with the oxen, ploughing the land or doing whatever was necessary. As soon as I came home from school, I had to start work. When I was little I had to look after the cattle to see they didn't get into mischief while they were grazing. We didn't have any fences like in Australia, we had to be very careful that they didn't go into

the cornfield or garden or anywhere else. In the wintertime all the animals had to be kept in the stable, so we had to prepare food and hay for them. Snows were very heavy then, up to a metre and a half high. We were always indoors during the winter, husking corn, shelling beans, feeding and looking after the animals, and getting water once or twice a day.

I worked two hours before school in the summer. As well as farm work, I had to run several kilometres taking messages to people, -farm workers and others - as there were no telephones. They were hard times and all the children had to work. When I was about nine or ten, my father bought a pair of horses, because there was such a lot of trips to be done into Brezice or further. Both oxen and horses worked 10,12, or 14 hours a day. I was allowed to ride the houses when they were not working. On the weekend, we did have some rest, we didn't do so much manual work and we had to go to church, and to a second mass on Sundays when we were older.

I remember from an early age that my father was always buying properties. The more properties he bought, the harder we had to work. In fifteen or sixteen years he bought seven properties. We would all be sort of excited, because before he intended to buy some property, he would call us all up to the house and tell us that he was going to buy such-and-such-a-place, which we would all know of, and he'd say, "Well, that means we all have to work much harder." But we didn't mind. In those days, everybody else was working hard too. He said if you want to eat you have to work.

The last property that he bought, we moved into. It was on the main road from Brezice to Maribor. While we were still living in the old place, all eight of us slept in one room. But in the new place we would be able to have separate bedrooms. It was a big house with stables and cellars, and it was closer to school and the village.

I was a very mischievous little boy, and one day soon after I had started to walk (I was told I started walking at nine months old), my mother set a big pot of boiling goulash on the table, and I reached up and grabbed it, and pulled the whole lot of it onto my head. They rushed me to my father's brother who had a horse and wagon, and they took me to Brezice hospital which was 18 kilometres away. They told my mother that I would never be able to see again, because I was burnt and blistered all over my head. I lost all my hair too, and you can still notice a bit now where it left scars.

My mother stayed with me while I was in the hospital, and my father came to visit us once. He came on foot, and arrived at 5 o'clock in the morning. He didn't know what time he had left home because he had forgotten to wind the wall-clock. He

had heard the rooster crow, and had thought it was 4 o'clock. He walked for three hours, and arrived so early the nurses wouldn't let him in. He refused to leave and caused such a fuss that they did let him in eventually. He stayed with us a little while, then walked back home again.
My mother was a very religious woman, and she prayed night and day that I would be able to see, again, and it happened. Not only was I able to see again, I was in a lot more mischief after that.

Another time, my father was greasing the ox wagon, which had to be done every day. The big, heavy wheel had to be pulled right to the end of the axle to put the grease on. The oxes and cows started to misbehave, and my father got up to steady them. In the meantime, I came from somewhere, I touched that wheel and it fell right on top of me. My father turned around and saw me under the wheel and he yelled out to my mother, "Teresa! Teresa! Ivan is dead!!" Mother ran towards him and they lifted up the wheel and I got up and ran away. They told me I was laughing, but if I had been under the middle part of the wheel I would have been crushed to death.

One day my mother took me with her to a steep hill which was used as a pasture for the cattle. At the top of the hill was stacked a pile of big logs, and somehow one of them came loose, and the logs started rolling down the hill. I was about halfway down, and my mother screamed at me, then ran towards me. She said that the logs missed me by inches, so I was lucky again. I don't remember these things, so I was probably very young.

One thing I do remember, happened to me when I was seven or eight years old. I was working with the oxen, and my father told me to take something to the vineyard, where we had our cellar and barrels. It was a very wet season that year, and the mud was up to the oxes' knees, and the oxen were going very slowly. So to make them go faster I stood up and started hitting them, and I fell over the front of the wagon into the mud right in front of the wheel. I yelled "Whoa!" and luckily they stopped, or I might have been crushed to death. When my father saw me and asked what happened I said "Oh, I fell in the mud", I was too scared to tell him I fell under the wheel and I had been hitting the oxes, because my father was very strict, he'd say, "Never hit the animals." He was very good about that, he was very gentle with all animals. He used to hit us though, but we probably deserved it.

One winter, about the end of 1937, my father got very sick with pneumonia and lay in bed for a long time. The doctor came only once, and said he was not allowed any wine to drink because of the pleurisy. My father didn't like that, he saw another doctor, and the different doctor said "He can have a litre of wine a day". And he kept that doctor. He was very, very sick. One time in the evening he got up from the bed and put his clothes over his arm and said, "Come on, we have to go, we have to go". He was delirious and one of us had to run and get a neighbour to hold him

down. A few days later he was so sick he looked as if he would die, he said nothing and his eyes were rolled back, and my mother sent for the priest. All our neighbours came around. My mother said, "He always liked drinking, I'll just get a glass of wine, get his head up", and she got a glass and put some wine on his lips. She did that and it was like a miracle, I'll never forget: he opened up his eyes, and was alert, and he said "Why are all these people here?" And from then on he recovered fully.

I was coming home from school one day in August 1938 and noticed that the sky was very dark and the clouds were very black. Thunder and lightening started, soon it was continuous and I was very scared. The rain started with very heavy drops, then turned into hail and started coming down by the bucketful. I had never seen anything like it. A few minutes later all our vineyards and crops were completely destroyed. This happened three weeks before the grape-picking. We usually made 10-12,000 litres of wine and this year we had none. Our neighbours and relatives on both sides of the family lost everything too, even their windows and roof tiles were broken. It was a very sad year because we didn't get any new clothes or shoes and our poor mother was forever sewing patches on our clothes. Our family and other families who'd suffered from the hail storm had to survive from the charity of the people who hadn't been hit by it.

That year I decided that I had to have some other occupation besides farming. My uncle and grandfather were shoemakers and they lost everything on the farm but were able to survive much better because they had an income from their trade. I thought about it for some time then I asked my father if I could learn to be a shoemaker. He was not impressed with that but he said, "The blacksmith in the village needs an apprentice. You could go there because that would be much more useful on the farm, to fix the wagons, shoe the horses and a lot of other work." He took me to see the blacksmith and the blacksmith took one look at me and said to my father, "Anzek, your son is too small and too thin. A blacksmith has to be tall and strong to lift the heavy hammer all day long." I was secretly pleased. Then I was allowed to learn shoemaking from Uncle in the winter season.

I worked as an apprentice in the winter months, for two winters,1940 and 1941, because in summer my father needed me on the property. I quite enjoyed working with my uncle. There were 4 boys and 4 girls as well as me. I didn't sleep there, only when it was very late. I would sleep in the stable with my cousin Victor. It was the usual thing to do, in country towns. Boys loved to sleep in the stable with the cattle because they felt more grown up and independent.

The winters were so long, six months with very heavy snow, (the winters were much colder than they are today, that's 60 years ago).I remember walking once in the early hours of the morning to my uncle's, and it was very, very windy. The wind was so strong that I couldn't walk towards it because it was taking my breath away, so I had to walk backwards.

The beginning of the war

I was still going to school, it was in 1939, when our teacher announced that Germany had occupied Poland. For the class and for me especially it didn't mean that much, because I didn't understand politics anyway. Life went on, and soon after that I finished school, to take up the apprenticeship with my uncle.

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It was 1941 and people were saying that the Germans were advancing through the countries of Europe and very soon would be attacking Yugoslavia, and that Slovenia would be first. They did occupy Slovenia, on the 17th of April, 1941.

The people in Bizeljsko were quite happy about it, some of them were quite excited. My father was, I remember. He had been in the German army in WW1 and he spoke quite a bit of German, so did my mother. (They had both been to a German school under the Austro-Hungarian regime) Things changed hardly at all. People forgot about the war, they were very busy as usual on their farms. And that year, 1941, everyone said was the best year for many years. All the crops were doing marvellously well, the vineyards were loaded, it was a fantastically good season for everything. Rumours were going around that the Germans were going to take all the people from Bizeljsko and Brezice away from their properties and put German people onto them, but nobody believed it, because the Germans left us alone, never bothered us. September and October passed and the crops had all been picked from the fields, all the grapes had been gathered from the vineyards, the barrels were all full of wine, and the stores were full of feed for the animals. It was a really great year and everyone was so excited and happy.

And then they came. On November 11th they came in the early hours, at 6 am, two German soldiers to each house, and told the family to be ready in one hour. I had been away the previous day, transporting wine from our cellars and selling it to the Germans, in Brezice, 18 kilometres away. My father and I went with the oxen and we were there till about 2 am because there were so many people in Brezice at the railway station, trying to get rid of their wine. It came out alright and my father sold our wine, and when my barrels were empty (they were pumped into the railway containers), I went back to Bizeljsko. It took about three hours and I arrived home about 5 a.m. I put our oxen into the stable, gave them food to eat and I lay down in bed, tired out. Not long after, my mother came to me and said "The Germans are here, we have to go, get up." (My father wasn't back yet, he was held up in Brezice, waiting to be paid for the wine.) So we were trying to get everything ready, taking as much as we could carry.

On the main road was a big open truck waiting. And they were loading people onto the back of the truck. There was a terrible sadness you could hear, especially from the old ones. Mothers were crying, children were screaming, some of the fathers were swearing. I was so tired, but I remember being on the truck. We went through Brezice and were taken to Reichenberg. A big camp was set up there. They were taking people from their homes, keeping them for two to four days till they got all the names down, then transporting them to Germany and other places.

Reichenberg was a big castle built on a hill. Before the war it was a monastery, where the monks used to make cheese and brew brandy, very successfully, as they owned big stables and a lot of property around there. We stayed in the stables there for two or three nights, our family of eight. The youngest was Toncka who was only six. (All the families were big, from six to ten people was the usual size family in the country.) After that it was terrible. Every family had to hand over the keys of their property to the German authorities and leave everything they had worked for all their lives.
(Reichenberg has been made a museum and is full of photographs documenting what happened there in those four years during the occupation, and what happened under communism. My picture is there, and Maria and Theresa, with a lot of people I remember from our village)

On the morning we left, after they took our particulars, we had to walk down a steep windy road, lined with German soldiers, to the railway station. My mother said to a soldier, "Where are you taking us?", but he didn't answer her. She was a kind person and she felt sorry for them, that they had to follow their orders.

Fortunately we didn't travel in open wagons, we had a passenger train, so we all had a seat. It was nearly wintertime and snow was already covering the ground. About six days later we arrived at the first camp, at Boutzen, not far from Berlin. It was a two story place. Upstairs were sleeping quarters. Girls and boys were separated, little children staying with their parents. Downstairs was the eating area and kitchens. What I remember first was that we discovered that we all had lice, from sleeping on straw in the camp with hundreds of other people. The Germans took us all through the showers and disinfected everything, it took a whole day, and the lice disappeared.
My eyes were opened when I first heard a radio there, and for the first time saw showers, and toilets that flushed and other new things. I was a sixteen-year-old who'd been in Bizeljsko all his life and had never seen anything like that. Brezice was the most advanced place I had been; it had electric lights.

Being in the camp didn't worry me much. That camp wasn't bad; we weren't starved. We weren't given meat or anything like that but we were not hungry. When I was there, I was always up early, and there was an old man, a caretaker of the place who loaded up the furnace every morning with coke for the heating

system. I used to help him, and one day some money went missing in the kitchen. I was accused because I was there in the early hours of the morning. I had a very hard time then. The police came, and tried to get out of me where I had taken the money, and of course I didn't know anything about it. They did give me a hard time, they bashed me around a bit. Afterwards they found they had made a mistake and let me go.

Because I had training as a shoemaker with my uncle, they took me to a workshop and shoe shop, where I started working with Alfred Paharli, my German boss. There were a few other young boys there. We all sat around a round table and did different things making and repairing shoes. We were mainly doing military boots for the army, and my job was hand sewing. I was so shy that I never looked left or right for all of those eight hours that I was there every day. Midday I was allowed to go to the camp for one hour to eat, then I would work on until six. The days were short because it was winter, the end of November and December. The boss was very good to me, I'll never forget him. Alfred Paharli. When I'd go back in the evening, if his wife wasn't there, he'd have some sandwiches to give me, and he'd say, "Don't tell my wife I gave you this'. I only spoke a few words of German, and he told me, "When you walk towards our place from the camp, read all the signs above the buildings so you'll learn a bit more German". When Herr Paharli wasn't there, and his wife was there, she would slip some food into my pocket and say "Don't tell my husband about it". They really were good people. I liked it there, it was more or less like home. I never thought about how we had left home. Maybe because I was seeing so many new things, they were so advanced in Germany. Even though a war was on, everything was bright and there was music on the radio.

One day I remember my father hearing Hitler on the radio (because he understood much more German than I did), and he told us Hitler said they would fight to the last man, they'd never give up. At that time they were at war with Russia.
All the men and women from our camp were working in factories all day long, there was so much work to do in Germany. Mothers with young children would look after other women's children.

We stayed there for three months. We were then transported to a different camp, Zwikau, a very big camp. Before we left, Alfred Paharli came to the camp, and asked, "Couldn't John stay with me and learn with me?" My father said he wanted to keep the family together. Alfred Paharli must have really wanted me to stay because I saw tears in his eyes when I said goodbye.

At Zwikau there were thousands of people; fortunately we didn't stay there very long, about three weeks. The winter was very severe, and the food was shocking there. We were only given soup with cabbage and carrots every day, and two pieces of bread that was so thin that if you held it at the bottom it bent down - I don't know how they cut it so fine. My mother and father saved their bread for the two little

girls, Tonchka and Rozica, because they were too little to understand and were hungry.

When we arrived we found my uncle, whose apprentice I had been. He was already working in the workshop there, making and repairing shoes. So I joined him there. My uncle made a pair of shoes for me, from some leather my father had brought from home.

That three weeks passed very quickly. It was a very cold winter, with snow in deep drifts, and the men had to work every day shifting snow from the roads. The 'camp' was a three-story building like a school building. There were a lot of people coming in and going out all the time. Our turn came and we were transported to a camp called Feilenbach. This was mountainous country, the camp being situated in a valley, a very beautiful farming area with not much industry. There I worked for a couple of days with my grandfather (who had come with my uncle and the rest of the Zagmeister family -my mother's family). That camp was nice, and we had very good food, considering a war was on. There were a lot of people we knew there from Bizeljsko, and whenever a group of them were together there was a lot of singing. I used to join in sometimes.

Working in Germany

On the 18th of July 1942, after three months in the camp, we were transported to Niederseeon. It was a big station or farm, surrounded by forest and a large lake which was a summer tourist resort. There was a church and a villa where the owners Herr Von Wedelstadt and his wife lived with their two children. They had 80-100 dairy cows and fields producing potatoes, wheat, and vegetables. Twenty eight to thirty people worked the farm every day. There were three Polish families who looked after the dairy cows. We all came to the farm: my sister Maria, my father, myself and my mother. My mother came only sometimes as she had to look after the children who were still going to school: Pepich, Tonchka and Rozica. Theresa my oldest sister had to work at Dachau prison camp for some officer in charge there. We didn't see her all during the war. All that time she worked there, she never knew what was going on there in the concentration camp. My father got out of working on the farm because he said he was wounded in the army in WW1 and he couldn't do any heavy work. He was given a job with Herr Von Wedelstadt. Maria didn't work on the farm all the time. She was taken to work for the owner's wife in the kitchen. It was a very, very big farm, very strange for us because at home we had primitive tools to work with. In Germany things were so different we had to adjust, learning about new tools, tractors, machinery for mowing the wheat and turning and loading the hay. So it was very hard in the beginning. Language was a bit of a problem too so we had to learn that as well.

We were lucky coming to the farm because we didn't have any problems, we were not starved. We had plenty of vegetables especially potatoes, and bread we could buy with coupons. Talking of coupons, everything was bought in Moosach two kilometres away and my brother Pepich was in charge of that. We had plenty of money because my father sold all his wine to the Germans just before we left, and it was all in German marks so money was no problem. My father also received a small wage each month for the work the family was doing.

We worked every day except Sunday, unless the hay had to be brought in before a storm or something like that. It was alright, but sometimes we thought about home and that we had to work on someone else's land instead of our own. This was sad for my parents and other older people but not so much for us. I was actually treated very well. The Polish people were not treated as well as we were, although they had enough to eat.

I was working with a tractor, a 'Bulldog', with steel wheels in the front and the back. It was mainly for ploughing. Then they got another tractor, a wood and gas tractor. Stanislav the Polish man was working with that. When they went out they had to take a sack with very small chopped hardwood; that was enough to last the whole day. When he had to go away somewhere, they gave me the wood and gas tractor and I quite enjoyed it too.

Summer was very good, it was nice and warm. In winter we did altogether different kinds of work. We were sorting potatoes, threshing the wheat, repairing, oiling and greasing the machinery. The snow was thick, manure had to be taken out into the fields -a very long job that was, it took several months. There was a lake there and that lake was frozen in the winter with 10-15 cm of ice. They had a big cellar underground 5 metres wide by 10 metres long with a storage room above, and in winter time we had to fill that cellar with ice. That was a big job too. About ten of us would go to the lake, cut the ice, load onto wagons and bring it back. One day we had been cutting the previous day and it had frozen over again, where we had been cutting, and in the morning a bit of snow fell on it. So we went to work the next day, there was me and a polish girl Katrina in front and Katrina said "This is close to where we were cutting yesterday", and I said "Oh, its a little bit further", took one step and my foot went right down and I went right under. Luckily I came up in the same place, and Katrina pulled me out. If I had come up under the ice I would never have got out. Our sleeping quarters were about 50 metres away from the ice and I arrived there soaking wet and said to my mother, who was home that day, "Quick, I have to get back to work!". In the meantime they reported it to the foreman, who arrived on a bicycle and by that time I was working again. He got angry shouting "Who's making a fool out of me?". I was silly, I could have stayed at home. A couple of years later, Katrina's father said to me, "You're supposed to marry her, she saved your life!"

