SPOMINI

Danilo Nemec

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(MEMORIES)

DANILO NEMEC

MELBOURNE
2007

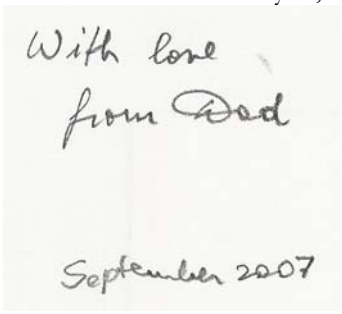
My dear Belinda,

Several months ago, I told you a story about my mother, Nana to you, from way back in Bilje, and you suggested that I tell you more stories, and that you would write them down. You were keen to hear them. It was a good idea, but then I procrastinated and you stopped asking. But you must know that your wish is my command, and I thought it would be better for me to write directly, as memory comes back slowly.

So I resorted to Billy's Windows, created a New Folder and called it 'Spomini', which is Slovnik for Memories. You know that I am no *Šakespeare* (Slovnik pronunciation required!), yet, one finger at a time, I did my best and described a fair bit of what I remember from childhood until we sailed for Australia. Of the rest you know enough. I stuck to facts only, as they appeared to me, even when the Goat turned into a Pig.

The only question mark in my head was what names to use. I tried Mother, Father, Grandmother, Uncle etc. but it all grated on me. So I went for the real thing, the original, as people and places were to me then, and you have Mama, Tata, Nona, Nono, Stric this, Teta that, and so on.

This small labour is for you, Belinda, and is dedicated to our Ivan.



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List of people and places

A few people

Family

Mama	my mother	Antonia Nemec	Popka, Netta, Tončka
Tata	my father	Emil Nemec	Milko
Rihard	my older brother		
Miriam	my older sister		
Danilo	me		

Relatives

Nona	my father's mother	Fanica
Nono	my father's father	Franc
Tata Juže	my mother's stepfather	
Stric Janko	my father's brother	
Teta Mila	my father's eldest sister	
Teta Dragica	my father's sister	
Teta Karmela	my father's sister (in Egypt)	
Douglas Baruh	her son, my first cousin (in Marseilles)	
Teta Milena	my father's youngest sister	
Stric Joško	my mother's brother	
Teta Slavica	his wife	
Iko	their son, my first cousin (in Ljubljana)	
Teta Lizi	my mother's first cousin, family migrated to Argentina	
Stric Karlo	her husband	
Silva, Maura, Delia	their daughters	
Teta Štefanja z Gorice	aunt Štefanja from Gorica	
Teta Štefanja z Trsta	aunt Štefanja from Trst	

Childhood friends

Franček	my age	
Đenko	one year older, Franček's brother	
Frančko	my age	
Berto	my age	
Anton	two years younger	
Alfons	two years younger	
Viljem	one year older,	migrated to Australia
Boris	two years younger,	migrated to Australia
Dorče	my age,	migrated to Australia
Guido	friend from Medium School, from Podgora	
Gigi	friend from Technical School, from Subida	

A few places

		Italianised names:
Bilje	my village	Biglia
Gorica	nearest city, 7 km away	Gorizia
Trst	large city, 40 km away	Trieste
Renče	next village up, 4 km away	Ranziano
Miren	next village down, 4 km away	Merna
Vrtojba	next village towards Gorica, 4 km away	Vertoiba
Sovodnje	village beyond Miren, 7 km away	Savogna
Podgora	first village beyond Gorica, 8 km away	Piedimonte
Subida	tiny village beyond Gorica, 25 km away	
Jurišče	tiny village in the mountains, far away	
Vipava	minor river through Bilje to Sovodnje	Vipacco
Soča	large river, Vipava runs into it in Sovodnje	Isonzo

Slovenian pronunciation

	As in English:	Example:	
c	**tz**ar	**c**ar	(=tzar)
s	**s**it	**s**edi	(=sit)
z	**z**ero	**z**ahòd	(=sunset)
č	**ch**urch	**č**aj	(=tea)
š	**sh**ow	**š**uma	(=forest)
ž	mea**s**ure	**ž**elja	(=wish)
g	**g**un	**g**roza	(=terror)
h	**h**ome	Rihard	
j	**y**et	Bil**j**e	
Đ	a**dj**oin	**Đ**enko	(from Croatian)

All other letters have normal phonetics

Before my time

Before 27 December 1930

Mama

Mama was born in Tolmin, on the river Soča. Her father had been a public servant, a *dacjar* (tax collector), in the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the day. When the father stopped serving Emperor Franz Jožef and retired, the whole family moved to Bilje. Mama used to tell us that she was about three or four years old when they moved, and that she remembered vaguely the ride in the horse-drawn carriage down from Tolmin along the blue Soča, that it was beautiful.

Their new home in Bilje was on the hill where eventually I was born. Mama told us the house was a fine two-storey villa, with a balcony on the top floor! In the lounge room there was a mural, of the Great Wall of China. It was painted by a Slovenian artist from the area, on commission, who was given a room to live in for the duration of his work. Mama and her brother Joško grew up in that house. There had been also a second sister, Julka, but she died, either in infancy or very young.

The father died not long after they moved to Bilje. Mama's mother Judita could not cope on her own, and a marriage was arranged for her, with a good man from a nearby village, Tata Juže. So he became Mama's stepfather, he was a kind man and Mama loved him. As part of the marriage arrangement, the total property was formally re-registered in joint ownership, half to Judita and half to Tata Juže. There were no debts on the property then.

When Mama grew up, she 'wanted to see the world'. Also, brother Joško wanted to go to Vienna to study agriculture, but there was no money. So Mama decided that she will go to Egypt to work. It was nothing out of the ordinary in those times, specially as Judita's sister Clementa was already there, with both her daughters Lizi and Tonerly, about Mama's age. This was one or two years before World War 1 broke out in 1914.

The first letter Mama received from home was to tell her that her mother had died. In Egypt Mama was employed for a short period in a Greek household, then as assistant nanny in Doctor Rabinovich's household. Here she looked after two little girls: Chickie and Sacha. Mama and the two girls formed a life-long bond, strong enough to extend to their next generations—that is mine. Through her Egypt years she was called Netta.

I was quite young when Mama would tell us that she had been to Paris, and would tell us with enthusiasm how imposing and beautiful l'Etoile and l'Arc de Triomph were. But I never knew when that was. Gabriel, Sacha's son, in the biography of his mother, writes that the trip to Paris was in summer 1914, for a few months. The purpose was to visit Chickie and Sacha's father, in a sanatorium there, sick with syphilis. Mama went too as part of her job. They returned just as the war broke out.

Miriam remembers Mama telling that she had problems disembarking in the then British Egypt, because she travelled on Austro-Hungarian passport and was therefore an 'enemy alien'. She was not allowed to disembark, until her employer vouched for her to the authorities. The MI5, or whatever the 'intelligence' service of the day was called, probably thought she was Mata Hari!

Mama supported brother Joško to study in Vienna. She stayed in Egypt right through the war period and until 1920, when she returned to Bilje for a short period. She went back to Egypt for two more years, and returned home permanently sometime by 1925.

Mama told us with amusement that when she first went to Egypt, Tata was still 'a snotty-nosed boy'. Miriam says that it was on the first return that Mama met Tata, more seriously this time. I remember Mama telling us that she went to listen to the Bilje group playing *tamburice* (mandolins) and Milko was on the stage too, playing, and that her heart fluttered. She was in her early thirties, Tata was eight years younger. They were in love, they later married, and Rihard, Miriam and I appeared in 1927, 1929 and 1930.

Fig 1. Mama and Tata at a relative's wedding, not yet married.

Fig 2. Tata on his wedding day, with lily of the valley.

During World War 1, called simply the First War, the nice villa on the hill was completely destroyed. Our region became part of Italy. With the post-war reconstruction, a plain house was built on the hill, to provide two adjacent homes: one for Mama and Joško, and one for Tata Juže and his second wife Teta Tina, whom he married sometime after Judita's death, and with whom he had two daughters. The war-damages payout was insufficient to properly complete the houses, and the top floors were entirely unfinished.

Tata

Tata was born in Bilje in 1899. He was the first child, followed by two brothers and four sisters in all. He was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army during the First War, very young, maybe 18 or less. He served Emperor Franz-Jožef on the local fronts. I remember him saying, smiling, that he had a mule, used to carry the 'gruel' and other supplies, and knew how to hide. He survived, and Mama used to say that he was clever at looking after himself.

In the 1980s, on a visit to Teta Dragica in Gorica, as she was showing old photos, she told me the story, which I did not know, that at the end of the war in 1918, Tata was prisoner of war of the Italians somewhere in Furlania. Nona, his mother, got to know where he was. She wore Tata's suit, her own dress on top of it, and set out on foot to wherever that prisoners' camp was. She fronted up to the guard and demanded to see her son, 'mio figlio!' This was probably as much Italian as she knew. The guard let her through, she found her 'figlio', and passed him the civilian suit to replace his military uniform. They walked out of the camp together, and went home together.

The fate of Tata's brother Rihard, one year younger, was more tragic. To evade being sent to the front, the butchery, he did what some others did. They drank a potion, tobacco, herbs and God-knows-what cooked in grappa, which was known to cause rejection at the medical test. One had to be healthy to be butchered. Rihard avoided the front, but he was made ill and eventually died in 1924 of the consequences of that potion.

It was well before my existence, but Stric Rihard was often mentioned when I was growing up, in sorrow. The earlier, alternative trick by soldiers for avoiding the front was to 'accidentally' shoot one's index finger off, the one used for firing, but this was made a military crime.

Fig 3. *Pradedje* (Ancestors) from Teta Mila's box of treasures.
In the centre with hat is Ivan Nemec, the grandfather to the four children.
Man on right, with moustache, is his son, my Nono, Franc Nemec, 1868–1946
Seated lady holding baby is my Nona, nèe Frančiška Štekar (Fanica), 1876–1952.
Boy on the right is my Tata, Emil Nemec, 6 January 1899 – 1943.
Boy on the left is Stric Rihard, 6 September 1900 – 1924.
Girl in the middle is Teta Mila, 12 September 1902 – 1997.
Baby on her mother's arm is Stric Janko, 2 December 1905 – 1972.
Another three children were to follow, Teta Karmela in 1907, Teta Dragica in 1910, and Teta Milena in 1915.
The photo then would be from 1906. Miriam retrieved it from Teta Mila's ancestral house in Bilje 113, in 2003, before it was sold.

Fig 4. Stric Rihard, whom I never knew.
He died aged 24.

Bilje 1918, end of WW1, from left-to-right:
1,2,3 **Nemec Dragica, Ljudmila, Milena,** sisters, teta Dragica, Mila, Milena
4,5,6 Peric Lizeta,Vilma,Talka (sisters) 7,8 Orel Edvard, Mozetič Pepi
9 **Nemec Emil (Milko),** eldest brother, later father to Richard, Miriam, Danilo

Fig 5. A photo Teta Dragica gave me in 1986.
Tata is last on the right. The church steeple is not there, obviously destroyed.
The mural of St Anthony of Padua, village patron, is almost intact.

Tata Juže

We children were growing up with Tata Juže living next door. He was like a grandfather to us. I loved him and he used to give me horse-riding on his knee when I was a little boy. He would pull out his pocket-watch to look at the time, and let me hold the watch, which fascinated me. One day I said, 'Tata Juže, when you die will you give me the watch?' His answer with a smile was 'Yes, yes, of course I will give you the watch.'

In my early years of primary school, it was said that Tata Juže was very sick. We did not see him much, as he was in bed a lot of the time. It was then that I learned the word pancreas, from 'cancer of the pancreas', it all meant nothing to me, but I remembered the word. One morning Mama returned from next door and said that he died in the night. Mama was very sad, she loved him, and I was heart-broken. Mama said 'You stay home today ... too sad to go to school.'

