I am Australian.
Of Polish Descent.

A Biography

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Chapter 1

1939. Family, Starachowice, Poland. Seen for the last time.

I was living in Starachowice Poland when World War 2 broke out.

German stukas (aircraft) were roaming over the sky and dropping bombs here and there, creating panic amongst the civilian population. Hours later, we were informed over the radio that Poland was at war with Germany and general mobilization was at hand. As Starachowice had an armorments production factory the civilians were panicking that it would be heavily bombed so they began collecting their belongings and moving to outlying villages. Of course as a thirteen year old boy I joined them and took the road to Pakoslaw where my mother lived and guess what happened next …..I ended up in the biggest battle! The Germans completely destroyed the village and yet only one bomb fell in Starachowice.

I think I should have stayed put.

Once the Nazis moved in with their regiments, requisitions started where local residents were moved out of their houses and occupied by German officers. At the age of thirteen I had finished public school and was enrolled in high school, but found myself on the street since the Nazis had closed all high schools and did not allow the higher education of Poles.

Jewish cleansing commenced and I saw Jews being forceably loaded into cattle trains. Anyone who resisted was beaten. Since the autumn weather was not favourable many people where being knocked down into the mud and not given any help and generally mistreated.

Once the Nazis finished this task, they began rounding up girls and boys and loading them onto passenger trains to take to Germany as forced labourers. I was one of them and that was the last time I saw my family.

We travelled by train for three days and two nights and stopped only once (at Berlin station during the night) for food and water. We finally reached our destination, Westphalia (Germany) where a stalag was located. There were Polish prisoners of war held in this stalag and it was situated about 40 kilometres from the Dutch border. Upon arrival, we were deloused, showered and given food.

We were then told by interpreters that we would be allocated to specific jobs. A lot of people were allocated to digging trenches and shovelling coal from trains. I was lucky as I was selected by a farmer to work on his farm as a labourer. My duties were milking ten cows in the morning and in the evening. I also fed the stock in their stables during winter. As time went on I ended up doing a range of jobs on the farm such as ploughing, growing crops, thrashing wheat. You name it I did it!

The farm was not far from Munster sandwiched between a military aerodrome and railway. On the

other side of the railway embankment there was a battery of anti-aircraft guns. The farm was about 80 kilometres from the Dutch border and we were frequently bombed by British aircraft mainly at night and they often bombed specific targets in the area. But in 1943 when America entered the war, we were constantly bombarded day and night - American aircraft during the day, British aircraft at night. This was a very harrowing experience particularly when they used incendiary bombs. There were no bomb shelters available for the civilian population but about a quarter of a kilometre away there was a concrete drain underneath the railway line that could hold about a hundred people. This is what we used as a shelter during bombardments.

There were a couple of occasions that are scorched into my memory. I recall one occasion when I slept so deeply I didn't hear the air-raid siren go off and was violently woken when my bed literally jumped about a foot away from the wall. I looked through the window and could see the sky lit up with flares and the bombardment was in progress. What woke me up was a bomb that exploded near the farmhouse and as a result, the house copped a bit of damage. I instinctively jumped through the window located near my bed, onto a bike shed and then took off toward the shelter. I didn't reach the shelter…… I remember feeling tremendous pressure, fell into a trench between a field and the road and then lost consciousness. I don't know how long I was lying there, but when I regained consciousness, I found myself covered by a large tree and about two tonnes of soil on top of it. I dragged myself out from underneath the tree and at that moment, I could hear the 'all-clear' siren and people returning from the nearby shelter. They wondered what had happened to me and I thought the same thing myself!

On the other occasion, it was a nice clear, sunny day - it was around midday on a Sunday. I just came out from a cow stall into a quadrangle and noticed some planes in the sky. Lots of them. One of the planes released a red flare which indicated a bombardment target. At the same time, the air-raid siren went off so I ran for my life over the railway line and got inside a small anti-aircraft bomb shelter. It was already packed full of people so I only could fit myself into the shelter near the door. All of a sudden, everyone felt tremendous pressure and we were all forced to sit down. This was followed by violent shaking and the door swung open. . In front of the door, there was a ten foot bomb crater and a German soldier ran into the shelter shaking violently, followed by a German officer. The German officer said "Quickly, get some shovels. There is a man buried under the soil." We started digging and it turned out to be a Russian prisoner-of-war. We had to resuscitate him and he survived the experience. The Americans who normally flew there planes during the day, decided to conduct carpet-bombing to knock out all the anti-aircraft batteries.

The farmer was a very religious person and he expected us to go to church every Sunday. There was a small chapel not far from the farm where many local Catholic farmers would congregate. In the beginning we had a special mass conducted in Polish by a Polish priest every Sunday, but in 1942, the Nazis put an end to that.

The farmers in this area detested Hitler and the Nazi movement but had no choice but to obey, or risk ending up in a concentration camp. An example of this relates to a German shepherd who worked on the same farm as I did. He had only one arm and lost his other arm in a concentration camp because he made a stand against Nazi injustice. Sometimes you can encounter humour at the weirdest times……. When this shepherd would go to the toilet, he would always leave the toilet door wide open, and while doing his business would shout loudly "Hail Hitler!" while raising his

arm in a Nazi salute.

Forced labourers were not allowed to socialise with the German population. There where strict rules banning us from eating, sleeping or entertaining ourselves with Germans. The SS occasionally came to inspect the farm and left with produce such as schinken (ham) hidden in their jackets.

I was taken away from the farm for about six months and assigned to help build a large concrete bombshelter near the Messerschmit factory on the outskirts of Munster. The work was hard and the food rations were lousy. For a long, hard day of work we received a one litre bowl of watery soup (with radishes and a couple of pieces of potato in it), 20 grams of black bread and the same amount in horse salami. I was always hungry.

We worked out a system to get more food. A deal was made between the Russian prisoners-of-war who were locked inside the Messerschmit factory site and the forced labourers who worked on the bombshelter. Whenever a ‘favourable’ German guard was on duty, one of the Russians would toss an item of jewellery over the fence to us, and make a signal with his fingers to show how many loaves of bread he wanted. Two fingers meant one loaf of bread for him and one for me. We traded the jewellery with local German civilians in exchange for bread coupons. We would then take the coupons to a ‘favourable’ bakery who would supply us with bread.

The farmer who I had previously worked for was continuously pestering the German authorities to release me back to his farm. He eventually succeeded and I was really glad he did.

While I was in the work camp building the bombshelter I was issued trousers and a jacket made out of some kind of paper. Once I returned to the farm, the work clothes didn’t stand up to farm work and they started disintegrating. The front of the trousers and shirt had disintegrated and I had to wear a hessian bag to cover myself. Eventually, the farmer asked me why I always wore a hessian apron and I ended up showing him the condition of my work clothes. He was genuinely shocked and said that no worker on his farm will have to wear substandard clothing. The following day he went into town and purchased two pairs of heavy duty trousers for me. Boy I was glad to get those pants and get rid of that hessian bag!

In 1945 the bombardment was so fierce that the 190-acre farm I worked on had 5000 bomb craters on it and it was impossible to use the land to grow anything. Leaflets were being dropped by allied aircraft every day or so to inform us of progress being made on the war front. We knew exactly what was going on.

Chapter 2

I am AMERICAN, of POLISH DESCENT!

When I first arrived in Germany and was temporarily held in the stalag for Polish prisoners-of-war, we were informed by interpreters that we were not be permitted any correspondence with our own country. If anyone disobeyed, the letter would be confiscated, and if the person writes again, he would be caught and prosecuted. Naturally, I thought it wise not to say anything to the German farmer about writing to my family. But one day in 1943, he asked me if I had any family in Poland and I said yes of course, I did. He asked me why I don't write to them and I told him about the warning I received two years earlier. His response to me was "you write the letter and your home address on an envelope, and I will write my name as the sender and personally post it for you". So I did.

About a month later I received a letter from my father from Starachowice. He informed me about my family situation.

He told me that a short time after I was taken away, my aunty Helena (who had raised me from the age of 4) had become so traumatised about my removal and unknown predicament, had become mentally ill and taken away from the family home to a hospital. She died there. I do not know the circumstances surrounding her death, possibly she was a victim of Aktion T4. To this very day, I still don't know what really happened to her.

Looking back over past events that had occurred I can understand how she became so stressed.

I recall an incident in early 1941 when the Germans wanted to start the manufacture of anti-aircraft guns in the munitions factory in Starachowice. There were a lot of parts lying about in the factory but no-one knew how to assemble the anti-aircraft guns. The Germans decided to issue a manifesto asking if anyone knew how to assemble this particular type of gun, and if co-operation was provided, the person would be generously rewarded.

A Polish colonel volunteered to do so and it didn't take long for the Polish Government-in-exile (in London) to hear about it. A communicade was issued to A.K. (who were in the process of organising themselves) that if the Colonel continued his collaboration with the Nazis, he was to be executed as a traitor.

The Colonel showed the Nazis his warning letter from the Polish Government-in-exile and they assured him that he was fully protected and absolutely no harm would come to him. At this point I have to mention that when the German's first occupied Starachowice they posted a manifesto with a warning stating that if any German is killed, they will select six hostages from the town and execute them.

About four days later, the Colonel left a security checkpoint at the factory accompanied by two SS,

and as they walked past a small forested area nearby, two shots rang out. One of the SS and the Colonel had been shot dead. Immediately, the Germans rounded up twenty people as hostages, six of them were to be selected and executed. Amongst those twenty was my father, Henryk.

That happened about four o'clock in the afternoon and Helena was terrified that he would be shot. Time dragged on and then about eight o'clock that night the front door opened and there stood Henryk - he looked completely exhausted but he was still alive. Helena had a look of enormous relief on her face as he said "They didn't select me".

Jan (my half-brother) had become a prisoner-of-war after being captured by the Germans while serving in the Polish Army. He had been 'assigned' as an interpreter because to his knowledge of the German language.

Waleria (my half-sister) had died while serving with A.K. during the Warsaw Uprising. She was a medical intern prior to the war. During the Uprising, she contracted tuberculosis and was administered an injection that killed her. The injection had become contaminated due to poor hygiene conditions.