In the meantime, while we were working on the farm, we became German citizens, 'Folkesdeutscher' they used to call it. Because my father was in the German army in WW1 They told him that if he and his family became German citizens, he would get a pension and everything that Germans got. So he did, and he received a war pension because he was wounded at the Dardanelles. And we received new furniture, a lot of new clothes and equal rights with Germans. In 1944 I was told to come in for a medical examination because they wanted me for the army. Soon after that I received from the authorities a letter telling me to report to a certain place. I didn't receive it myself, actually before this my father had received it and had torn it up and thrown it away. But a week later the same letter came again. And my father did the same thing. The third time it came I had to sign up. After that I had to go to Munich to see an officer about the reason why I hadn't reported in earlier. I had already been thinking about escaping from Niederseeon to go back to Slovenia because I didn't want to go into the German army. My mother and father knew what would happen if I did go back, there was a war there and different armies fighting each other, Italians, Serbs and God knows what, even the Russians -it was a big shemozzle there. So it was good that I didn't go, but I did have to see that SS-commander in Munich. My father organised to have a Slovenian who represented the interests of Slovenians in Germany, to meet me there. He advised me, "Let me do all the talking and pretend you don't understand much German". He also said to say that I would go into the army of my own free will if they let my family go back to Slovenia. But they didn't want to talk to him very much, only to me. There were two SS-officers there and so when I went in it was "Heil Hitler!" and then the questioning about why I didn't go. I only said what I had been told- that I would join up if they send my family back home- and the officer stood up and screamed out "Niemals!" which means 'Never'. So that was the end of it. I had to go. I was told I had to join the Folkesturm- the home defence force, full of old men and people who couldn't go into the army, digging trenches and learning to handle guns and so on. It was on the weekends. My father was told he had to go too. I said "Are you coming?" and he said "No; when they call out the name Johann Sekoranja, (we both had that name) they are going to call it twice, and you say yes both times". So I did what my father said and there was no question about it, he was right.

It was a hot summer and a lot of times during the day we heard bombing. The English came in the daytime and the American planes at night. Once in the night we heard a big explosion about 200 metres away. It was an American plane with eight crew on board. The plane was burning and we heard the ammunition going off. Next morning we went to look and there was a leg sticking out, all burned. I remember thinking "Gee, Americans are such small people, they have such small feet." But I didn't realise that it was because when you burn, your body shrinks.

Another incident I experienced was an air fight between two light planes. They were shooting at each other. The English shot down the German and he crashed about one kilometre away. We were told every time the aeroplanes come we had to run from the fields and hide. One day I was working with the tractor and I heard the

siren and saw other people running into the forest. So I left the tractor in the middle of the field, switched it off and I ran. While I was running there were two planes fighting above me. They came down so close to me I lay down very close to the ground, and an empty shell fell on top of me and I thought I was wounded, and I held myself; and then I saw it was an empty shell. I was praying, "God help me to stay alive I would like to see what it is like when the war is over." We did survive, all of us, to the end of the war.

It was not very long afterwards. The bombing was going on every night in Munich which was less than 25 kilometres away. Again I had to go Munich, to help get people out of the bombed cellars and that sort of thing. About five or six men went from our farm to Munich. Everything was crushed and we couldn't do anything at all. The war was going very badly for Germany. We hadn't heard much; they didn't tell you anything and the German people wouldn't talk about it. But we knew it was near the end; the people who were in the home guard with me in Moosach, the old men, were all taken away to war. Even Sep Wimbauer a German friend of mine, was taken. I was lucky; they left me. Soon after that we heard that the American troops were approaching Munich and we heard explosions closer and closer. They were coming toward Moosach with tanks. We were still working in the fields till about 5.00pm. The tanks came towards Niederseeon on the 1st of May 1945. That was about 7.00 at night; it was still daylight. My father took a white sheet, and hung it out of the window from the second story.

Before I go on to the end of the war I would like to say a bit about what it was like working in Germany. There were very strict rules about going to work. We had to start at 7.30 in the morning; but had to be there ten minutes before this. Herr Walter would greet everyone and we would say Good Morning Herr Walter. He had worked out what everyone had to do, and gave us our orders. I never remember anybody being late. The Germans were very, very strict about being on time. If you didn't turn up somebody would have to apologise that you were sick or whatever had happened to you.

As I mentioned before, the potatoes were the biggest crop on that farm. We produced hundreds and hundreds of tons. The hardest part was gathering up the potatoes. They had a machine that would dig up all the potatoes and we had big baskets and two people would work together carrying the basket. When it was full we would empty them onto the back of the wagon. When one wagon was full another would be waiting. That went on all day for two to three weeks. That is the hardest work I have ever done. Your back was so sore that by the end of the day you couldn't stand up. And we had to be very fast, there was no mucking around. You never saw anybody standing around having a smoke, you worked right through. If you wanted a drink of water it was there on the wagon, then straight back to work. There was nobody there with guns but you knew those were the orders.

I was lucky, I was treated well there. The big chief, Herr Von Wedelstadt, liked me. If there were any messages to do, he picked me out, to go by train or bicycle or by horse. Once he gave me a big envelope, and I had to go to Graffing 15-18 kilometres away. When I got there, I handed them my big envelope, it was full of money and they handed over the oxen. Another time I went on the train past Munich. I delivered a parcel for my boss; what was in it I don't know. From Niederseeon I had to go to Moosach. A Polish fellow took me in a horse and buggy; I was sitting there like a big chief . He took me to the general office in Moosach where I picked up the papers for travelling. There was a Polish fellow working in the garden; he asked the other Polish fellow who I was. He said "That's our chief." And the other fellow said "That young?!"
So he dropped me in Graffing, then I travelled to his parents', a place close to the sea and mountains. I stayed there overnight with those people; they were not very friendly, the only thing they said was to be ready tomorrow at 8.00 am, somebody's going to pick you up by car and take you back to Moosach. I thought it was fantastic, it was the first time in my life I travelled in a car.

My father was looking after the two horses for Gnadige Frau for all those years. My sister Maria was helping in the kitchen for all those years. She stayed there, slept there, and only came home on Sundays.

When the potatoes were all dug up there were hundreds of tons and they were transported to the railway station onto the big containers in Moosach, 2 kilometres away. Milk was taken away from the farm every day. Summer was hard; for one thing it was hot, and then there was the hay to be put into the sheds. There was no baling then, it was all loose. We were loading it onto the wagons and carrying it into the sheds for months and months. It was for cows in winter and horses all year round because the horses didn't graze; they were working all the time. They had many bulls too and I remember one day they got loose somehow and nearly killed each other.

In the winter time another thing we had to do was chop and cut trees by hand, and cut the wood very small for the tractor and for our own use. We needed it right through the year for the fuel stoves. I had rabbits there too, we were allowed to keep them. It was a very big experience for me, working on the farm, and I thought of all the improvements we could make to our own farm when we got back, to make it more successful.

While we were in Germany we knew nothing about what was going on in the war. We didn't dare ask, and nobody told us anything. We didn't even know about Dachau, the big concentration camp only 25 kilometres away, where my sister Theresa worked as housekeeper.
Working in Germany was a good experience, -good and bad- for us. In one way, because they took us away from our farm, it was better than if we had stayed at

home. All the men and young women would have been taken away for the army, and most of the ones who went didn't return.

The end of the war

My father put out a white flag, and only ten metres away was a main road where all the American tanks went by, and when they saw the white flag they came to investigate and asked my parents where they had come from. After that every day soldiers came bringing food and clothing, whatever we wanted. We didn't go to work any more after that 5.00 pm on May 1st. Fr Walter who was in charge, said, "Come, come, we need you, the work's got to be done." He threatened us "If you don't come to work we won't give you any food." So my parents told an American officer and he wrote a letter and said "Give this to the chef, he has to supply you with food, and more than you got before. You've worked enough for the Germans." And we didn't have any more trouble. Now the first time we had meat, fish, rice and other things we had never been given before. We had mainly eaten vegetables.

The American soldiers told me I shouldn't go out at all; being a young man I might be taken as a German prisoner of war. We didn't stay long after the Americans arrived. We had one friend there, Tony Toplisek, a Slovenian, who came to see us. He was coming back to Slovenia with us. He had been in the German army and was wounded in Russia, was taken back to a German hospital and when he recovered he was put in charge of the prisoners. Tony and I went to Munich and back on bicycles and he organised transport to take my family to Munich and then back home to Slovenia. We arrived back at Niederseeon and not long after a big truck with a trailer came. We took everything of our own as well as the tools that we had worked with, and there was even a little wagon on two wheels that my father took apart, and put into a big wardrobe which he filled with tools, clothes, shoes, blankets and pillows, cooking pots and so on, all things that had been given to us in Germany. So when the truck arrived, everything was ready and it was Goodbye to Niederseeon.

At Munich our belongings were put into stores and guarded by our own people there. We had to wait till our transport to Slovenia came; it took a few weeks because the railways weren't in good condition. So we went to a camp there, a big open camp. The barracks there were empty, the Russians had been there before us and had all been taken home. We went to have a look, and there were so many fleas there -they were jumping all over us - that we had to take our clothes off behind the barracks and shake them all out, otherwise they would have eaten us alive.

While we were in that camp, I went to a black market where they were selling everything, clothing, watches, radios. My father still had plenty of money which he had to spend, as German marks were no use in Slovenia, and I got a watch and some beautiful boots, German officer's boots they were. Then I had leather trousers and a

leather top and a lot of other clothes. In the meantime I had met a fellow there who overheard me talking Slovenian, this was Miro Semrov who later married my sister Maria. He was wounded in the leg; he could hardly walk. He told me all about what had happened to him.. He had been in the German army in Russia, and had been wounded in the chest. They got him back to Germany and afterward he applied to see his parents in Slovenia, in Celje. He was allowed to stay there a few weeks. He said instead of going back the communists got him and took him into the forest and put him in a company of ten fighting near Celje. The Germans went after him and shot all of them. They shot him too in the leg from a distance, but when they came up close a German called out "Shoot him" but Miro said "I'm one of yours". They transported him back to a hospital in Munich and he was still there when the war ended.

The American trucks came to get all our goods to take them to the railway station; we had a lot of things that the Germans had given us when we became citizens, and my father said to the Americans, "Leave that wardrobe here, it's too heavy." I'll never forget what the American soldier said: "Take every single thing, you won't find anything back home". So four or five of them lifted the wardrobe onto the truck, and then onto the open wagons of the train.

Jesenice, a town just over the border from Austria, was our first stop in Slovenia. The train stopped and everybody had to get out. We were questioned about our reasons for travelling, where we were going to, where we had been, and so on. Tony Toplisek who was travelling with us, although he was a Slovenian, had been in the German army in Russia, and so he was taken away for questioning. "Why didn't you escape?" they wanted to know. He had told me what it had been like in Russia, how terrible it was. They hadn't been provided with any shelters in the Russian winter, and as more and more troops poured in they had to march over the bodies of the earlier arrivals and were just mown down by the Russians. He had been shot in the stomach, and had been put on the truck that was collecting the dead from the front line, and called out, "Help, I'm not dead yet!"
He was treated shockingly back in Slovenia. They let him go after about three months. If you didn't have a good excuse for why you left and what you had been doing, you were in trouble. We were alright, the authorities knew that Bizeljsko had been taken by force by the Germans, so they couldn't tell us we should have escaped when so many thousands of us had been taken away.

So we were back in Slovenia. When we stopped in Jesenice, we soon found out that the communists were not very friendly at all. You had to be very careful what you said to them.

When we came home to Brezice where the train station was, everyone who arrived there went on foot eighteen kilometres to Bizelsko. I had to stay looking after our goods while they organised some transport to Bizelsko. After a long wait, six or seven hours, my uncle Andrej came with oxen and a big wagon, 8 metres long, that

we could fit everything on. We were lucky to be among the early ones to arrive home. The people who came late were mainly from the Russian zone, -areas occupied by Russia in Germany- and those people didn't bring home one single thing, the Russians took everything. I saw many neighbours, relatives even, who said that if for example you had good shoes on, they took them away and gave you old ones. If you had a watch or any good clothes on, they took them before you were allowed to go free. Those people arrived about three months later than the rest of us, they had been kept in camps while those of us in the British and American zones had been sent straight home. So I always respected the Americans because they treated us very well, and I still respect them today. There's no doubt that you find among all nations good people and bad people, but if you find good ones you remember them forever, maybe vice versa too, if you find bad ones you never forget either.

When we did get home, we were lucky that we had our house still standing. Others found their houses had been demolished or burned down. What we did find was that there was not a single thing there, windows were broken, the roof was leaking, there were so many things to be done. The big wooden pig sty was gone, so were our wine storage cellars. The vineyards were completely ruined. The German people they had put there couldn't do the work because of the fighting that had gone on all those years, by the Germans, the Communists, the Italians, the home defence. So we were lucky that we had a building still standing where we could sleep. And we were lucky that we brought a lot of things home with us: tables, wardrobes, beds, and a lot of shoes, not only for ourselves, but to trade for food, a cow and other things.

We arrived back home in the middle of July 1945. Everybody was so happy when the war was finished, we had never known a greater happiness. That it was over, that we were all still alive, and were able to go together back to our country, and our land.
But when we arrived home, things weren't as good as we thought they would be. Not reading any books, not able to listen to the radio, having no newspapers, we didn't know what kind of a regime communism was. We had to learn the hard way. When we came back, we were told that the land did not belong to us. We could work on our land, but we were working for the Communist Government under Marshall Tito.

We had to build up everything from the beginning. As I mentioned before, we had left the storehouses full, and the cellars full of wine, but when we came back, the cellars were gone, the farm buildings were burned down, and there was no food anywhere. Even though it was summer there was nothing growing, even the fruit trees had nothing on them.

So, we had to go to our relatives who hadn't been taken away, or to good friends, or not even friends, anyone, even on the Croatian side who could give us anything to get us through the winter. Furthermore, the government didn't give us anything.

The Americans sent a lot of food to our region, food, tools, grain, even horses were transported to the Brezice area and around. We did receive some of the first lot in Bizeljsko. However, we heard that of the goods sent for us, most didn't stop at Brezice, but went on through to Russia.
We were issued from the government, very old peas, which were all mouldy and infested with weevils. I remember one day when I was working with my father on the property, one of my sisters brought lunch for us, which was pea soup. And we took the lid off and poured it into our soup plates. It was covered with weevils, floating on the top. I said to my father, "We can't eat this, it's full of weevils", and he said to me, "My dear son, shut your eyes and eat it, it's all we have." It was a very tough life; winter was the worst. We survived; there were a lot of stray horses, and we would sometimes get meat from someone who had killed one secretly. The first time I ate horse meat was in 1945 that winter, and it was good.

We were lucky to get a cow from our relatives; at least we had milk for the younger children, especially the two girls, Rozica and Tonchka. There weren't any cows killed because they were producing milk for the children and their own calves, which were our future cattle.

That year the winter was very mild; we were lucky. We dug the fields, trying to get out the roots of the old vineyard, re-digging and trying to replant with new grape vines. We started right from beginning again. So many things had to be replaced that you didn't know where to start. There wasn't enough money to buy things, and even if you had money or goods, you couldn't get what you needed.

Right from the beginning there was a curfew. You were not allowed to be outside your house -especially two people together- after 9.00 pm. There were police and the military everywhere. There were a lot of mines all over the place, in the fields. A lot of people were killed. My uncle was killed by a mine while walking in the fields with his wife and daughter, and they were also injured. That was my father's youngest brother. (Another brother, Frank, died in Germany. He was so upset after he lost everything,-he was quite rich -that he lost his mind. They put him in hospital and he was given an injection in 1943 and he died. There was no hope for him anyway.)
In Slovenia a lot of people were taken away by the police. If they had been accused by someone, they disappeared overnight

We struggled on as best we could. As I said, you had to be so careful of what you said, it was so strict. You were not allowed to say anything about communism. I still didn't know what communism was. I had been driving a tractor in Germany, and I thought, wouldn't it be lovely to have a tractor back home, we could do so much work.. I thought we could all get together, the families on either side of us, and go to the authorities and ask if we could get a tractor using our land as collateral, and pay it back. We did go to Brezice, my uncle, my father and I, and we put it to them. And the officer said, "It's not your land, you can't have a tractor, everything belongs

to the government. You don't own anything." We were finding it harder and harder to believe what we had come back to. So we just had to forget it and work to survive.

In 1946 in spring/summer, we started to plant our new vineyards, and they started to grow. I was working in the vineyards all the time. I liked it just the same. We went to get wood from our own forest, but we were not allowed to cut the trees down without permission from the authorities. They came and marked which ones you could cut down. We had so much timber in our forest, that we could have sold some of it if private enterprise was allowed. But you couldn't sell and you couldn't buy.

What used to happen amongst the farmers was they'd help each other with the tough tasks. I'd help you and you'd help me. That went on for about a year before I was drafted into the army. I received a letter saying I had to go to Brezice for a medical examination because I was 21 years old and had to enter the army. After that it was another several months waiting for the letter telling me I had to leave.

In the meantime I was still helping the family. We had small horses given by the government to work on the land. Wagons we didn't have. But there were old military wagons and old junk left over from the war, and we'd been told we could go and get them, so my father and I and Miro my brother-in-law took the horses to the place about 35km away. But there were no wagons, only some wheels and parts that had to be put together.

Travelling back from there, we were hungry as we hadn't eaten for a long while. We didn't have any money to buy food, but when we went through a village, we passed a guest house, and my father said "Let's stop here and see if we can get something to eat". My father said to the owners that we'd been travelling a long time, and we were hungry and our horses were very hungry and thirsty. He said we haven't got any money but can you help us. They were very kind people. They gave the horses some hay and water, and they gave us some bread and soup. And we rested in the barn overnight. Even though it was only 35 kilometres we decided to stay as the horses were tired too. Next day we tried to put those wagon parts together and add some other parts to them.

