

PETER KAROL: PILOT, BUSINESSMAN



Introduction

My name is Peter Karol and I came to St Albans with my parents in 1950. I completed my primary school education at the Sacred Heart School in St Albans, and then attended St Albans High School from 1961 to 1966. I was christened Vova Karol and was known by that name during my childhood. Confirmed in Catholic School as Peter, I started using the name Peter Karol after I left high school; it was easier than

Vova at that time.

My father was of Russian background. I had always wanted to take Dad for a trip back to his old home town, so when he was turning 75 I promised that I would take him for a holiday to celebrate his birthday. We eventually did go back to the town where he was born, near Volgograd, which is deep within the Ukrainian interior. Here I met the uncles, aunts and cousins that I knew existed but had never met before, and it enabled me to find out more about Dad's early history.

Father's Background

My father was a grandson of Cossacks from along the river Don, which is central to the region, but he didn't want to fight in the Second World War and left everything to escape to the west. He defected from Russia and headed to Czechoslovakia. He was only 17 years old at the time, so it must have taken a lot of determination and courage to even contemplate such action. He didn't have any specific plan or resources, he just took the chance that opportunities would become available. His identification papers would not have allowed him entry into Czechoslovakia through the proper channels but a bit a luck and good advice enabled him to get in through the back door.

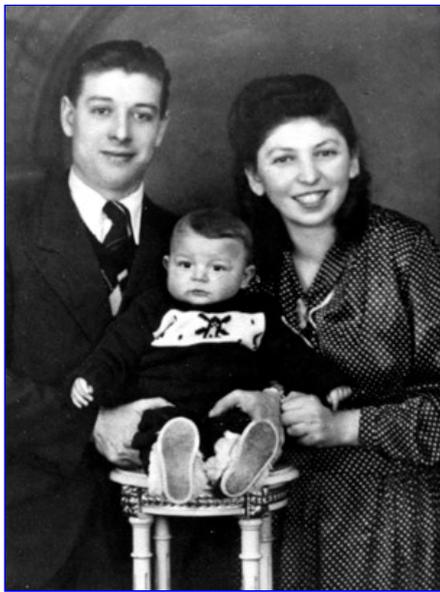
He met a Czech women who worked as a border guard and they had a romantic love affair. She sympathised with his wish to get out of Russia and helped him do it.

The border there was comprised of a river. She knew where the American border guards were located, and she knew that the river currents would carry any floating objects close to the American checkpoint. But, she warned him, if he couldn't convince the guards of his genuineness, they would either send him back or imprison him. He took the risks, survived the river currents, and, as expected, was detained by the border guards. After questioning him closely the Americans finally issued him with temporary identification papers, and that was the start of a process that enabled him to establish a new life in the west.

Emigrating from Europe

He made his way to Germany where he met and married my mother-to-be, born in Osek, Yugoslavia. Mum was working as an orderly in a hospital and her mother was working there as a nurse. Mum's parents also wanted to get out of Germany, so Mum and Dad came to an agreement with her parents: one couple would go to Belgium, the other to Australia, to see which would be the better country in which to settle.

Mum and Dad went to Belgium, where I was born in 1948. My father was working in the coal mines to support the family. In the meantime, my grandparents came to Australia. The doctor for whom my grandmother was working was well respected and he helped her apply for



immigration; I think they may have been sponsored through one of the church organisations and would have come in 1947 or 1948. After a year or so the family decided that Australia provided the better opportunities, so my parents applied to migrate here. It took about 18 months for this to eventuate.

Arriving in Australia

My parents and I arrived in Melbourne in June 1950 and at first we stayed in some arranged accommodation in Richmond. My grandmother was working at the MacRobertsons chocolate factory at the time, and my mother also got a job there. My father got a job as a process worker in one of the tyre factories. Eventually my parents built their house in Sylvester Crescent, St Albans,

near the railway line.



Attending Sacred Heart Primary

I started school in 1954, which was the year that the Catholic Church was built in Winifred Street, and it had several classrooms along the south side. I started in bubs grade, and then progressed through all the years as the school gradually extended the number of classrooms. The school was very close to home, so it was easy for me to go to Mass, like any

other good Catholic child. I remember that at one stage you could get red stars as a reward for going to Mass, and Henry Goralski and I were having our own little competition as to who could collect the most stars. For me it was a case of getting up every morning and going around the corner to the church before school.

The church and the school were built in stages and relied a lot on the volunteer labour of the parishioners. My father was one of the volunteers helping with the building. Fred Barnard was the builder who did a lot of work for the church and the school. I had Miss Barnard as one of my teachers, and Sister Leonard is another one I remember.