Wiktoria (my other half-sister) was still alive and living in Starachowice.

I did receive a couple more letters from my father during the war but communication ceased at the beginning of 1945.

According to leaflets dropped by the allies, they were sweeping through France very rapidly and the last leaflet informed us that it won't take long for the allies to reach Munster. They were urging the German army to surrender and if they did, they would be treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention.

Spitfires were sweeping low over the countryside day and night. They usually flew in pairs and seemed to appear from no-where. They were obviously on reconnaissance missions, seeking out the enemy.

I recall an occasion when the German farmer and I came out onto the quadrangle and we were discussing which bomb crater we were going to fill in. We used a large shovel drawn by one of the horses to do the job. All of a sudden, a Messerschmit appeared in the sky above us, and out of no-where, two Spitfires. The dogfight was on! As we were standing there watching the event unfold, a bullet from one of the aircraft landed right between my legs. We took off and went for cover. We don't know what happened after that - unfortunately, we missed out on all the excitement.

Two days later we started hearing the sound of heavy guns in the distance, early in the morning, then a break at lunchtime, and again it started about two o'clock in the afternoon. This continued for three days. On the fourth night it was quiet and peaceful with no sound of gunfire or aircraft in the sky.

The following morning, I walked out to the quadrangle and looked over at the aerodrome nearby

and noticed some strange-looking people walking around the bomb craters. I didn't have a clue who they were. As I stood there wondering who the hell they were and what I was going to do next, from the side of the hay shed, two soldiers appeared. I could see from their uniforms that they were American soldiers. One was dressed as a regular soldier but the other one looked more like an American gunfighter from a old Western. He wore two sharp-shooters on his hips and carried a rifle on his shoulder. He looked ready for action.

The first soldier approached me cautiously and said (in German) "Are you German?" and I responded that I was Polish. He then asked me (in excellent Polish) "Are there any German soldiers on the farm?". I told him they left two days ago but I had to assure him that this was definitely the case. He asked me if I worked for the farmer and how he had treated me. I told him that the farmer had treated me well. I then asked him if he was Polish and he proudly proclaimed "I am AMERICAN, of POLISH DESCENT!".

As we were talking, two fattened geese appeared. It was four days before Easter Sunday and the geese were intended for Easter celebrations.

The 'sharp-shooter' spotted them and all of a sudden, he swung his rifle around and aimed it at one of the geese. The goose copped a bullet and rolled over a couple of times. The farmer quickly came out of his house waving his hands in the air and yelling in German "Oh my God, my Easter goose!". The 'sharp shooter' promptly swung his rifle around and pointing it at the farmer said "you want one too". At this point, the farmer made a hasty exit.

The soldier I had spoken to, gestured toward his offsider and said "I better take him away before he made a nuisance of himself".

At this moment, I realised that the war was over for us and a new chapter in my life had just begun.

Chapter 3

The COMMOS STRIKE

As I contemplated that the war had ended for us, I wondered what I was going to do next. I went to some of the neighbouring farms and spoke to other forced labourers. We had been warned by the American soldiers to take care because it would take one or two weeks for the occupational forces to arrive. Until a Provost Marshal was appointed, there would be no law and order so I decided to stay put for the time being and carry on as usual.

At this stage, I was invited to sit with the German farmer and his family at their dining table to share meals with them. He made it clear to me that the segregation that had been imposed by the Nazis, no longer existed. The following days on the farm were peaceful, although I heard that in Munster there were hordes of drunken prisoners-of-war and displaced people from many different countries roaming the streets and creating a lot of disturbance. Some of them had acquired vehicles and guns - they were shooting in the air, singing, swearing and generally creating a scene.

A fortnight passed and we were informed that the occupational forces had arrived and it turned out to be Polish paratroopers. On a billboard outside a small chapel there was a poster advising that U.N.R.A. (United Nations Refugee Agency) had been established in the area. It advised that if anyone wished to leave their workplace they needed to travel to Dortmund to register at the refugee camp there.

I told the farmer about this poster and advised him that I was going to the refugee camp with the intention of returning to Poland. He expressed disappointment and asked me why I couldn't stay on his farm. The farmer's only son had been killed during the war and he had a wife and three young daughters living at home. He suggested that I could possibly marry one of his daughters at some point in the future and become a part-owner of his property. Although I appreciated this gesture, I was keen to leave and return to my homeland.

But it didn't happen that way…….. When I arrived in Dortmund I registered and was given accommodation. Local German civilians had been resettled from a section in Dortmund in order to make room for a displaced persons' camp. As we registered, we were asked a number of questions including whether we were ex-servicemen. If you were an ex-serviceman, you were asked if you would like to volunteer to join the camp police.

A couple of days after registering, the Duty Sergeant visited the houses within the camp and asked if anyone was interested in furthering their education. He gave details about the office handling candidates wanting to be in the education program. They established a panel of three teachers who conducted examinations to assess the level of education of each individual. So I signed up because I was very keen to continue my education.

I studied for about eight months until the Polish Communist Government stopped my education. U.N.R.A. had asked member countries to contribute toward the educational costs of displaced people in the camps. The response from the Polish Communist Government was that it would not contribute, and if displaced people of Polish nationality wanted to continue their education they had to return to Poland. This was my first major disappointment.

After that, we were issued with documents which we signed stating that we refused to return to Poland as a protest against the Communist regime in our homeland.

AS FAR AS WE WERE CONCERNED IT WAS NOT A FREE POLAND. I FELT THAT I HAD LOST BOTH MY FAMILY AND MY HOMELAND, COURTESY OF THE YALTA AND POTTSDAM TREATIES.

Feeling very disappointed, we were all just sitting around doing nothing, playing cards to kill time, until a communicade came through asking whether anyone was interested in doing guard duties for the American Army. We would be issued a full uniform, dark blue in colour, and we would have to go to Mannheim for training. So I raised my hand and was accepted by the Army officials.

We were transported by buses to the railway station and travelled by train to Mannheim. The following day we arrived and were collected by buses from ex-German Army barracks at Kafertal Training Centre. We signed up for the Labour Supervision Company in the U.S Army. We were issued our uniforms and told that our pay would be one hundred German marks and five American dollars.

After three months of basic training, there was a passing-out parade of two hundred and sixty men, but I wasn't one of them. My basic training had been fast-tracked. Six weeks into my training a Staff Sergeant directed me to see the Captain of the Company. The Captain told me that my progress was excellent, and therefore, he was sending me for training in rifle-shooting.

Tad in his U.S. Army uniform

The rifle-shooting lasted two days and I was then posted as a guard replacement at the 1301 Labour Supervision Camp in Mannheim.

1301 Labour Supervision Camp in Mannheim

So my dreary guard duty work began. Two hours during the day and two hours during the night according to the roster. Walking aimlessly from one post to another, and back again.

In the beginning of 1948, there was a call-up to army personnel asking for the names of those interested in doing truck driver training. So I thought driving trucks sounded a lot better than walking around aimlessly, so I stepped forward.

The driver training lasted for three months and the final examination was conducted on a hill along a very narrow, zig-zagging road leading up to Heidelberg Castle. I passed my examination with flying colours and felt great. At last, despite everything that had happened, I felt that finally I was getting somewhere in life!

When I returned to the barracks, I was informed by the Duty Officer that I had to pack my belongings because a contingency of trucks would arrive shortly and we would be driving those trucks to Kaiserslautern, about 260 kilometres from Mannheim. We were to be part of a newly-formed depot there and would be trucking goods from the railway station to the depot, about a ten kilometres round trip.

Preparing to go to new depot in Kaiserslautern

Accommodation was very basic at the new depot as we were living in army tents. But still it was a whole lot better than guard duty! In fact, anything was better than guard duty!

Arrival at the new depot

It didn't take long for the U.S. Army construction companies to erect prefabricated barracks for us to live in. We were all glad to move into them as the European winter was upon us and there were heavy frosts and snow.

Alone (without family and a homeland) I didn't know where my circumstances would lead me.

All of a sudden, a communicade arrived. It said that those who had served for a year or more would be discharged from the Army for a period of three months and transferred to a civilian camp. After three months we would be re-enlisted back to our regular duties. This was another setback for me. Apparently, the Polish Communist Government had applied pressure to the United Nations indicated that we "had it too good" in the U.S. Army and because of this, were unwilling to return to Poland.

So guess what? ……..I ended up in Stuttgart Refugee Camp. THE COMMOS HAS STRUCK AGAIN!

Tad in civilian clothes

The camp was situated in ex-German Army barracks. The barracks were three-storeys high with winding concrete stairs between each level. There were large rooms that accommodated about forty people in each. The food was atrocious. In the morning we were given a bowl of dark brown porridge made from oat husks. It looked like muck and tasted like muck! We were also given a slice of black bread. In the afternoon they dished out more of the same! At this point, needless to say, I really started missing Army food!

Subsequently, farmers from around Stuttgart began complaining to the Burgermeister (Town Mayor) that chickens, ducks, geese, rabbits, goats, etc: were constantly disappearing from farms located near the camp.

The farmers' complaints reverberated back to the United Nations with a warning that if the situation wasn't rectified, it would be dealt with under the Geneva Convention, on the basis that people held in the camp were malnourished and had resorted to stealing.

It reached a pinnacle when five official cars and the Provost Marshal's jeep arrived at the camp gate. The camp police and groups of refugees assembled near the gate. The Provost Marshal brought witnesses with him - the Burgermeister of Stuttgart, officials from the United Nations (transferred from U.N.R.A. to I.R.A.) and local police officials. He said they wanted to know what happened to the cow that had been taken away at night from a nearby farm and been led to the outskirts of the camp. He then said, according to rumours, the cow had been slaughtered in the camp but there was no actual evidence, even with the use of sniffer dogs, that the cow had entered the camp.

The Provost Marshal gave a firm assurance that there wouldn't be any repercussions and no-one would be prosecuted if they revealed what happened to the cow.

After a period of silence, someone piped up "Yes, we slaughtered the cow and we shared the meat around the camp". The Provost Marshal asked him "But how did you manage to get the cow into the camp because we couldn't find any evidence".