Some time later through the day Mama returned from next door again. She had an envelope which was for me, in it the watch. My grief only deepened, and I realized then how cruel my truly innocent question had been, but not to loving Tata Juže.

He was laid out in our lounge room, and people were coming for the customary *pokropit*—sprinkle holy water with an olive branch. I do not remember the funeral, perhaps I was not taken.

The watch travelled to Australia, it no longer worked, but was a loved relic of childhood to be kept forever. I had it in Hawthorn after I married, but before leaving for London and Sardinia in 1969 I gave it to Mama and Miriam to look after in Brunswick. One day after Mama's death, while we were still in Sardinia, the watch and three gold sterling coins Mama gave us from her time in Egypt, disappeared, Miriam believes pilfered by a 'trusted' outsider.

Another memory of Tata Juže was when a World Atlas textbook appeared in our house. It must have been part of Rihard's schooling. I was so impressed by the picture on the front cover showing, in colour, Atlas the god carrying the Earth on his shoulders, that I ran to Tata Juže: 'Look, look, Tata Juže, he is carrying the whole world! On his shoulders!'

He looked at the picture for a little while, and with a giggle said 'Yes, yes, yes, tell him to chuck it in the shit-house!'

Property

Mama said that Tata Juže was a kind man, but 'he drank, and he drank up his property, indebting himself, and there came a time when the debt had to be repaid. A lot of people were losing their homes then'. This would have been around the 1930s Depression.

The practice by creditors to sell indebted properties and kick the people out was to happen to Tata Juže. Mama persuaded Tata to buy the property from the creditors, and grant to Tata Juže the right to live there until death. This literally saved the family from being kicked 'onto the street'. She told us later how she could not bear the thought of Tata Juže becoming homeless in his old age.

Tata Juže was grateful to Mama, and he loved us, but this did not extend to his wife Teta Tina, who hated us all.

Now, in September 2007, as I again pulled out my suitcase (actually Simon's suitcase to Australia from 1950!) of my pre-historic documents, I found again, and finally read, some documents which Mama had guarded and kept all her life.

These are official documents from 1933 and 1936, all on *Carta bollata* (stamped paper) and in Italian legalese, which is why I had never read them before. One of them, in beautiful calligraphy, is headed 'Vittorio Emanuele III, by the grace of God and the will of the Nation, King of Italy, and Emperor of Ethiopia'. It's as high as one can go! Here it is:


CAV. LODOVICO BORSOTTO
REGIO NOTARO
GENOVA (Centro) Piazza De Marini, 1 - 6 Tel. 23-190
GENOVA-PEGLI Via Corrado Quario, 28 Tel. 468-277
L.8
Numero 19195 del Repertorio
Procura Speciale
Vittorio Emanuele III
per grazia di Dio e per volontà della Nazione
Re d'Italia
e Imperatore d'Etiopia
L'anno millenovecentotrentasei-anno XV
ed alli 7 sette del mese di Novembre

Fig 6. An impressive legal document. And it is '–anno XV Era Fascista'!

One set of documents is from 1933. They tell how the property was re-registered from joint 50/50 ownership between Mama and Tata Juže into two physically defined, completely separate titles, each comprising as close to half the land and half the house as physically possible.

The total value of the property was agreed to be Lire 10,000 (ten thousand) and each new title Lire 5,000 (five thousand), '*percui non avviene tra essi contraenti alcun pagamento a titolo di conguaglio* (thereby no equalizing payment occurs between the parties). How is that for translating Italian legalese!

It is hard to conceive today the above property values—of the order of A$10 total, and A$5 each.

The total area of Tata Juže's title was 10,990 square metres, that of Mama's title was 9,460 square metres.

A right-of-passage was granted through Tata Juže's land to Mama's house, 'on foot, with carts and animals ... along lines a-b-c ... width 3,00 metres (three)'.

Another right-of-passage was granted 'on foot through lots ... and along the border line c–d ... width 1,50 metres (one and fifty)'. I know which footpath this was between two vineyards.

A third right-of-passage was granted 'on foot through lot ... along the border line d–e ... width 1,50 metres (one and fifty) ... and this for the purpose of drawing water from the existing well on lot ...'

So everything was provided for:

- Space for us to run, naked and screaming, when Mama was to rinse us with a bucket of chilly water from the well, with 1.50 metres width! (see Early years)
- Space for Đenko to pull, and the German soldier to prod the goat to move, in 1944, with three metres width! (see *The goat*)

The other set of documents is from 1937. These tell that Tata bought from Tata Juže his property, and paid off the total debt on it of Lire 6,300.

There is no mention in these legal documents of Tata Juže having the right of residence for life. So this must have been a verbal promise from Mama and Tata. This commitment was kept not only until Tata Juže's death a couple of years later, but to his family in effect indefinitely. When our home was burned in 1943 and Tata disappeared, Mama had all the legal and moral rights to claim the house for ourselves, as we had no

home, but she did not.

As fate would have it, Teta Tina and her eldest daughter Jelka were deported to Germany in 1944, and never returned. Quite separately in Gorica, the youngest daughter, Vanda, was also arrested and deported, and never returned. She was a good, happy girl, hardly twenty, we grew up together.

September 2007

Early years

From 27 December 1930

I was born on 27 December 1930. According to Mama it was a Sunday, I arrived sometime in mid-morning, before noon, and that is why I was always slow getting up in the morning. I kept the habit, and the justification for it, all my life

When my parents married, the upstairs of the house was not finished, and their bedroom was downstairs next to the kitchen, the two windows where Belinda and Ivan are in Fig. 6 below, taken in 1970. The door in the photo is the front entrance, straight into the kitchen.

My older brother Rihard was born downstairs four years before me, but by the time I arrived Tata had the rooms upstairs finished, and the parents' bedroom was just above what had become the lounge room. So I was born upstairs. I do not know about Miriam, but probably upstairs too. We were all born with the same *babica* (midwife), who was one of the most important and best known persons in Bilje and surrounding villages. She covered several villages and must have seen hundreds, maybe thousands, of babies into the world. And I remember as a very young boy being told 'there is *babica*' and seeing her walking fast on the main road, a jovial woman, old to my childhood eyes, in a speckled grey and white dress—probably rushing to another arrival.

Fig 7. Belinda and Ivan in front of the house where I was born.
Photo by Jane in summer 1970, with the Canonette camera her Dad gave her.

Fig 8. The house where I was born. Photo taken in winter 1978.
I am in the middle, standing above the old rain-water cistern, no longer used.
Guido is behind his car. The wisteria is completely gone. The woman in the doorway
of what was the stable, later converted, is the new owner,
a Macedonian who married a Bilje man. She was always very welcoming on our visits.

Fig 9. The wisteria pergola in front of our house, in 1970.
In my days it had a concrete table underneath, and Mama liked us
to have evening meals there in summer. The four corner posts look like the ones
I put there when I rebuilt the pergola in 1946, before we left Bilje for good.
The trunk was much younger then.

Mama said that I was a 'surprize'. She was almost 40, and convinced that she was past childbearing. One day she was scrubbing the kitchen floor when Dr Beviglia, our village doctor who lived in Bilje with wife and two girls, came to the house unexpectedly. Dr Beviglia was from Abruzzo, he loved the villagers and was loved in return. He liked having a chat with Mama when he could afford the time, and would just drop in

unannounced when passing by. Mama was scrubbing the floor, looked up and he immediately said, 'But you are pregnant ... again.' Mama thought he must be crazy, and laughed it off denying. But he was right, 'And it was you, *Danilče moje* ... and wouldn't change you for the world!'

It was only a couple of years ago that Rihard, around the time of my birthday, said that he remembered when I was born. It was hard to believe, as he was just under four years old, but he clarified that, to keep him out of the way, they had given him the Christmas tree in the lounge room to strip. In those days this meant all the sweets, chocolates, peanuts, etc hanging as decorations were his, and he remembers! Still, it's nice for me to be remembered too!

So we three grew up on the hill. Miriam and I played together a lot. Rihard was the big brother, ahead of us and our games, but would involve us in more 'adult' activities. One was when we were making cigarettes from maize hair, at first using for cigarette paper the daily dockets from the calendar, but later Rihard brought from Gorica a 'proper' little cigarette making contraption, and prefabricated hollow cigarette papers, with filter! This was sophistication, and we made over a hundred cigarettes. They were never smoked of course by anyone, but we tried one and it was horrible.

Another activity we always did together was the making of the nativity scene at Christmas, and Christmas tree decoration. This was in the lounge room, and for the grotto of the nativity we used the wood chopping block turned upside down. It was a big block, so probably Tata would have carried it in for us, from the back of the house. Here too Rihard was the architect, and reached the peak of ingenuity when he said we shall make a 'lake' as part of the scenery. This was a glass pane over some silver paper, which we creased to simulate waves. The scenery around the grotto, hills and plains, we covered in moss, which we collected from the bush. Not just plain moss, but many types, as many varieties as we could find, the nicest being silvery-green. The winding road on which the Three Kings were travelling we covered with sand. One year we received from Teta Karmela in Egypt three wooden camels, just the right size, which we added to the caravan. Again, Rihard said that the caravan has to start far away, and we move it a little each day so that on 6 January the Three Kings reach the grotto. This was the Day of the Three Holy Kings, and also Tata's birthday, which was remembered because of the Three Kings, as birthdays were not greatly celebrated.

One other episode that stayed in my mind was of one sunny Sunday in summer. Mama gave Miriam and me a basket, and told us to go around and fill it up with assorted fruit. We loved it, going from white peaches, to yellow peaches, to red peaches, to summer pears, to nectarines, to purple plums, 'first grapes', and other fruits.

I also remember Mama bathing us in summer, near our water well at the base of the hill, very early in life. She would fill a wooden trough with cold water from the well in the morning, in the sun. By the middle of the day the water would be warm, and she soaped us all over, naked. She said that I always pleaded 'not the neck, not the neck' and she would reassure me 'not the neck' and scrub my neck vigorously, but I felt happy with her reassurance, never mind the facts.

Then the real fun of the occasion came. She would draw a bucketful of cold water from the well, and each of us would stand ready, holding our breath, as she would throw the cold water at us. We would scream with cold and delight and run the full length of the path to the left of the well, and back, to be dried by her. They were happy days.

Fig 10. Ivan and Belinda at the well in 1970.
The house had piped water by then. The steel arch with the pulley for drawing water is gone. The water pump Ivan is working used to be on the rainwater cistern at the house. The hazelnut bushes on each side of the well go back to my childhood. One had round nuts, the other oblong.

In the cold winters Mama would wash me in the kitchen, or in the stable which was often warmer than the kitchen. The cows would look on, ruminating. I knew they had many stomachs, not just one like us poor humans.

A few years later when I was a bit older, in the evening Mama would hand me a bucket of hot water and say 'here you are, get some more water and wash yourself in the stable'. And the cows would watch my ablutions in the wooden trough, peacefully ruminating. It was nice and warm.

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Fig 11. My first postcard, before I could read. Mama sent it from Genova while visiting Teta Tonerli. It depicts Stric Vincenzo's ship. I was 5 ½ years old, I could not read yet. I do not remember receiving it, but Mama preserved it for me.

The Earth is round

We grew up with a view that etched into the memory forever. From the front of our house on the hill we could see the profile of the Kras mountains, the up-and-down of a mountain chain, sometimes in a haze, other times extremely clear, particularly after a good rain.

When I was a little boy I heard from the grown-ups that the Earth is round. I believed it unconditionally, because grown-ups know everything. But nobody explained how big or small the Earth was. I was also told that beyond the Kras mountains is the sea. So in my imagination I visualized that beyond the mountain chain which I could clearly see, the Earth must curve down, towards the sea. I do not remember when I had to abandon this interpretation of the Earth's geometry, it came slowly. But I liked the idea of sensing the Earth's curvature, and I froze it once more into my mind with this photo of my beloved Ivan, in 1970, about the age I must have been.