Starting High School

I started high school in 1961, but after about 6 months the family moved to Newport because my mother had started running a shop out there. Business was not very good, so we ended up coming back to St Albans and I re-enrolled at the high school in 1962, joining Form 2B. This was the year I teamed up with Johnny Belko.



Form 2B, 1962. John Belko is in the back row second from the right, Vova is back row centre.

Johnny Belko struck me as being a bit of an outcast as no one would sit with him in the 2B classroom, so I decided to join him. He was only a short guy, but he was tough - you didn't want to mess with Johnny Belko. One of the things I liked about him was that he wasn't afraid of standing up for himself whatever his size. One day I was getting picked on by one of the school toughs and when Belko saw what was happening he came to my protection. He got stuck into this guy and beat the crap out of him. No one ever touched me at school after that. I think the message must have got out: if you mess with Peter Karol, you mess with Johnny Belko. I thought we made a good brains and brawn team, because I would help him with some of the school work.

Johnny left school after 1963 and trained as a butcher. He had the butcher shop in Main Road East near the Tin Shed for a while, and I think he ended up running three butcher shops at one stage. I don't know what he's doing at present, but I wish him well, because was a good-hearted person for all his apparent rough manner.



Vova Karol (centre) and fellow dancers at the school's multi-cultural concert.

Getting my Pilot Licence

1964 was an interesting year for me. I was in Form 4 and that's when I started training to get my pilots licence, which was not connected in any way with the school. One of my mother's friends would often spend some time on the weekend at our place, and she would ask me a few questions about what I was doing. One day she asked what I was thinking of as a career and I had to admit I hadn't thought about it much. She said "Why don't you become an airline pilot?" I

said I couldn't do it because I wasn't clever enough. She told me off for being so negative and said I could become a prime minister or a pilot if I really wanted to, that the opportunity was there. I thought about that, and decided 'why not?'

Over the next two years I studied to become a pilot. I did all the ground training and flight lessons until, in early 1966 when I was in Form 6, I obtained my pilots licence. I always thought it was a bit funny that I was licenced to fly in the sky before I was licenced to drive on the ground.

Getting my Driver Licence

I applied for my driver licence as soon as I was able, and obtained it on my 18th birthday. My parents were quite supportive of me in getting both licences. I had some money saved up prior to turning 18 and my Grandparents helped me purchase my 'pride and joy' car prior to when I was 18. I think I was the first person in the form to get their licence and certainly the first to get ready access to a car.

I can recall the day I went for my licence, 40 years ago, when I had a loan of Henry's prefect jacket, so that I could suck up to the Copper that was going to test drive me for my license.

What else could he do but "pass me" after I slipped him a \$5 note. Decimal Currency was "in" by Feb '66 - in that year I trumped 18.

The ole Copper thought for a split second and handed me back the \$5 note and said - "fill that pissey Falcon of yours with a tank FULL and ask your mates where they want to go." (We all said Sale Sale Sale after hearing the MYER ad for what was happening in Melbourne Town.) The ole Copper went on to say "and with the change from the \$5 you tried to bribe me with - make sure you have a tank FULL to take you back home."

How times have changed - \$5 gets you out of the driveway today - and that's it.

What a great weekend it was. August 2nd, 1966.

It was great fun taking a bunch of mates out for a drive. We only looked the "devil" in the eye once when I forgot to turn left and went straight into a "cow's home" (some people call it a paddock) so that we could experience pushing a car back onto the highway and thanking GOD that the fence was barb wire with no poles in front.

Sometimes we'd go for a drive during lunchtime, but you had to be careful to get back on time. One day we got back late and Mr Matthews, the senior master, had us all lined up wanting an explanation. He knew I was the driver.

"Whose car do you have?" he demanded.

"Which one?" was all I could think of saying.

He was a bit taken aback by my response, but calmed down when he realised I was fully licenced and there was nothing illegal about our use of a car. Matthews was an okay fellow, but he did tell us not to be late for any classes in future.

With my own car, a 1963 Ford Falcon, we went on some great trips, but from then on we made sure it was after school hours.



D Dusing, H Goralski, G Snooks, L Chatterton, V Karol, P Barbopoulos, J Attard; 1960s.

Flying Experiences



After high school I was keen on a career as an airline pilot. I had to accumulate around 500 hours first and did some commercial charter work after getting my Commercial Pilots Licence at the age of 19. I was also teaching ground subjects to potential Commercial Pilots since I already had my Senior Commercial Pilot subjects.