The man replied ever so casually "Simple. We tied shoes to the cow's legs, walked it up three flights of stairs to the attic, and that's where we slaughtered it".

The Provost Marshal just stood there, stunned……

Food supplies in the camp improved dramatically after that!

Soon after the "cow in the shoes" incident, I was reunited with my Army unit in Kaiserslautern..

Chapter 4

WHAT??? …. AUSTRALIA??? THERE ARE HARDLY ANY PEOPLE THERE!!

When I arrived back at the camp at Kaiserslautern I couldn't believe my eyes. In just three months there had been a lot of changes. The old tents had disappeared, everyone was housed in barracks, and on the side of the main gate there was a big concrete structure that housed a power station to meet the needs of the camp.

I was informed by my colleagues that there was a tavern in the town used exclusively by the depot personnel. We, the truck drivers, were now required to transport personnel to the tavern and bring them back safely to the depot after closing time, which was around 10.00 or 11.00 o'clock. I asked my colleagues why we were expected to do this. One of them asked me if I had noticed the big concrete structure at the gate and I said I had. He then told me that two of our colleagues (both truck drivers) had taken a jeep into town to go to the cinema. Afterwards, they got drunk, and as they were coming back to the depot at high speed they missed the gate, ploughed straight into the concrete structure and were killed instantly.

He showed me the wrecked jeep and told me that I would be responsible for delivering the jeep to Mannheim maintenance shop. I was to leave both my truck and the jeep there and be given another truck to drive back to the depot.

About 7.00 o'clock the next morning I set off in my truck with the wrecked jeep loaded on it. I left Mannheim in the other truck about midday and on my way back to the depot, as I approached one of the villages, I could hear music and singing tumbling down from a mountain to the valley below.. I stopped the truck on the side of the road and continued listening to the beautiful music and yodelling, echoing back up the valley to the mountain. I could see a ruined castle situated on the mountain and boys and girls sitting together singing and playing various musical instruments.

As I sat in the truck, thoroughly enjoying the free outdoor concert, along came an Army road patrol. An MP jumped out of his jeep and came over to my truck and asked me "What's wrong soldier?" I told him I was just having a little rest from driving and then I'd be on my way. He promptly said "Move on, soldier!" and my automatic response was "YES SIR!".

As I arrived at the depot, one of the truck drivers shook his fist at me and barked "You ******. We got a message saying we needed to replace you with another driver because you were tired from driving. They thought you might fall asleep at the wheel." Obviously my colleagues weren't impressed, but I must admit, the music and singing (ESPECIALLY THE YODELLING) was magic!

Things were moving along smoothly and as a matter of fact, became a bit boring after a while. So I

decided to break the monotony and one Sunday morning I got up from my bunk and suddenly started carrying on - jumping around, dancing, whistling, and singing. This continued for a few minutes.

About twenty pairs of eyes locked on to me, all with a look of surprise and disbelief. The men in my barrack must have thought I'd gone mad! Then I suddenly stopped, looked at them all, and announced "I just had my five minutes worth of stupidity, but now I'm okay!…. You can all relax". They all roared with laughter and I couldn't stop myself from laughing along with them.

A month passed by and a rumour began circulating that we would be issued a khakee uniform and were going to undertake formal military training. According to the rumour, towards the end of our training we would be shipped to America, naturalised, reformed into a fighting unit and then sent off to the Korean war. I didn't like the sound of that at all. The last thing I wanted was to get caught up in another war.

So I decided to look into what options were available to me. I made enquiries with I R O (International Refugee Organisation) about migrating overseas as a displaced person and was told that I could choose between the U.S.A., Canada, France, Belgium, England, Australia and New Zealand.

France, Belgium and England only offered work in coal mining. Canada offered work in the Yukon where the climate was freezing cold. New Zealand offered work in gold mining and Australia offered rabbit hunting and labouring on the outback railway.

So I decided on Australia. When I told my colleagues about my decision, they said "WHAT??? …. AUSTRALIA??? THERE ARE HARDLY ANY PEOPLE THERE!! Kangaroos race around on the streets and snakes get into the houses". I replied "it can't be too bad if kangaroos can hop around on the streets and I'll just keep clear of the snakes. As far as the population is concerned, THE LESS PEOPLE, THE BETTER!" After spending years in crowded conditions, the idea of wide open spaces and freedom really appealed to me.

I wrote a letter to my father Henryk, to let him know that I had decided to migrate to Australia. I didn't mention that I was working for the U S Army nor the reason why I would not be returning to Poland. If I did, it would be too risky and have serious repercussions for my family.

Sadly, I did not receive a reply and wondered if he even got the letter.

So I put in a request to the Captain asking to be issued a Certificate of Discharge for the purpose of immigration to Australia. I was discharged from the US Army on 3 April 1950 and transported to a migration centre in Ludwigsburg.

Tad preparing to migrate to Australia. Standing at the front of Ludwigburg Castle. The migration centre was located inside the castle.

Tad standing at the back of Ludwigsburg Castle

I sent another letter to my father confirming that I was leaving Europe for Australia, but again, there

was no reply. At that point, I strongly suspected that my letters never reached their destination.

Two weeks later, buses arrived at Ludwigsburg migration centre to take us to the local railway station. We were told that up until recently the transportation route to Australia was from Italy but now it would be from Bremenhaven.

'Anna Salen' at Bremenhaven wharf

So the train pulled into Bremenhaven wharf late that afternoon and we boarded the ship "Anna Salen" which was a converted aircraft carrier. The crew showed us our accommodation quarters and late that night I heard someone call out "We're moving!". So we ran to the deck and I saw the bow of the ship clearing the wharf. The lights of Bremenhaven became smaller and smaller as we sailed away into darkness……destination Australia.

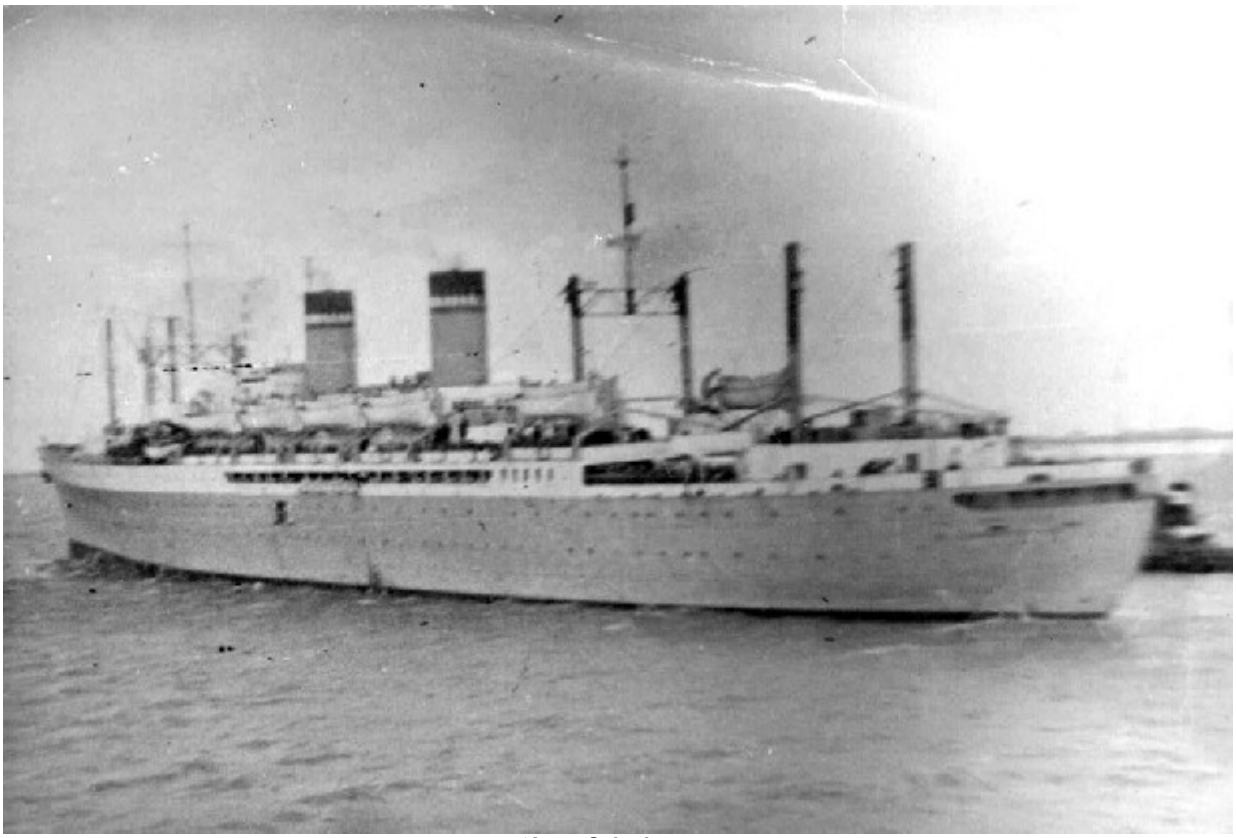
On the ship there were hundreds of displaced people of all nationalities - families, single people, young and old. Some of the crew told us that it would take about thirty days to reach Australia. They told us that sailing through the Baltic Sea would be relatively calm but when we reached the Bay of Biscay it was likely to be very turbulent with rough seas.

That wasn't the case. We had smooth sailing all the way through to the Straits of Gibraltar. We passed Gibraltar during the night and didn't get the chance to see anything as it was pitch black. As we entered the Mediterranean Sea the water was as flat and smooth as a table top. We proceeded with ease to Port Said where we had to wait for a shipping pilot to escort us through the Suez Canal.

When we berthed at Port Said wharf we were inundated with men in small boats posing as money traders. As they approached the ship they skilfully tossed ropes onto the ship's deck and the ropes wrapped around the deck's handrails. Attached to these ropes were small bags and inside them there was information telling us what currency notes they would exchange. As soon as the crew saw what was happening, they cut the ropes and explained to us that the men in the boats were illegal money traders and most of them robbers. We were informed that if we wanted to exchange our money there were legal international money traders located in the Captain's office. But the crew recommended that we hold on to our money and exchange it for Australian dollars when we reached our destination.