1 September 2007

Fig 12. Ivan in 1970, with the Kras mountains in the background, where the Earth curves down!

Corn baking and first aid

Franček from below the hill and I played a lot together. One day he proposed that we bake some corn, loose, and that if we do the baking very slowly it may pop, like popcorn, it would be fantastic! But first we had to have a container, so we collected from the bush behind the house an old chamber pot, good white enamel, only one hole in it. For the squeamish, it has to be clarified that the chamber pot had been through many rains, freezing winters and hot summers in the bush since it had been rejected because of the hole, so it was as sterile as surgical instruments.

It was a dry, cold day and we made a fire on the neighbour's land beyond our big pond, and very slowly baked the corn, religiously stirring and waiting for it to 'pop'. But it never did, so we just ate it un-popped.

I told Mama later about the corn not popping, and she asked what we baked it in. I told her without hesitation 'in an old chamber pot!' She just rolled her eyes.

On another occasion, a whole group of us boys were playing across the road from Teta Lizi's house. After we finished the competitions who can pee the highest vertically, and the furthest horizontally, we were doing running jumps from an embankment over a trench.

One of the boys got his neck somewhat dislocated. We gave him our 'first aid' but to no avail—his neck was still sore. So we took him to Teta Lizi, the village nurse, told her that we were just jumping when his neck got sore, then added proudly, 'But we peed on his neck, and it's still sore!' Poor Teta Lizi also rolled her eyes.

Motorbike

Tata had a motorbike, which he kept at the brick factory, not at the house. I must have been a very young boy when I was with Tata one afternoon, after his work, in front of the office building, and he had just finished cleaning the motorbike. I remember the smell of naphtha on the rag he had used. He said that he will give me a ride. He sat me on the main saddle, and with his arms around my sides held me and the handlebar. He then walked the motorbike the full length of the brick kiln and back. He asked me, smiling, if I liked it. I did of course, but I was aware that he never started the engine, so it was not really a 'ride'. I must have been just too little for it.

A summer came, however, when there was talk that Tata will take us children to Gradež, to the sea, on the motorbike! And it happened.

One Sunday we went. Tata was on the driver's saddle, Rihard on the back passenger little saddle or on the back pack rack, with Miriam between Tata and Rihard. Rihard was holding onto Tata with his arms around Miriam. I was sitting on the petrol tank in front of Tata, between his arms. So the four of us made the 40 or so kilometres to the sea for the day, and back. I don't remember the sea, only the ride. It was a great success, and

it was to be done again.

Another Sunday was coming, probably the year after, when we were to go to the sea again, four of us on the motorbike! One day before or maybe two, Tata went to Gorica with a sample of our peaches, an abundant crop that year. Yes, the market would buy the crop, could bring it in next Monday, but the peaches were too furry, and they must be brushed first! So that was the end of the trip to the sea, as we spent the whole Sunday, and a very hot one, brushing peaches in the back room, all of us itchy with the peach fluff.

One day Tata had a bad accident. Driving to Gorica, on entering the main highway near the Miren cemetery, he lost his balance and fell off the motorbike. I think a truck was approaching. He hit his head, but was wearing the headgear Mama had added padding to, which probably saved him. I still have that headgear in the suitcase of my precious prehistoric objects, which shows the scrape with bitumen where he hit the road. His goggles smashed and he had cuts around his eyes, but no damage to his eyesight. I remember him being upstairs in bed for several days, and Mama telling me to 'go up and see Tata, he will be happy to see you'. I actually remember walking gingerly to the bedside, saying 'Tata' and seeing the cuts around his eyes, already healing. I think it must have been before I started school.

Fig 13. Tata's motorbike headgear. I still have it!

Another 'real' ride on the motorbike was when Tata took me, and I think it was only me, to Trst to see some Italian battleships. It must have been at the very beginning of the war in 1940, I was not yet ten. The ships were interesting to me, of course, and I remember being inside one with Tata, cramped between sailors and other visitors, and there was a lot of discussion and merriment. Tata told me amusingly that a couple of 'signorine' among the visitors wanted to get out, which involved climbing a steep ladder, and wanted the sailors to go away so they would not look under their skirts. The young sailors said they cannot move—they were on duty!

Much more than the ships, though, what really impressed me on that trip was the tunnel, cut in live Kras rock, through which the road went, in the vicinity of Miramar. I don't remember whether Tata actually stopped there for me to look, or we just rode through it. I don't know when the cutting was built, but definitely in the times when chisels and sledgehammers were the tools for breaking rock. I was awed by the majesty of the rock and the labour to break through it.

Fig 14. The cutting through the Kras rock near Miramar. I first saw it with Tata in 1940 on the motorbike ride, and went through it again in 1944 with Mama, returning from Jurišče. The image is from 1965, my first trip back from Australia. It shows me with the car I hired in Trst, stopped there on the way to Bilje. I suspect that the lone man, who snapped this photo for me, was himself on pilgrimage.

Going to mass

Nona was very religious, and used to go to the first mass each Sunday, and many week days, early in the morning. Mama also went most Sundays early. I think Nono hardly went. Tata went most Sundays to the second mass at 10 o'clock, and when I was little he used to take me with him. I loved it because the routine was to stop at Nona's house on the way back, and she would give us hot white coffee with abundant clotted cream, and let me sit in the warmest corner in the kitchen, near the window and next to the stove. She always cuddled me tightly, and would 'bite' me on the cheek with her one-toothed mouth.

Fig 15. The church in Bilje. This photo was taken in 1960, but nothing has changed from when I was little, except what looks like a Vespa in front of the house on the left. From about mid-1944 to December 1946 we lived with Stric Cekat in his home—ground to roof of the four upstairs windows at the far end of the left building. The front door is nearest to the church. Our bedroom was the two upstairs windows this way. The middle mural is of St Anthony of Padua, Mama's patron.

The sled

Stric Janko was Tata's younger brother. His name on the birth certificate was Ivan, but Janko is how most Ivans were called. He was a trained joiner, and as part of his apprenticeship, long before my time, he had made a beautiful dining table, which had pride of place in Nono's house. It was a round table, known as 'Stric Janko's table' with a central hub near floor level, where we loved to sit as children, it was so cosy and sheltered there. A room next to the cellar was his workshop, with access from outside. I loved to go there and see his various wood planes and saws, and the smell of wood shavings.

He loved us children, and had made two useful 'toys' for us: a snow sled and a wooden horse. These were there before my consciousness, and I was really little when we used to ride the sled when snow came, and ride the wooden horse a lot. The sled was professionally made, slim and light, and travelled straight down the slopes. At some stage we, or other kids, must have broken it. I only remember that it was no longer there.

I could not have been more than ten, eleven at most, when I decided to make myself another sled. And I did! I used two green acacia branches with a bend in them for the runners, peeled and dressed as best I knew, and somehow built up the seat, also in acacia, with hammer and nails. It was as heavy as anything, certainly not Stric Janko's standard, but I waited for the snow. When snow came, Franček and I pulled the heavy sled to the best slope we knew, some hundred metres from our house, on neighbour Pijončk's land. We tested the sled with great expectations, but it was so out of symmetry that it veered strongly to the right. We kept trying, it was getting wobblier, and eventually it took us into a tree in the bush on the right and broke.

I blamed the failure on the two runners not being equal, and concluded that they should be made from one single acacia branch with a perfect bend, and split in two. There was just such a branch growing at the edge of the backyard, but it was still too young and thin. So I simply decided that I will wait until it grows. I followed its progress for a couple of years, but then other things happened and there was never another sled.

A dream of war

I had a dream of war, when I was a very little boy. I guess about five to seven years old, because I was small enough to be still sleeping in the cot in the parents' bedroom, as Rihard and Miriam had before me. The cot had the corn husk mattress which made quite a noise when handled or when I turned around in it. I remember how Mama used to fluff up the mattress, before cuddling me and tucking me in. I loved it.

One night, when I had influenza and a fever, I woke up from a nightmare dream in the middle of the night crying. Mama comforted me and, as the very special treat, moved me from the cot to sleep between Mama and Tata, in the little furrow over the two-beds sheet where the two mattresses abutted each other.

I felt better there and stopped crying. Tata was awake too, tried to comfort me, and asked what I dreamt about. I said, 'There was war, shooting (noise) everywhere and I was frightened.' To humour me he asked 'And did you see the big cannon, did you see the Zeppelin?' to which I replied 'No, there were no cannons, only rifles and machine-gun noises (*mašigeverji*).' And for me to already know that word there was something sick in the world. There was no Zeppelin either. Had there been one, I would have been too happy to have a nightmare. It was 'just a dream', but it stayed with me. I suppose because it was a vision of a not distant future.

Chores

We were given chores to do as soon as we were able to do them, but we were always warned not to lift heavy things. I list a few. In summer we would spread hay in the morning to dry, with a pitchfork, would rake and stack it in the evening for overnight, press it down in the hayloft when dry. Clean the stable of cow manure daily, chop maize stalks into short pieces for cows' bedding, as we did not have enough straw. Clean the pigsty every few days, wash it down well, even go for a second bucket of water from the big pond at the end of the vineyard. Clean the chook pen periodically, a nuisance as it was very low even for a boy. Sweep the front and back yards with the brooms of brush Tata made. Take the midday meal to Tata in a basket to the brick factory. Collect grapevine prunings

into bundles, which Tata would then tie with basket willow. I learned to do the tying myself quite young, but could never match Tata's tightening of the bundle. Bring firewood from the back yard into the kitchen, and so on.

We specially liked the occasions when Mama would prepare the potatoes on a wire, cut in half and salted with a small piece of lard on some, to take to the brick factory kiln, and ask the kiln man to bake them. There would be three or four 'wires' of potatoes in a big pot, with a lid, so that we could bring them back still hot for dinner. These were special occasions, and I loved following the kiln man in the warm upper floor above the firing chamber, as he would look for a coal feeding opening of the correct temperature for the potatoes.

The potato baking in the brick kiln was actually quite a ritual, as groups of men would come even from Gorica on a Sunday afternoon for the bake, the wine, and the song, in the warmth above the kiln. Today it would be called a 'tourist attraction', with appropriate entrance fee.

In 1986, on my last trip to Bilje with Jane, I satisfied my urge to do it once more. I got potatoes from a friend, Milan in old village, Đenko and kiln man Binček arranged permission to take people above the kiln (even in Bilje there were safety concerns by now), they provided wires, rock salt yet to be crushed, lard (this time a small piece for each half potato), invited Guido and Gigi with wives, and we went through the ritual of preparing it all, baking, and eating. We finished off the evening with coffee at Binček's house across the road. Binček (little Albin) was the son of Binče (Albin), Tata's close friend.

The only difference in detail was that instead of coal, the kiln was now fired with Russian gas. I was really amused to see the gas meter at the end of the pipeline all the way from Russia, feeding the Bilje brick kiln, the last user. It was as far as Russian influence was allowed to come, as four kilometres on was the border with Italy, the West! The irony, or more precisely the stupidity, of East/West was glaringly obvious even in Bilje!

David and the Devil

A regular yearly activity we particularly liked and looked forward to was the husking of corn. The corn cobs were harvested from their stalks in the field, brought home by cart and unloaded onto the floor of the room behind the stable. In the evening after dinner we would start husking, and we children were allowed to stay up late and help. A few neighbours would come and help. Tata would be busy pleating the corn cobs into long chains, a man's task as it required very tight pleating. Years later, after Tata had disappeared, I learned to do it myself, and was quite successful and proud of it. The proof of success was to be able to carry the long chain of corn slung over one's shoulder, without it tearing itself into halves. Mama was also selecting the finer, inner husks into a separate basket for the renewal of the straw mattresses (*slamniki*, *slama* means straw) which we children slept on.