Miro's parents were at that time in Celje, about 70 km away, but he stayed in Bizelsko probably because he liked my sister. Because he had a good record, and had been fighting with the communists and was wounded there, he got a very good job with the communist army.

One day one of our two horses fell in the trench and we couldn't get him out. (There were trenches all over our property that had been dug by the soldiers during the war) So we had to report it, and they told us to bury him. You had to report everything. The other horse was much older, so old he could hardly walk, so I had

to take him to Brezice, where they used to slaughter the horses for food, (although we never got any). When I arrived there a big fellow with the communist star on his hat said rudely, "There's nothing wrong with him, take him back home to work, you can't get another one." I tried to tell him my difficulties. On the way the horse had collapsed and I had had a lot of trouble getting him up on his feet again, some people had helped me. So he did take the horse after that. The government gave us two small horses to replace them.

Soon after that I got the letter saying I had to report to the army. It was November 11th 1946. They had a bit of a party for me and everybody brought something to eat or drink if they could get it. I went round to the village saying goodbye to everyone who couldn't come to the party. At every place they gave me a bit to drink so that when I got home I was quite happy and then I saw my uncles Anton and Louis, (my Mother's brothers), cousins and neighbours and friends. It was wonderful. We had a lot of singing and it was good, even though we all knew it would be two years before I'd be able to see them again.

How the people at home were going to survive I didn't know, things were getting worse and worse. You were not allowed to say anything. You had to go to meetings once a week, at least one or two from the family. At the meetings there was nothing else talked about but communism. How wonderful it was going to be; what a beautiful future Yugoslavia had, everyone working together. They talked about Russia, how it was progressing; how much the Russians suffered during the four years fighting the Germans, and talked as if they were the only ones who won the war. But there had been so much suffering in Slovenia; so many died. Everyone who fought against the communists, the people who stayed in Slovenia, (not us, we were safe in Germany) but the ones who stayed behind but who didn't fight with the communist army, all those paid with their lives, hundreds of thousands of them. Today there is a memorial center to remember them, in Jesenice.
I wish I could express how bad it really was in Slovenia when we came back from Germany. While we were there in Germany for four years, we knew that it wasn't our land, and that we had to work there if we wanted to stay alive. We accepted things, even though it wasn't easy. Our aim was to survive the war so that we could come back home. We thought when we came home life would be wonderful, sunshine; instead of sunshine it was practically raining all the time.

I was 21 and I took it very hard. I had seen how advanced Germany was, so when we came home it was like going back about 50 years. It was very very difficult for me. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been for my mother and father and other people who owned land, and had tried to achieve a better life for themselves and their children.

My only pleasure was after the curfew was lifted we were allowed to go out at night. If you had a little money you could go to a guesthouse for a glass of wine or beer. I had a group of friends who went out practically every night, singing. The

whole group of us had very good voices. We liked to climb the hills and from there our voices could be heard from a long way off, across the valley to the hills on the other side. In summer especially, we did that all hours of the night. For some reason when you are young you can do those things, you've got energy and will, even though you know the next day you've got hard work ahead of you and not much to eat.

As I say it was very hard for the farmers. The authorities came to every farm. If you had laying hens, they knew exactly how many you had and demanded a certain number of eggs a week. You were not allowed to kill even your own chicken, you had to report that you were going to kill a chicken, or a pig and get permission. You were never able to sell, they wouldn't allow it. Everything belonged to the government, and they were always telling us how lucky we were to live in such an organised system, united with the Soviet Union, the greatest nation in the world. Of course, the ones of us who had lived in places occupied by the English or the Americans, knew better. America was such a terrific country and the people were good - educated and decent. I had met some Russians in Europe after the war, and I will never forget how terrible they were to us, but also, how shockingly they treated the Germans- men, women and young girls. For many years I thought the Russians were all the same.

Leaving Bizeljsko for the army

It was a very sad occasion when I had to say goodbye to all my loved ones. My mother was crying, and she brought an envelope, a 'schutzbriefe' and gave it to me and she said: "Carry this with you wherever you go, it will save you from all the dangers that could come to you." It was a religious document that was supposed to protect you from harm. The letter was written in German: when we thought I had to go into the German army, my mother had copied it from one owned by Sep Vimbauer's mother, - the family who were good friends of ours when we were in Germany. My mother had copied it and saved it for the day I would be leaving for the army. So I put it in my pocket and I still have it today.

My friends were waiting in the front of the house to take me to the railway station 18 kilometres away. There were four friends with a horse and wagon and they were all yelling at me to hurry, it was time to go. I started down the hill to them, then I turned and said "Goodbye everyone, goodbye Bizeljsko, I won't see you for two years". My father was running beside the wagon as the horses started to pull, and he called out to me, "Ivan, Ivan, I love you, I will never see you again, goodbye, goodbye". I thought at that time, "Why is he saying I'll never see you again, I'll only be away two years in the army". As it happened, I didn't see my father ever again. The same with my sister Rozika, I never saw her again. It was twenty five years before I saw the rest of the family.

My friends dropped me at the railway station and we said goodbye. I was headed for Novo Mesto where I had to report to the army. When I arrived there, I didn't know anyone, they were all strangers to me, thousands of young men in the field, where I had to go to find out which unit I was in. Next morning it took all day to organise the units because there were so many men being sent in all different directions. I was taken to Prizrem in Macedonia where I was to serve my term in the army. That very day, in the evening, they put us on open wagons on the train. It took us two days to get down to Macedonia . Prizrem was a medium-sized town not far from the Albanian border. In Macedonia the people were all Muslims, very different people from what I had seen before. All the women were covered from head to toe, you couldn't see their faces. On the way down in the train I was observing the places we passed, the properties, the fields, how different it was from Slovenia. Germany had been very different from Slovenia, Germany was so advanced, but when I came to Macedonia, I saw that here, Slovenia was much further ahead. Although the people were quite friendly if you were able to talk to them, they were not very easy to make contact with. I was in the army four months before I got to know some Macedonians, and they were mainly old men; the young ones were all in the army.

We came to the barracks, tired after our long trip. The first thing that happened was we received a little can with a lid on and a spoon, and a uniform: cap, trousers, top, boots and overcoat . Underwear and socks you had to provide yourself. Before we put the uniform on, we had to undress and go into a room where there were barbers, hundreds of them, and they shaved our heads. I was expecting that, but I saw some young men who had tears running down their cheeks. We put our uniforms on, and what I hated most was putting my cap on with the communist star on the front. To me it represented the communist control of Yugoslavia, and I couldn't stand it. Right from the beginning when we came back from Germany, I saw what happened all through those twelve months before I left for the army, and nothing of that regime appealed to me. It was very, very strange and sad and I didn't know what the future would be for me or for the rest of Yugoslavia.

They took us to our sleeping quarters. It was a huge place with 70 to 100 double bunks packed close in, and little units where you put your belongings, just underwear. We had to leave our boots outside the room, and I thought, how are we going to find them .....and it was so cold, November already.

First we had to pack up our civilian clothes, put an address on and send it back to our parents. Civilian clothes were finished with, we were in the army now.
From then on I was in a unit training in telephone communications. We were trained to lay lines on the fields and over and under bridges, across the lines, hidden, so the enemy wouldn't be able to see them. I didn't like it at all, but I knew I couldn't get out of it, so I tried to be as good a soldier as I had to be.

At the big party in Bizelsko before I left, my Uncle Louis had given me a big lecture about going into the army, and how to behave. (Because he had been a sergeant in the army as a young man). And I remembered what he said, and that was a good thing for me, because if you made one mistake you were marked for the rest of the time you were in the army. Training was very hard, as in every army in the world. For us young men who didn't have experience of anything like it, it was harder and harder every day. The siren went at 5.00 in the morning, and we'd get up, all in darkness. First you'd run out, put your clothes on. Out in the corridor were hundreds of shoes, and you'd have to be very quick and lucky to get your own shoes. People with small feet were alright even if they got the wrong shoes, but the person with big feet who was left with small shoes, he had to go out in bare feet on the frosty ground - then exercise in the field for 15-20 minutes. We then had to get dressed properly, put our shirts on, and then breakfast was served. There were no tables or chairs, you just went to the kitchen, they filled up your cans (which you carried with you all the time), you were handed bread and you'd sit wherever you could. There were no shelters and sometimes we had to stand in the pouring rain eating our breakfast or dinner. One thing, they didn't starve us; even though the food wasn't marvellous, we had plenty to eat. You had to be quick; when the trumpets went again you had to be already lined up in your unit. The sergeant came along and you went to the field where you did your exercises. As it went on, they became harder and harder. The worst was around Christmas time, winter was getting colder and colder with snowfalls and heavy frosts. We had to be out just the same without shirts or hats, every morning. We Slovenians had gloves with us, and when the sergeant saw them, he told us to take them off, as all soldiers had to be dressed the same.

Sometimes the trumpet went early, at 1.00 or 2.00 in the morning, and everybody had to be in their places and march 15-20 kilometres with full packs, to the Albanian border and back. Some people collapsed but they forced them to carry on.

When I had been in Prizrem two months, I received a package from home, with some kransky and a big bottle of Slivovitz, some socks and underwear. Of course, when I received that I was very happy. It was in the evening when we were not on duty any more, and I was in the barracks. There were a few friends around me, and I gave them some food and some Slivovitz to drink. Then in came a sergeant and I offered him a drink too. He immediately went out and reported me to the captain. I was called on to report to the captain straightaway and to bring the bottle with me. I knew what was up, because they'd told us when we had first arrived in the army, "If you receive a package, don't keep it for yourself, give it out to everybody until it's all gone." So I took the bottle in, and greeted him, "Good day Captain Druzer". As soon as I got in there, he said, "Give me that bottle. Stand still." He gave me a lecture that seemed to last half an hour, beginning, "You've forgotten all the rules you were taught when you came here," while I answered "Yes captain", "Yes sir", standing so rigid that I was sore all over. He took the bottle, took the cork out and started to pour the Slivovitz into the top of the stove that was in the room for

heating. As he poured it in, blue flames rose out of the top. He said, "See how beautifully it burns" and of course I had to say "Ja, Druzer Capitano". And then he said, "Relax, remember what you were taught, now out!" I left the remaining food on the table, where anybody could help themselves. I was so angry that I wrote a letter home straightaway. I thanked the family for sending me the parcel. Then I said, "Please don't send me any more parcels. We have everything we need here." I knew the authorities read our letters.
After about four months, when we were all trained soldiers, we did a march to Prizrem, and because they knew the Slovenians were good singers they said, "All Slovenians into the front row," and ordered us to sing. So we marched into Prizrem, singing Slovenian songs, partisan songs, and the people looking out of their windows were saying, "Germans, Germans!" - as they didn't understand the language- and then all the civilians suddenly disappeared, we couldn't see a single one. That was a funny experience.

Soon after that we left there. But before we left, they made a big to-do about what wonderful soldiers we were, and told us we were so good that we were going to be part of the Communist 'Skoj' which was made up of the best army units, and we would be serving three years instead of two. Nearly all the men were very upset by this. Two years was already too long. But you couldn't do anything about it.

We left Prizrem, and were taken to the border of Greece, near a town called Dragos. In every unit there were twenty-five men, and in our unit there were five Slovenians. The rest of them were Serbs, Montenegrans, Croats, and others. We were right on the Greek border, on the main road from Beetel to Greece and there was a big ramp there where a guard stood night and day. Along the whole border, every 500 metres a soldier stood on guard. There were no soldiers guarding the Greek side -you might see soldiers on their side once a week. On our side of the border, all the trees and shrubs had been cut down in a strip 150 metres wide all along the border, so that we could see anyone arriving, or trying to get out of Yugoslavia into Greece.

During the day we marched up and down the border, watching for anything going on. Now and again we went up a 10-metre watchtower to view all over from there. Our orders were, if anybody tried to get over from Yugoslavia into Greece, to shoot them on the spot. Furthermore they told us right from the beginning: nobody is allowed to go over the ramp, even if Marshall Tito comes, he's not allowed to go through. During the night there were two soldiers every 500 metres, in four-hour shifts.

We had very strict orders there. If we were not on duty we had to exercise; if we were not exercising we had political lectures. The lectures were to tell us how lucky we were to be in Yugoslavia under communism, how it was the best system in the world. I remember one day, there were about ten of us out on the grass, listening to the sergeant telling us how good communism was, and he asked: "Who are our best allies?" Without thinking I burst out with "America!" He said "You mean 'the Soviet

Union'!" I said, "Yes of course, I mean the Soviet Union." I was lucky that the sergeant was a friend of mine and he came to me afterwards when no-one was around, and said "Why did you say that? If anyone else but me had heard, you would be put in gaol for that." That's what it was like under the new system.

I was on duty one rainy day, when a car pulled up and a lot of men got out. They all had raincoats on. They went to our sergeant first, and straightaway the sergeant and another man came towards me. He didn't say anything, and I kept walking up and down. I was only about 5 metres from the ramp, and he went with the sergeant straight to the ramp. I was watching him very closely, because I knew what the orders were. He came to the ramp, and while he was talking, he started to lift his left foot over the ramp. Immediately I yelled out "Stop mate, I'll shoot!" and pulled the safety catch off the machine gun -which made a terrible row; very noisy it was- and I kept my machine gun in his direction but pointing at the ground. As soon as I yelled out 'Od bi druze!' -'Get away mate!', not knowing how to address him properly because he had a raincoat on so I couldn't see his rank, he went away. A few minutes later a person came to take me off duty and I was really scared. I thought, 'What have I done wrong?' I knew that he was a big shot but I didn't know what he was. They put all our fellows who weren't on duty in line, and they called me over there. I was in the front with him, and he said, "Would you really shoot me?", and I said, "Yes I would because those were our orders." And he started to give a big lecture to the fellows in line there. He said, "I was in the army in heavy fighting, in the First World War and the Second World War, and I was never as scared as I was today." And he seemed to be saying what a good fellow I was that I was so alert that I wouldn't let anyone through. Afterwards, when he took his coat off inside, I found out he was a big shot, a field-martial.

They went away, but from then on, my sergeant thought that I was a really good soldier. They gave me the next day off, and I was able to go from Dragos, where we were, to Bitel, 15 km away. There was another army barracks where I had to report and give a letter to them. So I was there for a while, and had something to eat in the mess and then I walked back to our unit. I had my little semi-machine gun with me and it had 72 bullets in it. I was thinking about what had happened the day before. I still don't know what I would have done if he had really crossed the ramp. I probably would have shot him but I don't know. I'm very pleased I never found out.

In the meantime I'd been on duty in the daytime; there was only one soldier on duty every 500 metres. A couple of times Greek soldiers came up close to where I was on duty, walked along near me and talked. I wasn't allowed to talk to them, and I didn't understand them anyway, but then they said, "Can you speak German?". I looked away from them and said "Yes." He said, "Come across the border, because the war is coming here soon and you'll be first in line". And he threw a packet of cigarettes and I screamed 'Don't throw anything, I'll be shot!' Somehow I hid those cigarettes and, when I came back to our unit, I gave them to some Slovenian fellows there who I trusted. They were Janus Ursko, Vinco Augustin, Joze Zupancic, and

Stanko Stopo. I said "If you smoke them be careful to smoke them when there's nobody else around." They were good fellows, they never said anything to anybody. Some of us were already more or less planning to get away, over the border, but we didn't know how or when. But when I heard them saying there was going to be a war there, I had to think more than ever before about it.

I feel so sorry for Vinco Augustine because he was treated so badly. But in one way it was his own fault. They found him asleep when he was on duty, and from that time on, they never left him alone. Whatever he did it was wrong. Every morning we had an inspection of our weapons; some had rifles, some had machine guns, some had semi-automatic machine guns like I had. I had never cleaned my machine gun, it was clean anyway, once you took the dust off what else could you do. One morning they were inspecting the rifles, and poor Vinco Augustine, they took his rifle and gave him such a bad time, they said why didn't he clean his weapon, he wasn't proud of his army, it was shocking, and the sergeant said, "In one hour you have to report to me with a clean rifle." When we went to breakfast after the inspection he came to me and said, "I was cleaning my rifle all morning, what can I do?" And I said "Don't clean it at all, just go back in one hour and see what happens -what can you do more than you've done?" And it was right, when he went back the sergeant said, "See how clean it is now, why didn't you do that before?" Poor fellow he was always in trouble.

At that time we were planning to go away, trying to be very careful not to talk to anybody else, only the people who we were very sure wouldn't spread it around. Time went by, we were doing our duty as normal. I was a good high jumper, and there was a Serbian fellow, Georgia Dobric, who was a bit taller than I was, and he was a very good high jumper. He was selected to go in a competition in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana, for about three weeks. We were very good friends, and when he came back he brought some pictures back to show me. But when he showed me the photos, we were not looking at the photos, he was talking to me about leaving. He said he trusted me somehow or other, and he said, "We should get away from here, the war's going to start, everyone in Slovenia and Croatia is talking about how they're going to attack from the Greek border". He said we had to be very careful and plan to go in about four week's time. And to tell anybody I really trusted. I did tell the Slovenian fellows, separately, because we weren't allowed to talk in groups.

In the meantime, every night we heard a heavy bombardment, machine guns and bullets just across the border. Always at night. They were guerilla fighters, against the regular army. At that time Greece was occupied by the English army, in 1946/47. I remember once they said that one of our fellows had been killed by a stray bullet at night.

One day in our headquarters, we saw an aeroplane coming across, really high up. And the sergeant said "Get the machine gun!"-because it came from the Greek border. And they got the machine gun out, and were trying to fire it up, and the

machine gun didn't work. That was a terrible thing for the sergeant who was there. What would we do if they attack, our weapons don't even work.- he didn't say that to us, but I know he thought it. We all did.