It was dusk when the pilot came to take us through the Suez Canal. Again we missed out on seeing the sights as we passed through the Canal in darkness. Occasionally the pilot shone a bright light on to the water and when he did, we could see houses in the distance.

Tired from the heat of the day, we slept in our quarters below deck. In the morning we realised we had missed out on all the excitement. The pilot was gone and we were heading towards Aden to replenish the ship‘s water and food supplies.



‘Anna Salen’ at sea

By the way, throughout our trip there was music playing day and night - records of the Glenn Miller Band. After a while, I came to know the songs so well that I knew which one was coming up next.

We restocked our supplies and passed Ceylon (Sri Lanka), headed for the Equator. We were asked if anyone had crossed the equator before and most of us said that we hadn‘t. That meant we were to

go through an initiation ceremony to get the seal of approval from Neptune as we crossed the Equator. Some of the crew and passengers doused us with buckets of water and we were stamped on the arm with Neptune‘s seal of approval.

So we successfully crossed the equator only to be confronted by Indian Ocean monsoons. The monsoons generated waves up to 40 metres high and as a result, one minute I was looking out at nothing but sky and the next minute, all I could see was a wall of water. The ship started making cracking and creaking noises and the crew were running around closing windows, porches and doors. Passengers were becoming violently seasick and the first aid officer had his hands full dispensing seasickness tablets. There were people lying on the deck, vomiting and moaning. They looked as white as ghosts.

Word got around the ship that volunteers were needed to help in the kitchen. I figured out that the kitchen would be the best place to be. It was situated in the centre of the ship and there was less movement compared to the decks. So I volunteered to wash dishes in the scullery and continued to do so until we reached Australia. I washed thousands of plates, cups etc. and would have been an ideal candidate for a dishwashing competition.

We sailed through the Southern Ocean and early in the morning about six o’clock passed the entrance of Port Phillip Bay. We stopped in the middle of the bay and waited for the shipping pilot to come aboard to guide us to the port at Melbourne.

Finally we were nearing our destination and everyone wanted to see what the continent “downunder” looked like.

There was an air of anticipation on the ship that morning as we sailed towards our adopted country.

Chapter 5

Old Pat

We arrived at Melbourne wharf about 1 o'clock in the afternoon. There was a large group of former displaced people waiting for us to disembark from the ship. Many of them were Polish and there was a lot of shouting going on. To compensate for the height of the ship and the wharf below, the passengers on board were shouting down to the people waiting, asking them what it was like in Australia. They were given assurances that conditions here were good and not to worry.

Well, we started to disembark by walking down the ramp straight into the Customs hall. There were about five Customs officers checking luggage for prohibited items. Since I was almost the last passenger off the ship, I walked into the Customs Hall and saw piles of wood and coal stacked up against the wall. A lot of people had packed wood and coal in their luggage before leaving Europe because they heard rumours that there was nothing in Australia.

There was an old couple standing in front of me waiting to be checked by a Customs officer. I overheard the woman say in Polish to her husband "Jacek (Jack), they are going to throw away our wood and coal. How are we going to make a cup of tea?". At that point, the Customs Supervisor (who understood Polish) must have overhead her comments too. He told them not to worry because there was plenty of wood and coal in Australia.

After my luggage was checked, I was told I could go. I wondered why there was no supervision…… nobody was telling me what to do! There was such a layback attitude! I was accustomed to life in Germany, everyone and everything being strictly controlled. From past experience, my identification would have been checked and I would be told where to go and what to do next.

I asked some bystanders what is the procedure once we left Customs. A man answered me. He was so easygoing and very casually said "Ah, don't worry…..A man will come soon and tell you where to go to catch a train which will transport you to a migrant camp". FOR ME, THIS NEW-FOUND FREEDOM WAS COMPLETELY OVERWHELMING! I'm sure that many of the other displaced people who had just arrived, felt the same way.

As the man said, one of the officials and his interpreter came around and asked "have all of you come off the ship?" We said yes and then he said "come with me and we'll all walk to the railway station together". He then said "You will be going from Melbourne to Wodonga by train. At Wodonga Station there will be buses to take you to Bonegilla Migrant Centre."

Later, I found out that there are two border towns called Albury-Wodonga. These towns are on the border of two states - New South Wales and Victoria. The towns are divided by a river and linked by a bridge - Albury is in the state of New South Wales and Wodonga in the state of Victoria. At that

time, Victorian trains terminated at Wodonga Station and New South Wales trains terminated at Albury. It was all very strange to me! Later on, I learnt that each state in Australia had a different railway gauge. But things have changed since then. Nowadays, the railway gauges throughout Australia are all standardised.

Returning to my life story ……..buses arrived at Wodonga station and took us to Bonegilla camp. The camp was a former Australian army training camp comprised of rows of barracks with a big recreation hall in the middle. A supervisor informed us about our quarters - there were "married quarters" and "single quarters". The kitchen was located in the recreation hall where we received our first meal.

We went to our quarters to get a decent night's sleep and it felt strange because we didn't experience the rocking motion of the ship anymore.

Seven-thirty in the morning, the bell rang in the recreation hall announcing that it was breakfast time. So we sat down and had porridge and a cup of tea. While we had breakfast we were encouraged to sign up for free classes in English language, and if we were to take up a job, we would be under a two-year contract. After we completed the two year contract, we could do whatever we liked.

I spent two weeks at Bonegilla Camp and learnt some basic English. Then came an announcement advising us that there were jobs available for forty single men at Burrinjuck Dam. So I put me hand up and was accepted.

Burrinjuck Dam is located in the state of New South Wales, near a rural township called Yass. Since there wasn't a good connection between trains on the New South Wales and Victoria border, the Dam authorities organised trucks to pick us up from Bonegilla and take us to Burrinjuck Dam.

It was a rough trip to Burrinjuck Dam because we were transported about two hundred kilometres in the back of uncovered dump trucks. We arrived at our new worksite late in the afternoon and taken to our accommodation. Our quarters were tin sheds made from corrugated iron, two men to a room. Each barrack consisted of six rooms plus a common room with basic facilities for making drinks and snacks.

The next morning, we had our orientation and were shown around the camp. There was a general store, a pub (place to eat and drink, mainly serving alcoholic beverages), an entertainment hall and lastly, the dam itself. We were shown fifty pound hammers and large boulders on the side of the dam. The hammers were used to break up the boulders so the material could be loaded onto a skip (heavy metal container with four hooks) and picked up by a flying fox (mechanical winch that ran along a five inch steel cable between two mountains).

There were two groups of labourers. One group broke up the boulders with hammers. The other group drilled twelve foot holes into rocks, so they could be charged with dynamite and blown up. On the same day, following orientation, I was already swinging a hammer. After a short time, I

became so good at it that I knew exactly where to hit the rock so that the granite would fall apart, and the skip was loaded in no time.. To my surprise, when I broke some of the rocks I found tiny flecks of gold but it was just too small an amount to collect.

The construction manager came to me a week later and asked if I would be interested in drilling holes into boulders using a small jackhammer (pneumatic drill). I jumped at the opportunity and started the next day. After a while, the manager called me to his office and asked me if I would like to work on the railway. I asked him "where is the railway?" He explained to me what he meant by "the railway". He meant the tracks that the flying fox ran on, and it was a quarter kilometre long. The line had to be serviced periodically because sometimes it would run out of alignment.

He told me that I would be working with an old Irishman called Pat (Patrick). The manager told me that Pat was a very skilful and experienced fettler (worker who straightens railway lines and packs logs underneath the lines), but he had a downfall …….he liked to drink a lot of grog (alcohol).

He said to me "learn as much as you can from Pat". A few minutes later Pat walked into the office and I was introduced to him. He had a very distinct Irish accent and looked like he was in his fifties. He was tall and slim. He asked me what my name was and I said "Ted". He smiled and said "I'll call you Eddy". And that was the beginning of a great friendship.

Everyone in the camp called him "OLD PAT". He taught me a lot of things about Australian people and their way of life. He was an old bushie (a person who lives in the country) and knew a great deal about the Australian outback (remote areas of Australia). He also taught me Aussie slang and other phrases.

The first lesson I learnt from Pat was never to lay any tools on the ground. He told me to stand them up against a wall and I asked him why. His answer was "you lay them in the sun and you'll never pick them up until the sun goes down". And one day I found out for myself that Pat was right …...

During a hot summer day, I walked over to pick up a tool lying on the ground. I picked it up and immediately dropped it. The tool was so hot I almost burnt my hand!

One day, after work, there were a group of Aussie labourers sitting on a porch and every second word they used was "Bloody" (a swear word). Bloody this, and Bloody that! They were swearing a lot and talking about "new Australians". I forgot to mention in the beginning that we were told after disembarking from the ship in Melbourne we would be called "new Australians".

So I asked Old Pat "why are they swearing about "new Australians?". And he asked me "did they grin (smile) and laugh when they were swearing?". And I said "as a matter of fact, they were". Then Old Pat said "so you've got nothing to worry about …..THAT'S THE AUSTRALIAN WAY!"

After a couple of hours work, Old Pat announced that we were "going to have a smoko" (take a rest break). He pulled out a can of Coca Cola and unwrapped his sandwiches. To my horror, he ripped the bread crust from his sandwich and threw it away. I said "Pat! I know it's none of my business

but how can you waste bread?". Casually he said "Ahh, don't worry. It's a big country - a rich country. And besides, the wallabies (animals similar to kangaroos) will pick them up and eat them". A couple of minutes later a little, timid wallaby appeared, picked up the bread crust and took it away to eat.

After he finished eating his sandwiches, he pulled out a tin of tobacco from his pocket. He cupped his left hand and put some tobacco into it, then pulled out a cigarette paper. He stuck the corner of the cigarette paper to his bottom lip and with his right hand started rubbing the tobacco in his hand. When the tobacco formed the shape of a cocoon, he put the cigarette paper on top, and turned it over into his right hand so that the cigarette paper was lying underneath the tobacco. He then began rolling his cigarette by hand, licked the edge of the cigarette paper and sealed it. He finally lit up his cigarette and inhaled. In Australia, we call a handmade cigarette a "rollie".

