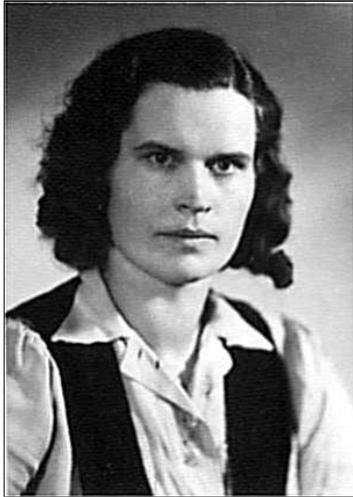


THE BLAHUT FAMILY: LOCAL BUSINESS PROPRIETORS

Introduction

The Blahut family came from an Austrian refugee camp to Australia in 1950 under the Displaced Persons Scheme, and then settled in St Albans in 1953.



Elsa Blahut

Elizabeth Blahut was one of the early World War Two refugees who settled quickly into Australian society and established a sound business reputation, firstly in conjunction with her Australian mentor, Mr Robert Potts, and then in her own right as a small business proprietor. She opened a haberdashery store in 1957. Three of her children (John, Toni, and Peter) went to St Albans High School from the late 'fifties and during the 'sixties, and a granddaughter also attended in the 'seventies.

Alzbeta "Elsa" Ragan was born in 1914 in the former Czechoslovakia in a place called Ipelske Sahy, the name denoting that the village Sahy was located on the river Ipel, which is the border between Slovakia and Hungary. She was one of fourteen children in the family, seven boys and seven girls. As Elsa was growing up she quickly acquired the native Czech and Slovak vernaculars, and also Hungarian. The latter language was also a natural childhood acquisition as the village was right on the Hungarian border and actually closer to Budapest (the capital of Hungary) than it was to Bratislava (the capital of Slovakia). Even as a young woman Elsa was a go-getter, and she was the first of the children in the family to get a paying job at a time when it was unusual in Slovakia for women to seek paid employment outside the family home. In 1938 Elsa married Anton Blahut (who was born in 1907) and they settled further north into central Slovakia along the river Vah, at the town of Povarska Bystrica.



The German army occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939 and imposed a harsh regime. Despite being caught up in the war, the Blahuts raised two children. Olga, their first daughter, was born in May 1942. Eighteen months later in November 1943 their second daughter, Antonia (Toni), was born. But towards the end of the war, when Soviet forces entered Czechoslovakia in 1944, many people feared the rise of the communists and felt the threat to religious and personal freedom. The family couldn't flee north to Poland, the closest border, because that was already occupied by the Russians, so they headed southwards for the sanctuary of Austria, where they eventually arrived at a migrant camp in the American-controlled zone.

Life as Refugees

Conditions in the refugee camp were primitive. A dozen families shared one hut, food was scarce, and relief parcels from the refugee agency were even rarer. The other refugees were from different European countries, also desperate to escape their circumstances. Each day the men would go into town to look for work while the women sold what few possessions they could or turned their hand to knitting and selling garments in order to make some money. Their lives of hunger, illness, and poverty continued for the next five years. During this time the Blahut's first son Marian "John" was born in December 1946 in the camp.

German was the main language in Austria, but in the refugee camps it was a polyglot environment that introduced Elsa to the rudiments of her neighbours' languages, particularly the Slavic tongues: Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and also Yugoslavian (as it was then known). Elsa found she was adept at picking up languages and this became a skill she retained to her advantage in her later work.

In 1948 the refugees heard that the communists in Czechoslovakia had organised a coup d'état and taken control of government, and under their influence the country then followed the policies of the USSR. This was the last blow for many of the displaced nationals still in the holding camps of the neighbouring countries; they definitely could not return.

People were desperate for escape to virtually any country, but the receiving countries each had their own quotas and priorities. So the families languished in the camps until they were lucky enough to be accepted somewhere. Sometimes people feared that they would never be accepted at all, despite the efforts of the International Refugee Organisation. When the IRO immigration officials advised that migrants were being recruited for Australia, it was an opportunity that many of these refugees accepted as their escape. Elsa and Anton were happy to get away with their children.

Migrating to Australia

So in 1950 the Blahuts left Austria for an even greater unknown: the antipodes. There were 5,000 Czechoslovak nationals who arrived that year in Australia, which was the peak year of these post-war arrivals. Mostly they settled in New South Wales, with Victoria having the next highest number. By 1951 and 1952 the intake was declining, with 1,100 and 500 arrivals respectively. Between 1955 and 1957 there was on average fewer than 200 Czechoslovak nationals per year still arriving in the country, and in fact by this stage there were more departures so there was a small annual decline in these population figures.