But the real attraction was David, the son of Rok from under the hill. He was older than us, probably in late teens, and he would tell us horror stories. He was a good story teller, and managed to build up our fears and terror of the various monsters he invented. There were ghosts, cemeteries, devils, ogres ascending ten steps one by one with the threat on each step of which organ he will tear from us: the liver, the lungs, the guts, and on the last step the heart. I remember being genuinely scared, but loved it!

David was a fixed feature of our growing up, and we loved him. He always did something that was fascinating to us children. In the years before the war the old custom of making bonfires on a specific day in summer was still followed, and allowed by the regime. This also was a very special event: the preparation of the wood stack in the afternoon, the impatient waiting for darkness to come to finally light up the bonfire, and the laughing, yelling, running around the fire, until there were only hot coals left. At this stage David raked the hot coals into a long rectangle, and he and Vanda, arm in arm and barefoot, would say 'one, two, three' and make three quick jumps on the hot coals from end to end. This was on the grass meadow just under the water well, the grass was already moist with dew, and the soles of their feet could take it. They were also young, of the same age, and probably in love. For me it was magic that they went barefoot over the coals.

St Nicholas' Day in early January was the day when he brought presents, from far away, and we would put out our stockings for them, and had to leave the windows of

the sitting room open so he could find the house in the darkness. The story from Mama was that the Devil comes too, and that we better be good. So we waited in the kitchen, scared of the Devil, and looking forward to the presents. At some stage there would be frightening noises from the dark outside, and Satanic whistles, while a whole bunch of long willows would come flying into the sitting room, to punish naughty children with. With a final long frightening whistle the Devil would depart again. In my early years I believed it all, and loved it in spite of all the fear. It turned out later that the Devil was our David.

Also later, I realized that Mama always said she better go and milk the cow before St Nicholas arrived, and he always turned up while she was in the stable milking, and he never had enough time to come into the house.

A time came when David was drafted into the Italian army, and all that fun ceased. We got used to his absence, when one sunny day I remember vividly, David's voice came up to the hill. I looked down and saw him on the path below walking briskly towards his home. He was singing 'O campagnola bella', obviously for Vanda, and looking up the hill. I ran inside ecstatic: 'Mama, Mama, Mama, David is back!'

He was on leave for a few days. David survived the war, but Vanda did not.

Mama was very fond of David, and he of her. However, after we left Bilje for good Mama did not stay in touch with him. We were already in Australia when, in the mid 1950s, Mama received a letter from him, quite unexpected. It was to tell her that he had his first child, a boy. He had married and lived in the same house under our hill. It was a beautiful letter, deeply touching to Mama, as he could not contain his joy and had to share it. Later he had a daughter too.

On my trip back to Bilje in 1970 with Jane, Ivan and Belinda we went to see him, and meet his family. After some 25 years he was the same David. It was June and he wanted to give us something special from his own tree: white cherries. Jane, who had been skeptical that they exist, was convinced. His son, a few years older than Ivan, played football with Ivan on their front grass.

In the later 1970s Rihard returned from one of his trips to Europe with the sad news that David had died. I actually think that Rihard went to his funeral, a fluke of timing. Around that time I had a dream that I was standing in our back garden in Hawthorn, near the back hall door, and that David was coming towards me along the concrete path near the lemon tree. I had never dreamt of him before or after.

In 1978, on my first trip after our return from Sardinia, I visited David's family, and remember how sad the son looked, he never smiled.

Discipline

I do not remember ever being spanked by Mama or Tata. But I do remember several occasions when a good whack on the bottom from Tata would have been fully justified. It was Mama who believed that words are better than spanking, and Tata trusted her.

As young boys, Franček, Đenko, I, and sometimes others, liked walking through the various parts of the brick factory, in the afternoon after workers had gone. But we didn't just walk through; we loved to put our fingers through the freshly made roof-tiles. The clay was so beautiful, blue colour and cool, but roof-tiles with holes through them are no longer roof-tiles! It would usually be the following evening that, straight after dinner, Tata would ask with poorly concealed anger, 'And where were you yesterday afternoon? And who with? And the holes through the tiles?' My looks of guilt said it all. As per Mama's recipe it was 'Straight off to bed!', no playful evening in the kitchen.

We loved the clay. We used to make toys from it, and money boxes. When dry, we would give them to Vanko the neighbour, who worked in the brick kiln, to bake for us. He would bring them back after one week, the time it took for the fire to travel the perimeter of the kiln. We could take good blue clay from stacked raw blocks, but we preferred to squash freshly made tiles for it. This also would result in a 'straight off to bed'.

The nasty one with clay was when we found Rok's bicycle. Rok, David's father, often worked late after others had gone, with special tasks. We plastered his bicycle with clay all over, particularly thoroughly over the chain and gears, both big gear and small gear. It was straight to the point this time with 'And who plastered Rok's pushbike with clay? He had to carry it home, and spent hours cleaning it! Just don't do it again!' before the 'Straight off to bed' finally arrived.

But I was learning what I should not do with clay.

Just ahead of the brickworks there was a stretch of road without houses on either side. One side had a long row of basket willow trees. The trunks were very old and hollowed inside, with a hole at the base. They produced lush new willows every year. It was winter and they had been pruned already, when some genius in the gang suggested that we light little fires with grass in the base of each tree. We did, but never predicted that the dead dry wood inside the hollow trunks would burn too, with a beautiful draft. The result was a long row of natural chimneys, each belching thick grey smoke high into the overcast air. It looked impressive, even by Nero standards.

Names

Up to the First War, under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, schooling was in the local languages, so Bilje had its Slovenian primary school. While Austria-Hungary was no great democracy, it was not oppressive of languages, so both elementary schooling in villages and high schooling in Gorica were in Slovenian. In predominantly Italian villages elementary schooling was in Italian, with Italian high school in Gorica. German was taught in high schools, and was essential for tertiary education, which gravitated to Vienna.

After the First War our area became part of Italy. Immediately after the end of that war, schooling resumed in pre-war pattern, but this lasted, from what I read, only for one year. Italian nationalism, or fanaticism, was such that Slovenian schools were eliminated completely, all place names Italianized, Bilje became Biglia, Miren became Merna, Renče became Ranziano, Podgora became Piedimonte, and so on. But the people living there just continued to use the original names in conversation.

The policy was to completely Italianize place names and population. With the advent of Fascism in Italy, this went to even greater extremes, with a concerted push to Italianize surnames as well. The fact was that with a Slovenian surname one would simply not get a job, while with an 'Italian' surname one would, so it was not difficult to persuade people to change their family name. As examples the next door man became Perozzi from Peric, my friend Guido Pinusig later told me his father, working in the textile factory in Podgora, had Italianized it from Pinausič. The 'g' was the minimum required to remove the Slav 'č'. One has to see racism and nationalism in action to understand stupidity.

The peak was reached in about 1941–1942 when notices were put up in the local shops declaring 'Only Italian spoken here'. For a completely Slovenian village it sounded like a joke, but it was not, as older people who knew no Italian would whisper their simple order to the shopkeeper in Slovenian, afraid to be reported. But generally the edict was just ignored, but at a risk, particularly for the shopkeeper.

In the 1930s sometime, my father was also called in to the appropriate office in Gorica, and pressured to change his surname, Nemec, to something more 'Italian'. He had a secure job as foreman at the brick factory, he was not dependant on his surname for a livelihood, so he could afford not to change. I remember Mama and Tata laughing as he was telling her the surnames being proposed to him by the officials: it could be translated to 'Tedesco' (Italian for German, because Nemec is Slovenian for German), or better still 'Tedeschi' (an 'i' at the end is even more Italian!), or simply 'Nemi', and the brainwave 'Nemezzi'—a double 'z' is so Italian! and the 'i' at the end on top, perfect! The stupidity of fanatics had no bounds.

But, partly to avoid mispronunciation which riled, and partly to just conform, I used to sign my name as Nemez. If you are told you are a reject often enough, and young enough, you start to believe it.

Harlequin

It was tradition, on carnival day of each year, for the men's choir of the village to go from house to house and sing a song, and collect an egg or two and some wine for a celebration in the evening at an inn. The so-called bear—a man wrapped in ivy and led on a chain—would come also, but the best for me was the Harlequin. This was a young man dressed in real harlequin colours, prancing and fooling around. I remember seeing him the first time, and looking forward for the whole year to see him again.

Traditionally the men sang old popular Slovenian songs, but with the Italian clampdown on anything Slovenian, only church songs were now tolerated. It became

even stricter with the advent of Fascism. I remember one year when Mama asked the men to sing something more substantial: '*Triglav moj dom*' (Triglav my home). Triglav (Three Heads) is the highest mountain in the Julian Alps, not that far from Tolmin, Mama's birthplace. To Slovenians, Triglav has also always been the symbol of their country, and the song is an exaltation of the mountain.

The men were quite reluctant to sing it, as it was forbidden, and they could get into real trouble. But Mama insisted, saying that on our isolated hill nobody can hear them anyway. Perhaps she promised an extra glass of wine; in any case she got them to sing it, with the best of their tenors, baritone and bass. I remember Mama's happy smile listening to it. She must have soared to the peak of her mountain.

Education

The elementary school building in Bilje accommodated years 2, 3, 4 and 5, while the first year was held in a small hall attached to the priest's house, on a small street off the church square, towards the river. We called the hall *koplanija* (chaplain's) as above it there was a small living quarters, where a chaplain used to reside in much earlier days. This was when Bilje had both priest and chaplain, and its own city council, now a derelict building in the church square. That must have been the golden age of Bilje, before me.

The school starting age was seven, but I don't remember much of it at all. All schooling was in Italian, teachers were all Italians.

So in the first year we learned the alphabet, pronunciation rules and a little arithmetic. We picked up Italian from the teachers' talk, and I started to read comics which Rihard used to buy, at first extremely slowly and by syllable. I distinctly remember one day sitting on the pushbike outside the kitchen window (I loved doing that) reading a comic, and my reading just became smooth and faster. I was so pleased!

I remember some of the teachers, but not all their names.

There was the short woman teacher of early grades, probably around 30, which we thought was old. We nicknamed her 'Mucka' (kitten, pussy). She was kind, and the girls behaved well, but we boys were boisterous and she could not control us. We kept talking to each other and ignore her pleas to pay attention. At some stage her belly started to grow bigger, and we all knew that she will have a baby sometime. One day when we were out of control, I remember her on the dais in front of the blackboard, turning away from the class and actually crying. I realized how wild we really were, and felt sorry for her. Later I told Mama about it, she sighed saying 'Poor woman, pregnant, and still having to teach. You should be kind to her, not like wild animals.'

There was the De Rocco couple, both teachers, no children, so probably quite young. They were renting a nice villa in Bilje. We respected the husband, who was not from our region, but disliked his wife. She was from Gorica, and we sensed that she actually knows Slovenian, but pretends not to. So there was a distinct antagonism between her and the class. One day, after the start of World War 2, she announced to the class that we shall go on an excursion into the fields, to collect metals '*per la Patria*' (for the Motherland). Collecting metals from World War 1 was a common activity then, and they were sold to a local ironmonger. Of course we were more than happy for the excursion—a whole morning out of the classroom. We branched out over fields and collected our metals. But we despised the teacher, didn't care much for the Patria, and so we sold our metals to the ironmonger before reassembling to pool all the metals for the Motherland.

Signora De Rocco was furious, she would have thrashed us if she could only catch any of us, but we went under the little bridge over the creek, and stood on rocks sticking out of the water—she just could not get us. And our laughter and merriment really drove the nail home—she was livid! But the following day she never raised the subject. It must have been a salutary lesson for her.

One year, perhaps while Mucka was having her baby, we had Anton Orel as temporary teacher. Anton was from Bilje, the eldest son of the village sexton, and had recently completed his degree. It was unexpected that a Slovenian speaking teacher would be put into a Slovenian village, but there must have been no alternative available. Mama amusingly told us how Anton had selected Slovenian as the required foreign language for his degree. Today this would be called 'very cheeky' but it was actually quite bold, and in a way defiant to the local Italian education authority, also racist, which had to

actually find examiners for this language which was not supposed to even exist.