From our barracks there was a very steep hill on one side and on the other was flat country. On the top of the hill was a church and there were other army units guarding the border up there. Our unit guarded up to halfway up the hill, another one guarded from the top of the hill down. I was told by one fellow who was guarding with me, that up in the mountains were forests where wolves lived. One winter it happened that two soldiers were attacked by wolves, and though they fired all the weapons they had, there were so many wolves that they were killed and eaten.

Sometimes I felt so tired; in the night time it was so quiet, you'd be looking at the stars, thinking about different things. You'd like to have a sleep you're so tired, but as soon as you feel sleepy you'd get up and move about.

There were 25-28 soldiers in our headquarters and some of them were real communists. Once a week they had a meeting, only for the people who were in the organisation called Skoj- or secret police. Two fellows came because a Skoj meeting was being held in Dragos that day, and they said to me, "Because you're such a good soldier you've been selected to come to our meeting." Meanwhile they took me under the arms and sort of dragged me with them. I said "Look, don't drag me. If I have to go I'll go voluntarily; if I don't have to go I won't go so leave me alone". So I was even more scared of what would happen to me. They wanted to send me to Russia, the sergeant told me the next day. He said, "You should go with them, you're a very good soldier. They're considering sending you to Russia to be an officer in the army." I thought: good Lord, not Russia. And I said "I'm not prepared to go yet". I wasn't going to say I hated the army and Russia even more. I had had experiences with Russians in Germany and in Slovenia, and I would never want to go there. More and more I thought how I had to get away.

One day we had a working bee carrying bricks into Dragos and onto the hill, and we met some other Slovenians there, who we had known previously in Prizrem. We trusted them, and so we told them we were planning to go over the border. Seven of us were ready to go, and we told them that we'd be going in about a week's time. A certain fellow, also a Slovenian, that we approached, said, "No, don't go yet, I would like to come, but I'm married and I would like to see my wife before we go across" and he started to cry. We said okay. We discussed it with all the other fellows -all were Slovenians except Georgia Dobric, - and he said, "We have to go tonight. If anything happens, he could squeal and he'll probably put us in." So we planned it for that very night.

Our escape

We had planned that we would go at 9.00 pm sharp. That night, three of our group were guarding the border about half a kilometre down the hill, and three were in the barracks, -you went to bed early when you weren't on duty,- Vinco Augustine, Stanko Stopa and Joze Zopancic. I was outside on duty where the ramp was, right in front of headquarters.

They waited for 9.00 pm and then headed out towards the back of the unit. Joze Zopancic dropped something in the corridor and the sergeant in bed nearby said, "What's that?" Zopancic said, "I'm going to the toilet, I just dropped something." It was lucky the sergeant didn't come out because there were three of them there. They went behind the barracks and I saw them going, and when I saw them going across, I put down my machine gun on the border on our side, and then I left too.

We had all agreed that we would stay just about a hundred metres inside of the Yugoslav border on Greek soil. The Greek barracks were about a kilometre away, but we couldn't go there, because they wouldn't know who we were, since there was fighting going on all around at night. They had told me that we would have to come early in the morning, not at night. So we had to stay where we were until morning. It was lucky, there was a cornfield on both sides of the main road along the border. It was the end of August and the corn was already high. I met Stanko Stopa, Vinco Augustine and Joze Zopancic in the cornfield about 100 metres inside and there we stayed all night, very very quiet. But as soon as we got there, we heard a shot fired on our side, because somebody must be giving a signal that we were not guarding the border anymore. And we heard the sound of running, up and down, and they were calling my name, "Ivan Sekoranja!" It was a calm, clear night, with no wind. We were sitting there very quietly, nobody spoke at all, we were just waiting. It was one of the longest nights.

About an hour later, the wind started to blow, and if you ever were in a cornfield when the leaves are starting to dry, and the wind is blowing, it rustles. We didn't know the wind was blowing, we just heard the corn rustling, and I thought they were coming after us. I had three grenades with me in my haversack. I said to my three friends-we were sitting very close- "It looks like they're coming after us. We can't move, we have to stay here, but they're not going to capture me. I'm going to let the grenade off. You'd better get away from me because I don't want to be captured alive." Instead of moving away they came in closer. "We don't want to be taken either, we know what would happen to us."
Anyway we waited, scared. Nothing happened, the wind started to blow stronger and we realised what it was. Our hearts went back into the right position, and we relaxed a bit; we were safe for the time being anyway.

We stayed in that cornfield all night. We heard the shots from the guerillas fighting the general troops. Their was an English command at that time in Greece, and the commander of the communist guerillas was General Marco. There was bitter fighting; the poor people went through so much suffering there as well.

So we stayed there until the early hours of the morning, and I said to my friends, "Well it's getting light now. One of you go and crawl towards the Greek quarters." We couldn't go all at once and we couldn't go onto the main road, we had to crawl through the cornfields. Of course, none of them wanted to go. They said, "You organised this, you go first". There was no other way; I had to go. I was crawling slowly through the corn, and I came close to the Greek quarters, and a dog came out and started barking, followed soon after by a Greek officer. He asked me, in German, "Are you the only one?' I told him there were another three of us. He took me to the headquarters, and the other four out of the eight were already there. What excitement it was to see they'd got across without incident.

The soldier who met me went to look for the others. He didn't go far enough, and he came back and said, "I can't find them, they're not there". So they gave me a Greek uniform, a coat and cap, and a rifle, and I went with him. We came to the place and he said to me, "Tell them to crawl, don't come on the main road." We walked back, and about ten minutes later we were all together in the Greek quarters, with about 20 Greek soldiers around us. All of them spoke Greek, some spoke German and some a little bit of Serbian. So we were able to communicate.

We stayed there until about 4.00 in the afternoon. We had a rest, and good food there. They welcomed us very well. They told us it was too dangerous to be picked up by truck because the communists were up on the tops of the hills with machine guns everywhere, and it was not safe for trucks to come in. So they gave us rifles and ammunition and said we would have to walk about 10 kilometres, the eight of us with ten or fifteen of their soldiers. We had to walk in single file, about a metre apart. He said "It's very dangerous; if anything happens, you know what to do, you're soldiers."

We started walking about 4.00pm. In front of me was a Greek soldier who spoke German, and he said, "Look on the top of the hill, you can see a soldier with a machine gun." We all went very still, watching the hills on the right hand side towards Lerin. Luckily enough, the weather was good, and the sun was still shining. When we got to about 15 km from that area there was a truck waiting for us. The soldiers gave us to a different lot of Greek soldiers. On open trucks they took us first to have something to eat before we arrived at Lerin. The soldiers were protecting us because it was still very dangerous. They didn't want it spread about that we had run away from the communists, because at that time in Greece they were having a very hard time with the communists. The fighting was continuous, especially up in the hills at night. Eventually we did come to Lerin. They put us in a small room, there were eight of us and we stayed there for seven days. On the wall

was written lots of names of people who had gone through there already. We found the names of three Slovenians who had left before we arrived: Franz Urbos, Franz Pintric and Franz Samic: all Franks. We left our names there too. We didn't have a very good time there; every night we heard heavy artillery and machine guns in the distance. We knew that we had come to a difficult area, but at the time we didn't know it was as bad as it was.

In Greece

There was a rumour that there were a lot of people in camps in Greece from all over Europe, and we thought we'd be able to get there straight away, but we didn't. One night was very bad. I believe they found out that they were sheltering people who had belonged to their side, and they were trying to attack our barracks. So we were told afterwards. There was very heavy fighting all night. After seven days we left there, and the next place was Amindion, and it was an army camp- mainly English. They welcomed us very much, because they knew we had escaped from the communists. After one day we left and went further by truck, to Kozani, and we stayed there overnight- we never travelled by night, only by day. From there we went to Lariso, the eight of us. And from Lariso to Volos and from Volos we went by ship for a day. We sang on the ship -they loved our singing in Greece, -and when we got off the ship we went by train to Athens. They were very strict there. We were locked up separately at the police station. They questioned us there for about two days, one by one. About whether we knew about the army's movements, why did we leave, where we were from, and so on. Anyway from there we when they got all our details they put us on a truck again and took us to Piraeus. At Piraeus there was a big castle close to the sea, where there were big ships, from America and other places. We stayed in Piraeus for three weeks. The Piraeus refugee camp had about 1,500 people and was full. We were sleeping on an open area of concrete inside the building, and we were issued with half a blanket each. No beds, our pillows were our army boots. The food wasn't too good at all. After being there about a week I was sick, not only me but a lot of my friends and other people were. I had a lot of diarrhoea and was very sick. The Serbians who had been there a long time were very kind. They knew how to get some money by working or smuggling or whatever. I remember one Serbian who, when I had diarrhoea came to me and said don't eat anything for a couple of days. The only thing you can have is chocolate and he gave me some chocolate to eat. And he said we were all so sick is because the kitchen, instead of using proper oil for cooking, was using machine oil. I don't know if it was true or not. Anyway I recovered from that in a couple of days.

There was a wall all the way round in Piraeus, like a castle wall, about seven feet high. And beside the wall some Serbians had a workshop. I was very curious about

what they were doing there. They were making all sorts of needles, like shoe repair needles, awls, straight and curved needles; and they were very good too. So I tried to get a job there and so did Jokal. Somehow Jokal got a job straight away, filing the needles. To me they said "No, we haven't got anything for you". I wouldn't go away, I just sat there all day long, and the next day too, watching what they were doing. The Serbian fellow came to me again. "What's your occupation, have you ever done mechanical work, have you ever done any kind of machine work?" I said, "I know all about tools and machinery because I was working with machines in Germany". So I was lucky, he did give me a job. And Jokal and I worked there every day. We made some money, not very much, but the time went by. Someone took a photo of us, I think it's still somewhere around. I am in it and Jokal, and some Serbians too. We looked like convicts or prisoners. Anyway the fellow who was in charge was a real drunkard. He was a blacksmith. And there were two or three fellows working with him. We made awls. Shoemakers used them all the time, because everything was done by hand in those days. So we made and filed them all day long. After three weeks passed, we were all transported from Piraeus camp to Lavrion. Lavrion was about two hours by bus from Piraeus, all mountain country. Greece is a very poor country, nothing grows in those areas except olive trees. The only places where they have good soil is in parts of Greek Macedonia and in Crete; Ceros is another one. Even today the main industries are fishing and tourism.

When we came to Lavrion it was another big camp. We were lucky in a way, we were all Slovenians together. Now there were eleven of us - the three Franks had joined us. And we were lucky to have among us a blacksmith. So we organised our own workshop, a Slovenian workshop in Lavrion, making needles again. We arranged with a Serbian fellow, who had permission to travel from Lavrion to Athens any time he liked, to get us the equipment and tools we needed. We told him we had some needles -because we had been paid in needles at the end of our work in Piraeus- and one fellow had made a stamp that we could use to stamp all our needles with a false brand name: it was "Konig", which means "king" in German. And before that we had to make our furnace for our blacksmith so he could cut the steel and shape it.

So we started working. Some were good workers, and Jokal and I were the most experienced, but when we did get some money, we shared it equally, no matter how much each of us worked. Poor Janus Ursko, he was always the last to come to work, he always slept in or something. I don't know if he was lazy or what it was. And poor Vinco Augustine, he was another one. But we treated everyone equally. The Serbian fellow who delivered our materials sold our needles for us. We didn't get much, maybe he made a good profit for himself, but at least we got something. And we couldn't leave the camp ourselves, only in the daytime in groups. For coal for the blacksmith, there was a railway yard behind our camp, and there was a lot of coal on the ground, which we picked up in bags for the blacksmith.

In the meantime, it was still very dangerous there for us. We had a police guard in front of our door all the time, because there were still a lot of communists in Greece, who were against all refugees from communist countries.

Across the sea about 1 kilometre away there was an island, where several thousand prisoners were kept; they were communist fighters, and when they captured communists they sent them there. It was dangerous for us. So we made knives, and everyone kept a knife under his bedding. There were a lot of palm trees in the yard, and we picked up all the dry leaves and put them under our blankets to sleep on.

We were making our needles slowly by hand, but there was an old building nearby with a lot of good timber, and Frank Pinterich and I thought that if we could make a little machine out of timber and attach a grinding stone to it, one person could wind it instead of filing the needles by hand. It was a crazy idea, but we thought it might work. Frank and I went there, and were on top of some scaffolding when a Greek policeman came in and yelled out "What are you doing". We jumped down and ran for it out the back, and he went after us. Frank escaped, I didn't. There was a big trench I had to jump across and I didn't make it. The Greek soldier took me to an official. He said "Do you speak German?" - he was a Frenchman. He said that the building was a French furniture factory. It was lucky I could speak German, and he was happy he could speak in German to someone. I explained everything to him, we had a good chat, and he let me go. That was another lucky escape for me. I had thought when I was caught, 'This is it'; they could have sent me back to Yugoslavia for that.

We continued making needles, and were making a bit of money. I felt lucky to be able to make some money and I saved everything I got. Franz Jokul was a gambler, and he spent his money, and the others were buying cigarettes and other things, but I saved mine, because I wanted to get myself a suit made. We had a tailor in the camp and he charged just a small amount, and I did get a suit, which I was very proud of. The way I was able to afford a suit was because of George Dobric. He had relatives in the United States who had sent him a beautiful suit, but he was very tall and it didn't fit him, He let me have it for a good price and I got the tailor to alter it to fit me.

Now and then we went out, the eleven of us, to a vineyard just close by. It was safe for us to go around in groups of more than two or three. So we went there to drink wine -Greek wine, which was very hard to get used to in the beginning - called 'retsina'. It was quite good later on. A lot of people drank the hard stuff, 'ouzo'; it was very expensive and you got drunk quickly on it.

As time went on we were getting desperate, because there was no way we could get out of Greece. The Greek government was too poor, they couldn't give us proper

supplies, we didn't eat very well, although we didn't starve. One day we heard that a Yugoslav submarine had arrived on that island, with a lot of guns and ammunition to give to the communists prisoners there. Luckily before they started to unload, they captured the submarine and the prisoners didn't get any supplies. We knew we weren't safe where we were, and we couldn't go back to Yugoslavia to see our loved ones. We were desperate to get out to America, anywhere, the further away from Yugoslavia the better

One day somebody came to tell us that the French Foreign Legion were taking volunteers, anyone who would sign up for five years to go to fight in Algeria. Well, it was a terrible deal, and none of them were game enough to even think about it except Frank Pinterich. He said he knew about it, and he told me what you had to do. We both went to the office and they told us that first we would go to France for about 6-8 weeks, for training indoors under very hot conditions, to get us used to the heat in Algeria. Frank said, "We won't sign yet, we'll think about it." I wasn't very keen either. It was lucky that we didn't sign, because a few weeks later, an international organisation, UNRA, came to Greece to help get us out. We were all very happy.

Soon after, we were transported back to Athens, then to Italy. When we came to Piraeus, we went into a ship, an army ship with tanks and cannons. There were no cabins, we slept on the decks. There were over a thousand of us, mainly men. We were not even all there, it was about 9.00 in the morning, when the microphone started yelling, "Prossegee, Prossegee!" "Attention, attention! Everybody out of the ship! Hurry, Hurry!" We all got out and they told us we wouldn't be going until four in the afternoon, if then. They didn't tell us why.

We spotted the Serbian who spoke Greek and who sold our needles. He owed us some money, 40,000 drachmas to each of us. He took us to the town and he gave us the money to buy things. I remember buying a singlet, a warm singlet with that 40,000 drachmas. Money was hardly worth anything. (I still have that singlet. I don't wear it now but I keep it to remind me of my time in Greece.) Anyway we went back again and they told us they had discovered three bombs on the ship, but not to be frightened because they had checked and cleared the ship. We would be sailing in a few hours time. When we all got on and moved out of the harbour. There was a warship in front of us and another behind us, and they took us from Piraeus to Bari in Italy. On the way there we passed the hills and they told us it was the Yugoslav border- we were on the Adriatic. It took us a long time but we didn't mind sleeping rough, we were so glad to be going to a safer place. What a terrible experience we had gone through. The memories stayed with us, and I will never forget those days. If it was today, at my age, I would never take the risks I took. But when you're young, you don't think of the danger.

In Italy

I'll never forget the words "Prossegee, prossegee, gligura!", which means "Attention, attention, Hurry!" After all the trauma, excitement, and fear, we finally left Piraeus, and we safely arrived in Italy's first port, which is called Barri.

When we disembarked from the ship, we went onto a passenger train which was waiting for us there. It took quite a long time before we moved, as there were several hundred people waiting to board. While we were waiting, I was looking out of the train window at a new country, Italy, which I had never seen before, or its people, or heard the language spoken. It was very strange at first to hear. There were two men outside working on the railway. They were quarrelling, I thought. They were speaking so loudly and moving their hands left and right, and I thought: what on earth are they quarrelling about? As the train moved a little further on, the same thing happened again. Two small Italians (I wasn't very big but it appeared to me that the Italians were smaller) were talking in loud voices, and moving their hands in all directions. What they were saying I couldn't tell. I discovered later that all Italians talk like that.

Finally we moved away from Barri, and we arrived at Bagnoli, which was close to Naples. Here they took all our details, names, where we came from and where we had been since. It was a huge former army camp, and there were already 8,000 refugees from all over Europe when we arrived. The place was very very big. There was a courtyard in the middle, and buildings all around it. We stayed there, and again we were lucky to be with other Slovenians. I think they tried to keep us together in groups of different nations. It was very good, otherwise you would have been very lonely, not even being able to speak the language.

The food was much better than in Greece. Another thing I noticed was that the countryside was altogether different from what we had seen in Greece. In Greece it was rocky, mountainous country with few trees, a very hot and dry place. In Italy there were trees, pastures, apple-growing orchards, vineyards, and so on, which was more exciting, especially for me coming from Slovenia.

