

LEO AND MARIA DOBES

[Leo and Maria are from Moravia, Czechoslovakia, and arrived in 1950. The former nation of Czechoslovakia was made up of two ethnic groups: the Czechs who were mostly in Moravia and Bohemia, and the Slovaks mainly from Slovakia. In 1921 there were less than 300 people in Australia who were of Czechoslovakian background and by 1947 this had increased to 1,500. The Czech migration increased after WW2, especially after the communists took over the country on 25 February 1948. The International Refugee Organization sponsored a number of Displaced Persons in 1949 and 1950, who were mainly single people under the age of 26 years. The arrival of these nationals peaked in about 1950, after which time the annual intake declined rapidly. In 1954 the number of Czechoslovak-born people in Australia was 12,700 (0.14%). More refugees came out after the occupation of the country in 1968 by the Soviet Union. In 1981 the total Czechoslovak-born population in Australia was 16,200 (0.11%) which was a lower figure than a decade earlier. In 1986 there were 89 St Albans residents who were born in Czechoslovakia, 0.2% of the population.]

LD: As far as our involvement with St Albans, it was early in 1950. We came to Australia like practically everybody through Bonegilla and that was in March 1950. My wife was pregnant. They sent me to work for the Victorian Railways as a supernumerary labourer. They intended to send my wife, because she was pregnant, to the Mildura camp and it was a bit of a problem. I was supposed to earn seven pounds and ten shillings a week. I was supposed to pay for board at the Williamstown Hostel three pounds ten a week, and three pounds ten for my wife at the camp in Mildura. Of course that would leave me with practically nothing.

To be honest with the Australian Government, we were told overseas that we might be sent on the two-year contract to a different town than our wives could be living with the children, but of course we didn't know, didn't envisage, that there are some distances. We believed it might be ten or fifteen kilometres, and therefore it didn't worry us at all. Another thing, even if they promised us half of hell we would have accepted it because we wanted to get out of Europe. Therefore these things which the Australian Government or their representatives were telling us were really honest, but we probably didn't understand everything. Even if we understood it we would have accepted it, because there was no other way than rotting in the camps in Europe, which was really bad for everybody.

Now that we had come here I was living in the Williamstown Hostel while my wife was still in Bonegilla waiting to be sent to Mildura. At that time somebody mentioned to me that there are some jobs available for women at the Windsor Hotel as maids with accommodation. Because accommodation was the biggest problem.

The Immigration Department told us ... actually we were given to understand as soon as we found some accommodation for our wives and the children we can have the wives brought from Bonegilla or from anywhere free of charge, and everything will be fine. Unfortunately in those days there were no flats, there were only rooms available for people who wanted to live like couples or single people, and it was no problem for them. But nobody wanted to take a woman who was pregnant because the problems with a new child were really out of proportion. Nobody wanted to take it on. Therefore about three or four of the women with the same problem were brought from Bonegilla to Melbourne. My wife, because her pregnancy was not showing, was accepted in the Windsor Hotel as a maid and was given a room, which was fine. I was living at the Williamstown Hostel. Of course you can't live there forever and I was searching for something.

Some people advised me the best thing would be to buy a block of land, put on a bungalow with a plan that you're going to build a house later on, and everything will be fine. Therefore I went and saw an agent who was advertising land in St Albans and I bought this block of land for seventy-five pounds, on ... I'm not quite sure whether it was fifteen pounds deposit or twenty pounds deposit, but something like that.

(How much weekly were you earning then?)

It was seven pounds ten, but I was getting quite often overtime on Saturdays and Sundays. Then I was searching for somebody who would be willing to advance the deposit to build a bungalow. The bungalow cost fifty pounds to seventy pounds. It was ten by twelve feet, cement-sheet outside, no inside lining, and that was all. I had a lot of problem to persuade Custom Credit to lend me the money on a bungalow that will be built on the land that I haven't paid off yet. (laughs) Somehow it all happened fine.