The fact to me was that Anton was the best teacher in my five years of primary school. In class he spoke only Italian, of course. And we learned more Italian grammar with him than with all the other teachers put together. He got us into conjugation of verbs, something none of the other teachers ever mentioned before or after. He had the whole class reciting out loud the conjugations of irregular verbs—he got us all enthused. Discipline was no problem. If he saw pupils not paying attention he would spring his weeping willow stick, from wherever he was, onto the desk or head of any straying pupils. It was a very clear message, no need for smacking, which he never did, and was not allowed anyway.

When the school finished at midday, he would walk to his parents' home with boys holding his hands, laughing and joking, in Slovenian now, Bilje version.

Sometime in 1944 Anton, arrested or captured I don't know, finished up in the prison in Gorica, in the cells of hostages for execution, under the reprisal policy of 'ten bandits for one German'. One day the message came, I don't know how those messages were delivered, for the parents to pick up the body of their son Anton Orel from the castle in Gorica. He had been shot, they said with two or three others, as hostages. The horrible news shook us all, and Mama made comments about the parents' grief. I do not remember the funeral, but recall one day walking up the main road opposite Nono's house, and crossing Anton's father. I told Mama that I greeted the sextant in the usual way '*dober dan, nunc*' (good day, elder) but that he just walked past looking at the ground and 'he did not even see me!' Mama sighed with 'No, he wouldn't.'

Figlio della Lupa

As a good, obedient young boy I also did my best for Il Duce. The Italian Fascist regime had everything organized, and youth was divided into phases, by age, to develop the perfect Fascist. Now I would fail the test of recalling the correct ages of transition from one stage to the next, but I will try:

Figlio della Lupa: from birth to age seven.

Balilla: from eight to 14.

Avanguardista: from 15 to 18.

Giovane Fascista: from 18 to draft age.

Cultivation of the good young Fascist started with school. We were told why we were Figli della Lupa, when we became Balilla and the exhortation of the Genovese boy who threw the stone at the Austrian occupiers many years before. Also to look forward to becoming Giovani Fascisti, and to remember '*Libbro e moschetto—Fascista perfetto*!'

Fig 16. Me as Figlio della Lupa.

Each stage had its prescribed uniform, all comprising the black shirt of Fascism. The first two wore grey-green shorts, the next two long grey-green pantaloons. There was also a black cap with a hanging tassel, a triangular scarf around the neck (blue I think) knotted in the front, knee-length socks (white I think), and shoes—I do not remember what style, but definitely not the wooden-soled clogs we boys used to wear then.

At each stage it was expected (decreed)

that all boys own the uniform, which had to be bought, so that they could participate in the activities of the *Sabato Fascista*, the Fascist Saturday. But the reality was that polenta was more important, and most people did not have money for that, so in Bilje, to the best of my knowledge, no boy had the uniform of Figlio della Lupa or of Balilla through the years of primary school.

I remember one year in primary school, about third or fourth year, we were trained in Physical Education to do group exercizes. Teacher De Rocco was our instructor, and used to tell us to be brisk and energetic with our movements. It was extremely important according to him, as we would perform in front of some great functionary. And a Sabato Fascista actually arrived when we had to be all present in Ranziano, our Renče, to so perform, all in black shorts and white T-shirts, the sports uniform of the Balilla. There were boys from schools of surrounding villages, and in front of some little Duce in his black shirt we did our exercizes. I was as brisk as I could be, and was pleased with myself.

The irony was that about one year later, I went again to Renče, but this time because Tata took me with him. Renče was a more important metropolis than Bilje because it had the council office for the region, and even a station of *Questura*, the Fascist police. We went on foot, and Tata took me because Mama suggested that 'it is safer if you are with a little boy'. They didn't know what to expect. It was the time when the regime was vicious in its clampdown on the fomenting rebellion by Slovenians, and they ordered all men of surrounding villages to come and hear the speech of some other important functionary. On the morning of another *Sabato Fascista* I remember standing at the periphery of the square with all the men and Tata holding my hand, while another little Duce in black shirt was delivering his speech from the cleared middle of the square. He was pacing up and down and, with extended hand and index finger in good Duce style, kept yelling '*Non v'illudete! Non v'illudete!*'

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. They were unknown words to me, and almost certainly to most or all the men there. When we got back home I asked Rihard what it meant, and he explained 'Don't delude yourself', and that the *Questurin* was obviously delivering a threat to the men present.

The real Balilla

I turned out to be as good a Balilla as the very original. There was a council messenger (*Messo comunale*), who used to take council papers between Renče and Gorica with his motorbike, passing through Bilje both ways, daily. In classic Bilje adaptation, we called him simply Mešo. He lived in Renče now with his family. He was an Italian from southern Italy (la Bassa), and it was accepted that he had that nice job simply because he was Italian. No such luck for a Slovenian. It was just another case of causing local resentment, and these feelings filtered from adults to children, and I had them too, little as I was.

One afternoon, in the early years of primary school, a group of us boys were hanging around on the side of the church where the main road makes a gentle rising curve. It was winter, there were iced puddles on the road, and I had a lump of ice in my hand. Mešo came around the bend on his motorbike, and I instinctively threw the piece of ice at him. He nearly fell over, pulled up and dismounted. In no time I was off through the gate at the end of the church into the area behind the church, and hiding in the space between church and bell tower.

Mešo told the other boys to catch me. They came after me running, while Mešo walked behind them. They found me and grabbed me by the arms dragging me towards the Mešo, while I was resisting furiously, leaning and pulling backwards, and ploughing into the ground with my feet. Mešo pulled out a notepad and pencil and asked my name. I told him loudly 'Danilo Nemec, figlio di Emilio!' as we were taught to state our name. He scribbled it down and left.

I was terrified! Too scared to return home I meandered slowly along the Red Road, which took longer, with two fears eating me—that Mama and Tata will scold me, and more importantly that the Fascists may come and bash up Tata, because of me. When I reached home, Mama saw me upset and amusingly asked why was I mumbling to myself as I was approaching the house. I told her nothing, just lived in my fear.

Evening came and Tata returned from work, in a good mood. He told Mama that Mešo had stopped at the brickworks to see him. It turned out that Tata and Mešo knew each other, were actually on very good terms, because once in the past Mešo had run out of petrol and Tata had given him some. Mešo

had told Tata of my misdemeanor with the ice, and amusingly of my firm answer 'Danilo Nemec, figlio di Emilio!' which touched Tata's heart. Mama said that I should not do such things, that he could have fallen off the motorbike badly, 'the poor man, trying to provide for his family'. A happy ending for all, and I learned something.

But the fact that it was my own friends who caught me, instead of protecting me, I considered betrayal.

When I was at medium school in Gorica in the year 1942–1943 I had to have the Balilla uniform, and we had to wear it every Saturday, but I don't remember any of the *Sabato Fascista* activities then. School finished in June, and in July the Fascist regime collapsed. Thus ended my blackshirt career, as a real Balilla.

Carrying the veil

Teta Milena, Tata's youngest sister, was getting married, to Stric Lado from Štanjel, when I was about eight or so, and I was to carry her veil. It was not something I would volunteer for, but I was always an obedient boy. I tell this only because I found the photo below, where I look like an angel. I did not remember that I was dressed as a little sailor, nor that I had long trousers. They must have been the first and only long trousers of mine for some years. There had been talk also that for the first long trousers one has to jump into them from the top of the wardrobe. And I had a real whistle at the end of the sash! The photo reminds me that I had white gloves! and also that Rihard told me, 'Don't grab that veil with your fists! Take it gently between your fingers, delicately, like this.' We must have walked the short distance from Nona's house to the church and back, but I do not remember the walk.

I did my very best and was a success, but I also remember Mama saying, 'But you would rather be out there with the other boys, throwing yourself after the confetti (almond lollies), wouldn't you?' which was very true.

Fig 17. Me carrying the veil at Teta Milena's wedding.

Ties to Egypt

From early childhood Mama would tell us stories from her time in Egypt. She was there for over ten years, and Egypt left an indelible mark on her. She had all these names of places—Cairo, Helwan, Alexandria, also at some time Paris, l'Arc de Triomphe, l'Etoile.

She had postcards of the Pyramids, of the Sphinx, with many tiny soldiers on it. Could they have been Australian soldiers, waiting to be shipped to the slaughter for 'King and Country', and given by the Australian war correspondent Mr Schuler?

She told us that she heard a Theosophist say that 'religions are just different paths to the same mountain peak'. Could it have been the then young Krishnamurti? Seventy years later our Ivan loved to read Krishnamurti.

She was in Egypt when they found the tomb of Tutankhamen, and what a great event that was. She would tell us, with a sense of awe in spite of her lack of superstition, that 'two archeologists had died—the curse!' That the fashions in 'higher society' had everything 'à la Tutankhamen'—parasols, ladies' fans, hairdos. She smiled.

Mama had innumerable anecdotes on Mrs Rabinovich 'who was so beautiful, died so young, left her little girls Chickie and Sacha'. On her father 'famous avvocato Rossi', her husband Dr Rabinovich 'who had died in Paris', the Australian journalist Mr Schuler who 'courted Mrs Ravinovich but was killed in World War 1—so sad, they were in love'. On Mr Debbane the second husband, the ancient English nanny, old Ahmed the cook, who taught Mama a lot of Arabic. Ahmed also took her to see the 'real Cairo' of the Arab bazaar, with floor of compacted earth, where Arab servants of well-off families congregated for their gossip. Mama asked Ahmed what were they talking about, as they would break into laughter. 'They are discussing their mistresses (employers)', Ahmed would say. 'But what are they saying?' 'You do not want to know that!' old Ahmed would reply.

She talked of loyal Popsy the dog, a bitch, which she loved and used to take with her on evening walks to the edge of the desert, in Helwan. She loved to be there alone—with Popsy and silence. That she once lay down on the sand pretending to be dead and Popsy became worried, started to run around her and sniff her all over, then suddenly galloped off back towards home, presumably to give the alarm. She got up and called out Popsy! Popsy! and the faithful animal braked to a halt in the sand, turned, galloped back to her and madly circled her in happiness, tail wagging too fast to be visible. No wonder our dog on the hill was called Popsy—and he didn't mind being a male. Our first dog in Australia was also Popsy, also male.

I used to always think it was the Sahara Desert, but just now I looked at my 'digital' atlas and found 'Hulwān' not far from central Cairo, on the Nile but on the eastern side, next to the Arabian Desert—we never stop learning.

Fig 18. Egypt. Delia, youngest daughter of Teta Lizi who was in Egypt with Mama, sent me this image with several others, from Argentina, as we reminisced about our mothers about six months ago. *A mi me encanta Egipto, sus desiertos, sus esculturas y sus costumbres.*

Mama often said how she was treated well in the Rabinovich household, 'they were good people, I was a servant but always treated with respect, we really were a family'.

In actual fact it was more than 'a family', because the most enduring of all things that Mama brought back from that ancient Egypt was the bond she had formed with Chickie and Sacha, the two girls she looked after in those years, and saw them grow. The affection was mutual, and Mama kept contact with Chickie and Sacha all her life. She knew when they married, when they had children, and other truly major events, happy and tragic. We, Mama's children, also got to know Chikie and her little daughters Monica and Anna. And much later Sacha and her adult son Gabriel, who got to know Ivan and Belinda. Gabriel played chess with little Ivan, in London in 1969.

November 2007

Fig 19. Ivan, Sacha, Jane, Belinda and Gabriel, also dog Pilič, in Lewes. We saw each other frequently when living in London in 1969–1970. Mama came to London too, and she and Sacha met again after more than 30 years.