Old Pat started work again and had his "rollie" hanging off his bottom lip and he would occasionally suck on it. It was very foreign to me as I had never seen this before!

One day, I asked him why is it that when Aussies pass each other, one would twist his head from right to left and wink at the other person. (I found this very intriguing.) He told me that it was a very old Australian custom dating back to convict times. In the early days of the colony, the convicts were forbidden to talk to each other and so they devised a non-verbal way of acknowledging each other.

Today, this custom is slowly disappearing but it is still quite common in bush towns and amongst older people.

So the days passed and we had almost finished all outstanding jobs and I wondered what work they would give us next. Pat said "don't worry, there will be work for you". The next day, I started work and Pat was nowhere to be seen. The construction manager came to me and asked if I had seen Pat. I said I hadn't and he told me that some men had seen Pat in the pub last night but they don't know anything more. The manager and I drove over to the barracks to look for him. He wasn't in his room so we walked over to the recreation room and there he was ……..

There was a fire burning in the open fireplace and a six foot long log with one end stuck in the fire and the rest of it lying on the floor, facing the doorway. And there's Old Pat in the middle, lying next to the log and hugging it. He was sound asleep and as drunk as a skunk! So the construction manager said to leave him where he was and let him sober up. He said he would come back later to check on him. That afternoon, when I went to the pub for my evening meal, everyone had heard about Old Pat hugging the log and they were all killing themselves laughing.

A day or so later, I saw Old Pat and he told me that he was leaving. I asked him where he was going and he said in his casual style "there are plenty of jobs around and I'm a free spirit!".

Although I never saw him again I missed him because he was a good bloke (man) and I learnt a lot from him about life in Australia.

Chapter 6

Burrinjuck Dam Disaster

Thanks to Old Pat, I knew a lot more about the Australian way of life but I wasn't prepared for what happened next.

I shared my barrack with other men including two middle-aged blokes (men) who regularly went out drinking at night. On this particular day, it was a public holiday and both the general store and pub were closed. So we had to make our own tucker (meals). I was in the common room preparing a sandwich when these two blokes walked in.

One said to the other "Ahh, we're going to cook some bacon, eggs and sausages". The other one responded "where are we going to cook?". The first bloke answered "ON THE ROAD, DOPEY!"

That immediately got my attention.

And sure enough! The first bloke took a frying pan, put a lump of dripping (animal fat) into the pan and carried it out to the road. The second bloke followed him carrying the food. They put the frying pan on the bitumen road and in about five minutes, the fat had melted and got hot. They put the sausages and bacon into the hot fat and when the meat started sizzling, they broke the eggs into the pan. All in all, their tucker was ready in fifteen minutes.

I found out that Australia gets so hot in summer, particularly in the middle of the day between 11.00 am and 2.00 pm, the bitumen roads become extremely hot and you can cook on them.

So everyone (well, at least the sane ones!) stay out of the sun at that time of day. There is an old Australian saying that goes "only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun!". And now I know why!

Of course, being a public holiday and in a remote work camp, you had to find ways of amusing yourself. When the heat of the day subsided, the two blokes organised a game called "two-up" (gambling) in the entertainment hall. Half of the camp turned up and the game was on! There was a lot of shouting, cheering and cursing ……money was won and lost …..and that was all part of the game.

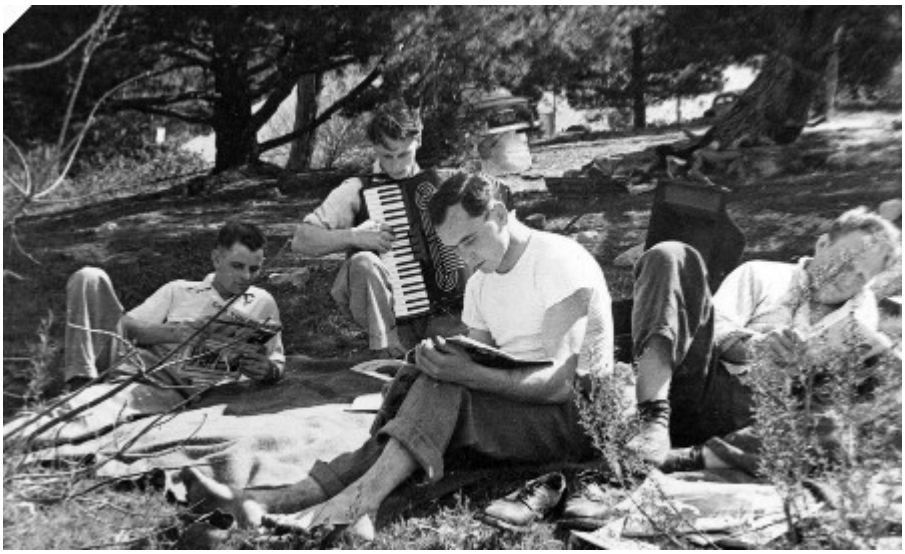
Generally speaking, Australians are keen gamblers and there is even an old Australian saying that "Australians will gamble on anything, even two flies crawling up a wall!".

I had some great times at Burrinjuck Dam. We often cooked freshly-caught rainbow trout (fish) in a frypan over a campfire next to the lake. And the taste was fantastic! The flesh of the fish was so moist and sweet that you would never experience this in a commercial fish shop.

The fishing was good there. A 110 kilo Murray cod (largest freshwater fish in Australia) was caught at Burrinjuck.

I also learnt how to "boil a billy" (make bush tea) and this is an art of its own. The water is placed in a billy can (a tin can with a lid and wire handle) and placed over an open fire. When the water comes to the boil, a fistful of loose tea leaves (preferably the Billy Tea brand) is added, and it is gently simmered for a few minutes. A fresh eucalyptus leaf is added to the tea for extra flavour and then the billy can is taken off the heat. The billy can is repeatedly swung over the shoulder in a circular motion. The freshly brewed tea is then ready to drink.

Weekends and public holidays were mainly spent bushwalking, rabbit hunting, reading, playing music, and hiring small boats to go upstream to fish in the lake.



Resting time at Burrinjuck Dam. Tad is playing accordion.

Occasionally, the Irrigation Commission organised entertainment for the workers at their own expense. It could be a bush dance, movies, story-telling about the adventures of early Australian explorers and bushrangers, "swinging the bull dust" (telling tall tales) and reading the poetry of Banjo Patterson (a famous bush poet) and others.

On one occasion, a bush dance was organised and "The Bushwhacker's Band" performed. They played traditional bush instruments such as the mouth harmonica, lagerphone and bush bass.

The lagerphone was a popular instrument in the bush and was made out of a broomstick with lager bottletops nailed to it. A notched bow or "rattlestick" was run across the broomstick. The instrument was played by rhythmically stomping the broomstick on the floor while playing the rattlestick.

The bush bass was a stringed instrument made from a tea chest or oil drum. A stick (sapling or broomstick) was used and strings were made from cord, wire or ordinary string. Different notes were obtained by increasing or relaxing the leverage of the stick; changing the tension of the string.

In the "old days" there was a scarcity of musical instruments and the bushies (people living in the country) used their ingenuity to provide their own entertainment. They made improvised bush instruments to make music using whatever they had on hand. Some to these "creations" were the cigar box fiddle, kerosene tin dulcimer and cake tin banjo. They also used "bones"- short pieces of bullock ribs or similar pieces carved from hardwood.

In the spring of 1951 it was very wet. When it was raining somewhere, it didn't just rain, it poured down. Most of New South Wales experienced nuisance flooding and at Burrinjuck Dam it was raining constantly. Because the dam was between hills, the rain pelted down the hillside and the water level in the dam began to rise rapidly.

The construction manager sent a communiqué to the Irrigation Commission (based in Sydney) requesting permission to open the spillways on the dam to reduce the level of water. A communiqué came back telling management to keep the spillways closed in order to conserve as much water as possible. The reason for this was the previous year's drought.

The construction manager started worrying and issued another communiqué to the Irrigation Commission stating that the water level was rising one foot an hour. That made the authorities in Sydney panic and they issued an order to open the spillways as quickly as possible. They were concerned that if they didn't take immediate action, the dam itself could be damaged.

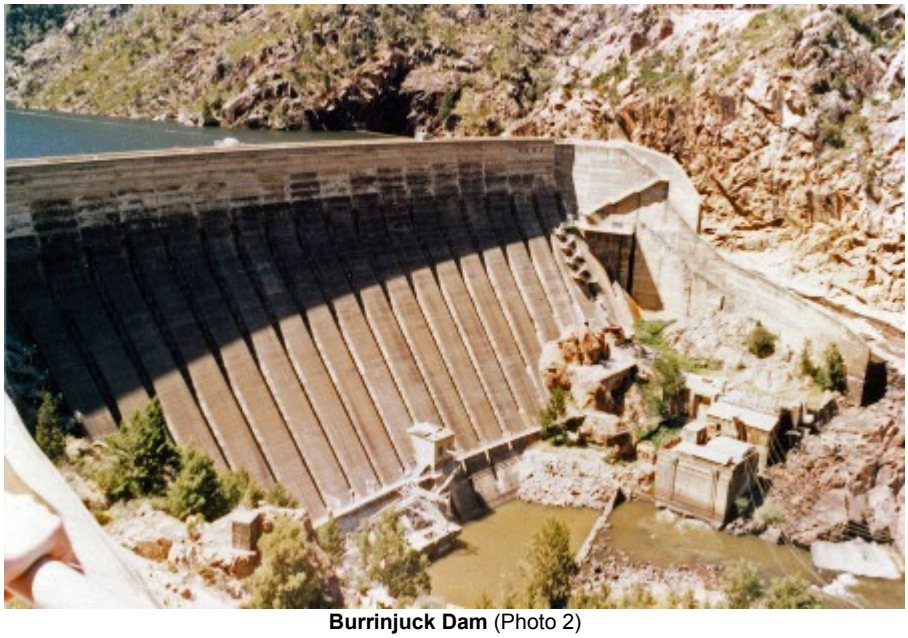
Burrinjuck Dam (Photo 1)

To open the spillways wasn't easy, particularly in wet weather, and it was very risky. One this occasion, it required men standing on top of a makeshift platform secured to the dam wall and pulling out, one by one, a series of timber logs which retained the water. The level of the dam was already above the top of the logs and the men had to move quickly to relieve the water pressure.