Just before the baby was born we moved here. I had to build a toilet just outside, which you know they used to bring some steel buckets and they put it always on the head and were carrying it outside. I had to build the toilet, which took me a long time because I never had a saw or a hammer and nails in my hand. It really took me a lot of time before I built the toilet and therefore my wife had to use the facilities at the St Albans Railway Station before we were able to use our own here.

At the same time I drew the plan of a home which I intended to build and put a little bungalow on it, but unfortunately the local council for some reason wanted to stop building the bungalows. Therefore they went down hard on people, and I was one of them.

MD: We were the first and last.

LD: I was the first and last who had the misfortune to be brought before the court for building something that was not allowed.

(That seems pretty tough.)

It was silly and stupid. Meanwhile, an 'old-timer' from the next street, who was a very nice person, helped me to build an extension to the bungalow so we had a little bit of a kitchen to that little ten by twelve feet.

I forgot to mention it was probably about two o'clock in the morning between Sunday and Monday when my wife had the pains and she had to be taken to the hospital. Of course there was nobody around here. I went to the station, which was occupied by somebody, but he said he didn't have a telephone and couldn't help me. I was able to stop a truck, which was going to the Victoria Market, and we were able to take my wife onto the truck. It was a small wagon. She had to get up on the ladder. She was booked into the St. Vincent Hospital. She was very lucky to get in because in those days it was very hard to get booked into a hospital. We got there after the baby was born, because she had a tracksuit on and the baby was born in the tracksuit. They brought her into the hospital and they said 'Good girl,' and my wife thought the baby was a girl, but it was a son. (laughs) It doesn't make a difference whatsoever.

MD: I said to the sister the baby's been born and she looked at me as if I were being silly, and when they came up she was shocked and said, 'Good girl.' (laughs)

LD: The son is still alive and we had his fiftieth birthday a few months ago in Canberra, but that's beside the point.

MD: When I brought the baby back home after two days—they let me stay only two days because they were so short of beds—there was a note that we had to go to court. That was for unauthorised building, for erecting a building without a permit. I was silly and stupid. I should have told them it wasn't me that erected the bungalow it was the firm, but I wanted to protect everybody because everybody was very nice to me. What was very nice of a lot of people in St Albans they brought us baby clothes and the people around were very helpful. We just have to say we were living in a place that everyone was helpful. It was a small village. I think St Albans had 700 inhabitants at that time. That's what I was told. There were three shops here. One of them was Mr Self and his sons. There was Mr Perrett; he was also a postmaster. There was a greengrocer and his name was Clarence Moffat. There was an Australian butcher where they now sell the pet food. I've forgotten his name because we never bought any meat there.

LD: When the son was born it was September. We were short of money. At that time there was also a railway strike for about three months and I was without any income.

MD: Just when the baby was born.

LD: Just after the baby was born I was looking for work everywhere and I got a job in Albion with Rubbertex. That firm doesn't exist any longer but it was on Ballarat Road. I denied I was on a contract and they accepted me. I was actually getting good money but I had to walk from St Albans to Albion for the afternoon shift, and after the afternoon shift I had to walk back. Sometimes I got a lift; that was very nice. Some time before Christmas the railway strike came to an end and I was able to hitch a ride to St Albans and coming back wasn't as bad then. We were still constantly short of money because we wanted to build a home.

In January my wife decided she would like to go back to work—the baby was four months old—and she was able to secure a place in the Footscray nursery. It doesn't exist any longer; it was just behind Forges. She was able to bring the baby there. She got a job with the knitting mills and later with the Bancrofts Dry Cleaners. There the pay was the same as for the men but it was hard work. I was able to persuade the railways that the pick and shovel is no good for me and I was getting a job as a goods clerk at Yarraville. Instead of earning seven pounds ten plus overtime which brought me quite often to about twelve or thirteen pounds a week, I dropped again to about

fourteen, fifteen pounds a fortnight, therefore my wife's wages were something which was really helping us when we started building this house.

MD: There wasn't enough timber at that time.

LD: The timber was quite often firewood. (laughs) I was learning how to build houses. I didn't know how to cut it through, how to use a chisel, all these things. But we were able to put up a bit of a house. It was learning the hard way but we were constantly progressing.