So we settled in Bagnoli. When you went for breakfast, dinner or tea, the queue was so long it would take you about an hour to get to the kitchen where you got your food. The weather was good, and we were happy to have left Greece to come to Italy, a safer country. We thought we'd have more opportunity to get out of Europe from there. We arrived in Italy on the 14th December 1948. We stayed about ten or eleven months.

In Bagnoli you were allowed a pass to go out for a day, to have a look at Bagnoli or Naples nearby. All of us Slovenians, ten of us, had some of the needles we had made in Greece. Our supplier couldn't sell the last ones, so we had shared them out between us, and we got about forty or fifty needles each. You couldn't do anything with needles in the camp, but we didn't have any money, the Greek drachmas were spent before we came. In Naples in the courtyards we got together and started singing in Slovenian. We had a crowd of people around us listening to our singing, and through that we met many more Slovenians in the camp. One fellow I remember very well. He had lost his right arm in the war, but he spoke fluent Italian, and he sometimes took our singing group outside the camp into a bar, and he would buy us a drink. Then sometimes other people who heard us singing would buy us a drink as well.

One night we went out with that fellow, he knew a very good bar with dancing, so we went there, and next door there was a wedding. The people were Slovenians from Trieste -Primorska in Slovenia. We started singing of course, and because they didn't have singers amongst them, they bought us a few drinks. When they started dancing, the girls asked us to dance. We started to enjoy ourselves. I love dancing and I was a good dancer too. So were the others, Jokal, Janus Ursko, Franz Pinterich, they were all good dancers and entertainers and the girls loved to dance with us. We were drinking and were starting to get quite happy, then we started asking them to dance, and they were jumping up to dance with us. It was getting late, about eleven pm, and the men from Primorska were getting annoyed that we were dancing with their girls. Somebody started a fight. Bottles of wine were flying over the room, and there were big vases with lovely flowers in them, and some of them were smashed. Fortunately none of us was injured, and none on the other side either. Somebody sang out that the police were coming, and we ran out of the place and back to the camp. Except one man, Frank Salmich, who somehow missed the place where you go in and he ended up in a big pool of mud, where they found him the next morning. He was brought in by the police at about 5.00 am. They said we were responsible for the damages, but in the end, nobody was put in gaol and everything was alright.

Time went on, we were still in Bagnoli, and we still had those needles. We thought if we went to Naples we might be able to sell them. There was a Slovenian fellow who spoke Italian, and he offered to go with one of us to Naples to sell the needles. They didn't want Franz Jokal to go because he was a gambler, and they didn't want to get Janus because he was always very slow, and it was hard to communicate with him -although he was a nice fellow, -and a lot of others were the same, so they chose me. Anyway we went to Naples. We didn't have much luck selling the needles, but we did find one place, like a little factory, and the Italian fellow there was very interested in those needles -awls they were, for making shoes. They had a German brand name and the needles were strong and perfect. That fellow suggested that we come and make needles for him in his workshop. So our interpreter and I went back

to the camp, and we told our group about it. Three of us went back to the place to make needles: me, Franz Jokal -he was very quick and a good worker, and Franz Zopancic, the blacksmith. We were taken into the cellar, and there was all the equipment we needed to make the needles. When we had made our first lot of needles, the Italian tested them with two pliers and he couldn't break them. He said, "They are too strong, you have to make them so that they break. If I sell one needle to a bootmaker, he will have it for the rest of his life and never buy any more." So what we did was, when they were red hot and were dropped into the boiling oil, we put some kerosene in with it, and that made them breakable. He was very happy with that. He paid for us to stay in a hotel, and he paid for our meals, because we had no money. A few days later when we had been working for about a week, and had made quite a few needles already, he came down to the cellar where we worked, and he said, "the police found out that you are making needles with a false brand, you have to go." So we left everything there, and had to run. That was a trick, I'm sure, because he got the knowledge of how to make those needles, he got all the needles we had made, and he didn't pay us for our work. It was a sad story that we had to tell to our Slovenian friends back at the camp, but they understood.

We didn't stay very long in Bagnoli because it was a transit camp. People were coming and going all the time. They took most of the Slovenians from Bagnoli on the train to Yesi .That was a big army camp again, run by English officers. That was another IRO (International Refugee Organisation) camp. We stayed in barracks, again Slovenians all together. There were six of us there. And some other Slovenians that we met when we arrived there -there was one fellow from Ljubljana who spoke Italian very well, and even English -his name was Franz Urbancic.

It was nearly Christmas, and we wanted to buy some Italian wine -it was very good,- but we didn't have any money. We still had needles, and again it was suggested we go to the city and sell some of them. We took about 100 needles to Ancona, a big town. Franz Urbancic and I were going, and Franz said, 'We should get special permission to go out of the camp'. But as we thought that we would never get permission, we just went without it. We went to Yesi railway station, and. before we got the train ticket, the Caribinieri asked us where we were going and why. Franz said "Ancona". "Have you got permission?", he asked. "No", we said. "Come with me and I'll get you permission". Franz said, "You know where we're going? -to gaol." And that's what happened. We came to the gaol, and they took our belts, and our shoelaces, and all the needles we had. They took us to the cells, a huge area with hundreds of people there. We saw there were huge pictures of Tito and Stalin on the wall -they were all communists. Franz said straight away, -and I knew- " We have to pretend we're communists". He told them that we were trying to escape because we were communists and they got us and put us in gaol. They had plenty of wine and food and everything, because they had local people bringing it in, and they gave us plenty. We stayed there overnight, and in the morning they called us back into the office, and the police contacted our camp officer and told them what had happened. We were lucky, we got all our needles back, and

everything else, and they let us go. They told us that we had to report to our officer when we got back, so we did. He asked us why we went out, and we told him that Christmas was approaching and we wanted to buy some wine and food to celebrate our way. He said, "Why didn't you come to get permission?". Frank Urbancic said, "We thought we wouldn't be able to get it, it's not easy to get." He said, " Well in those circumstances I'll let you".

The next day Franz and I arrived in Ancona, and we went to a guesthouse where people were drinking. We sat down at a table. We couldn't buy anything, but we just put our needles on the table, and -Franz was pretty clever,- he said to me, "Pretend you've come from the bombing in Germany and you got away with those needles, and I'm trying to buy them from you." So he started to talk loudly in Slovenian, and the other people asked what he was saying. He said, "I'm trying to buy those needles but he doesn't want to give them at that price. The factory was bombed and he was lucky to get away, and he got those very good quality needles, and I want to buy them." They said how much does he want? Then they started to buy them, 'I'll have six," "I'll have two", "I want ten". And we sold practically all those needles in the pub. Then we went to the shop; we bought some nice loaves of Italian bread, bought some mortadella, bought flagons of red wine, and we took it back to the camp. Everyone was happy, and we had a great time; there was enough to celebrate Christmas too.

That was another experience I have been through, when again I was lucky. Soon after that I was approached to be on duty on the ramp at the entrance of the camp. If you knew that somebody wasn't from the camp, or if the vehicle didn't have IRO on the side, you didn't let them in, you had to ask the fellow in the office. A lot of civilians were trying to get into the camp, selling things, smuggling things and God knows what.

So I worked there in civilian clothes on and a red band on my arm with IRO in big black letters. I received a small amount of money for doing that- a lot of other Slovenians were employed too, in the kitchens and other places. They gave work out for short periods of time, so that everyone who wanted to work got some money.

There was an Italian teacher who came everyday and I got to know him. He got to know me and he said, "I'll come sometimes when neither of us are on duty and I'll teach you Italian." That'll be good, I thought. His name was Ferruccio Ferarri. He was a very nice fellow and I met him often, and one day he said, "Lets go to the pictures tonight, - the girl from the office is coming too" -she was an English girl. I thought: that's good, a girl is coming, we never see any girls. We walked to Yesi, about 5 kilometres away, and there was hardly anybody in the pictures. We sat together and I said, "Where is the lady from the office?'. He said, " She couldn't make it". I found out very quickly why he wanted to go with me. When the picture started it was dark and he put his hand on my knee, then I knew what was going on and I rushed out of the pictures and went back to camp. I never saw him again.

When I came back into the camp, the others started laughing, and said, "Aah, you've been out with the poofter." They had noticed him but I never knew what he was up to.

As we had some lira because we were working, now and again our group went to a restaurant. They had very good wine there and I really liked it. We used to drink and sing, and one day, we came there and we'd already had a bit to drink and were quite merry. There were some Italian fellows there and they were annoying us; they told us to get out otherwise they were going to bash us up. There were only a few of us and we had to run away.

While we were still in Yesi we went to a church sometimes where there was a Slovenian priest. He organised a trip to Loreto. When we came to Loreto the priest told us all about it. First he said they had international police there, with different uniforms from the Italians. He took us to the church. It was a very big church, and was very famous. He explained to us that the stable where Jesus was born was brought to Loreto from Bethlehem and the church was built around it. He said it was the richest church in the world, there was a lot of gold in there, from all over the world. Today I would take more notice; but being young, in my twenties, those things didn't interest me much.

Around the church was a concrete area and people were going along on their knees praying. There was a track that they said had been worn down from millions of people praying there, but I didn't believe it, I think it was made like that originally, like a channel for people to kneel in. People still go there today and will probably be going there forever. The church was on a hillside, and there was a very beautiful view to the sea all around, and big mountains on one side. It was very heavily guarded when I was there in 1948, and had a big gate where you entered, with policemen guarding there night and day. From there you could see Mount Vesuvius.

We went to church several times because the Slovenian priest organised special days to go to mass. I went sometimes, because I liked the choir, who were singing hymns in Slovenian. The priest was very generous, he gave me some money. But when he wasn't at work you wouldn't know he was a priest, he always took his collar off. And he liked the girls a lot. I saw him several times, and he came up to me and said," Don't mention this to anybody." Anyway that was his business.

While we were staying in Italy I learned the Italian language. I was always interested in learning languages, and I somehow picked up Italian very quickly.

When we first came to Bagnoli they had taken all our particulars, and asked our destination or where we wanted to go, so I said I would like to go to the United States. A lot of Slovenians used to go to Argentina in those days, so I thought, yes, Argentina's all right, why not. I didn't know any more about Argentina than I knew

about the States, or Australia for that matter. The papers came through - I still have them - and it was all complete, I was selected to go to Argentina. We were waiting impatiently, and then they announced that Argentina was not taking any more refugees, because it was completely full, they said. We were left out. As I now know, we were very lucky that we didn't go there.

"What are we going to do now?", we thought. An office had opened up to arrange to take people to Chile. Janus and I talked about it. We decided to go to Chile, but someone told us they would take only people of a certain height. Janus was a little bit taller than me, so I thought, just in case I'm too small, I'll put some cardboard in my shoes to make me about a centimetre or so higher. I did that, and we went along to the office of the ambassador. They asked us, first, why we wanted to go, and a few other things, although they already knew about us. After that they said, "take off your shoes", and they measured us. Janus was alright, but they said I was too short, and they couldn't accept me. We went out, and Janus said, "They didn't take you so I don't want to go either." So that was out.

We thought, 'What are we going to do now? We can't go to Argentina, we can't go to Chile.' There was a notice around that Australia was taking a lot of people. We'd never heard about Australia. What we heard now, was that it was very far away, about 16,000 kilometres from Italy, and somebody who'd been there or who had heard, said there were a lot of black people there, and wild animals, and you had to carry a weapon with you all the time. I thought, well let's go and see what it's really like. We had to go to Bologna where there was an Australian embassy where they were questioning people and you had to go through a medical examination. When we came to the office there was a huge area with several people at desks, and all around the walls, there were pictures of kangaroos, crocodiles and lots of other animals that we'd never seen before, and black people with their spears. So this is Australia, I thought. When we were talking to the people there I asked what the population was; it was eight or nine million. So I thought to myself, 'If eight or nine million people can live there, so can I'. A whole group of us, all Slovenians, decided that we would go to Australia.

To Australia

We were moved around, and it was coming up to nine or ten months that we'd been in Italy, when we were accepted for Australia. That was in Yesi. We were taken back by train to Bagnoli. In Bagnoli we were in a camp for a day or so, and from there we were taken to Trieste, and I was quite shocked when they said they were taking us to Trieste. From Trieste to my home it was only 100-150 kilometres. In one way I was very happy to be so close to home, in another way I was scared. If we were so close, what if somebody came to get us. Because we had run away, we always had that fear, the fear that somebody might be watching us all the time.

We arrived in Trieste and straight from the train we went on the ship, which was called the Dundalk Bay, and Irish ship. It was a very big ship, there were around 1,000 people on board. I met a lot of people on the ship; there were Hungarians, Serbs, a lot of Slovenians, Germans, even Swiss, -people from all over Europe.

It took a day or so before we left Trieste, and headed for the open sea to Australia. The ship was quite good, it even had a swimming pool. I had my sleeping quarters below the water, in a double bunk bed. It didn't worry me at all. Sometimes the sea was very rough, and they closed us in so we couldn't get out, because the water was splashing onto the deck. I was lucky, I think I was in about the middle of the ship, where it wasn't rolling so much. I was never sick for the whole trip, which took about 31 days.

I remember going to Breakfast in the morning at 7.30. We had to go from the top of the deck down some stairs, and when you got halfway down the stairs you could see the dining room, a huge open place, with tables covered with white cloths, loaded with food. Some people would run back again when they saw all that food. But I was lucky, I always felt well enough to sit at the table and eat. We had so much room for ourselves and so much food. It was the beginning of our new freedom, more on that ship than we'd had for many, many years. It had been a long time and many things had happened, starting from the beginning of the war: the time in Germany; then back in Slovenia; in the army; in Greece; in Italy, and now finally we were going somewhere safe, where we could start our lives again.

Although, we were still concerned about Australia, and what it would really be like. We had no idea.

We were travelling and travelling; the days were very long. On the open sea, the days were beautiful, you couldn't see any mountains or lights, or anything at all. When you think about it, in those days when you're young, nothing worries you much. You get very scared, very frightened now and again, but it all passes by and you're young and carefree.

We had English lessons on the ship, and I learned to sing 'My Bonny lies over the ocean'.
And we used to play cards on the ship: 'Ein und Zwanzig' -'21'. We didn't do much reading because there was nothing to read. Slovenian books we didn't have, or any other article. Although I did find one fellow who used to read a lot. His name was Joze Katz and he was studying for the priesthood, and he was reading the bible all the time. He tried to tell me about the Catholic religion, but I was brought up a very strict Catholic by our mother and father, and I thought I knew everything about it, so I didn't take much notice. But he was a very nice man, it was nice to talk to him about different things. He told me he'd been in the communist army in the tank brigade, and they were sent to Trieste when a problem occurred in 1946. Tito

wanted to preserve Trieste, so they went there with tanks and the army. The English and the Americans were there then and they came to some agreement, and Slovenia lost Trieste, and Trieste was given to Italy.

None of the other Slovenians of my group were on the Dundalk Bay. For some reason I was the only one. But later on I found out that they were all in Australia except Frank Pinterich, and Georgia Dobric. They went to the United States because they had relatives there. But the rest of our group found each other after a year or so. We got each other's addresses and were able to communicate with each other.

When I was in Greece I had written several letters to my family in Bizeljsko, but I never got any replies. I was very concerned and didn't know what was happening there. When I came to Bagnoli, there were people in similar circumstances to myself, and I spoke to them about it. They said I didn't get a reply because I was a deserter, and any letter that came from outside Yugoslavia to my family they would never have been allowed to have. They did tell my family that I was 'missing', but they never told them what had happened to me. In the meantime, fifteen months had gone by since I had written, and my family thought I was dead, and in the church they prayed for me and paid a priest to say a mass for me. Anyway I found out in Italy that I should not write directly to my family; I should send it to some other people I trusted, to give the letter to my family. So that's what I did. And they told them about me, that I was alive. As soon as they knew I was alive, it didn't stay a secret very long. In their excitement, my family told everyone, and somebody must have heard and gone to the authorities, and immediately, the police -the 'Militza'- came to our house and demanded the letter that I had sent. They took away everything that I owned, even my pushbike and my clothing -my high German officer's boots and my leather clothing, my rings and my watch. That was my sister's husband, Miro Semrov, who was the Chief Minister in charge of Bizeljsko at the time, but I don't blame him, he couldn't do anything.

Then they arrested my father and put him in gaol. He did not have a very good reception there. They treated him badly. A young police officer was hitting him and blaming him for my desertion, saying he was a terrible father. My father said to the young fellow, "You hitting me is the same as hitting your own father." I was 21 years old when I left, and I never knew what bad treatment they'd get because I deserted the army. I never found out how long my father was in gaol. If I had known my family would suffer so much I would never have gone away, because we were a very close family. We were brought up very well, and even though my parents were very strict, in every way they taught us the right thing.

Once I was permanently settled in Australia, my mother and I wrote to each other every week. I remember that one letter came from Yesi and I received it in Australia, it had been travelling for about six months. One day my sister Maria told me that she and Miro were invited to a dance, and one of the officers there had a civilian uniform on, and she noticed that he was wearing my pants. There had been

a tear on the back which she had darned herself. She was angry and said to Miro, "the policeman is wearing John's pants." Miro went up to him and asked where he got them. He said, "They were there and they fitted me so I put them on." These sorts of things were told to me much later, when I first went back home after twenty five years. During those days when I was away it was really tough for them in Slovenia. Thank God it's all over now.

Anyway, back on the ship, we were approaching closer and closer to Australia. Days before, we had seen land, and had been told, "That's Australia." In the early hours of the morning we arrived at Port Melbourne, very excited. It was December 1949. We were still on the ship when a Slovenian came on board to welcome all Slovenians, and translate for us into English. His name was Frank Pierce. I remember he gave me about five shillings, my first Australian money.