As the men worked on the platform, the flying fox was hooked up to the logs to remove them a few at a time. As soon as the flying fox starting lifting the logs, the pressure of the dam water was so

great that it took the whole platform off, and the men with it, and slammed the platform, logs and men against the rock face wall. All of the men were killed instantly.

Nine men lost their lives that day and it was the biggest disaster in the dam‘s history.



Burrinjuck Dam (Photo 2)

When this happened, the alarm sounded to alert everyone to get off the dam and work ceased immediately. The construction manager looked devastated.

Hours later, a police contingent and rescue teams arrived. They organised all the dam workers into recovery teams. The police began fishing out the bodies about two kilometres downstream, past the power station. The recovery teams, accompanied by ambulance officers, carried the bodies on stretchers up to the main road located near the township of Gundagai.

We were formed into eight groups. Each group consisted of eight men - four men to carry a stretcher and the other four men acting as a relief team.

Every hour the teams took turns carrying the stretchers through rough terrain up to the main road where the ambulances were waiting.

We did this all night. The mood was sombre, no-one wanted to talk, we were all soaking wet …….. but no-one minded. The tragic loss of life weighed heavily on us.

According to unconfirmed reports, there were two Latvians, three Ukrainians, two Poles and two Australians killed in the accident. The workers union collected money donations and the dam authorities pitched in, dollar for dollar. I heard that a substantial amount of money was collected and distributed to the families of the dead men as compensation for their loss.

Two days later the rain stopped and a nice, sunny day commenced. The construction manager came to me and said “I have organised two men to walk on this side of the river and I need another two men to walk on the other side because we are still missing one body. We have accounted for all the men, except one”. He said “would you mind going on the other side of the river with one of the Yugoslav men and walk along the riverbank, up to Gundagai, and back again. That will be your eight hours work”.

So we commenced work, walking along the riverbank. A couple of days later I suggested to the construction manager that it would be a better idea if the Yugoslav and I walked along the ridge of the mountain to get a clearer view of the river below. I said that if we walked on the ridge and got a better view of the river, there wouldn’t be the need for the other two searchers. He remarked “that’s a splendid idea”. So off we went on our search.

One day, we were walking along the ridge and surveying the river. All of a sudden, a kookaburra (Kingfisher bird), on top of a tree started making loud squawking noises. Well, I stopped and looked to see what was wrong. At that moment as I stopped, the kookaburra dived down from the tree, snatched a snake off the ground, took it up to the top of the tree, and then dropped it to the ground. The kookaburra then dived after the snake, picked it up again, took it to the tree and dropped it again. The bird did this about three times…….. By this time, the snake was well and truly dead. He picked it up for the last time, flew to the top of the tree, hung the dead snake over a tree branch and flew away.

When I walked up to the spot where the kookaburra has picked up the snake, I realised that I had almost walked on top of the snake!

The kookaburra saved me from being bitten.

When we came back to the dam I told an old bushie about what had happened. I asked him “why did the kookaburra hang the dead snake over the tree branch?“. And he said “that’s their way of feeding their offspring. They hang the dead snake over the tree branch and then bring the whole family, sometimes as many as six or more, back to the tree where the dead snake is. Then they tear the snake apart and feed themselves.”

So we kept walking for another week but could not locate the dead body.

Subsequently, the water eventually drained out of the dam and river, and we finally found a skeleton. The remains were wedged between two boulders near the dam. The construction manager notified the police. After taking photographs, the police and ambulance officers removed the skeleton.

While we were walking on top of the mountains, the Yugoslav and I found two natural springs. They were tumbling from the halfway point on the mountain down to the river below. Where they emerged from the mountain, they formed small pools of cool, fresh, crystal clear water. I noticed that one of the pools even had a small goldfish in it!

The day after we found the spring water, we took waterbags with us. On the way back to the dam

we filled our waterbags with fresh spring water so the other workers could have a taste.

Once they had tasted the water, well, …….the workers wouldn't drink any other water! They insisted on drinking only spring water. So every day, the construction manager arranged for a couple of workers to go "shuttle service", to collect more spring water for the workers.

I used to go to the general store to buy a rock cake (sweet bun flavoured with dried fruit and spices) to eat for morning tea. . The rock cakes tasted good but after a while, I got sick of eating the same thing and wanted to try something else.

I saw a workmate eating a pastry filled with cream and asked him what was the name of the cake. He said "apple turnover". So I was determined to get myself an apple turnover from the store.

"Armed" with this new information I headed off to the store, and so I didn't forget the name of the pastry, I kept saying over and over to myself "apple turnover" "apple turnover".

When I arrived at the shop counter, there were a couple of customers in front of me. I stood there waiting for my turn, still saying to myself "apple turnover", "apple turnover".

One customer was served and then the next customer said "I want a dozen exsess". The woman said "I only have two left". And he answered "NO, NO! I want A DOZEN EXSESS!". So the woman said "I'm sorry, but I have only got two left".

The man broke out in Russian language, swore, and then said in Russian "YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!". He suddenly ripped his hat off his head, crouched down, and put his hat underneath his backside, and shouted "Kok, kok, kok, kok! Kok!".

And the woman said "OH……EGGGGS. You want a dozen EGGS?". With a look of great relief, the Russian said "YESSSSS!"

Apparently, the woman thought he wanted a dozen AXES!

I stood there laughing to myself and by the time it was my turn to be served, I had completely forgotten the name of the pastry I wanted.

So guess what? I bought a rock cake!

Chapter 7

The Characters Downunder

Two kilometres from the dam downstream, as I mentioned before, there was a power station supplying electricity to Sydney and surrounding areas. This power station had to be serviced with oil and kerosene, and there was a small gauge railway running from the dam to the power station.

As a result of the dam disaster, the railway had been wrecked and washed away. The construction manager came to me and said "you're going to get fifteen men and your responsibility is to reconstruct the railway, back to the way it was."

He then said "you'll be on Ganger (foreman) wages and you'll be in charge of the fifteen men".

Well, we commenced building the small gauge railway. The job was progressing well and the construction manager said "just before we finish the railway, we're going to have a test run to check it out". He said he would let me know when it was going to happen.

One day, some officials arrived at the dam from the Irrigation Commission and the construction manager announced "we are going to have a test run today".

When the officials came down to the dam to watch the test run, the dogman appeared. He was the bloke who carried a whistle or bell and his job was to regulate the movement of the flying fox.

Using the flying fox, he brought a trolley and set it down on the rails. He then picked up a skip fully loaded with rocks and put it on top of the trolley.

As I saw the officials waiting and talking to each other, I decided to make myself busy and began collecting tools from amongst the rails.

All of a sudden, the officials and construction manager started shouting "Ted, get out!!" and waving their arms wildly in the air.

I looked towards the dam and there was the fully laden skip approaching me. So I dived out from the rails, onto the rocks and saw the skip go past at high speed. It took one bend, and on the next bend, derailed and became airborne.

As I nursed my aching elbows and knees, the officials and construction manager ran over to me and asked if I was alright. If it wasn't for them, I would have been killed.

This is what had happened ……

The dogman had been drinking heavily at lunchtime and began his work shift at 3.00pm. While under the influence of alcohol, he organised a small diesel locomotive to run the trolley down to the power station, and back again. He brought the trolley loaded with the skip, and was going to get the locomotive to hook it up the trolley. Because the trolley wasn't secured, the weight of the skip started pushing the trolley down the rails.

As they were shouting to me to get out of the way, I didn't have any other option but to dive onto the rocks.

The dogman was sacked on the spot!

The officials came to me and said enthusiastically "Gee, you did a good job on the railway! The trolley took the first bend, and dislocated itself on the second bend at high speed!" At least they were pleased with the job we'd done!

So that was my second near-miss …….

On the first occasion, I recall we were doing an upgrade to strengthen the dam wall. The dam wall consisted of two concrete walls with a narrow twenty metre deep gap in between. Concrete was going to be poured between the two walls, so our job was to roughen up the dam wall to ensure that it bonded well.

The work went day and night - four or five workers per shift, two shifts in twenty-four hours. We were standing on wooden planks that lay on top of steel reinforcement that protruded from the dam wall. We had small, air-driven jackhammers and I had just secured my jackhammer to the steel reinforcement. Somehow, and I don't know how it happened, I stepped forward into fresh air! Instinctively, I spread my elbows between the two walls and shouted "quick, get a plank! I was suspended by my elbows, with a twenty metre fall beneath me!

The bloke next to me quickly shifted a plank sideways to get it underneath my feet, and as a result of this I lived to see another day!

Nowadays, although I occasionally get arthritic pain in my elbows, I am grateful because they saved my life that day.

I was nearing the end of my contract at Burrinjuck Dam so I said to the construction manager "all the jobs are finished and I have two months left on my work contract. If you don't mind, I would like to resign and go to the city". Being so long in the bush, I wanted to move on and work in the "big smoke" (city).

Given that I had an excellent work record, the construction manager gave his approval on the spot, but at the same time said "Ted, you're making a big mistake, but there will always be work for you

here if you want it. You could be part of our management team". But I was young and naïve and determined to see the "big smoke".

So I left Burrinjuck Dam and travelled by train to Sydney. At that time there was plenty of accommodation available and I found an advertisement in a newspaper for a fitter's assistant with State Rail. I applied for the job and was asked to attend an interview. Since I only had one previous job with the Irrigation Commission, I got the job and was expected to undergo training.

After the training was completed, I was sent to the locomotive depot to work as a fitter's assistant.

I worked on the railway for thirteen years and during that time I certainly met some "characters" (odd or eccentric people).