Afterwards I got a job with the railways as a booking clerk and after a few months training I was getting a full-time job in South Melbourne. Of course on the morning shift I had to push the bike from here to South Melbourne. In the afternoon it was easy, I was able to go there by train and come back home. It was not a problem whatsoever. During this time when I was working night shift or afternoon shift my wife was living in the small bungalow on her own. We were never frightened that something would happen to her. That was something; we were feeling so safe while we could see from here to Essendon airport. There was nobody around here and people were slowly and safely coming here.

One thing that I was able to bring into our street was water. There was a water main over in Percy Street and a plumber from Sunshine, Mr Morton (he now has an arcade in Sunshine, Morton Arcade). He brought the water in and I was helping him. When I told him how far it was he took the pipe but he was a metre short. You have no idea how he was swearing. He had to send his fellow to get that extra pipe. That was an advancement because we had water but of course we had no light.

(What were you doing before you got the water?)

We didn't live here before we got the water. It cost me twenty pounds. There were already a few bungalows springing up around here. They all used to come to get the water from us. At that time a Czech named George Eisner came with a really good idea. He was making plans for a house and the back of it where there was a bit of a verandah, a laundry; he was building the back of the home. A few of the houses were still standing and one of them was close to Arthur Street and Alfrieda Street. We took the picture before it was demolished and there's two units built there now.

Those half house or quarter houses were spread around here.

MD: George Eisner was building them. Also he bought a lot of land and he subdivided. Over the Main Road one of the streets was named Eisner Street. He was a really successful businessman. He really knew how to get things done. Unfortunately, he had misfortune in the family.

LD: We're from the same country as George Eisner.

MD: We were quite often friendly, on good terms, but of course as soon as they got a bit rich you couldn't keep up the status, but otherwise we kept on good terms. We used to go visit at Easter and Christmas time.

(Which country did you come from?)

LD: Czechoslovakia, that was our beginning, but we would like to stress that we are so happy and really so thankful to the country that accepted us, gave us a chance in spite of the two year contract which, if somebody didn't take notice nothing happened. I got back to St Albans and was working nearly nine years as a booking clerk in St Albans, first at the old station, and then the new station. It was really one of the good times when I was enjoying myself. I was able to help people when they came with a few problems. If they didn't understand the language they came quite often to me to help them to fill out certain papers and so on. I was really having a good time. I have only good memories of St Albans. We had a few times a chance to move to a so-called better suburb but couldn't see any reason why we should move.

MD: Especially because of the food, we were able to buy anything here.

LD: People from the better suburbs came here to shop, but that was later on.

When our children were growing up and going to the city or somewhere they were able to go on the train and come back. Nowadays people who live in those new suburbs the parents become taxi drivers. They have to take the children there and bring them back, while we were happy or lucky not to do that. Why the hell should we move from a suburb where we know so many people and they are so friendly? Unfortunately things are changing, there are a few strangers. We used to be a suburb of young people, now it's a suburb of old people but young people are coming in all the time.

(It's a much bigger suburb now.)

Yes, you can't compare. There is another thing I would like to mention, for instance, in those days how stupid it can be, unless you had a special permit you were not allowed to sell milk. You

had to have a special permit to sell milk. When we had the baby and of course we never had electricity, we never had a fridge. Mr Self was good enough to keep a litre and a half of milk in his fridge always stating it was our milk he was keeping for us. That was very nice of the old man. We knew him even when they built the big shop. There were three sons and his son-in-law. He was having arthritis but he was still in the shop putting on all the prices. He was one of the people you would call Old Australian.

Mr Perrett when he was postman was coming on a horse (laughs) and the milkman was bringing milk also with a horse. There was always a fellow with the bread. That was later on.

When they were building the streets we had to pay for the street construction. It was expensive. I think about two hundred pounds. This was a lot of money for us but we were able to pay it off.

That was St Albans. Now it's changing for the better and in some cases for worse, because you don't feel as safe as we used to be. On the other hand all the advantages, all the good things are here and we are able to complain only against the Sunshine Council (laughs) because that was something awful, we couldn't have a good word about that.