Monica and Anna

I must have been about eight or nine when Chickie's daughters Monica and Anna spent some days or weeks with us on the hill. Monica was about my age and Anna a couple of years younger. We played together, all five of us. I still have this image of us sitting on the green grass near the bottom of the footpath sloping down from the house towards the water well, between the two vineyards.

During our stay in London in 1969–1970, Chickie also came to England from Egypt, to help her daughter Anna with the children. Anna was there and due to leave for Brazil with husband and family, but we did not meet. She rang once before her departure, and we had a conversation on 'what we remembered' of the long gone years of childhood. She told me that she remembers me, basically as a bit of a 'naughty boy'. I corrected her that 'it is not true, I was a good boy', and still believe it. Or perhaps she knew something about my criminal escapades with my friends.

Jane and I went to London again, the second and last time, in 1986 for a few days. Anna then lived there permanently, after her husband's retirement. I had her phone number from Sacha. On a Saturday the soccer World Cup was on and the finals between, I think, Argentina and England were about to start, when I rang. There was some shaky excuse from Anna's husband that she cannot come to the phone, and would I please call again. She later confessed that she was backing Argentina and was not going to miss the game on TV 'for anyone on Earth'. I accepted the damage soccer addiction does to otherwise normal people, and did ring again. I went to see her on the Sunday, met her husband Aleco, and we had a short one hour or so of reminiscing.

Anna's recollection of details of her brief time with us in Bilje was unbelievable. She remembered every one in our family. She remembered footpaths in green grass! The wisteria pergola! She told me that for much of the stay she was sick, of which I remembered nothing. That she was in bed a lot of the time in the little upstairs bedroom at the back of the house and facing the huge walnut tree—she remembered the walnut tree, which I had almost forgotten. I used to climb it and, along an overhanging branch, reach the roof of the house, high up, all the way to the main chimney on the ridge of the roof, scared but driven by the thirst for adventure. Perhaps she saw me climbing up to the roof, to conclude that I was naughty.

It was after leaving that I fully felt the leap of 50 years into childhood Anna gave me, and easily forgave her for putting me second to her Argentine soccer team. They won the Cup for her, it was the least they could do. We keep in touch with rare, but so welcome, letters since then.

When we lost our Ivan in 1997, in her beautiful letter of condolence, one brief sentence made me utter 'she understands!' It was in 2001, from Gabriel's book on Sacha *A Life,* when I learned that Anna too had lost, to a different illness, a son in 1969.

November 2007

The school test

When I finished year five of primary school, Mama convinced Tata that I should do at least the further three years of medium school, even though I was meant to become Tata's successor to work the land. But there was a test to be passed for entry, and it was well known that the standard of country schools was low compared to city schools, and insufficient to pass the test. So Mama took me to Gorica to have my 'knowledge' assessed by a teacher at the city primary or medium school. I remember being welcomed very kindly, Mama leaving, and being taken by the teacher to a desk in some sort of science laboratory. He gave me some written questions and left me alone.

But I could not care less for the questions, because I wanted a leak! I was too shy to ask the teacher, and even more so to leave the room I was in. So I paced up and down, holding on, but getting more and more desperate. Among the various items in the room, from memory even a human skeleton in one corner, there were some pot plants around. I do not remember what kind of plants, but hopefully exotic ones. When the situation became unbearable, I peed a little on each of the pots, but not too much for fear of it being noticed. So I was reasonably relaxed when the teacher returned, saw that I provided no answers, gave me some different questions, and again left me to it, alone. The need for a proper pee was there again, and as my attempts to hold on again failed, I did more rounds from pot-plant to pot plant with little pees on each, just to survive. I do not remember how many visits there were from the teacher.

Eventually it was over, Mama had come back, spoke to the teacher who told her that 'he hasn't got the faintest idea' (of the things required for the test). His diagnosis was correct, but for the wrong reasons.

I can only assume that the pot plants did very well in the subsequent months, and the teacher didn't have the faintest idea why.

The conclusion was that Rihard took me over, and taught me the requirements for the test. He did this through the summer months, in a well disciplined and organized way, with regular lessons of a few hours every morning. I distinctly remember him saying 'when they ask you who Virgilio was, don't just say a Latin poet, say 'a *great* Latin poet, he wrote the *Eneide*'. At the test in autumn one of the women examiners asked me just that, and I replied just as I was told. I passed!

It was just one example when Rihard proved to be my true older brother, giving me a helpful push when I most needed it, then and throughout life.

July–August 2007

Please do not hate!

So in October 1942 I started the first year of medium school in Gorica. One day, before the year started, Mama gave me a little talk in the kitchen, while she was cooking. She said that in Gorica it could happen that I get insulted, that some Italian boy may call me *sciavo*—slave in the Italian dialect, from *schiavo*. The word was used as a very derogatory term for Slovenians, who were called at best *Slavo* (Slav) anyway. To us, *Slavo*

instead of *Sloveno* was also insulting, and quite annoying, as it implied that Slovenians don't even exist.

So Mama said that I must not take it to heart, to let it go, not to get into fights over it, as 'it is not worth it, you know, it is only ignorance after all'. Of course she was also afraid that I could get bashed up, her little boy. After a short silence she added 'but one thing I ask you ... I beg you ... do not hate, *Danilče moje*, please do not hate!'

Tata drafted

When the war started in 1940, at first it did not affect us directly. Young men were drafted into the Italian army, up to maybe age 30 or so, and sent to the various fronts, to fight for the Patria! Not all returned, of course. In about 1941–1942 men of Tata's age, early forties, got their notices as well. So Tata and many others finished up in southern Italy. But they were not even armed, and it was said that they had been drafted because they were not trusted, being Slovenians, and they were put out of the way. In any case, Tata going was a big thing for us—the adults knew what the word war means. As it turned out, he and many other locals spent about one year in Catanzaro, Calabria, twiddling their thumbs in barracks, and eating the soldier's *rancio* (gruel).

Mama would get a letter from him now and again, he probably had to write in Italian as they were all censored—the usual stupidity of all nations at war. He wished to be back home of course. Once he wrote for me to dig and tidy around all the young spruce trees, about ten, which he had planted in the front of the house a couple of years earlier, just for aesthetics. I did it very thoroughly and neatly, as I wanted to please him. Mama told me 'Write a little letter to Tata. Tell him that you tidied around all the spruce trees ... how the cows are ... he will be so happy'. I did.

Anyway, even before July 1943 when Fascism collapsed, they were all released and he was back home—the family all united again.

I must have been more affected by Tata's absence than I realized then. I learned then that the town of Catanzaro existed at the bottom of Italy, and the name had a different connotation to me from all the other 'province capitals' of Italy, which we had to learn at school by heart.

On the last, long, driving holiday before returning from Sardinia in late 1973 with Jane, Ivan and Belinda, I made sure we drove also through Calabria, and I satisfied my urge to go to Catanzaro as well, right up on the Calabrian mountains, where Tata had been. It was a good feeling.

15 September 2007

Fig 20. Tata as I remember him.
Photo taken probably around 1940.

First casualties

Teta Tonerli lived in Genova, with husband Stric Vincenzo, eldest son Biaggio (Biaggino to us) and second son Dario, about five years older than me. Stric Vincenzo was an officer in the Italian merchant navy, which with the advent of the war was militarized. Nothing really changed for him, as he continued working on merchant ships. Even the risk was the same—as the chance of being sunk in war is precisely the same for merchant ships as for any other ship. He was on the Genova–Sardinia run, approaching a port in the north of the island, maybe La Maddalena, when a British torpedo hit his ship. Some survived, he did not.

I do not know in which year this happened, sometime between 1941 and before 8 September 1943. We heard the terrible news. Later Teta Tonerli told us that a survivor came to see her, and told her that he and Uncle Vincenzo met on the bridge, coming into port early morning, and said to each other 'we made it again!' and parted. The torpedo hit a few seconds later.

Again I do not know precisely when, but at some stage Genova was bombarded. Biaggino, in his early twenties, was already conscripted, but still allowed to continue his university studies in engineering in Genova. He was on a tram, in daytime, going to or from university, when the bomb hit nearby, and killed many—Biaggino was one. So Teta Tonerly lost husband and son, and not far apart in time.

It must have been before the war started, that Mama was very excited because Stric Vincenzo was coming to see us in Bilje. I remember him arriving in his white uniform, on a very hot summer day, on foot, probably from Gorica, for only a few days. Everyone was fond of him.

Biaggino and Dario, with Teta Tonerli, spent many weeks with us one summer, when I was very young. Biaggino promised to teach me to swim, and one day took me to the river, near the water wheel of the mill, where the water was quite deep. He was in the water floating, and encouraged me to just launch myself towards him from shore and paddle. Although very scared of deep water, I did as he said, and paddled and kicked like mad, and was moving very slowly towards him. After a little while, I noticed that he was moving slowly backwards, keeping the distance from me. I thought he tricked me, but he got me to cover the distance of deep water to the dam. He was as pleased as I was.

Teta Tonerli and Dario visited us in Sovodnje, probably in 1948. He was then studying engineering in Genova, and brought a textbook with him. It was on hydraulics, the typical roneo prints bound in soft cover, common in those times. I understood nothing of it, but was greatly impressed by all the formulae in it, and the Greek ϱ (*rho*) everywhere for fluid density. I must have been very impressionable then, because I still recall another instance, when a relative from Gorica who worked in Milan visited us, and a small slide rule was sticking out of his breast pocket. It was the peak of technical sophistication!

I next saw Teta Tonerli and Dario in December 1965, on my first trip to Europe from Australia. It was only for a few hours. I was coming from New York after a week there for multinational Mobil Oil. Dario picked me up at Milan airport, already dark, and drove past the Duomo 'you can at least say that you drove past it!' on the way to their flat. He was already married to Enid, and there was a tiny baby in the cot, it must have been Laura, the last of three girls. Teta Tonerli was there, probably from Arenzano, outside Genova. It was a good, but also sad, reunion after all those years.

When we were in Sardinia in the early 1970s we had many get-togethers with Dario's family, in Parma by then, and Teta Tonerly, always coming from Arenzano. The last time we (Jane, Ivan, Belinda and I) saw her was on our final long trip before returning to Australia. We had three beautiful days with her, and she took us to a restaurant for a special *pesto genovese*. I remember her waving goodbye to us from her balcony. She died a few years later.

When Dario and Enid visited us in Australia in 1995, he took us all for a farewell dinner to a place in Glenferrie Road. Rihard's family, Miriam's, and mine were all there. It was a lovely evening. I told him my memories of his brother, and he told me how he went from hospital to hospital looking for Biaggino on that fateful day. That he still keeps the wallet which was in Biaggino's breast pocket, damaged but not pierced by a piece of shrapnel. It explained why Teta Tonerli was consoling herself by saying that her Biaggino was killed by 'air displacement', it sounded gentler.

Fig 21. Ivan, Belinda, me, and Teta Tonerli in Arenzano, summer 1973.

Trst

8 September 1943

The summer of 1943 was for me a happy summer. I was twelve and a half years old, and old enough to help Tata with daily chores. He was home, working very little at the brick factory which was closed, as there was no coal for the brick kiln.

I loved going with Tata to the fields to work, bring home hay with the cow drawn cart, unloading it and stacking it in the hayloft. It was a good year and by late summer the hayloft was really full.

My young cousin Iko, much younger than I, perhaps only three or four years old, spent many weeks at our place, while his mother Teta Slavica was visiting her parents in Sovodnje. Mama, a great believer in getting children to provide company to each other and play together, would have arranged this.

Iko's parents (his father Stric Joško was Mama's only brother) had lived in Yugoslavia, in northern Slovenia around Celje, an old city. Whilst we were not yet directly affected by the war, they had been. They were kicked out of their area and home by the Germans, and had moved to somewhere in Croatia. The area was being resettled with German families. The expression 'ethnic cleansing' did not exist in those days, only the fact did.