After a while I was asked if I had met MECHANICAL JOE. I said "who is Mechanical Joe??" My co-worker grinned and said "haven't you noticed a tall, skinny bloke walking around? You know, he has so much grease on his trousers that when he takes them off, they stand up on their own!! He doesn't have to put them on, he just steps into them. He lives in a caravan made out of old pieces of corrugated iron and the city council keep chasing him from one spot to another because they say his caravan is an eyesore (ugly sight)."

He then introduced me to Mechanical Joe, who was also a fitter's assistant. I looked down at his trousers and they looked like they were made out of black steel. My co-worker said "ask Mechanical Joe about his latest invention". ….. So I did.

He said enthusiastically "OH YEAH ……..I'M WORKING ON A RIFLE THAT SHOOTS 'ROUND CORNERS! But I've got one problem – how am I going to solve the problem of getting the rifle to sort out all of the different types of bullets so I can fire them? Then he showed me his bag of assorted bullets, and trying not to laugh I said, "Joe, I don't think I can solve that one!".

As I walked away I could see my co-workers standing together in a huddle and having a good old laugh.

There was another worker at the depot who was also Polish. His surname was Zimnawoda. They all called him "JOE BLOW". I asked a co-worker why they called him "Joe Blow". Apparently, when an Aussie can't pronounce a foreigner's name they exaggerate! And the answer I got was "oh, he's a bonza (good) bloke and a mate (friend) of ours but he's got too many "Zs" and "Ws" in his name. No-one can pronounce it so we just call him "Joe Blow"……..AND HE KNOWS IT!!

One day we were standing in a group and one of the Aussies said "those Balts (people from Baltic States), they don't waste money. They won't spend any money on the races (gambling) or the footie (football games) and that's why they can afford nice houses." So I popped up and said in a cheeky way "YEAH, THOSE BLOODY NEW AUSTRALIANS! THEY'VE ONLY BEEN IN THE COUNTRY FOR FIVE MINUTES AND THEY THINK THEY OWN THE PLACE!!".

There was a momentary hesitation and they all stood there looking at each other. And then the Aussie smiled broadly and in a loud voice proclaimed “OH, HE’S ONE OF US!!” He said to me “do you drink?” and I said “yes.” And then he said “well, you’ll have to come to the pub with us”.

That “broke the ice”. I was accepted and became “one of them”.

A couple of months later there was a big worker’s strike at the railway. We went on strike for three weeks because we were seeking better work conditions. We had a lottery going to finance the Union’s newspaper called “Magnet”. We paid two schillings per ticket and periodically received copies of the newspaper.

On this particular occasion, there was a small article in the newspaper about a depot and how they coped with the strike. Nothing was mentioned about our depot but there was another article, one and a half pages long, saying how well the Soviet Union railway runs! (In other words, Communist propaganda!).

When I saw this, my blood starting boiling. I went to the Union delegate and said “if that happens again, I will ask all the new Australians to boycott the lottery”. It was my protest against the Union peddling Communist propaganda.

By this stage I was furious and said “I CAN’T GO BACK TO MY OWN COUNTRY BECAUSE OF THE COMMOS, AND HERE YOU ARE, GLORIFYING THEM!!“. I said “and my family are suffering under the Communist regime”. I then quoted a joke about a Soviet soldier saying to a Polish farmer “we’ve come here to free you of Nazi oppression”, and to that the farmer replied “and in the process, you’ve also freed me of my horse and cow!” The Polish farmer described very well their so-called freedom.

As the State Rail was a “closed shop” (union stronghold) and I had made a stand against what was going on, I knew my days were numbered.

So eventually I resigned and took a job with A.W.A. (Australian Wireless Association). And all thanks to the Railway Union, I was now in a better job and with better pay.

And sure enough …….I found another “character“!

I was employed as a sheet metal worker at A.W.A. and it didn’t take me long to make the grade. I started working in the sheet metal shop under the supervision of a leading hand, foreman and production manager.

We called the production manager “FLAT BATTERY BILL”. His first name was Bill and whenever he “got hot under the collar” about something, he stuttered badly and sounded like a car with a flat battery; hence the name, Flat Battery Bill!

After working for A.W.A. for about ten years, I left and moved on to jobs with higher wages.

I remember one place. A.W.A. had recommended me as a highly skilled sheet metal worker and I got a job with a company who built air conditioners.

There was a friendly, highly skilled sheet metal worker there but he had a couple of peculiarities - he didn't work in one spot and was accident prone. Whatever job he was doing, he didn't stay put and work in one spot. He moved around the shop and had his projects and tools scattered all over the place. He knew that he had a habit of scattering his tools so he branded all of them. And because he cut himself a lot he left blood on the work benches.

So whenever someone was looking for Charlie, we used to say "oh, just follow his trail of tools or blood and you'll find him".

In 1975, I built my first home under an owner-builder licence, and at the same time, made an application for a builder's licence. A Builders Licencing Board representative came to inspect the completed house that I had built and I was given an oral test at their office. I passed the test and was granted a full builders licence after that.

I worked as a self-employed builder for a number of years and when there were slack times in the "building game" I worked for other companies.

Eventually, I got to know a former bank manager who gave me a hand in preparing my income tax return. He asked me if I would be interested in doing renovation work on old cottages in the Mudgee area of New South Wales. He intended renting the cottages following renovation work. He also owned a 1,700 acre grazing farm and I would be assisting on the farm, as required.

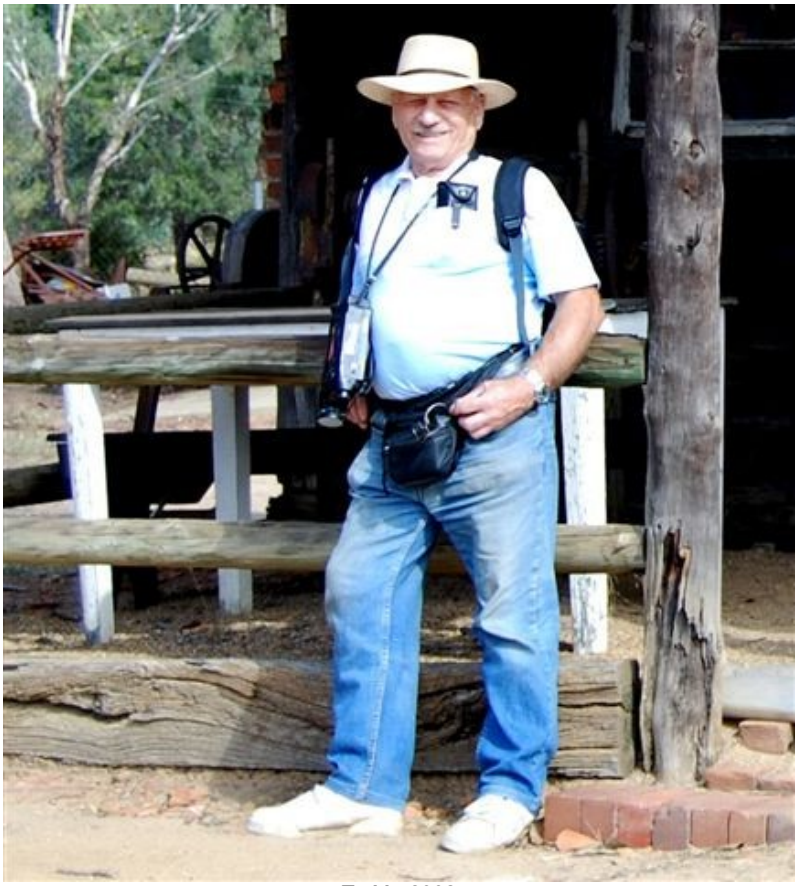
The type of work really suited me, so I agreed.

I spent a considerable period of time in Mudgee. I worked in the township doing cottage renovations and on his farm helping in the shearing shed and repairing farm machinery. It was there, in Mudgee, that I met my life partner Linda.

Shortly after meeting Linda, we moved to the Blue Mountains and built a two-storey home. We lived there for over twenty years.

And life certainly has many twists and turns…….and do you know where I ended up next? Back where I started. In a place not far from Burrinjuck Dam.

When I retired, we moved to a rural village called The Rock, in the Riverina region of New South Wales. It is about two and a half hours drive to Burrinjuck Dam. The Rock is in the vicinity of the Mt Kosciuszko National Park. Mount Kosciuszko is the highest peak in Australia and is located in the national park. It was named by a famous explorer, Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki, because he thought the peak resembled the tomb of the Polish patriot Kosciuszko.



Ted in 2008

The Rock, Kengal - Lion of the plains

The Rock village used to be called “Kengal” meaning “lion of the plains”. It refers to the large rocky outcrop that resembles a lion and overlooks the surrounding open plains.

Our village is about twenty-five kilometres from Wagga Wagga (pronounced Wogga Wogga). It is the largest inland city in New South Wales and in Aboriginal means “place of many crows”.

In Aboriginal language, when something is said twice it is the plural form, hence Wagga means “crow” and Wagga Wagga means “many crows”.

The area that we live in is Wiradjuri country. Wiradjuri is the name of a tribe of Aborigines who have occupied this land for ages - pre-dating white man’s arrival.

Australia is a continent of vast distances. I recall visiting my doctor some time ago and she told me that I had to go to a regional hospital located in Albury. I said to her “that’s a long way from here”. She looked at me and said “it’s only up the road!” and added “it’s only a hundred kilometres away! This is an Australian’s concept of distances.

I am now in my eighties and over the years have come to love my adopted country. I love Australia with its wide open spaces, its people (including the “characters”) and the relaxed way of life.

My feelings for Australia can be summed up in the words of a much-loved lyric poem entitled “My Country” written by a famous Australian poet called Dorothea Mackellar (1885 -1968).

This is part of it.

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-seas,
Her beauty and her terror --
The wide brown land for me!

Chapter 8

FAMILY UNCOVERED! After 62 years...

Many years ago, when I was four years old and living in Poland, I remember it was bitterly cold that winter when my mother took me to a house in Starachowice. I recall feeling that I just wanted to sleep and nothing else.

When the woman opened the front door she looked shocked and said (referring to me) "DON'T LET HIM SLEEP!! ……. HE'S HALF FROZEN!!". She immediately grabbed handfuls of snow and started vigorously rubbing my face, ears, hands and feet. After this, she said to my mother "from now on, Tad stayed here with us! Obviously, you don't look after him properly."