(What happened with the court in the end?)

We were fined twenty pounds. I was given about two months to pay.

MD: That was a lot of money.

(You said you were the first and last.)

LD: At that time they also started to build bungalows. There was another interesting case in our street. As I said before if you were able to secure some accommodation for your wife and children the Immigration Department brought the wife and children with the train and taxi to your abode. One Estonian fellow had a block of land on the corner of the street and he bought two boxes from Volkswagen. He put them up there and he mentioned that he had a place of abode. His wife came down here and she was living in the two boxes with him, all clean and nice, and they wanted the children to come back. The people from the Immigration Department came down one day. He was at work and of course her English was as good as your Chinese. Therefore they came to see my wife and those two chaps were laughing their heads off. This is the accommodation. Anyhow, they let the children come down. Well why not if they wanted to live there and were able to do so? He wasn't the only one. He was one of a few who was using the VW boxes as accommodation and why the hell not when some Australians used to live in tents. There was a man here living in a tent. There was another one living here but that was later on. He was a no-hoper with five children, a heavy drinker. That's something that was never accepted in the street.

I would like to mention there are a few people who could tell you interesting stories about the history of St Albans. One fellow lives in Beaver Street, Juzek Stempnac. He comes originally from Poland, from where he was deported by the Russian army to Siberia. He was a small child, grew up, and from Siberia after some agreement between England and Russia he became a member of the Polish army of Anders, fought in Palestine and God knows where. His father used to earn a living in Siberia by digging graves. Unfortunately his sister died and is no longer here. She could probably tell just as colourful a story. This man is 73 and can tell you a real story of how he got from Poland, Siberia, Persia, Palestine, England, and then to Australia between 'fifty and 'fifty-three. He is a member of the 'parliament' that sits over there in St Albans.

There is another family in the street who arrived practically six months after us, the Diakuns. They are Ukrainians. She comes from the town of Kharkov and he comes from a place called Lvov or Lemberg, call it whatever you like. There is a story about a chap who was born in Austria and never left the place, then lived in Poland without leaving the place, then lived in the Ukraine without leaving, then lived in Russia. (laughs) He was living in one place—Lemberg.

(So he stayed at home and the world came to him.) (laughter)

The Diakuns are very active in the Ukrainian society, they know a lot and are very helpful to a number of people. They know what is developing here because they also came here late in 1950, a few months after us. The other old timers who were living here have died, or some have moved away to old people's home.

(Can you tell me a bit about where you came from?)

We came from Czechoslovakia, a part called Moravia. We were born in small villages close to the capital of Moravia which is called Brno. We grew up in villages till about fourteen or fifteen years of age and we moved then because of our studies to the town of Brno, where we lived till 1948. First we lived in various institutions for boys and girls. Then we got married in 1949, and late in 'forty-nine we left illegally and went to Austria where we lived first in Vienna and then in a camp.

In the camp we got the chance to migrate to Australia which we took with both our hands. We arrived here in March 1950. We were greeted on the boat by a fellow countryman who said, 'What kind of country did you come here to? What a hell it is, they close the pubs at six o'clock.' (laughs)

It also was a very delightful story I have to tell you. On the boat I was earning some money by working in the bakery baking bread. Somehow a rumour started that there was a famine in Australia. People who've been through a war believe that practically anything could be coming up. What the women did, they were stacking bread that we had baked. Normally we have to bake a certain amount of bread, but suddenly there's a huge amount and the women were stacking it up for the children and they came to the customs who took the bread from them. A few of the women were fighting with them for survival of themselves and their children. The women couldn't understand that you cannot bring any food to Australia; they thought the customs were taking the food for themselves.

I didn't believe the first story I heard about the pubs closing at six o'clock¹, because I thought that probably they opened the pubs at six o'clock after work, not before. But when these people believed it was a famine you really saw a lot of women were crying because they didn't really believe that they would be fed. Of course the way they fed us in Bonegilla was with mutton, which was served half-cold. It was only boiled, they was nothing in it. We made a promise we would never eat sheep-meat, sheep and mutton, never again, because it was such awful stuff. It took us about four or five years when we discovered how nice lamb is; it was something.