Iko was following me everywhere, I was a big boy to him, and we had a good time together. I felt good looking after him. We wore only black shorts, and with all our games, our bare chests were not the cleanest—someone actually said that we were walking maps.

Time came for Teta Slavica and Iko to return home, which meant taking a train from Trst. Mama wanted to accompany Teta Slavica, and took me along too, to look after Iko. We got by train to Trst, probably mid-morning, and the news had come out that Italy had collapsed (*Italija je propadla*).

It was 8 September 1943, the 'Day of the Armistice'. It was some 50 years later that I learned from Sacha's son Gabriel's book *A Life* that the Italian Armistice was actually signed on 3 September, somewhere in north Africa, but was not to be announced for many days. In Italy the accepted date is 8 September.

Teta Slavica felt very uncertain. She was thinking that it may be better for her not to go back to Croatia, but stop in Sovodnje with Iko at her parents' home. She was quite unsure on what to do. But Mama advised her not to change her plans now, but return home while it was still possible, as it was best for their whole family to be together, come what may.

Their train was not to depart for a few hours, but it was on the platform, so Iko and I were placed in a compartment with instructions not to move, while they went into town, or maybe to see a relative, Teta Štefanja z Trsta (aunt Stefania from Trst),

who lived nearby. The station was practically deserted, only a lone soldier pacing up and down. Teta Slavica said he was a German soldier—his uniform did look different to me—probably going on home leave, as he was not armed. All I remembered was that Iko and I stayed in the train for a long time, and eventually Mama and Teta Slavica returned. But many decades later, when reminiscing with Teta Slavica, she told me that, when they had returned to the station, the train was gone! They went through some panic before finding out that it had been moved to another platform. Iko and I never moved! We followed orders.

Teta Slavica and Iko left. Mama and I must have slept at Teta Štefanja's, but I don't remember. We would have taken a morning train, probably stopped in Sovodnje to tell Teta Slavica's parents that she left safely, and would have undertaken the walk towards Bilje, some six or seven kilometres. As we got half way, near Miren I remember seeing a lot of women carrying all kind of things from the nearby military airport towards the village. What stayed in my memory was the women carrying mattresses on their heads: they were looting the airport, by then completely abandoned by the Italians. I could fully understand that a proper mattress is a valuable possession, compared to a corn husks bag, but I still did not like the scene.

What is today called 'law and order' had broken down.

16 June 2007

Miren Airport

12 September 1943

The cognac

The days immediately following 8 September were tense. Nobody knew what to expect, except that 'the Germans will come...'

September 12 was a Sunday, and my friends Đenko and Franček proposed 'let's go to the airport in Miren. The Italians have all gone, and you never know what goodies we may find.' It must have been soon after midday. So the three of us, and some other boys but I cannot recall who, walked the three or four kilometres there. The airport of the time consisted of a very large grassed area for aircraft take-off and landing, no runways in those days. There were some hangars, but by now no aircraft at all. The field and hangars were on one side of the Gorica–Trst highway (*Tržaška cesta*). On the opposite side, towards Bilje, was a large building which we called 'the pilots' barracks'. This is where we went, and parted each to his own.

There were other people around too. On the grounds outside the barracks there were various things scattered around, nothing much 'of value', some ammunition too, and I put some into my pockets. Then I found in the grass a bottle of cognac, still nicely sealed and intact. That was a prize find for me and I took it. Đenko rejoined us and said that he had been in the cellar of the barracks, that the floor was flooded with wine, that he tasted it but it was foul, no good! We had just started slowly back towards home, walking on a footpath between corn fields, when there was some commotion and words that German planes were coming. From a distance, in the direction from Gorica towards Miren two fighter planes were diving directly towards us, very fast. We scattered and threw ourselves to the ground. I was on my belly in the middle of a field of low maize *(sržita)*, maize grown thickly as fodder for cattle, looking in the direction of the coming planes. I wanted to watch them as they approached, diving ever lower, holding my hand over my forehead with my eyes wide open to the planes. The noise was getting louder and more frightening, but I was determined to 'see what happens', until the planes were practically over us when fear overcame curiosity. I closed my eyes and buried my face into the flattened, fresh maize leaves. The planes just flew over us towards Miren. Later it was said that they had fired over Miren.

In the group were us boys, and also a man from Bilje. He was without his left hand, up to mid-forearm, and had a steel stub fitted with some leather straps to his forearm. He was the typical victim of the then common activity of defusing and dismantling grenades from World War 1, to then sell the metals—copper, brass, lead, iron, in order of value. Many men did it, and successfully, but accidents did happen. A boy of my age killed himself doing it.

The man with the steel 'hand' was a kind

man, I cannot recall his name, but to me that metal fitting, where a hand should be, was always frightening whenever I saw him. He had an Italian military rifle in one hand (all men had been armed by the Partisans in the few days since 8 September), saw the bottle of cognac in my hand, and said peremptorily 'what have you got there, boy, give us that, we are all brothers now'. I handed him my prized cognac, he put the bottle firmly under his left arm, pressing it to his body with the steeled 'hand', and with the bayonet in his good right hand, prized the cork out of the bottle, chipping the edge of the bottle's neck quite badly. He just lifted the bottle to his mouth, sharp glass and all, and guzzled down about half of my cognac. With a sigh of satisfaction and 'aaahhh ... I needed that' he handed me back the half empty bottle of cognac, and we continued home.

I got back home sometime in the afternoon, proud of my cognac. Later, just before dusk, a group of Partisans came panting from the side paths to the front of our house. They were on the run as the Germans were already pushing forward. I remember one young man, he was a Furlan. He told a little of what was happening. He had his rifle, had a belt of ammunition across one shoulder, and the classical rolled up blanket across the other: the 'real hero' in my boyish imagination.

Much earlier

When I think of the Miren airport I always recall Mama telling us, as little children, of the first flight there by Rusjan.

Rusjan (I cannot remember his first name) was a young Slovenian in Gorica, living in a street just under the castle, in the old part of town. It must have been in the early 1900s, certainly before 1914, when he was 'building his own aeroplane'. It was very early days for aviation, to say the least, but Mama said 'you could walk past his home and you would see him busy in his back shed building his aeroplane', which meant that Mama had seen him.

Anyway, a time came when the news spread that 'Rusjan will fly his aeroplane!'

Mama was a young girl, and remembers going to the Miren field for the great event. She said that there was quite a crowd, they waited and waited, it was cold and windy, but they waited. Eventually they saw this flimsy biplane chugging along the grass, and actually lift a little off the ground only to come down soon after. Mama said you could hardly call it 'flying', and they returned home rather disappointed—they had expected 'real flying'.

Sometime in the 1970s I received a letter from then Tito's Yugoslavia, and the stamp was commemorating 'Rusjan, Yugoslavia's first aviator', with the classic illustration of a pilot's head in his flying gear, and a biplane.

Now, in 2007, I 'Googled' Rusjan, and found that the first flight by Edvard Rusjan was in November 1909, the plane lifted two metres, and flew for 60 metres. I wish I could tell Mama, and show her the marvels of 'Googling'.

22 June 2007

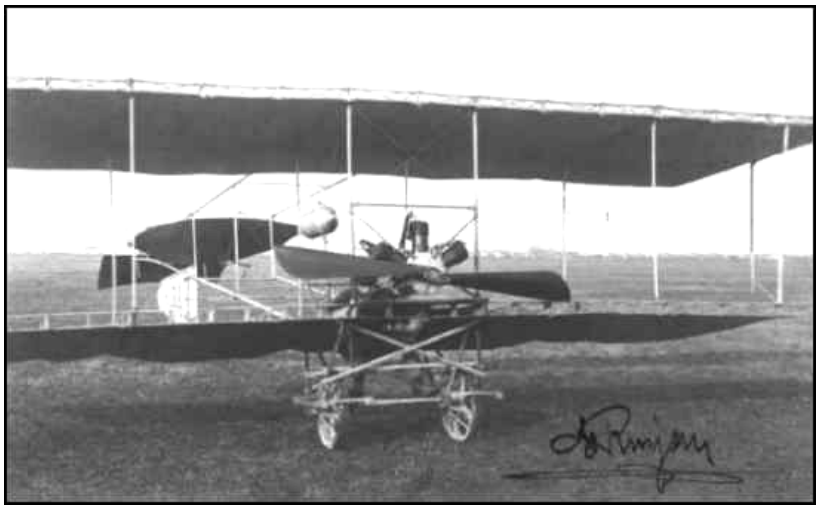

Fig 22. Edvard Rusjan's aeroplane. Mama was there in 1909.

PIONIRJI

Pioneer aircraft designers/builders whose aeroplanes performed fully controllable flights:

1. Wright brothers	USA	Dec. 1903	Wright Flyer
2. Santos Dumont	France	Nov. 1906	Santos Dumont '14 bis'
3. Voisin brothers	France	Oct. 1907	Voisin
4. Louis Blériot	France	Nov. 1907	Blériot VII
5. Ellehammer	Denmark	June 1908	Ellehammer IV
6. Glenn Curtiss	USA	July 1908	'Golden Flyer'
7. A. Levavasseur	France	Oct. 1908	'Antoinette'
8. Ferdinant Ferber	France	1908	Ferber no. 9 Biplane
9. A. V. Roe	Great Britain	July 1909	Roe Triplane
10. H. Farman	France	Aug. 1909	Farman III
11. F. Cody	USA–England	Aug. 1909	Cody Biplane
12. Edvard Rusjan	Slovenia–Austria	Nov. 1909	'EDA I'
13. Goupy	France	1909	Goupy Biplane
14. Louis Breguet	France	1909	Breguet I
15. Aristide Faccioli	Italy	Dec. 1909	Faccioli no. 3 Biplane
16. Igo Etrich	Austria	1910	Etrich 'Taube'
17. Odier–Vendome	France	1910	Odier-Vendome Biplane
18. Zodiac	France	1910	Zodiac 'Albatros
19. Delage–Newport	France	1910	Niewport Monoplane
20. Sir Geoffrey de Havilland	Great Britain	Dec. 1910	D. H. Biplane no. 2
21. Antony Fokker	Holland–Germany	May 1911	Fokker 'Spin'
22. Lioré	France	1911	Lioré Monoplane
23. Tatin–Paulhan	France	1911	'Torpille' Pusher Monoplane
24. F. D'Arbesio	Italy	Oct. 1911	Asteria no. 2
25. Hanriot	France	1911	Henriot Trainer Monoplane
26. A. Chiribiri	Italy	July 1912	Chiribiri no. 5 Monoplane
27. Louis Béchereau	France	1912	Deperdussin 'Course'
28. L. &R. Morane/R. Saulnier	France	1912	Morane-Saulnier 'G'
29. Louis Borel	France	1913	Borel Monoplane
30. T. O. M. Sopwith/F. Sigrist	Great Britain	1913	Sopwith 'Tabloid' fighter/bomber
31. Pateras / Guidoni	Italy	1914	P. /G. 'IDRO' Torpedo plane

Fig 23. List of pioneer aviators.

The goose

14 September 1943

The open rebellion by Slovenians against Fascist Italy's rule in our region started sometime in 1942, when a large group of young men of military age, on receiving their draft orders for the Italian army, went into the Partisans instead. From Bilje there were more than ten. This was open defiance of authority, and the families of the 'rebels' (as they were derogatorily labeled by the authorities) were arrested and interned in a concentration camp, somewhere in Furlania.

But it was after Italy's collapse on 8 September 1943 that the Partisan movement really escalated. Within a day or two, there were meetings called, and every man (under 45 years of age I think) was to be armed and available for whatever comes. Tata also was issued a rifle, the old Italian weapon of World War 1 vintage.

