

Sylvia's Story

Sylvia Jones

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I was born in 1961 in Geelong near Melbourne, Australia. My father is Australian born and has quite an unusual Italian name, Spartaco Panizzon.

Apparently my Italian grandfather Gaetano, who was very religious in his early life, became an atheist after returning from WWI. He apparently proclaimed that there cannot be a God after what he saw. When my father was born Gaetano wanted to call him "Lucifer" and that is the truth. He may well have succeeded had it not been for the fierce protests of his eldest sister.

My mother Ingeburg Erna Panizzon (nee Hofmann) was born in West Germany and was one of seven girls. I also have a brother Marcus.

My Italian grandfather was told to get out of Italy as he was strongly against the Fascist Government. When he arrived in Australia in 1922 he went to work in the sugar cane fields in North Queensland. His wife and two children joined him approximately 6 years later when he had sufficient funds to pay for their passage to Australia. My father was the only family member to have been born in Australia. Gaetano died in 1961 when I was approximately 6 months old.

I never met my German grandfather, who was an engineer and studied at Heidelberg Uni. After the war he couldn't get a job so he found work at the US Army Base in Mannheim. He had 8 children to support and they lived in a 2 bedroom apartment in Feudenheim. My Polish Uncle Frank ended up at the same US Army Base and that is how he met and married my Aunt Marga. (Note: [Ted also ended up in this US Army Base](#) and after seeing a picture of Frank said he looked familiar).

I didn't really realize I was different from the Australia kids, until I went to high school. It was there that I heard pupils talking about wogs. My best friend, who didn't realize I was from a wog family (slang for non-Australian) even made comments. I told her my mum was German and my father was Australian born with Italian parents. Her reply was "Well I didn't know". She had told me that "All wogs should go home to where they were from". She would be horrified now if I reminded her of those words.

We lived in town but the weekends were usually spent on my mother's sisters farm. I called her Tante Marga (Aunt in German). Frank and Marga came to Australia in the early 50's and went to a migrant camp until they were able to find work. They then purchased land and lived in a makeshift tent until they were able to build a house in Geelong. After much hard work they purchased a farm running merino sheep (used for wool) and also cattle.

When I was about 10 my Italian grandmother moved to an elderly home and whilst we visited, she taught us to talk some Italian. She was disappointed apparently when I was born, because I was a girl but my brother three years younger than myself, made up for it.

As a child I always remember having people from different places around us. Some German people, but also lots of Poles.

Dad worked for the Australia Wheat Board in Geelong and it was not uncommon for him to bring

home a Russian Captain for dinner. They all thought we were Capo's (slang for capitalists). This was in the 70's. I also remember some Belgian Officers visiting.

Uncle Frank never spoke about his life in Poland to me but I learnt recently that when the war broke out he was in a paddock with some friends. Soldiers came towards them and shot some of his friends as they were trying to make a run for it. He was arrested and sent to a forced labour camp in Westfallen in Germany. He never returned to Poland again. I am also told that Marga contacted his family (with help from Red Cross) many many years later to say he was well and now living in Australia. He always had a smile on his face, appear happy, but drank far too much. I guess he wanted to forget things. He loved AFL football and died just short of Geelong winning the Grand Final in 2007

There was also a family friend named Eric Hintenberg. Eric was German but lived in Poland until the war broke out. He told me that he came alone to Australia seeking a bit of adventure. He actually boarded with Frank and Marga and they became long time friends. We also had a lady boarder who was Polish named Yannka (spelling)??? but they called her Jan. She was terrified of spiders etc so as kids we always put plastic ones in her bed.

Eric is still alive and still very dear to me. He is such a gentle soul. He bought me a pony when I was 12 and I have never forgotten the excitement and gratitude I felt towards him. He never had any children of his own. I actually helped him to write to his now wife Clarita (who was from the Philippines) as he was not confident writing in English. It was nice to see them finally meet and marry, knowing I had helped. I was only 14 at the time.

Eric always told me about his adventures in Poland, when I was a kid. There were so many stories about his horses and wagons that needed repair. I will always remember he would say "Me and me brother" in stead of "Me and my brother"and he still does. Such dramatic stories about runaway horses and wagon wheels leaving the wagon. He actually handmade the bridle for my pony. That is, he hand sewed the leather for the bridle just like he would have if he had been in Poland. Why buy it when you can save the money by making it yourself.

I wish he would tell me all about his life now before something happens to him. He is 80 in October and is starting to shake a lot. He just doesn't want to talk about most of his life and I have to respect that. I can only assume the worst. His father who was a policeman was taken by the Russians to Siberia and was never heard of again. I do know his mother was drowned by the Russians after this and she was pregnant a the time.

Some of the loveliest memories I have of my childhood is having all these interesting people around me, and the parties my parents and relatives had. We had several New Years Eve parties in the shearing shed. Everything would be moved aside and the shearing stage would turn into the dance floor. I will always remember Uncle Frank trying to teach me to dance with Polka music playing in the background. I am so grateful to have had such diverse people around.

I do not speak Polish but my ears know it, if I hear someone talking in Polish I recognize it straight away. It is part of the sounds of my childhood. I wish I could have had a dance with you Ted on that stage and that you could have met us all back then.

Queensland, Australia, April, 2008.