There was one of our promises that we never kept. We were really hungry in Austria and the Italian camp and we promised that as soon as we came to Australia we're going to buy a pig and eat it all by ourselves and not invite anybody else. (laughs) That was another promise that we never kept, but you have no idea how hungry we were in the camp, especially in Austria. In Italy it was a bit better in the camps.

(Was that on the way to Australia?)

Yes. We got to Austria in October 1949, spent some time in Vienna with friends or relatives. We got into the camp in January 1950 and probably were accepted in February. We got our transit visa immediately and from Naples we were travelling to Australia which took us thirty days. In the boat it was overcrowded. What else can you say about it? The food was quite good. The accommodation was overcrowded and we were quite happy to arrive in Australia, get a job and start to work up.

In those days it was also the policy of the Australian Government to separate the migrants so there wouldn't be too many—let us say too many Czechs, too many Yugoslavs—because they were frightened it will develop like in Chicago. The policy was to have a mixture, to get people from the Baltic States, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Yugoslavia, and mix them up. But it just didn't work, because after a while the people drifted together and for instance they built up a small Ukraine over in Ardeer. A lot of Polish came here, and a lot of Maltese. But they were a different story—they were not displaced persons, because that's what we were. The others didn't have the two-year contract. We had the two-year contract of course. We were not guaranteed any accommodation, while the English migrants were guaranteed accommodation.

(You said in Brno you were living in institutions for boys and girls.)

MD: That was while we were studying. Boarding places.

(Your families were back in the villages?)

Yes.

(You met in the school situation?)

Yes, we were eleven years old. (laughs) How many years have I stayed with the same man? We married nearly fifty-two years ago.

(What's happened with your parents?)

MD: I had only my mum. She came with us. She worked also in the Windsor Hotel. Unfortunately she got very sick with cancer and in a few months she died when she was just fifty. It was just about a year after we came. The son was six months old when she saw him. It was a very nasty cancer. My parents stayed in the village. They didn't have very much happen to them because they were not rich, because the rich people were suffering much more. They were telling my mum to write to me to come back again. She would say, 'Oh, she's been studying enough to know what she should do.' It's the communists. They couldn't do anything to her because she was so old. They thought she didn't understand what it is all about.

¹ In Victoria, 6 p.m. closing was introduced in 1916, and extended to 10 p.m. in 1966.

(What were you studying in Brno? What were your career aspirations?)

LD: I finished my law degree in 1948. My degree was not accepted here, and after unsuccessful attempts to get a law degree here I went over and finished my study as a social worker at Melbourne University. Believe me it was hard, because I was working thirteen days a fortnight on the railway, doing a little of carpentry at home, and studying here. It took me twice as long. Before I even finished my diploma in social studies I was accepted as a probation and parole officer and I worked in that capacity for nine years. Then I was not happy over there and I was accepted as a social worker with the Australian Army. I was working with families, people who had problems that the military couldn't solve, for about fifteen years. I retired nearly eleven years ago.

(That's quite a career change.)

From the pick and shovel?

(Yes, if I think of the cycle from law to pick and shovel, through to social work. That must have been quite a courageous step for you.)

Not really. As I said to you before, because I knew a little bit of English a lot of people came here and I was helping them with certain things. When I said I was doing law I was more inclined to be on the social side than making money. Therefore it wasn't really a jump. It was something progressing from one thing to another and of course knowing something of the background. I grew up among very poor people and I know what their struggle is. We were actually poor people and we were very much honest, and proud of that. There are poor people here who are willing to steal, who are willing to cheat.

We were always proud of our standing in the village, because if you were in the village you had your standing, you were not among the very rich people you were among the poor people but you were not among the scum of the earth people. That was a different story. It was a very strong line. You just couldn't be on this side. The tribulation, we knew people couldn't go to church because they never had shoes. We knew about all these things and we were sorry for them, but we knew even the very poor people were the ones who had some kind of pride. I don't know how to call it. Some poor people here don't have any pride; it's just a different story.