As happened with many other arrivals, the Blahut family was first taken to the migrant hostel in Bonegilla. Here there was food enough, but the families were separated as men were billeted separately from their wives and children. Though this condition prevailed on the ships bringing them over, it was an unexpected intrusion into family arrangements once they had come ashore, particularly at a time when family cohesion was about the only security that people had to draw on. But even this was survivable.



Though it was a strange country to them the Blahuts soon began to realise that most people were genuine in their welcome of new settlers and recognised that Australia was slowly becoming more cosmopolitan. Australia's population was just 8.3 million people, but it was growing quickly because of the many immigrants arriving from Britain and Europe. The government-sponsored migration program provided food, shelter, and employment. Under the migration obligations, Anton had to work for two years as directed by local officials. But it was paid work. The basic wage for men in Victoria was £6/14/-. It was lower for women, slightly more than half the male rate. This was considered adequate for women, because it was assumed they didn't have anyone else to support. Australians at that time were seeing the benefits of a large immigration program

that contributed to a healthy growth in the local economy and boosted both imports and exports, and the federal government believed the nation was poised on the brink of even greater prosperity.



Anton Blahut

In Slovakia Anton Blahut worked in an office. In Australia his allocated employment was first as a fruit picker and then with the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW), with whom he worked for many years. He finally ended up working for the tramways.

The family moved between the migrant camps at Bonegilla, Rushworth, and Somers, as Anton carried out his work obligations with the MMBW. Moving from the New South Wales border across to central Victoria and then down to the shores of Western Port Bay was like travelling from one end of Czechoslovakia to the other. The Somers migrant hostel had previously been used by the scouting movement as a holiday camp and later as an RAAF training camp, then became a migrant hostel from 1949 until 1958. Families lived in corrugated iron quarters similar to the army Nissan huts. The

children went to school in nearby Hastings where the Sisters of St Joseph were running the classes. The children would usually be transported there by army trucks. The area has pleasant sheltered beaches and a variety of exotic bird life attracted to the lagoons, so it was a tranquil setting for the family in establishing a new life, though some arrangements were still unsatisfactory - Anton was working in Werribee during the week and his family was in Somers, so he saw them only once month on weekends. Despite this a sense of security was being achieved, so they were delighted when their second son, Peter, was born; a true Aussie boy.

Elsa was learning English very quickly and obtained a job almost immediately with the general store in Somers. Mr Robert Stanley Potts was the owner of the business and he quickly saw that having a multilingual assistant was a great asset to the business. The growing number of "foreign" customers from the migrant camp kept returning to the town store where they could be understood and where they could purchase the daily necessities in the comfort of their own language.



Mr Potts' emporium in Somers, 1950s.

Moving to St Albans

By 1953 the family had saved enough money for a deposit on a small land and house package. By now they had four children so they were looking for something of their own to raise the family. St Albans was the place that many people were turning to because the land was cheap and readily available, and so the decision was made. They left the Somers migrant camp and moved into a small home in Glendenning Street, St Albans. The neighbours were Polish and Hungarian families. At this time the area was still mostly open paddocks and there were very few houses.

A lot of people from the Somers camp came to settle here, including nearly all of the Polish people who had been at Somers. It happened because representatives from Bells Real Estate came to the hostel advertising the availability of cheap land in St Albans, which of course was an attractive enticement for people who had little money. Anthony was able to continue his employment with the Board of Works, so at least one breadwinner was assured of continuing employment.

St Albans was different to Somers, particularly with its flat open spaces and small farms. Glendenning Street was not very far from the railway station and the small shopping centre. Perrett ran the general store and post office agency, and to get the child endowment you had to wait in line at Perrett's because it was the post office that distributed the child endowment money. Not far from Perrett's store, on the corner of West Esplanade was a old barber. Olga, who was already 10, soon found herself a little job in cleaning the barber's shop on Saturdays to earn some pocket money.

It was pleasant to see the trees that had been planted around the area and along the main road, which added to the rural charm of the area. It was only later that many of these trees were chopped down.



Elsa Blahut (center) with her children (L-R): Olga, John, Peter, Toni

St Albans at this stage was still a small town with a population of 900 people, but it was on the brink of its most spectacular period of growth. Until 1928 the population base had been fairly static with fewer than 200 residents. For the next 25 years to 1953 there was a slow increase as the town numbers crept from 200 to 900. Then suddenly there was the population explosion as the town tripled in size within a couple of years. Within two years the numbers skyrocketed to 4,000 people, an increase that was ten times the national average if not more. The post-war European migration had arrived with a force that would change the quiet little farming village forever.

At the national level in 1953 Australia had reached 8.9 million in population. Migration had brought in 163,000 people for the year, one of the highest intakes. The target for new arrivals was 115,000 for 1954-55, and 125,000 in 1955-56, so as to maintain a 1% growth in the total population. The migration program was set to continue as a positive force in the growth of Australian society, and therefore St Albans would continue to expand at an incredible pace. And, of course, this meant that businesses had the opportunity to prosper.