My life in Australia

We were still on board and Joe Pierce was explaining a bit about what it was like in Australia. It was still the early hours of the morning. We had breakfast on the ship, and they called out our names to go and board the train to a camp called Bonegilla. We went on the train and it was a beautiful sunny day, but very hot. We arrived at Bonegilla just after lunch. It had been an army camp during the war, and there were hundreds of barracks. They showed us our sleeping quarters and the mess where we had our meals, and the showers and washroom. Our sleeping quarters had steel beds with mattresses. I went out with some people there, and they pointed out a river not far from the camp. I spoke a little bit of English, but not much. We had taken some lessons for 31 days when we were travelling over on the ship, so we remembered a few things: thankyou, please, water, today, the months and so on.

I went to bed early as I always go to bed early, and I woke up very early just at daybreak. Everybody was asleep, and I thought I'd have a walk down to the river. It was only a few hundred metres away. The water was flowing, it was beautiful clean water, and grass was growing on either side of the river, but everywhere else was completely dry. At the river there were more rabbits than I had ever seen in my life, they were running in the thousands, everywhere. And I thought to myself, "I'll never be hungry in this country". And it was true, I never was.

I went back and had breakfast at the mess, you could serve yourself with meat and bacon and eggs and plenty of bread. I think we had tea to drink. We walked around during the day. Everybody was interested to see this new land, so far from Europe, 16,000 kilometres away. Running through my mind was: I'm safe here from communism. But other thoughts too: my family are so far away, will I ever see them again?

There were some beautiful trees around the camp, nice and shady, especially before midday. But the heat didn't worry me for some reason, I don't remember being that hot in Bonegilla. Bonegilla is only 10-15 kilometres from Albury, and we spent a day there. But the day after that, the loudspeakers were calling people out to be taken away to other places. In the camp people were always coming and going. I don't know how many thousands were there when I was there.

One afternoon my name was called, and I had to be at the front office at 2.00 pm for a bus which would take us to Leeton. I had to hear it several times before I remembered the name Leeton. There were about twenty eight of us in the bus, all men, travelling from Bonegilla. We arrived and were taken to a racecourse. There was a big barracks or meeting house, and that was our new camp. There were 30 or 40 beds, a high ceiling, and from the ceiling was hanging a big mosquito net, reaching over every bed. Good lord, what's that? we were saying; we'd never seen anything like it. I said to someone, 'I'm not going to sleep under that.' I was frightened that I'd suffocate under it. He said, "If you don't sleep under it you won't sleep at all, the mosquitos are so bad".

The next morning farmers were already there asking who wanted to go to pick fruit on the farms. So I volunteered straight away and there were a couple of other Slovenians as well; one was Joze Turk, and there were some Hungarians. The farmer came in the car and took us to the farm, I think it was Yendo or something like that. We were given the big bags you put round your neck, and you picked the fruit, and when it was full, you emptied your bag into the horse wagon standing there. We had plenty of beautiful fruit to eat, and we were picking all day. About 5.00 they took us back to camp. They asked us to come next morning. We went to our quarters, and had a bit of a wash. There was a place nearby where they served beer and we arrived there about a quarter to six. There were hundreds of people there, you couldn't get near the counter. People were yelling for beer and showing their hands, with the fingers up - we didn't know what it meant. We were thirsty as anything and we wanted to try Australian beer, but we didn't get anything, because six o'clock was closing time everywhere in Australia in those days. So we didn't get any beer because we didn't know how to approach it. If you had your beer, you could still stay there drinking it outside, but they didn't serve any after 6.00. And there were only men there, no ladies. We soon learned what we had to do. You put your fingers up, for however many beers you wanted, and they handed your beers over the crowd and you handed your money back the same way.

The second day we went to pick fruit, the farmers -they were very nice to us-they gave me a letter which I still have, about how much they enjoyed having us, and wishing us all the best in the new country, and to come back to see them some time.

In Griffith

We stayed in Leeton only two nights. The third day a fellow came from Griffith. He wanted two men to work in the milk depot. I didn't know what it was but it was work, and I volunteered and so did a Hungarian fellow by the name of Henry. The boss was named Jack Donelly. He had a utility and he took us from Leeton to Griffith - about 40 miles along a gravel road. The rocks and dust were flying everywhere. We arrived there at Jack's place. He showed us the factory and showed us what our duties were. To me he said I would be delivering milk, by horse and cart. I had to get up at 2.00 am, get the horse which was about a kilometre from the town, put all his gear on, bring him to the depot and hook him onto the two-wheeler wagon where there were already two cans on the back. There were pipes you turned on and the milk flowed out. There were about 40-60 litres in the cans. Then he showed us where we slept on the verandah of his house. He had big tarpaulins which you could pull around if the weather was bad. So we stayed there, Henry and I, and the boss would wake us up about 1.30 am. Henry was working in the depot, washing cans, working machines and putting the milk in containers and things like that. He was the only one in Griffith, this Jack Donelly, who delivered milk in the town.

I went with a fellow the first day who showed me what to do, how to catch the horse, put his gear on, and walk him to the depot. He was an elderly fellow with no teeth on the bottom and he never spoke much. He took me all around the run that first day. I worked from 2.00 to 6.00 or 7.00 in the morning. Next day he said, "You go and get the horse and bring him here." When I brought him, he said, "Now away you go." I said to Jack Donelly. "I don't know where to go", and he said, " The horse knows where to go." He gave me a book, torch, pencil and a pint measure for the milk. You wrote down how many pints you gave them. And there was a leather pouch for change, as some people left the money in the can.

So off I went. Sure enough, the horse knew exactly where to go. He stopped, and I had to run around and see to the can, see how many pints they wanted. The first one was right and the second one. It was very difficult the first day because at some places I didn't know where they put the can. They were under the bushes, near the letter box, under a tree, on a verandah, everywhere, and were hard to find at night. While I was running around looking for the can, the horse would move off, he knew how long he had to wait. So I had to run after the horse, turn him back, stop again, look for the can again. I didn't have time to look at the book, anyway most people wrote how much they wanted. But sometimes they didn't so I had to look quickly. The first day I probably arrived back at the depot at about 8.00 am. It was a long day and a very hard day. The boss was pleased with me, he told me to take the horse back to the paddock and give him oats and hay. When I went back to the depot the boss explained a few things and then he told me to go to breakfast in a Greek cafe across the road. I would just sit down and breakfast would be served to me. The next day it was a little bit easier, but I still had trouble. I was worried about it and trying to go as fast as I could -running all the time. It was terrible when it was raining, you were soaking wet, but at least the weather was warm. Some times the

people left change in the can, and I poured about two pints of milk in when I heard the rattling, so I had to pour the milk out, get the money, put it in my bag. I thought, how terrible, but I couldn't do anything else. I got paid five pounds a week working seven days a week. Once I knew how to do everything, I finished about 6 am. One day when I was delivering milk, I was crossing a bridge, when the horse's leather strap broke, the front part that was holding the wagon straight, and the back tipped down and the pipes were touching the street, pouring out milk, and the horse was frightened and started to run, with the milk running out onto the street. Somebody came to help stop the horse, and helped me to get it wired together so it was up again, but I lost all the milk in the meantime. I was very scared about what the boss would say. I went back to the depot and told the boss what had happened, but he was very understanding. I didn't have to go back to deliver more milk, it was already too late.

During the day I would go with Henry outside for a bit of a walk round Griffith, but we didn't have much time. We had to go to bed early to get up early. Henry didn't stay very long, only a couple of months. He told me he would leave, and the next day he did. Next day when I finished my run, Jack Donnelly said, "We'll go back to Leeton and see if we can get somebody else for the depot. I went with him to Leeton and he asked for one man to work and he was saying, "I've got a Slovenian, are there any more Slovenians here?" He probably thought that would be better for me so I could have some company. There was one fellow who sang out, "Yes, I'm a Slovenian". It was John Small. He's still in Griffith today, he married an Italian girl and had three children. I had met his brother Joze on the ship, so I said to him, " Have you got your brother here?" and he said yes. John must have come with some other ship. We took him back to Griffith, and he had to start washing all the big cans, that I and about three others were delivering milk from. He said the work was very hard. After John Small arrived, we got accommodation in Canal St., it was a sort of boarding house. Jack Donnelly paid for it.

I had been with Jack Donnelly for about five months when I had an appendix attack. I didn't know what it was. I was finished the run, and I tied the horse up somehow, then I was crawling back, I was in terrible pain. It was about 9.00 am. Jack Donnelly came with the car and found me there and they took me to hospital, and did a few tests. They gave me some medicine or a few tablets and the pain disappeared. Next morning I was going to go back to work but I got another attack before I got to work, and had to go back to hospital. My pain was in the side instead of the front where it usually is for appendicitis. But finally they found out what it was and they operated on me. I still couldn't speak much English, and luckily there was a Polish doctor there, and I was able to talk to him in Polish. He said to me it was very last minute it was lucky they operated so quick or the appendix would burst. What would happen then I don't know. I stayed about a week in hospital, and in the meantime there was a cleaner, an elderly Italian fellow, and I spoke to him, because I could communicate with him. He liked to talk to me and asked me all about myself. I told him I was working in the depot with Jack Donnelly. Apparently everybody knew him and how

he was always looking for people to work for him, nobody would work for him for long because the money wasn't good and nobody wanted to work in the early hours of the morning. He talked to me about it and said, "Why don't you leave, you could get a job in the hospital as a cleaner." "But I'm supposed to stay there for two years." He said, 'Aah, don't worry about that.' In the meantime John Small was still working there, but he left too, while I was in hospital, and went to work at the rice mill.

John still came to see me every day in the hospital, he became a very good friend. He even wrote a letter to my family when I was very sick.

The Italian man who was a cleaner in the hospital, was encouraging me to get a job at the hospital. He said, "Before you leave here, I'll take you to see the matron in the office, and see what she says." Matron Fox was her name. She said, "Anytime you want a job, there's a job for you here.". The Italian fellow gave me the details of what I had to do. He said, "You go to the employment office and tell them all about what hours you work, what money you get, and tell them you'd like to work in the hospital.". I thought, Henry left him, John Small left him, I'm not staying for two years either. I had a few days off before I had to start work again, because I couldn't get up and down from the wagon, and I did go to the employment office, and I talked in English as much as I could, and it was enough, he understood me. I told him about my work, and how much I got. He listened and was very nasty with me. He said, "Don't you know you have a two-year contract, you have to go wherever the government sends you." I said, "Yes I know but I can't jump up and down from the wagon after my operation, it's too hard for me." He said " Alright, then I'm going to send you to a farm." I told him I had a job at the hospital. He said, " Well, come back on Thursday, I'm going to talk to your boss and see what's going on." Anyway I didn't worry, I thought, whatever happens, happens. I went back on Thursday and when I came to see the officer, this time he was very nice to me, and he put a hand on my shoulder, and said, "Well, you can get a job anytime you like at the hospital; he worked you so hard, and he didn't pay you enough, so you can sue him and get what he owes you". I was so happy to get a job in the hospital and to get away from Jack Donnelly that I said, "No I don't want to, I just want to get away from him." Jack Donnelly was very angry that I went to the employment officer. They must have given him a hard time.

I went to the hospital, and I saw Matron Fox again, and she told me I could start in a few days. In the meantime I went to Sydney, with John Small on the train, because he knew some friends in Sydney. When we were travelling to Sydney, he met an Italian girl who was travelling to Sydney too. When we came back a few days later, they saw a lot of each other and eventually got married.

I went to see some friends in Leura when I was in Sydney. I had a friend from Bizeljsko, a man with one daughter and four boys; he had been a priest and had left

the priesthood and had all those children. I met him in Yesi in Italy. Somehow he found my address when he arrived in Australia, and I received a letter from him, and he was trying to match me with his daughter. She was a nice looking girl, blonde and about a year younger than I was. While I was in Griffith her father and I were writing to each other, and he was like a father, sending nice letters saying, "Look after yourself, don't run around with just anybody, my daughter's going to write to you and you can come and visit us in Leura." We started writing letters to each other, and when I came to Sydney I had to travel to a suburb on the North side where we had arranged to meet and travel to Leura to meet her family. I arrived by train and was waiting for her, and when she saw me she said, "Where's you car?" I said, "I haven't got a car". At that time I had only been in Australia about five or six months. Anyway we were travelling to Leura, and she told me, "I've got a friend in America, and we're very much in love and I'm going to marry him." I said to her, "That's alright, that's okay." But I thought: why am I going to Leura to meet the family? I did meet them and they were very nice to me, but I never spoke to her again, she was never around, and she didn't want to speak to me. The next day I went back to Sydney, and back on the train to Griffith. That was the end of that friendship, -their name was Sepetavc- I never knew any more about them. I should have written to the father and explained everything because he was so nice to me.

When I came back I started my new job at the hospital. It was quite a distance from Canal Street to the hospital, so I bought myself a new bicycle. I started at 6.00 in the morning and worked till about 4.00 in the afternoon, and I didn't have to work Saturday or Sunday. So it was very good and I liked it very much right from the beginning. I still lived with John Small, and one night at our boarding-house I remember an old fellow came in with a flagon of sweet sherry. John and I were there. I was writing a letter home, and he came in and brought two big glasses for us and filled them up, and he was trying to talk to us. He was drunk already. The first glass we drank, we had never had sweet sherry before, and maybe the second one too. We couldn't drink any more but he kept filling our glasses, and when the old man wasn't looking we were pouring it into the pot plants nearby. I am very sorry for them they must have died from alcohol. It was lucky it was a Saturday night because I don't think I could have worked the next day, I was so sick, my head was nearly bursting. John had to go to the rice mill, I don't know how he stood it, and I was so sick from that sweet sherry that I rode the bicycle out of Griffith to an open paddock and was rolling around there, I'll never forget how painful it was.

By Monday I had recovered and went to work. My job was sweeping the floor, polishing the floor, vacuuming, shifting beds, and trying to help anywhere they wanted me. The work was always inside, and I wore good clothes, nice shirts and nice trousers with good shoes, I kept myself neat and tidy. They found out I knew quite a bit of Italian, and I knew German and Polish too, so I helped with translating. Even though I didn't speak much English, there were some who didn't speak any at all. So they would call me over the microphone to come to the different wards. Once they called me to the maternity ward and they took me to the place where an Italian

lady was in labour, but before I went in they gave me a white gown to put on, and then I went into the room. They told me to ask her where the pain was, and I did and she said, doctor, I have a very bad pain, and she pulled off her clothes to show me. I was only a young fellow, and I just turned around and ran out of the room. The nurses ran after me, laughing, and I said to them, "I'll never come to the maternity ward again.' I was a very innocent young boy.

Once they called me to the male ward. There was a Hungarian fellow with a broken leg from a motorbike accident. He didn't speak any English at all, but he spoke German. I was on one side and the sister was on the other side. I asked him the questions and he explained it all to me, and I told the sister everything he said, but I was speaking to her in German. She said, "John, I don't understand anything, speak to me in English." That was embarrassing for me too.

I always had breakfast in the hospital and it was very good, you could have as much as you liked. I particularly remember minced meat with egg, that was beautiful. I have tried to make it ever since, but it never turned out like it was at the hospital. There was toast, coffee and tea and plenty to eat.

In 1950 I received a letter from home saying that my sister Rose had died. She was only eighteen years old and she died on 3rd August 1950. I was crying when I read the letter and I couldn't understand why she died. They told me that she died suddenly when she was working in the garden, she had collapsed and they took her to the doctor but by the time they got her to the doctor she was dead already. That was a terribly sad time for me. My family and I wrote to each other all the time. I received a lot of letters from my sisters, and my mother wrote about every two weeks. She wrote beautiful letters, telling me everything that was going on back home, -nothing political, they were not allowed to.

When I was working in the hospital, I met a nice young sister, her name was Olive Walker. As I was working in the corridor she would often walk across from the office to the maternity ward, and I always said, "Good morning sister", and she would always say nicely, "Good morning John". I said Good morning to everyone, doctors and nurses, I was sort of a friendly chap. I got to like her and I saw that she was very friendly. I didn't know her name, I called her 'sister'. We saw a lot of each other, but just passing by, we never stopped to talk, you weren't allowed to anyway. It was getting close to Christmas 1951, and my contract for two years ended at Christmas. One day I walked past Sister Walker and said, "What are you going to give me for Christmas, Sister?" She said "I don't know, John, what are you going to give me?" I said "I'm going to give you a big kiss". She just laughed and kept walking. Olive was on night duty so on Christmas morning at 5.30 am. I found her in a little room getting the babies' bottles ready and I gave her that big kiss. Somehow I got to see Olive one afternoon in Canal Street and we had a talk there, we were good friends. I had by then sold my pushbike and I bought a motorbike. I was very pleased that I already had a motorbike after such a short time in Australia.

I also bought a radio, even though I couldn't understand much of what was said. But I thought, if I listened to the radio when I had time, my ears would get used to the language. I understood a word here and there, and slowly I picked it up. I never had much problem with languages when I was young.

I was getting to know Sister Walker. I had planned that I would be leaving after Christmas 1951 because my contract was ending. I gave my resignation to Matron Fox the week before I was due to leave, and she said, "Don't leave. I know you don't like the work much, but stay with us and you can be a boilermaker." She gave me a big talk, saying they would send me to Sydney, pay for my training, and I'd be able to work for them permanently. I said to Matron, "I can't tell you straight away, I have to think about it. I'll come back tomorrow and tell you what I decide to do." I did go to see about boiler-making. I still knew that Italian fellow who helped me get the hospital job, he used to invite me to his house in Griffith. I had spaghetti there. I didn't stay long, I was very shy - that was in the early days. Anyway I met him in town and I asked him about being a boilermaker. He said, "Well, you have to be in the union", and he told me all about the unions, I didn't have any idea. He said, "You've come away from communism and they're all communists in the unions". Well when I found that out, immediately I thought: never. I went to Matron's office and I said, " Thankyou very much for offering me that job, but I want to go and work on the big Snowy Mountains project." She said "Alright, but before you leave, come to my office and get your money and your reference." I got a beautiful reference from Matron Fox. It said something like, "He is very reliable, honest, adaptable, punctual, courteous and at all times a gentleman." I think that was very nice of her.