(Maria. You were studying a particular theme yourself?)

MD: I was studying Phys Ed. We had another subject to go with Phys Ed, which they didn't have over here. So I hadn't finished the other subject back home but they didn't ask for it over here. They were very glad to get a female Phys Ed teacher because all the young girls they're getting married and of course getting babies and they were short of females. So they advertised that position for some time in 1968, I think. I didn't answer because we still had a five-year-old child so I didn't want to go to work. I intended to give it a try for three months but stayed for sixteen years. (laughs)

(Which school was that?)

St Albans High.

(What years were you there?)

I think I started in '68 when the revolution was back home. I finished in 1985 when I was sixty. In the last year I was working only half time. It was a very nice stay at the school, because we weren't told what to do. There was another woman from my country who was employed here later on, so we could do good programs from what they used back home, especially gymnastics. All the girls just loved it. They asked us to stay during recess time because that was something new for them. At that time I was still fit. It was good. Except for some people, of course, like everywhere.

There were some problems in those days. Some years ago the government said the girls can't stay longer at the primary school. A lot of girls used to stay in years six, seven and eight at the primary, and they said after grade six you have to go to secondary school. A lot of boys went over to the technical school, while all the girls went to the high school, and there were a double number of girls against boys. Nowadays it's a different story. That was at the time there were so many girls not suitable for secondary education—their families didn't really worry to give them secondary education.

(Can I ask about your community, was there any community here?)

LD: No, no. There were mostly Polish, Yugoslav, Bulgarian, etc. I was able to communicate with them, thus able to help them.

(What was your social life like?)

None. Well, we had Czech dances. St. Wenceslas Day is a big one in September. In North Melbourne they had a hall. There was also in the city a place called Rhineland where we used to go to dances. (MD: That was a restaurant.) We were teaching folk dancing. There was a lot of singing

going on and one fellow found out about us and came to our place here and he took some recordings and it was deposited in the museum of Victoria.

(That's been a tradition in your family?)

Right from my family of five children, grandma, my uncle and we all used to sit before it got really dark without the lights; they called it the dark hour. There was singing. There was nothing much else to do when it was getting dark, or when we were plucking feathers, that was another occasions people were singing. Singing was always on. We were quite good at it and we still remember a lot of songs from the old days like my mother used to sing. My mother used to sing in Czech in the 1920s.

(Was that a typical village thing, or was that just your family?)

I think everybody in the village would be good at singing. We went back to Czechoslovakia about two years ago. We were the only ones who knew how to sing.

There wasn't television in earlier times. That's what we noticed, people don't speak dialect in that village any more, because the children are listening to television and they speak like the people in Prague.

(Did you speak Czech at home with the children?)

Our Czech is one hundred percent Czech, our children just the same. They speak and one son writes one hundred percent, the other one eighty percent, and the daughter fifty percent.

(What are your children doing?)

Pen pushing. One son is with the Department of Transport and whatever it is. He has a Ph.D. with honours from Oxford. The daughter is an optometrist. The other son does some kind of research in that international school near Paris. The eldest one is called Leo after the father. Maria is after the mother. Alex is after his great grandfather.

(Do you have any other stories about St Albans?)

We were very grateful to the old-timers here. They helped us very much. While I was working with the railways I had very few problems with the customers. They knew me and I knew them. Sometimes people were asking for some sort of a refund, which they couldn't get, but they came to see me as the man who could fix a few things or everything. (laughs) In our country they used to say if you want to get rid of somebody you send him to the goods traffic station, and of course I couldn't send them here so I used to send them to the post office. (laughs) The post office couldn't help them with their problems with their tickets. They were often amused but one day the postmaster came to see me and told me not to send them again.

There was a time when I'd like to mention how St Albans was different from today. We were already at the new station and a policeman came to ask us whether we could lend him a gun because there was a dog run over by a car and he wanted to put it out of its misery. He never had a gun. He had to come to us because we had a gun. Of course the gun was always in the safe well away. It was a time when the policemen were walking around St Albans without a gun.