So from then on I lived in this house but I didn't know why I was there ……..

About a year later, a group of workers came to the house to replace bricks inside our coal-burning stove. One of the men said to me "why do you call him (referring to the man of the house) mister, ……. HENRYK IS YOUR FATHER! I was shocked and confused, I didn't say a word and just walked away in silence. It had such an impact on me that it has remained with me up to this very day.

Apart from the worker's comments, NO-ONE had told me anything about Henryk being my father. Maybe it wasn't true, just a rumour. I even thought my father may have died. Life went on and I continued to call Henryk "Sir" and my aunty "Pani".

There were other people living in the house and I subsequently learnt that they were my relatives - Helena was my paternal aunty, Jan my half-brother, and Wiktorja and Walerja were my half-sisters.

My mother was Italian and I presumed that she was a widow because I overheard the workmen saying that her husband was crushed to death in a rockfall at the Starachowice stone quarry.

Many years later, I wrote a letter to my mother from Germany to tell her that I intended marrying a German girl and I didn't want any future child of mine going through what I experienced when I was young.

You see, I was an illegitimate child.

I suppose in those days, because of the scandal and stigma of having an illegitimate child in the family it was simply "swept under the carpet." As a child, because no-one spoke about those things, I didn't understand what was going on - it was all a complete mystery to me.

As my mother couldn't read or write Polish, she organised a woman to write a letter on her behalf.

My mother replied in the letter "yes, your father is Henryk but I didn't have an opportunity to tell you this before." It came as a revelation to me because I thought the worker's comments may have been just a rumour.

As it turned out, I didn't end up marrying the German girl but I did keep the letter from my mother as it was the only evidence I had that Henryk was my father.

I certainly have the knack of spotting "characters" wherever I go. This probably goes back to the time spent with my father because he was a "real character." I recall one day, Henryk decided to do a carpentry job in our backyard. I stood there watching him work and asked him what he was making. He said " I'm building a gateway to the forest!!" So I walked away with my mind full of thoughts and ideas about how he was going to do it. How heavy would the gates be? How high? What type of material would he use? He was obviously pulling my leg, but never let on!

On another occasion I was given a new pair of Bata school shoes. I put them on and stood there admiring them. Aunt Helena said "Henryk, have a look at Tadek's new shoes". My father wore glasses and had a habit of leaning his head down against his chin, and would look up over the rim of his glasses to see what was going on. So he sat there in his usual way recording some written calculations into a book. Without even raising his head, he continued with what he was doing, and said "don't miss any pot holes!" He must have snatched a glimpse of me admiring my new shoes and wanted to have a bit of fun.

One day, Henryk arrived home from work carrying a large rock under his arm. Aunt Helena looked at him and said "What's that for?" He replied "I found this rock on the side of the road and it's the ideal size and weight to weigh down our sauerkraut in the barrels. Aunt Helena just shook her head and said "unbelievable!". He could have just used the bricks we had lying around or something else, but oh no, it had to be THIS rock.

But the rock brought a bit of misfortune. While my father was carrying the rock home it had rubbed up against the side of his much-loved, brown leather jacket. The surface of the jacket was damaged and my half-sister Wiktorja said to him "that jacket looks awful, it's old and scaley and has lost all of its gloss. You better buy yourself a new one." Henryk replied "ahh, I'll fix it up. When I'm finished, it will look as good as new."

So off he went and what do you think he did next? He took out a tin of brown boot polish and started polishing his jacket. The family could smell his jacket for weeks later.

Henryk loved to go to the local Club after work or dinner to play bridge and chess. I used to sleep in his bedroom and I recall waking up in bed. The bedroom light was shining in my face and I was trying to work out what was going on. I noticed Henryk sitting at a small table with his chess board on it. He was playing chess. Sleepily, I asked him what time it was and he told me it was four o'clock in the morning.

I then asked him "what are you doing?" He said "I lost a game in the Club and I'm trying to find

out where I went wrong". Well okay ……. but at four o'clock in the morning?

I still occasionally laugh about his eccentricity and yet, he was such a down-to-earth person and very witty.

After arriving in Australia I began thinking about my father and the rest of my family in Poland. During quiet times, I wondered whatever happened to them. Were they still alive? Would I ever see them again?

In 1957, the long and frustrating search for my family began. I became an Australian citizen around that time and decided to make an effort to find my lost family. I approached the National Tracing Bureau of the Australian Red Cross Society. I completed an application form, returned it and about two years later finally received a reply. But it wasn't the answer I was seeking.

The letter from the Red Cross provided contact details for my mother who was still living in Pakoslaw, but I already knew this……. Disappointingly, there was nothing mentioned in the letter about my father and the rest of my family. The letter simply told me what I already knew.

So I abandoned the search and thought that my efforts to find my family in Communist Poland would be futile. It was a feeling of hopelessness.

The years passed by and life continued. With Linda's persuasion, we decided to contact the Polish Consulate in Sydney. They provided us with some contacts including a Polish Government agency called "Piast" Genealogical Services, located in Warsaw.

We sent a letter to the Director of the service requesting assistance. Time passed, and despite regular correspondence and research carried out on my behalf, I was still no closer to finding out anything about my family.

At this stage, it seemed as if my family had disappeared off the face of the earth and I couldn't get any answers.

So once again, the search for my family came to a grinding halt. I thought it was too late and just a fruitless exercise.

The years passed and in 2005, Linda and I were sitting together searching the internet. Without realising it at the time, my luck was about to change!

While on-line, we stumbled onto the Polish Culture website and one particular topic caught Linda's eye. The title read "The Gift of Family" written by Nancy Maciolek Blake. Linda read Nancy's story to me and in Part 4 "A passion for Poland", Nancy wrote about a young Polish man called Zenon Znamirowski. She detailed her own search for family and mentioned how Zenon helped her during her visit to Poland. Nancy's comments about Zenon were very favourable and she provided a

link to his website.

We looked at Zenon's website and Linda said to me "maybe we should contact Zenon to find out if he can help us locate your family?" At first, I was very reluctant because I had "been down this road before" and didn't think it would amount to anything. But again, with Linda's persuasion, we contacted Zenon by email. And that was the turning point in my search for family.

Linda and I knew that we were presenting Zenon with a major challenge. As a displaced person, I had very few records and some old letters including those from my mother. Many years had passed and we had little to go on. It didn't look good.

Surprisingly, Zenon offered his help. He started making various lines of enquiry about different members of my family. He travelled to Starachowice to conduct a virtual tour on our behalf and to look for any information about my family.

When Zenon was organising his second trip to Starachowice, I asked if he would try to find the building where my father had worked as an architectural engineer. In that building there was a draftsman's office where my father used to supervise five draftsmen. Zenon, always obliging, agreed to my request.

In July 2007 Linda opened our email and have a guess? There was an email from Zenon with the subject line "I FOUND JAN AND WALERIA!" When I read this I almost "fell off my perch". It was a surreal experience.

We opened the email and Zenon told us that he tracked down the records of my father's old factory. He ended up finding two folders, one concerning my half-brother Jan, and the other about my half-sister Waleria. This came as a complete surprise to me because I didn't know they had been working there.

Zenon also advised that in Jan's folder, there was a letter written by Jan in May 1992. Because of his pension, he had written the letter to the factory requesting confirmation of his employment there. The letter provided quite a lot of detail including my father's name, occupation and his date of death in 1962. There was information about Jan's army service, the family's address and another address in Starachowice-Wierzbnik, where they had been "resettled" by the Nazis during the war.

Zenon also found an old damaged photo of Jan. He arranged to have it scanned and put in a request to have photocopies of the documents in both folders sent to me.

I received the scanned photo of Jan - it was a face that I hadn't seen in decades.

Jan, Tad's half-brother.

And most importantly, Jan had written his address at the top of the letter. In May 1992, Jan lived in Olsztyn, Poland.

We fully understood the significance of this find, and thanks to Zenon, it was the very first clue I had about my family in almost sixty years.

Zenon put his detective cap on again and started looking for telephone numbers in the Olsztyn area in the hope that he would uncover relatives living there. He managed to find five numbers with the family surname. Two of them had the identical phone number - one had the first name, Jan, and the other belonged to someone with the first name, Cecylia.

What a tantalizing clue, the two telephone numbers had the same Olsztyn address and it was the same as the address on Jan's letter written in 1992!

Zenon made numerous attempts to contact anyone on this number, but it proved unsuccessful. He did some checking and found out that it was a valid number, but no-one was answering the phone.

Linda and I asked Zenon if he would go to Olsztyn to check things out for us. Zenon agreed and his plan included visiting the address mentioned in Jan's letter.

In September 2007, we opened an email from Zenon with the subject title "YOUR FAMILY UNCOVERED!" I couldn't believe it! Zenon had achieved the impossible!

Zenon had gone to the address in Olsztyn but no-one was home. He then spoke to a couple of neighbours and they told him about the family who lived in the house. They revealed that the house belonged to a lady called Cecylia. As it turned out, she is the wife of my half-brother Jan.

Zenon had more news about my family. He wrote that Jan had died in February 2000 and my half-sister Wiktorya died in 1999. Jan's wife Cecylia was living in Chicago, USA, with her daughter, son-in-law and their three children.

He also took a lot of photographs - Cecylia's house, the neighbours, the local area and most importantly, Henryk and Jan's graves at Olsztyn cemetary.

He advised us that he had spoken by phone to Cecylia in Chicago and that she was expecting my call. After Linda and I worked out the time difference between Chicago and Canberra, I decided to call my newly-found relative the following morning.

About an hour before my planned call, our home phone rang and Linda answered it. She turned to me with a surprised look on her face and said "there's a lady speaking Polish and I think it's Cecylia"…… And it was.

As I look back over past events, I believe that without Zenon's efforts I would not have reached this point in my life.

It was his hard work, persistence and problem-solving skills that reunited me with my family.

To be continued... in several months when life will write the sequel...

The Rock, NSW, Australia, January 22nd, 2008.