Working for the Snowy

At that time John Small had left the rice mill and he was working for the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, in the Survey Section. He wrote to me a lot; he and his girlfriend were planning to get married after Christmas. He came back to Griffith to see her at Christmas, and I had everything organised to leave Griffith and go back to the Snowy with him after Christmas. But before I left there I asked Olive if she would see me the last night before I went away. We met across the canal at the Catholic School. I came there with the motorbike with the sidecar on, and I asked her to come for a ride with me. She refused, she said she had seen so many accidents that she would never ride in a motorbike. She had a best friend, Jackie Harris, in Griffith who lost her brother in a motorbike accident. So we just went for a walk, and we sat and had a chat, and then we said Goodbye. Olive gave me an address in Pagewood, and she told me to write to her at her mother's address in

Pagewood in Sydney, as Olive was leaving the next week to work in Sydney. I had some other friends in Griffith, Ivan Pacic and his friend Metod. His sister arrived six months before I left Griffith. We became very friendly too, and saw each other quite a lot, but I knew I would never marry her. Anyway I made an excuse not to see them the night before I left, I said I had to say goodbye to someone in Griffith. I couldn't say it was Olive because Maria knew her, she worked at the hospital too. In those days domestic staff didn't mix with the nursing staff.

Anyway, John Small was ready, Christmas had passed and next day we were going away. I put my radio and all my belongings into my sidecar, and John and I left Griffith in the early hours of the morning. We stopped at Batlow and stayed overnight in a hotel. The second day we went through Tumut and arrived late at night at Tumut Ponds. John had a barrack at Tumut Ponds. Next day at Tumut Ponds, John introduced me to his boss, Bill Gunning, a New Zealander, and Mr Taylor, the top surveyor. He said, "Yes we do need you, but you have to go to the Cooma office, and they'll give you the papers you need". So I took the bus in the early hours next day, leaving my motorbike there. I went to the Snowy Mountains Authority, we arrived about 11.00, and I saw Mr Eggling. I did get a job. He said to try to do a bit of work because the bus was not leaving till next day. I stayed there till about 5.00 pm, and went to get something to eat, and then went to get some accommodation. I went from hotel to hotel practically everywhere, because I had plenty of time to look. I couldn't get accommodation anywhere, it was all full. I didn't know anybody in Cooma, but in the park was a covered area with benches underneath, so I just lay down and was going to sleep there all night. Soon after that, a policeman came around, a great, heavy, big man. And he said, "You can't sleep here, you have to go to a hotel." I told him I'd just arrived and had got a job, and I went everywhere in Cooma looking for accommodation and couldn't find anything. He said, "Come on, hop in the police wagon with me, I'll take you around all the hotels".

So he did, but he couldn't find anything either. And he said, "Well, if you'd like to stay in the gaol, we can give you a room for the night." So I went into Cooma gaol, they gave me blankets, and in the morning they brought me tea and toast, then they opened the front gates and I was free again.

I caught the Snowy bus back to Tumut Ponds. I was happy to go up to the mountains. The climate up there was beautiful. Having just come from a hot place like Griffith, and being used to a cold climate in Europe, that suited me down to the ground. As soon as I arrived I reported to Mr Taylor's Survey Section office. I was going to be working with a German fellow, Eric, but Bill Gunning was second in charge after Mr Taylor in the office. Third in charge was a German named Wasserman, and there were a few others whose names I can't remember. I was working with Eric and two other chainmen for quite a long time in Tumut Pond. John Small was still there in the beginning of January, he stayed until March. While

he was there we had a very good time, we were in different groups but in the same section.

One weekend when we were off work, four of us organised a trip to Yarrangobilly. There was a restaurant there and lot of games and accommodation. We went on our motorbikes - I had Alfonse in the side car - and we had a good time and a few drinks, and then we headed back in the afternoon. I went ahead with Alfonse and we were happily singing along, and when we came round the corner, the steel holding the sidecar to the bike, snapped, and I lost control and I went off the road - we were not going very fast- and straight into a tree. We had a bottle of champagne with us and Alfonse took the champagne out of the sidecar and we waited until John and his friend came along, not knowing that there was something wrong with the bike: my front fork was bent and I couldn't ride any further, not with the sidecar on anyway. Luckily enough, we were waiting for awhile when two Irish blokes took my sidecar on the top of their utility and took it back for me. I had to get my bike fixed and I had to organise a trip with somebody to take it to Old Adaminaby where there was a garage, and leave it there for a few weeks to be fixed. He fixed it alright - I paid what he asked, and as I was leaving he said "Just before you go, let's go and have a drink in the hotel." I paid for the beers, and then he said, "Oh, I've forgotten my money, could you give me ten pounds, I want to buy something for my wife." That was a lot of money in those days. I handed him ten pounds, and never saw it again. That was my experience of being generous, that was not the only one, I made a lot of mistakes by being too generous in lending money.

When we were working in the Survey Section, my group was transferred to Major Clues's party, Eric and Gunning and about fifteen of us. Major Clues was an old bushman, an army man. We got there and set all our tents up, there was a kitchen already established; Major Clues had his own hut. We stayed there for a few days, working towards Saddle Camp, which is Cabramurra now, and on the 15th of April, we had a very heavy snowfall- an early winter. We were all in bed and our tents collapsed. There was a bit of an alarm, and Major Clues called us all into his hut, it was nice and warm there. He offered us some liqueur. In the morning we started cleaning up the snow and set up camp again. We never saw Major Clues very much, he used to go into the bush and did whatever he liked. He sent a driver sometimes for supplies to Tumut, with a landrover. In the SMA vehicles they were not allowed to carry liquor. But Major Clues took the driver aside, and told him to call into the Tumut Hotel and ask for Major Clues's medicine. They had the cartons all ready for him there.

In the meantime I got a letter from Olive. I had written to her from Tumut Pond. It took me about 2-3 weeks -it was very hard for me to write in English. At that stage she had left Griffith too, and she said in her letter, 'If you ever come to Sydney, let me know when you are coming and we'll meet at the top of Mark Foys stairs." That was alright, I managed to write a letter back, and managed to tell her what time I

was coming to Sydney, and that I would meet her at the place she mentioned. I organised to go to Sydney and had to take the bus from Tumut Pond to Cooma. Because of the heavy snow we got stuck just out of Kiandra in a heavy drift of snow and couldn't go any further. They were all men in the bus, and the bus driver got us all out pushing the bus and digging it out. Eventually we got to Cooma and luckily, caught the train from there to Sydney. When I came to Sydney I stayed in a hotel called The Ritz. Olive met me on a Saturday, and we bought some chocolates, and went to meet her mother. When we arrived there, she introduced me to her and her mother was very nice. I first called her Mum, and from then on I always called her Mum. It was very nice for me after so many years without a mother, to call her Mum. I immediately liked her, she was a lovely person and we had a good chat. We went out again and Olive showed me around Pagewood where they lived. That was Saturday and I went to the hotel on Saturday night, and we met again on Sunday morning for a little while. I had to catch the train back to Cooma on Sunday afternoon.

Olive's mother had a Woolsley car, and Olive could drive, and they took me to the railway station. I said goodbye to Mum, I said goodbye to Olive, and she was so shy she wouldn't even let me kiss her. I slept on the train and was back in the Snowy Mountains at work on Monday morning.

So time went by. After we came to Dry Dam, we were surveying the main road from Tumut Ponds to Saddle Camp, now called Cabramurra, the highest town in Australia. We were not able to use landrovers much, sometimes we had to use horses to carry equipment, and at one stage our party lost a horse when he slipped with the supplies of food and was killed. When we were working on very steep hills, sometime we had to use ropes to slide down the mountains to get the measurements and climb up again. I thought that was fun; I quite enjoyed it. I forgot to mention that when we were at Tumut Ponds I learned how to drink tea without milk but with lots of honey. In Dry Dam we had a Slovenian fellow as cook, Tony Glavica. He was a good cook and there was plenty to eat, always plenty of meat. He managed to get some strudel and things like that too.

I got another letter from Olive, and we managed to meet again. The second time I knew where to go, and I took a taxi to Pagewood. We bought some champagne, one or two bottles, because at that stage we were thinking of getting engaged, and while we were in town we bought an engagement ring. Then we went back to see her mother, and her brother Bill was there too. So we told her that we were engaged, and we celebrated with champagne. It was funny, because her mother was frightened that Bill would drink too much, because he was studying and had to get up early. So every time he looked away she drank his champagne. She suffered the next day and Bill laughed and said "It serves you right."

Because I was engaged I told Bill Gunning that we probably would be getting married after Christmas, and I asked if I would be able to get a transfer to Cooma.

He said "Yes, I've got a place in Cooma with my family, come and see me there and we'll have a bit of a yarn about it." I don't know if he believed that I was engaged or not. I think he wanted to see my future wife. Olive applied for a job in Cooma District Hospital and she got the job, and her friend Pearl did too, and they both arrived in Cooma and worked there before we were married. I arranged to get down there before Christmas too, and of course went to see Olive. I told her that Bill Gunning was living in Cooma, and that we might go to see him and tell him we were getting married in January. Anyway we walked there up to North Cooma, he welcomed us well and gave us some biscuits and brandy. We told him about ourselves and he said, "leave it to me and I'll organise it when I get to Tumut Ponds." He did, and I did get a transfer to Cooma, and I lived in East Cooma in one of the barracks. My boss there was Tom Richmond. He was an elderly man, a very nice man, I admired him. He never married, he never swore, he went to church, and he was a scoutmaster. He was a religious man who was trying to do a lot of good for people. He was a property surveyor and very well known all over the place.

When I joined there was already a Hungarian fellow called Charlie Latsko. He was the driver. We worked together, going from one place to another, checking the surveyed work. Soon after that Charlie resigned from there and he started his own business delivering milk in Cooma. So I became the driver for Mr Richmond and I like that very much. We went long distances from Cooma every day checking things. When we had a cup of tea, he always liked to make a fire. He said "always use only one match to light a fire", and he would set up the fire very nicely and sure enough, took only one match to get it going. He'd use forked sticks and another stick across the top and hang a billy from it. When the billy was boiling he put a handful of tea in the billy, took it off the fire, and swung it around; he said that's the Australian way to make tea. So I learned how to make a fire and how to make tea with Mr Richmond.

Early days in Cooma

Olive and I went out quite a bit, and soon we arranged to get married, on the 17th of January, 1953. I got two weeks off, and we had a wonderful wedding, and I was lucky enough to have some of my Slovenian friends there: Janus Ursko, Tony Glavica and Alfonse - I don't know his other name. All Olive's family came, her mother and five sisters and two brothers, an uncle and aunt and some friends, and they organised a beautiful wedding. It was at St Judes Church, Randwick. We had a reception in a house nearby. We had a nice dance and a lovely party, and Janus Ursko was my best man. None of us could speak English well. The family were laughing for a long time afterwards about the way Janus thanked the bridesmaids, he couldn't pronounce it properly: "bradsmates" he said. We stayed that night at Pagewood. Our guests and all three friends of mine came there too. At about 6.00 am they serenaded us outside our door, but it wasn't Olive's and my door it was

Bill's door. We went on our honeymoon to Huskisson for a week. On our honeymoon, we bought two watercolour pictures: one with oxen for me, and one with sheep and gum trees for Olive. That was a nice memory and we have them still today. We bought some furniture in Sydney before we went back to Cooma; and we bought a fridge called a Lindbergh Foster; it was a very good fridge, it lasted 20 years. In Cooma we had arranged to rent a house from a nice old lady called Miss Price, in Campbell Street. We had to come back early from our honeymoon because our furniture was delivered to Cooma earlier than we expected.

I was still working on the Snowy and Olive was working at Cooma Hospital. It was only a street away from where we were living. The place was very primitive where we lived, we had a fuel stove, a chip heater and one powerpoint, but we were happy just the same.

We often discussed our future, and I said I wanted to do something else; I didn't want to be in the Snowy for too much longer. Olive had talked to a lady from Nimmitabel, Mrs Charles, who had a baby in the maternity ward where Olive worked. Olive was telling her about us, that we were married and I was working on the Snowy but we were looking for something else. Mrs Charles said they needed someone to work on their farm, doing fences and everything else, and asked us if I we would like to go and have a look at it. I thought: why not, there's nothing to lose. So we made arrangements to go to Nimmitabel, and we went there by train, and Dr Charles came to meet us and took us to the farm, which was 10-15 kilometres from Nimmitabel. Even though we were married Olive slept in the house and I slept in the caravan. In the morning I went up to the house, and Dr Charles made us breakfast. He went to work and his wife told us about the farm. They had one cow that had to be milked. She took the milk container and we went to the stable. It was pretty dirty; it didn't look very well looked after. She asked me to milk the cow and I said, "I don't know how to." Olive was surprised, she knew I came from a farm and we had cows there. "Yes," I said, "but in Slovenia the men don't milk cows, that's women's work." That was it. Because I didn't know how to milk the cow, they didn't ask me to work there. I didn't like the idea at all. We went back and Olive was very annoyed with me about that for a while.

I was still going off with Mr Richmond, sometimes he picked me up in his landrover from home. He got another chainman, John Klima, who was a very nice man. He married an Australian girl too, and we were very good friends. Mr Richmond also got an assistant to teach about property surveying, his name was Vince McCarthy, a young Australian fellow; he was just married too. So there were four of us and we used to travel as far as Kosciusko. The old trig station was blown down in a heavy wind; Mr Richmond said he was going to construct a new trig station and the four of us were going to put it up on Mt Kosciusko, one that would be so strong it would never blow down. He had all the plans, four and six-inch pipes were cut out in Polo Flat, and we carried it all up to Kosciusko. We had to carry the cement up, but water and sand we got from the Tumut River, just below the summit. We had to drill the

rocks and concrete the pipes into them. The trig station was sixteen feet high and Mr Richmond was very proud of it, we all were. When we finished that station we went around checking all the trig stations: Island Bend, Tumut Ponds, Cabramurra and the ones surrounding Cooma too. It was a very good time, we were all good friends and Mr Richmond was a great man to work for. It was sad but that trig station blew down too. The holes are still there where we drilled them. They now have a concrete structure there instead of a trig station.

One day when I was off work I went to the saddlery where they sold equipment for shoe repairing and making. I bought myself a last, a hammer, some leather, hemp to make the thread, wax, and pinchers, a few other things, and wooden pegs. I made myself a little bench, and I went back to my trade. I did repairs for the neighbours and the people I knew. I only knew how we did repairs in Europe, and I put the soles and heels on for some friend of mine in the Snowy, using the wooden pegs as I had learnt to do in Europe. I did a beautiful job and I was very proud of my self, not having done that sort of work for three or four years. I took the shoes to my friend and he paid me. A few days later he brought the shoes back and he said that the soles were coming apart. I couldn't understand why; I had done so many in Europe and that had never happened. I knew an old Czechoslovakian shoemaker, and he said, "Well, you can't do shoes in Australia with wooden pegs, because the country's too dry. We've got plenty of moisture in Europe and the wooden pegs are always swollen and they don't come out." So I knew I would have to stitch all the soles by hand, or nail them. From then on I didn't have many problems.

Starting our business

I was still working with the Snowy, but I had Saturdays and Sundays off. In Cooma there was an Italian fellow, a shoe repairer and shoemaker. I saw that his place was for sale. It was in Sharp Street and there was a shed out the back, between the Kosciusko Bakery and an electrical contractor. So I went in and asked a few questions. I found out how much he wanted, and the reason he was selling. He wanted to go back to Italy to get married. He said he would like to stay in as a partner until he went back to Italy. I thought it suited me. If I bought it I would get experience working with machinery with him before he left. I went home and told Olive all about it. We both went to see him and came to an agreement; he wanted 350 pounds to come in and 350 pounds when he left. So that's how we started our business, in 1954.

Before we went into business, we were working hard and saving money. We had been married in January 1953; in the same year I was naturalised, and in December 1953, we bought a new car, a brand new Holden. It was just before Christmas, and we went on a holiday to see Olive's mother in Pagewood, very proud of our new car. In April or May 1954 we bought a half share in the business and I gave my

resignation to the Snowy Mountains Authority, and told Mr Richmond I was going into business. He was sorry to lose me but he was pleased I was able to go into business for myself.

We started the business with Enrico Damor. He had a key and I had my key. Whatever we bought we shared the cost, whatever we made, we shared the profit. It was very busy. Once I was working with Enrico at the table when two Italians came in. They were talking with Enrico in Italian and said, "I want to pay what I owe you for shoe repairs". Enrico said, "Not now, I'm too busy, pay me later." When they left I said, "Why didn't you let them pay you, you should never be too busy to take the money; anyway half of it's mine." He didn't know that I could understand Italian. After that I thought I'd have to be careful. But I didn't have time to think about it as we were so busy, repairs were coming in all the time and so was the money. I used go to bed early, and get up in the early hours of the morning, and Olive was working the evening shift, she'd come home at midnight or 1.00am. I'd get there early, but the Italian was often there even earlier. One morning I left the house about 5.00 am; I couldn't sleep. I crept out so I didn't wake up Olive, and sure enough, as I was approaching the shed he was just leaving the shop and had a side of leather under his arm. I stopped him, and said, "What's going on? You're taking this out of the shop and half of it belongs to me." He said, "I was just taking this leather to show somebody to see if it's suitable for his shoes". I said "No, you're not taking it anywhere, you take it back in. If he wants to see it he can come over here." That was the second time I found him being disloyal. After that I watched him carefully as I didn't trust him. The third time, another friend of his came in, and he asked Enrico to do a shoe repair. He said, "I'll just do this for my friend." I said to him, "You can't do it in our time," but he ignored me. I said "I've had enough, I can't work any longer with you. Either give me my money back, or I'll pay you to get out." He didn't have a leg to stand on, he knew I was very angry, so he said he was going. So we had to find 350 pounds to pay him off. As we didn't have the 350 pounds, Olive rang her mother and she sent us about 300 pounds and we paid him off straight away.