(Why did the station have a gun?)

That was normal procedure. We had to have a gun, and every station had a safe.

There was another thing. At St Albans station, like other stations, there were young fellows congregating at the station not at the shopping centre as at present. They were always around the station, fellows fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen years of age. They were good for nothing, standing there being a nuisance; not really a danger to anybody but a nuisance. When I was selling the tickets some mum asked one fellow how to ask for the ticket and of course they didn't know. I said, 'One and a half to Melbourne return, please.' I was telling them and he had to repeat it to me. I said to him, 'When somebody asks you where you picked up your manners tell them at the St Albans railway station.' (laughter)

What the police used to do, they'd come here and pick up a few chaps who they needed for questioning. That wasn't really as bad as after the First World War when they were congregating about the railway station and they were really a threat. The people at that time—I'm talking about when I wasn't here—decided to do something. They had a special squad called the Terrible Ten and a car and they were coming around the stations with their batons and they were really not asking who was guilty or who was not guilty. They were able to minimise the threat of the bodgies in those days. Something similar happened to me when I was a probation officer in Ardeer. There were families who didn't like each other and were constantly fighting.

People knew me as a probation officer. My wife was always worried and frightened what might happen to me as a Probation and Parole Officer. It's not a dangerous job really. I was always on very good terms with all probationers because I just told them you got yourself in trouble and

you have to get yourself out of it. When I wrote a pre-sentence report I always asked them 'What can you tell me not to be sent to prison or on a restraining order?' They accepted it.

One man called me a Dago at the station. I used to have dark hair then. That was when I was a booking clerk.

I said, 'Yes, I'm a Dago. What are you?'

'I'm Australian and proud of it.'

I asked him, 'But is your country proud of you?' Of course he wanted to get hold of me and give me a good hiding.

I had very, very few problems as a booking clerk with the customers. If somebody abused me, well alright. Somebody taught me a really good trick. If somebody started to abuse me I took a pencil or pen and pretended to write it down. (laughs) Of course they stopped.

During my time as a probationary officer I was asked to deal with some other family problems. At one time someone referred a Russian family from Dandenong. There were about a thousand White Russians living in Dandenong at the time, which probably made that school the biggest Russian school in the southern hemisphere. I was asked to speak with a labourer who had about nine children and his wife was pregnant again. There was an organisation which had been running the Melbourne orphanage, which was sold and the money was invested. There were no longer any orphans in 1960-1980. They had lots of money which they were offering to families as well as counselling. However, they wouldn't give any money to this family because they couldn't do any counselling in Russian. I offered to help with the language but that was not acceptable because they had to do the counselling themselves.

There was a St Albans Progress Association who used to meet at the Mechanics Institute Hall, which was where the old town hall used to be. I didn't really know what they were doing.

(Did you become naturalised early?)

No. At first we didn't want to become naturalised citizens. Some people took on Australian citizenship early and didn't even speak their own language at home. Our thinking was that there will be another war and we will go back home. There was the Korean War in the 'fifties and other instability in the world. Therefore we thought it would be a betrayal of our home country to change citizenship; we still thought we would be going back. We saw our original settlement here as temporary and for six or seven years we didn't accept that we could be living here permanently. In the 'sixties there was a realisation that there was not going to be any change in Czechoslovakia. The world was becoming stabilised and the communists were there to stay.

MD: In the 'fifties we insisted the children always speak Czech at home so that they could learn. My sister was a primary school teacher and she sent us over all the proper books for the children to learn. Saturday was the day I would teach the children our Czech language classes.

LD: We had a crash-course in English on the ship, but it was odd because we were taught by someone who didn't speak English properly. We learnt things like 'My Bonnie lies over the Ocean,' which wasn't a help. I found my studies of Latin, German, and French while at school were a help, especially the Latin, as it helped with learning about English with the grammar and sentence construction.