The Potts Store

Mr Potts also decided to move his little country business, and the opportunities in St Albans sounded to be a worthwhile risk. In 1953 he set up his store in Main Road East, "R S Potts Pty Ltd", which was next to the "Coles corner", as the intersection of Alfrieda Street and Main Road East was later known. He quickly became part of the growing business community and was soon characterised as the fellow with the big truck who sold all kinds of articles including food and clothing. Later it seems that his business became mainly a drapery store and the bank agency. Robert Potts was noted for extending credit to customers; if you didn't have the money to pay in full he would give you the merchandise you needed and allow you to pay the balance over time. He was also community spirited. In 1956 when the youth club was being completed he donated an amplifying system for the building.

Mr Potts took on an arrangement with the State Savings Bank to act as their agent at St Albans, and the positive working relationship with Elsa Blahuts continued in this new environment. The rapidly expanding migrant population here also responded quickly to the diplomatic charm and multilingual skills of Mr Potts' assistant, so the store and the banking agency enterprise grew. Elsa's efficiency was such that even though she was Mr Potts' assistant in the business she was virtually doing all the paperwork. People remember her from this time as an attractive woman who looked a lot like Marlene Dietrich, in some people's view.

Going into Business



However, after a few years Mr Potts passed away in 1957 at the age of 60, and his shop was later taken over by May Knowles. At that stage Elsa had to make some quick decisions and one of those was to make a bid for the banking agency. So in September 1957 she wrote to the State Bank of Victoria with the proposition that she continue operating the agency as she had effectively been doing for the last couple of years. Elsa had effectively taken over the full management of the bank agency from September 1957. At this stage she took advantage of another of her skills that had contributed to the family's survival in the refugee camp. She went back to the business of knitting, by opening a wool store, Elsa's Drapery, at 294 Main Road East, which was just further along the street between Collins and Erica streets. Knitting, crocheting, and sewing were traditional handcraft skills for all women in that era.

It was done as a challenging yet relaxing pastime and also because of necessity. During the war many Australian women contributed to the war effort by knitting socks, jumpers, etc.

At this stage Elsa also had an assistant in the business, a Mr Ludgate, who could also handle the banking transactions, but it was Elsa who was in charge. On 2 October 1957, much to Elsa and her family's joy, she received confirmation that she was appointed as the Agent of the State Savings Bank at St Albans. So Elsa had plenty of customers now in her own small business.



And then in the 'sixties when Toni left high school she also got a job with the State Savings Bank and was working at their Sunshine office.

Later, when the population of St Albans had expanded even further, the management of the State Savings Bank decided to open a branch office in the main shopping area and they asked Elsa to take a position at the bank. She accepted, and was thus able to continue her contact with many St Albans residents in helping them with their finances. She was pleased to have her personal story included in one of the State Bank's publications, particularly as it demonstrated that migrant women were able to succeed in positions requiring business acumen and management responsibility rather than just be relegated to the factory floor.

Family Tragedies

The children were growing towards their adulthood and life seemed pretty good for the Blahut family. John started high school in 1959. Unfortunately the biggest family tragedies occurred in 1963, when both Anton and Toni died within six months of each other. Anton succumbed to cancer, while Toni died suddenly and unexpectedly as a result of a parachuting accident at Pakenham.

Retirement

When Elsa finally retired she still enjoyed the company of the many good friends she had made in St Albans. When asked to be the guest speaker at one of the Tin Shed's discussion group sessions, she spoke frankly about the hardships of her war experiences and the challenges she was able to overcome in her new homeland. She had no regrets.

[Elsa passed away in 2002 at the age of 88.]

Peter Blahut



Mum would tell me about her early life in Slovakia and how she went to the Bata factory to buy some shoes and the salesman asked if she could speak Hungarian. She could, so he offered her a job and she accepted. It was very unusual for young girls to work in those days, and mum was the only one of the seven girls who had a paying job, so she was treated like a princess at home. She said when she came home they'd mend her stockings and all.

Every week they used to do stock taking which went fairly late so her brother would come and pick her up. She'd finish about 11 o'clock at night and they'd walk home which took about half an hour.

When you started working in a shop there it was a three-year apprenticeship. Because she worked in a shoe shop she also had to learn to do pedicures and all that sort of stuff; it was everything. They got small wages and worked on commission. All the people liked her so she made big money.

Mum's father was a station master. When he got the position at Ipelske Sacky they were going to put the family into units, but he didn't think that was suitable for the kids so they offered him a railway house with a couple of acres. They grew their own vegetables and had a couple of cows and pigs.

I think my mum was way ahead of her time. Even when she was older she was more with it than I was when I was young. She always looked after herself and was well groomed. She went to the hairdresser once a week even up to the week she died.