I had so much work to do, I thought to myself: now I've got my own business I have to look after it. It doesn't matter how hard I have to work, I have to do it. I was working from the early hours in the morning until 9.00 or 10.00 at night, Saturday and Sunday, I didn't have a day off. I didn't mind, I liked it. When Olive saw what long hours I had to work she resigned from the hospital and came to help me in the shoe repair shop. That was a very big help to me; she not only helped stitching, painting and polishing the shoes, she served the customers and we were really getting ahead . I forgot to mention that before we bought the business, because we had a car, we set up a shoe repair agency in Jindabyne and Old Adaminaby, and Olive used to drive up there to collect the shoes twice a week while still working at the hospital. But it didn't really take off so we gave it up. But that was one reason why the Italian had agreed to us buying the business -because we had a car and could have agencies outside Cooma.

We worked together; Olive helped me as much as she could. After she left the hospital, we had a lot of people she knew from there coming in and we got even more business. Next door was Leno and Glen, they had a bakery and worked very hard too. We became good friends with them and they were good neighbours, but we were all so busy we didn't see each other much. In early 1956 we had a young fellow working for us, Don Guzelli, he was just out from Italy and a trained shoemaker. It was good having Don, I spoke Italian with him - he couldn't speak any English- and it was good for me to learn more Italian and remember what I'd learnt in Italy. He was a good worker and he stayed with us for seven years.

Things went on as usual. Olive had a lot of friends and we were invited out quite often. Mrs Schweiger had a well-established shop in Sharp Street, her husband was a Polish Jew. They invited us for dinner, which was very nice. They had just built a new house close to the Post Office, and it was a beautiful house. Mr Schweiger proudly showed us around it, before we had dinner, and I said to him, "You've got a beautiful house. I would like a house like this one day." He said, "Yes, but you'd never be able to afford a house like this." That got me thinking: why wouldn't I be able to do the same? I didn't enjoy our dinner because I was upset, thinking: Is it really so hard to get a house in this country?

Something drastic happened in 1956, a big flood. It was something we had never experienced and none of the Cooma people had either, for at least twenty-five years anyway. It was the 13th of March. Olive was with me in the shop. It was raining heavily and she looked out of the window at the creek and she said, "Look how high Cooma Creek is". I had a look and I said, "I've seen it just as high as that before". It was only a few minutes later and she said. "Look at it now". And I hadn't seen anything like that before. A few minutes later, the water was coming up to our back door from the street. We knew we'd be flooded so we tried to put everything on the floor up onto the shelves: shoes, leather and stuff, as high as we could, but we didn't put it high enough. We had to get out. Leno and Glen called us from next door, to come out, because the water was rising higher and higher. We quickly shut the shop and got into Leno's place; his place was about a metre higher than hours. The water was rising higher and higher, and they broke the ceiling in the bakery and took a sheet off the roof and we climbed onto the roof: Leno and Glen, his staff, Olive and I, and Don Guzzelli. We saw people on rooftops all up the street. When we were up there, Don said, "I was going to buy an umbrella, but my brother told me it never rains in Australia".

We stayed up on the roof for several hours. We saw cars, and furniture and mattresses floating down the street, between the bakery and the shop next door and I was watching my place. I thought, we're going to lose the whole lot, it's going to float away. Cars were going through there. Before we got up on the roof, Leno had tried to hold his bread van and he nearly lost his life; we had to pull him away, then we watched as his bread van floated away. After a few hours, the water was still

high; it started to go down a bit, but was still flowing heavily. People came to rescue us from the roof. There was a big fellow who tied a rope from the bakery up to the main street where the water wasn't so high. We got off the roof safely. Luckily we didn't lose our Holden, Olive must have parked it further up the street. When we went back to the shed, it was still there, but a lot of our stock was wet. Later we got some compensation from Cooma Council for our losses. We went back to work next day. None of our customer's shoes were damaged.

Business was flourishing, but the owners of the land told us that we had to move our shed, as they wanted to build there. When we bought the business, the shed was included in the price. There was land for sale just across the bridge on the other side of the creek, and we thought we'd buy a block there. We borrowed money to buy a block and got it interest-free for three years. But we had to start building on it, and we didn't have the money, so we had to sell our car. We still had a bicycle.

We had bought our land. We didn't waste any time; we couldn't because we had to get out soon, and Olive contacted somebody she knew from the hospital who was a draughtsman. He drew up his plan very quickly; we told him what we wanted; and it was approved by the council. We had sold our car that we were very proud of, and I rode our bicycle to and from work. There were some other people who had a shoe shop in East Cooma, and one morning as I rode past on the bicycle she saw me. "Ha ha", she laughed, "you had a new car before, now you're riding on a bicycle!" I said "There are plenty more cars at the dealers."

Those are some small incidents I remember from the early days in Cooma.

After work I would go straight to the block to dig the trenches. I had a fellow helping me who had some building experience; his name was John Koren. He made cement blocks, so I gave him a contract for several thousand cement blocks. He worked very long hours too; he was a good worker. We dug the trenches, put in the steel work in, poured the concrete in, -Don came on the weekend to help pour-. And soon after I approached a bricklayer to go on with the building. It didn't take long before the walls were finished. We built two shops in front and sort of a corridor down the side, and one weekend we got removalists to put our shed on the back of a trailer and bring it over to the block, and put it at the back at the end of the corridor. The next day we started work in the shed on our new block. People didn't mind coming over the bridge to our shop, because they had known us for many years, and they always got good service.

I had said to Don when we were still working in the shed before we shifted, "Well, over there we're going to be standing up at a bench, not sitting down". He said, "Oh no, I've never worked standing up, I'm going to sit down." I said " Neither have I, but when we go over there, we're both going to be standing up."

There were two brothers doing shoe repairs in Cooma, the Linsells, and they had a Landis stitching machine. Once or twice a week I had to take the work that needed stitching, up to the Linsell's shop, and then pick it up in the early hours of the morning and finish them off. I wasn't very happy with that; his work was very rough, I had trouble with customers sometimes over it. So before we shifted I organised to get myself a Landis stitching machine. It was an American machine and very expensive. We put a deposit on and when the machine arrived we had to pay the rest. Again we didn't have enough money, because we had put everything we had into the building. My friend Janus was still working with the Snowy, and he had a lot of money which he would never put into the bank. He kept thousands of pounds in his pockets. I said to him "Look, could you lend us a few hundred pounds for a deposit to buy the machine, we'll pay you back as soon as we can." He gave us the money without hesitating. The machine arrived, but the power wasn't on yet. The roof was on and the building was looking nice, but there was still a lot to be done. We were concentrating on the shed. The man came from Sydney at great expense to give me a lesson on how to work the machine.

Business was going well again. Don and I worked at the bench -it was much faster than sitting down-but the front shops had no glass, no doors, no ceiling, only a roof. One day the bank manager came to get his shoes repaired, and he said, "John, why don't you finish your building?" I said, "We haven't got the money." I had worked out we still needed 5,000 pounds. He said, "Come and see me and we'll talk about it". We went, and the loan was approved, and we were able to do everything to completion. The two shops looked very nice and we were able to rent them. My shop was still in the shed out the back. Our builder was an Italian, Binuti and his two sons.

We had the two shops to let, and we soon got word that Paddy Pallin from Sydney wanted one of them for a ski equipment shop. We got the rent we asked, and soon after, we rented the second shop, it was a clothing shop run by a Mrs Kennedy. She didn't do very well and closed down, but after that we got a tailor; his name was Chiodi, an Italian fellow. We didn't like him much, but he paid his rent well. The Paddy Pallin shop was doing terrific business. The money was coming in, and we bought a brand new Holden Utility.

Our first child, Rosemary, was born in October 1956. We were still living at Miss Price's at that time. We lived there for five years. The rent was very low, it was handy and we didn't have any problems. And we liked Miss Price very much. We called her 'teta', the Slovenian word for 'auntie'.We had chooks there and a lovely garden, I looked after that as well, I liked working outside. I remember coming home from the shop one night when Olive had gone out. She had left a note for me, saying "Miss Price would like you to kill Kokosh with the Nosh". That was Olive's try at Slovenian. I used to kill a chook every now and then when they got old; I had a special way to do it with a knife, so that they didn't struggle. It was a very clean

way to do it, and Miss Price had seen me. Her brother used to kill them with an axe and she didn't like it.

We had built a second story above our shops, a contractor named Seigfried Tietz had built it for us. So we shifted from Miss Price's to our new flat. We had got some floorcoverings from Olive's brother. It was a type of brown felt, like blanket material. I put it in every room above our shops, except the kitchen and laundry. It looked quite nice. After we moved there, Rhonda was born, in 1958. There were beautiful living quarters up there. We had three small bedrooms, a sunny loungeroom, a kitchen and bathroom and a high enclosed verandah out the back. It was very comfortable, and because I was working downstairs I didn't have to travel backwards and forwards.

Things were going well. I had started making moccasins. I had seen them made from kangaroo skins, with the fur outside, and I thought, 'I'll do them with the fur inside,' and everybody liked them. We did good business with them in those days. It was Peter Sharr's wife who laughed when I was riding the bicycle to work. He and I were quite friendly, and he often came to see me. He admired the moccasins and he said, "I'm going to Europe for a holiday; could you give me a few samples, I might be able to sell them in Europe." When he came back he said "I've got a big order for you for moccasins, I need about 10,000 pairs". I was quite shocked. I thought: well if I have to make so many moccasins, first of all I need money, people working for me, and machinery, so I said immediately without thinking, "Peter, if you want 10,000 moccasins you have to pay me half the money in advance". And of course he said, "No, I can't do that, I haven't got any". So that was that. But we had plenty of business even outside Cooma, as far as Wagga and down the coast at Bega. We did get orders for moccasins from other places and Olive would send them away.

We had tons of work, and had to put an extra lady on and another man in the workshop. We lived above the shop for about two years, and John was born in 1960. Soon after, we bought a block of land in Bligh Street, up from the hospital. We got a plan and started to build as sub-contractors. We had red bricks from Bowral and we got Binuti again. It was a double brick building, a beautiful house. We had garages underneath, four bedrooms, a kitchen and quite a big loungeroom. I knew a German fellow who was a very good carpenter, he did the roof trusses and other things. We worked on the weekends and I worked with him. Poor fellow, Lou was his name, he said to me, "Never in my life have I worked as hard as I worked this day and a half with you." I said "Never mind. I'll give you some extra money and I'll take you to the Railway Hotel and buy you a drink."

We bought a Chrysler Royal because we had three children and needed a bigger car. When I finished building we had bought a little Austin, so that I could go to and from work, we used to call it 'Little champ'. Olive used the big car to take the children places. I was very proud of that house. I thought to myself: 'This is the house I will stay in for the rest of my life.' We had a very good business in Sharp

Street, and everything was doing fine. I thought: 'Well we've got everything now: we've got a business, our own house, and a nice family- two girls and a boy.'

I was accepted into Rotary at this time. It was very strange for me; I was just an ordinary worker, with no high education, but I was with all the big fellows: lawyers, doctors, big property owners -and I was just a little fellow. But strangely enough, everybody accepted me, they were very nice, and I was surprised that all these people who were well established in the town, liked me, and we had a lot to do with them.

In Rotary we met every Thursday and if you missed three times you were out, unless you had a very good excuse. If you were travelling, you had to make it up by going to meetings wherever you were. But of course we didn't travel in those days very much and I was there every week, regularly. On the weekends we had working bees, and we'd come on some mornings for half a day. We had a good chat and got to know each other personally. There were about 32 men in our Rotary group. I was in it for ten years and I enjoyed it very much. I left Rotary when we moved to Canberra.

By this time we had both front shops for ourselves, and we started shoe retailing in a big way. First we started with just slippers, working boots the moccasins.
Next door was a two-story motel which was owned by a Greek fellow, Peter Charalambas. He had another business in Vale Street, a restaurant. He came to me and said "What about if we exchange buildings, because I'd like to extend the motel. I'll give you my building in Vale Street." I said, "Well, I don't think so." But I went to have a look anyway. There it was opposite the taxi rank, an old building with old-fashioned small windows, but when I came inside, it was a huge place, and I was very impressed. It was a in very good position in the centre of town. Olive was not very impressed but changed her mind as soon as she saw the inside. We exchanged buildings and got some money too. We needed more money, to modernise the front, and we went to the bank. The bank manager was not very helpful. I don't think he liked migrants. When we asked for a loan, he said, "The bank might not want to lend you money." We told him our ideas for the shopfront, and he said, "Do you really think that changing the front will make any difference?" Olive told him that we intended to put a barber shop along the side. He then agreed. One day he saw Olive and asked her how long she had been in Australia. She said "My parents came out from England in 1912 and I was born in Sydney!"

We made a beautiful shop out of what was really a dump, on the outside anyway. We took the frontage out and put on new awnings and plate-glass windows, and built a little side shop which became a barber shop.

We had even better business after that because we were in the centre of town. In the meantime we established our children's shoes, Gro-Shu and Robin; we were very lucky to get those brands. We put a big sign up advertising them. One day Mr

Richie, the owner of Gro-Shu Robin, came through the town with his family, and his wife asked him, "Have you got shoes here?", he said "No, not in this town", then she saw the sign, and he came into the shop. He said "You've got my shoes, Gro-Shu and Robin." He bought about 3 or 4 pairs of moccasins for his family and he said, "I've never bought shoes from anyone else -you're the first."

Time went on and I seemed to be busy all the time, and I never had much time to take the children out. Now and again, we might go to get wood on the weekend with our friends the Horsboroughs. Once a year we went to Sydney for a week.

Our children were growing up, and we thought they'd do better getting employment if we moved to Canberra. The Snowy Mountains Scheme was folding up, it was nearly complete and they were putting people off. There was a rumour going round that once the Snowy was finished Cooma would be a dead town.

Leaving Cooma

We visited Canberra and we went to Civic to organise a shop in Woden Valley. There was nothing there at that time. Woden Plaza was in the planning stages. They took our names and said they'd let us know. We prepared to move and in the meantime, as we knew the shopping centre would be ready in about a year, we thought we should buy a block of land. We came down one weekend and bought a block in Farrer. We got a plan ready, and when I knew I would be staying in Canberra a lot, I resigned from Rotary. We were still not sure if we could get a shop in Woden, but there were a few shops empty in Farrer. So we got a place there for a shoe shop and shoe repairs. It was close to where I was building. I thought I would be able to manage the shoe repairs during the day, and watch the building as well. Two or three times a week I went back to Cooma. We had a caravanette and I brought it and put it on our block of land in Farrer; I slept there when I didn't go to Cooma. We had a new car now, a Valiant Station wagon, we'd had an accident in the Chrysler and had to buy a new car. We bought a little panel van for me to carry things up and down all the time.

So I was establishing the new shop in Farrer, and I was looking after the building of the new house. The business in Farrer wasn't any good at all. But the shop in Cooma was still doing very well. Our house was going up slowly. I had a lot of trouble with the builders -I don't want to go into that. I was working very hard; after I finished in the shop, I worked on the building and I did my back in and at one stage I could hardly travel from Cooma to Canberra. Once when I was halfway to Canberra I couldn't go any further, and I stopped. I thought I'd go outside the van to stretch, but I couldn't get out, I was in such pain. Finally I did get out, and I stretched a bit, crawled back into the car and somehow got back to Canberra.

We were very lucky; Lend Lease did contact us, and we were able to get a shop in Woden Plaza. We finished the house in December 1970, and opened in Woden Plaza in August 1971. It was a terrific business, and we still had the shop in Cooma. Olive was travelling to Cooma nearly every day to look after it. Eventually we sold the shop in Cooma and were able to concentrate on the shop in Canberra. It wasn't very easy for the children to settle into school in Canberra.

Back to Slovenia

My sister arrived in 1971 to visit us, and she stayed with us for about three weeks. I showed her around a bit; we went to Sydney, Newcastle, Griffith and around the district. She told me that it was safe for me to come to Slovenia now, because Tito had given an amnesty for all the people who went away. So before Maria came to Australia, Ludwig, her brother-in-law thoroughly investigated my case in Ljubljana, and Miro investigated in Bizeljsko, and found it was safe, as I hadn't hurt or killed anyone during my escape. I wanted to go there because my mother was still alive, and I wanted to see her one more time. Olive was very upset; communism was very strict in those days and she was frightened that I'd never be able to come back. I risked it and went back with Maria just for a week or ten days, and saw my mother, and I'm so glad I did, because a year later she died.

A couple of years later Olive and I went to Europe. To England first, then to Slovenia and then a tour around Europe. Our shop in the Plaza was well-run, we had people working in it who were quite good, and our children were old enough to look after themselves -they were eighteen, sixteen and fourteen. We had a good time in Europe. In Slovenia we went with Maria, Miro, Theresa and Pepich, to Moosach, where our family had spent four years of their lives. We also visited the concentration camp Dachau, and Theresa recognised from a photograph the camp commandant, who had been her boss there. When Olive and I came home, we were already planning another trip to Japan, and Asia. It was the first time in our married life we were able to have a bit of time to ourselves.

We have now been living in Canberra for twenty-seven years. We had two businesses which we sold and we retired in 1996, so now we can travel and do other things. Our children all live around us in Canberra so we see them often. I have had some others of my family visit us since Maria came in 1970. My brother Pepich and Miro came here after we visited Slovenia in 1974. My sister Theresa was killed in an accident not long after I visited Slovenia in 19--. Thankfully we had spent a lot of time together on that visit. My sister Tonchka and her daughter Josica came to Australia in 1996, and Slovenian cousins living in America have visited us too. In 1998 we went with our family to Slovenia, the whole thirteen of us, so that our children could meet their cousins and other relatives, and now I am sure they will keep in touch. So I am happy to end my story now.