My studies in social work at Melbourne University started after 1965. It normally would take three years but it took me six years because I was working, studying, and building at the same time. I got my job as a Probation and Parole Officer because of my studies and because the department was short of men. Normally you had to have a diploma of social work, but if you had another degree they could take you on with the understanding that you were going to finish your social work degree. This would have been impossible for me if I was still with the railways but as a probation officer I was able to combine my work and study much better.

For one year I worked with the Interchurch Missions to Trades and Industry, which was financed by industry to help the workers deal with their problems. I spent time in places like Massey Ferguson helping to organise Christmas events or assisting with individual and family problems. In places like Pridhams we looked at the work conditions and the problems of noise.

When I was doing the social work course I remember only a few other migrants. There had been a Dutch fellow about ten years before me. I think his name was de Groot and he had been head of the Social Security in the city. I was the oldest one in my course, and there were only a few other mature age students. One was a trained teacher, a nurse, and there was someone in a wheelchair.

If you want to hear of some histories of the people who came from Europe why don't you go to the local parliaments? There are three parliaments sitting here. One is a Maltese one that is at

Alfrieda Street around the bus stop. A second one changes places, which is a Ukrainian and Polish one, sitting in front of Safeways, or sometimes we move our business elsewhere. And there was one from Yugoslavia also telling nice stories. The Ukrainian and Polish one is telling some really interesting stories. There is one man attending them and he is a Tatar, an aged man, and his family background was that they were brought in by the Polish patriots to fight the Ukrainians in Poland in the case of war, and to get this very special history, because it's a very old one, would be wonderful.

There is another fellow there; unfortunately he is also getting a bit old. He was born in Poland, and then he moved when the war between Poland and Germany broke out. He was taken out by the Russians to Siberia. From Siberia with his whole family they were taken to Teheran, and then they went to Africa. Some of them served in the Polish Army, the overseas army, and then they came to England and from England to here. Fascinating histories, and nobody wants to listen to it. There are really some people who you wouldn't believe it that we have here. For instance, I know that chap, I knew his father who was living recently here ... When they came here they started to work and started by picking grapes even in that time when it was 30 degrees or 40 degrees.

All these stories will be lost because no one wants to listen any more to the parliaments, but that's actually very interesting because you could actually learn something. You wouldn't believe how complicated it is really, of history. For instance, you said about coming from the Ukraine and Poland, that used to be Lemberg, that used to be Lvov, that used to be about three or four lands.

(Depends who was in power.)

That is something that is lost, or will be lost, because their children are no longer interested in the history of their parents. But unless you go and get in touch with them—they are quite willing to talk to a tape recorder but would be unwilling to put it down because they couldn't write it down. It would be in Ukrainian, not really Ukrainian, but some mixture of Polish and Ukrainian, and sometimes even translating it would be very difficult.

And the same thing about the Maltese. My neighbour is a Maltese and I never knew what kinds of tradition they have or their way of living. I saw some photographs how they go about preparing food ... unbelievable, never heard of it, never saw it before. But it's about the ways of cooking that are completely unknown and lost in this country. And it only takes—as I said to you—to go with a tape recorder and listen to the parliaments and you hear lots of things, some a little rubbish, but that's beside the point. You can really hear stories you wouldn't believe are possible. Unfortunately a lot people have moved, a lot unfortunately have died before they are able to state their story. It wouldn't be difficult to go with a tape recorder. I don't know about the Maltese, what they are talking about.

We've got a few people in our street. There are some Maltese, Polish, Ukrainians, Greeks, and even Australians.

Just recently into our street moved some Indian people from Fiji, and you probably know in the month of Ramadan they are not supposed to eat during the day. But the food smells absolutely so nice in the evening, it really smells so nice, and I would like to invite myself over (laughs) but I haven't got the courage to get myself invited because they have a lot of prayers over there. That is also something that ought to be recorded, because they had to leave Fiji because the Indians had a bit of a hard time there. They are very good people, I would say a very good advantage for the whole country and St Albans. They should be encouraged to keep their own traditions, and should be encouraged with everything and should tell about it, and that history is all getting lost.