When I went to the shop after school or on Saturdays mum would often be speaking to several customers in several languages at the same time - German, Yugoslav, Polish - and keep the three different conversations going. That used to amaze me because I found it difficult in one language. She was good with languages.

I went to Sacred Heart School for primary school in 1955 and later went to St Albans High School.

I remember Mr Smith and Mr McLeish. Mr Torpey was the headmaster and the vice principal was Mr Matthews. Mrs Sturesteps must have been there a long time because she was later teaching Olga's daughter when she went to the school in the 'seventies. Mr Smith came from Ballarat and taught in St Albans. When we went to live in Ballarat he'd returned to the area and taught my daughter and my two nieces. He'd mellowed down a bit by then.

My brother John was at St Albans High from 1959 to 1964. He left after form 5 and worked as a sales representative for a number of years before he took up driving a delivery truck for Comet. John also ended up living in Ballarat and had two daughters.



John Blahut (back row, third from left) and school colleagues.

I transferred to the technical school for form 4 because I wanted to do an electrical apprenticeship. I always felt a bit nervous at school but I managed to get a B Grade Electricians certificate.

I went to Slovakia with mum in 1992 and again in 1994, and I'm hoping to go there this year with my sister. Mum was the only one of her family who left Slovakia, and we've still got one aunt and one uncle over there from mother's side. On father's side they've all passed away. He had a sister and brother but they went to America in the 1930s. The aunt still in Slovakia was the youngest in the family and now she's 82. She's a fantastic character.

At first I was hesitant in going to visit because I thought I wouldn't know them from a bar of soap. I was also unsure because I didn't know the language too well - my parents tried to teach me but I said I was an Aussie. It was amazing how quickly there was a connection. They met me at the airport and within five minutes it felt as if I'd known them all my life. It was an amazing feeling because there an immediate family bond.

Under the communists they were too scared to write and only one sister would write to mum. She never wrote anything political.

At present I'm working as a driver for TNT and have been doing that for nearly 30 years. I have a set area around Richmond with regular customers.

John is now retired and living in Lakes Entrance and only works part-time on weekends.

Olga Blahut



I remember when we were in Somers that a lot of the migrant women earned some money by picking vegetables on the nearby farms. I wanted to buy my mother a present or just to help financially so I joined the women in picking peas and beans. It seemed to me that I had had been picking all day and didn't even get a shilling for my effort. All the women who were there felt sorry for me and they all contributed some of their own earnings so that I got more. That was my one and only attempt at produce picking. I was only 10 and it was hard work. I was so excited by the thought of earning all this money so I could do something for mum. Mum worked virtually straight away at Somers.

When we came to St Albans I went to St Aloysius in North Melbourne for my secondary schooling. It was run by the Sisters of Mercy. I went there till I was 14 and then stopped. Mr brothers and sister all went to St Albans High School. My daughter

Elizabeth was born in 1963 and went to the high school in the mid 'seventies and then to Geelong uni. All my boys went to St Johns in Braybrook. By the time my youngest girl was of high school age we were living in Ballarat.

I hated school and left as soon as I could and worked with mum in her shop. I found it interesting working in the shop, where you'd be speaking every other language but English. Mostly the customers were Europeans, but by that time there were more Europeans than Australians living in St Albans.

I really liked being there and even when I had my children I would go every day to the shop to assist mum. My kids thought it was the best time they ever had as children. Mum had a fairly big shop and there were lots of things that caught the eye of toddlers. She had lots of different coloured buttons and wool and they'd be into the counters exploring things. For them it was a wonderland. My first son Paul was a contented child; I'd put him into an empty card board box and he would stay there looking around him. When people saw Paul as he was much older they would recognise him and ask "Are you the boy in the box?" He is in Queensland now. My daughter would tip the box over and crawl out to explore. I had five children: Elizabeth, Paul, Michael, Andrew, and Cathy.

Mum didn't have a lay-by system but she would let people take the goods home and pay them off as they could, and most of them were wonderful and paid everything off.

I went to Slovakia three years ago. Some of our family are extremely rich but the wife will open the pantry and have it full of home preserves she'd made herself. It's like they did here 50 years ago. Even city people buy the vegies in the summer and bottle it. Bottling is still a tradition over there but nobody does it here anymore.

My most memorable occasion in Slovakia was when we went to where mum and dad lived with my dad's parents. The home was no longer standing but part of an original shed was still there. That was extremely touching to be there. The people now living there invited us in for lunch and were very hospitable. You're barely in the door and they have the whole table laden with food. We visited the cemetery where our grandparents are buried. We also saw the home where mum lived.

I'm now living back in St Albans and many of the long term residents still remember me and my mother. They still speak nicely of her. It makes me proud that she was well known, because she was a very hard-working woman. She was a fantastic businesswoman.

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Olga and Peter Blahut
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