One day I took some high school friends (Joe Attard, Henry Goralski and Peter Barbopoulos) to the country near Hay in NSW for a shooting experience – we were going for some wild pigs. On the way back, we stopped at Mangalore Airport, got an all clear weather report, and were allowed to fly home to Moorabbin. Bad weather developed fairly quickly after take off as a cold front moved across the Great Dividing Range trapping us in a huge valley near Healesville. A storm front engulfed us as we flew over the Range and because of the low clouds I couldn't see the way out of the valley and we were too low to be picked up by any radar, so it was a dilemma what to do. I had plenty of fuel, so I could have kept circling for 3 hours, but there was no indication that the cloud cover would lift and light was fading quickly.

Meanwhile, Joe, Henry, and Peter are all trying to give me advice and suggestions at the same time about what to do, because they could see we were in a spot of bother. Anyway, I said to them, "Guys, can you stop talking, because I need to make a decision and you're distracting me." Suddenly there was silence, just like that.

I decided we had to land before last light, and found one paddock that was a possible landing strip. There wasn't much space and the terrain was rough, but it was the only possibility. All my training had kicked in because I was quite calm and my one concern was to get my passengers landed safely. They thought the field was too short to try a landing and said so, but I knew I was the only one with the training and experience to make that judgement and asked them to be quiet again. Which they did immediately. Anyway, I landed in that little rough field and the plane was only slightly damaged. But the best thing was that we all got out without any injuries. I must admit I was relieved that none of my friends were hurt.

Unfortunately, my fiancée thought that zipping around the world at 32,000 feet was risky and it made her very nervous and worried, so I gave up that idea as my main career and decided to try my hand at computer programming instead.



Computer Programming

Computer technology at the time was based around mainframes; there were no personal computers or off-the-shelf software as we now have. Computer programming for the commercial sector was just emerging as a new field at the time, and I wanted to try it. I phoned up a computer consultant (Norm Longmuir) and asked for some professional advice (I paid for his time and advice), about the possibility of making it in the Computer Industry. He gave me some aptitude tests and said if I passed his course he would give me a job. I got the job and started as a programmer cutting code in assembler. The Computer Industry was kind to me. I traveled around the world two times and lived in USA for six months.



Norm taught me a lot about sales and marketing. He was selling the payroll and commercial packages and since we were always developing applications, he would agree to anything to get a sale. His standard answer was "That's being developed right now and should be ready next week." He hated missing a sale and was always confident in adapting the software to meet specific requirements. Then we would come back to the office and all the programmers would have to work on modifying the program. It might be provided a bit late, but it was provided.

Long hours was the working order of the day. Liz and I had married in 1971 and our son, Justin (born 1975), was nearly 12 months old when we were living in East Keilor, which was half way between the respective grandparents. One evening I came home and was looking at my son and I realised that I didn't know very much about him. I decided

there and then that I had to change.

Noosa

That's when we decided to sell up and head for Noosa, Queensland. The plan was to buy a business there and get the benefit of a lovely climate as well as being your own boss. We bought a squash court and ran that successfully for 18 months. We built a house there but in the end, Liz got homesick and we came back to Melbourne. I got a job placing computer staff, then got back into the computer Industry in Sales, moved around a bit and in 1987 bought another squash court

in Mill Park. Once we got that business up and going, I got restless and thought I would try real estate.

Recent Business

I joined Nicholas Lauder in the late '80s. Within two years I was running the Greensborough Branch and had done quite well. Then I made the foolish choice to join Ian Reid who fired me after 18 months because, as he said, I was a silent partner in one of the largest squash courts in Victoria (Diamond Valley). The fact that I witnessed my 'branch manager' with the receptionist did not help my case even though my branch manager gave me permission to go ahead as a silent partner in the squash courts.

I've always enjoyed the challenge of being involved with different business ventures. At present my business partner and I run a very large Newsagency and Tattslotto Centre, which is ranked within the top 8% of Lotto outlets in Australia.



Peter Karol, 2005.



L Chatterton, P Nowatschenko, Peter Karol, J Attard, P Barbopoulos, N Szwed; 2005.

Menu

[People](#)

[Photos](#)

[History](#)

[Albas](#)

[Top of Page](#)

[Home Page](#)



Marin Gunew, Kathy Hatjiandreou, Peter Karol, Jutta Heymig; 2016.

Photographs courtesy of Nick Szwed and Barry Rayner.