There was a meeting one evening for all the village men, at which some Partisan functionary gave a speech. Tata told Mama, and she later told us children, how the meeting was inspiring and idealistic. The gist of it was that 'the war is far from over, we have difficult times ahead, hard times, but the most important thing is to be united, and if there are any old animosities or hatreds between any villagers, forget them, put them aside, get over them' and, to make his point,

the speaker invited and urged the men to 'talk and shake hands after the meeting'.

Tata, like others, did just that, and he told Mama how he talked to such-and-such and they shook hands, and with such-and-such joked about their old disagreement, and even laughed about it.

But with one individual it was different. Tata went up to Šumpasc to shake hands and talk, but there was nothing doing. His old hatred for Tata was still all there, and there to stay. Mama told us how years earlier, Tata (who was foreman at the brick factory) did not hire Šumpasc, because he thought (knew) that he would be a troublemaker. The brick factory was the only major employer in the village, and all men employed there were from Bilje, but as usual there were many more men available than jobs, so apparently Tata hired those he though best. This was the basis of that hatred towards him.

Tata was quite sound and well, in spite of the tensions, until about the Sunday and Monday, 12–13 September, but then one night his nerves gave way. Mama told us how he got frightened and panicky in the night, and saying 'They will come, kill me and then you all.' This went on for some days and nights. One night he heard some noises and jumped out of bed, ran to the window and threw open the shutters with a 'they are coming, they are coming', but nobody came.

I remember him one daytime pacing up and down the front yard of the house, immersed in his thoughts, trying to work something out, completely oblivious to Miriam and me nearby. In my boyhood ignorance I thought it was funny the way he paced up and down, and even laughed about him, but he either did not notice or did not care.

One night he also said to Mama, 'You know,…what I told you about, forget it, don't take any notice.' Mama said 'But Milko, you haven't told me anything, what do you mean by "what you told me"?' His reply was, 'I haven't told you? Well, so much the better.'

One night, a few days after his first panic, probably on the Thursday–Friday, 16–17 September, in the dead of night, the message came that all the civilians become refugees—leave the area and go away into safer zones, wherever that was. This was what had happened in World War 1, so for some people it was in a way routine.

We all got up, hurrying, and Tata got active and alert like his old self, all inertia, depression, uncertainty gone, getting things ready for us to leave home. The idea was that we take one cow and the cart, load some hay on the bottom and our essentials on top. Mama later commented how this leaving home must have seemed the escape from the trap he was in. While Tata was getting things onto the cart, I was told to kill a goose to take with us. There was nothing to discuss, I caught a goose, grabbed the hatchet used for chopping firewood sticks, and holding the goose under my left arm I tried to chop its head off. But the poor bird was moving its long neck all over, and the whole thing was horrible. I finally chopped the head off, with blood squirting everywhere.

But shortly after, the message came that no! we do not become refugees, we stay where we are! This put an end to Tata's vision of escape, and Mama could see it. We went back to bed from that ugly night.

24 June 2007

House burns

19 September 1943

19 September 1943 was a Sunday, a religiously important one, but I don't know what the religious significance of the day was, something to do with the word 'Four' or 'Forty'. In any case we were meant to go to mass that morning.

It was a typical sunny September day, not a cloud in the sky, as is usual at grape picking time. At about eight or nine in the morning somebody from the village brought the message that going to church was out of the question, because 'danger is coming'. Strange how this expression, to me anyway, had the connotation that 'danger' was not an impersonal concept, but a living thing, like some slow moving monster.

Mama told us children (I was almost 13, my sister Miriam almost 14, and my brother Rihard 16½), not to disappear anywhere as we would probably have to take shelter in the kiln of the brick factory.

Tata was around too, showing *some* interest in what was going on, but still prisoner of the worry, fear, and anxiety which had been afflicting him over the last week. His nerves were very shaken, and I now

believe that his fear was more for us than for himself. It wasn't fear of Germans or Partisans, but of village hatreds. Mama didn't want to leave him alone for any length of time.

I was in front of the house when suddenly a loud whining sound started, getting louder as it approached, and seemed to go over and above our house, finishing with an explosion in the field below our hill, just beyond the water well. With the curiosity of boyhood I was not going to miss this opportunity, and ran to the spot of the explosion to have a look. There was a crater, with a strange smell of burning and still some blue smoke dispersing. I wanted to pick up a splinter of shiny steel from the exploded bomb, stuck firmly into the soil on the wall of the crater, but it was too hot to touch and I just ran back home.

We, the whole family of five, were in the kitchen, ready to go to the kiln for shelter, when Mama with a 'before we go, let us embrace, all together' guided us all (yet it seemed to happen so spontaneously!) into a circle, each with arms outstretched over the shoulders of the two neighbours, heads bowed to the centre and touching. We stayed silent like that for some seconds (I often wondered how many!), then with Mama's 'now let's go!' we rushed towards the kiln. It turned out to be the last embrace of the whole family, and the only one of that type.

The brick factory was just below our hill, only a couple of hundred metres' walk from our home. The kiln had been shut down for about a year, due to lack of coal I guess, and the continuous, long, oval firing chamber was empty on both sides. The walls of the kiln were some two metres thick, with narrow arched openings.

There were several people inside the kiln, all from neighbouring houses. We were all together at about the middle of the left side of the firing chamber: women, children and some middle-aged men.

Fig 24. A brick kiln, but in the Antipodes. This is a kiln about 15 minutes' walk from where Jane and I live now, in Brunswick. It is no longer in use, kept as a relic, and surrounded by new housing. It is so similar to the one in Bilje, and of the same vintage and technology. It is bizarre that I could take, now in 2007, this photo from an angle to say that 'we were sheltering inside the second or third opening, on this left side'. The only difference: we were on the other end of the Earth's diameter!

I have no recall of the pandemonium starting, I can just remember it going on. The Germans had come with tanks. It was their first serious offensive against the Partisans in our region. Some tanks took position in the clear, open ground outside the right side of the kiln structure. The noise of tank guns blended with that of engines and with the screeching of tank chains, as they were turning, reversing, spinning around, and firing in the madness of what is called 'action'.

The interesting thing is that I never saw one single tank that day, but they were there.

They fired also into the structure of the kiln, making the vibrations and ground-shaking even worse. Later we saw that the tall factory chimney had also been damaged by three adjacent hits, about two thirds up, but it withstood them impassively without collapsing. I still marvel at the military logic of firing at a brick chimney!

The fine red dust, which is an integral part of brick kilns and is everywhere, was falling from the vaults and from the coal firing holes, more generously when a shell would hit the kiln.

We were generally standing up, sometimes squatting, but I clearly remember my brother sitting on a few bricks and reading *Noi Vivi* (*We The Living*) by Ayn Rand, it seemed to me for the whole time we were there. It was the book of the time, and there had also been an Italian film made of it, with Fosco Giacchetti as Andrej and Rossano Brazzi as Leo. Alida Valli was Kira. I had seen the film that summer in Gorica, and I remember clearly how I admired Andrej, the idealist who in the end takes his own life, and considered Leo, the survivor at all moral costs, as a reject.

Time was completely undefined, but it must have been about midday when firing ceased and with departing noises the tanks disappeared. Some people cautiously moved into the open, and a voice yelled out that our house was burning. Mama later told us of Tata's reaction 'Let it burn!' '*Naj zgorì!*', as he showed no interest to stop or alter the flow of things. Mama stayed with Tata outside the kiln, my sister also I think, while my brother shot like a rocket towards home, followed by Mama's words 'save the animals!'

I followed my brother, running, but his long legs and earlier start left me way behind. While running, it became obvious that the hayloft above the stable was burning, but the house itself not yet. Our house, atop our hill, consisted of one long building with, from left to right: our stable and 'back room' with hayloft on top, then our home, then another home. The two homes were completely separated by a thick wall. Our home was separated from our stable also by a thick wall, except for one side door from cellar to the back room.

When I reached the house, Rihard was returning from behind the stable and yelled that 'the cows are all right. I have released the baby calf' and rushed into the house. In a flash I saw that the cows couldn't possibly be 'all right'. The roof of the hayloft had already collapsed, the floor of the hayloft was still holding, the hay by now was a glowing mass about one metre thick, alternating in colour between shades of grey and a firing-orange (literally), changing its brightness at the gentle flow of a breeze.

With the collapse of the roof's inside, the rafters had already done their classic 'swing-over'. Typically all houses had a very generous roof overhang. With the fire, a stage is reached at which the roof of a house is burnt and all the roof-tiles collapse, the beams are on fire, while the overhang is still intact. When the weight of the overhang exceeds the weight of the burning beams inside, the whole half roof swings over, pivoting on the top of the wall, onto the ground outside. The result is a row of evenly spaced burning pine rafters, leaning at some graceful angle against the outer wall.

This was now the situation in front of the stable, with glowing beams in front of the stable door, and rubble from the broken tiles on the ground. But this was no serious obstruction to duck under and enter the stable.

Inside the stable the two cows stared at me, they seemed frightened. On the ceiling at the far end from the door, a patch of some 20 by 50 centimetres had already lost the mortar rendering, and the split timber support was glowing gently. Small cinders were on the floor under the patch, but the floor was completely clear of any straw or hay, which was a miracle. Whoever cleaned the stable that morning, Tata, Rihard or myself, did an excellent job!

There was no fear, only urgency. I untied the 'Old Cow', then the 'Young One'. The Old One went straight to the door but stopped there, scared by the burning beams and rubble in front of her, the Young One waited behind. I grabbed the pitchfork and with all my strength swung it overhead onto

the behind of the Old One, hitting her with the steel part. I felt the power of the hit in my hands and arms, and had an immediate fear that I may have broken her bones. In that instant she jumped forward, out and between the burning rafters. The Young One just followed, and so did I.

It must have been then that I registered what Rihard had seen before: that the back room below the hayloft was already completely gone. That's where the grape press, various implements and the pigsty had been. The flimsy internal walls of the pigsty were gone, no sign of the pig (our Čočo), only hot, smouldering rubble. The ceiling of the back room had not been rendered, that's why it gave in much earlier to the fire from the hayloft above. Our Čočo, on whose back I used to ride and whose sty I had kept clean, had been burned alive.

I joined my brother who had just inspected the inside of the house. He said that we may be able to stop the fire spreading from stable to house.

During some futile attempts, with a bucket of water here and a little sand there, I was in front of the house when a loud 'whooshy' noise made me look at the stable. The hayloft floor had finally ceded, and the whole flaming mass of glowing hay had come down. I could never tell how long it was since I had been in there to release the cows: 20 minutes? ten minutes? five? I would like to know.

Mama, Tata and Miriam returned home. It was decided that we should take out of the house as many belongings as possible, which we rushed to do. There were also three men there, who went onto the roof of our home, next to the neighbouring home, and proceeded to smash a half-metre strip of roof tiles and cut all timberwork in between. The idea was to save the next door home, while giving up on ours.

Rational thinking in such situations may well be absent, but we often wondered whether that decision to let our home burn was the result of desperation, or based on long rooted hatreds towards Tata. One of the men was Šumpasc.

But the fire decided otherwise, and in effect stopped spreading beyond our stable, with very little help from us. Our home, however, was no longer habitable: with roof partly damaged by fire at the stable end and smashed at the neighbour's end, all front windows and some back ones smashed by bullets, the side door burned.

Mama rushed to Nono's house, about one kilometre away, to see how things were there.

On that day about ten houses or stables had been burned in the village, the result of firing with tracer bullets. There were no civilian casualties, I think. There was at least one case of cows burned alive. Nono's house was also one of those burned. It was an imposing house not far from the church, and it was completely gutted before Nono and family got to it from their shelter in another kiln. Their stable was detached and did not burn. Otherwise they lost everything.

When Mama returned from Nono's she told us that when she got there, the barrels of wine in the cellar were still holding, but ablaze and enveloped in blue flames, of burning alcohol. She said 'it was sad, but I must say that it was beautiful, the blue flames'.

At some stage in the afternoon, when the fire had done its work and a type of calm had returned, Mama with a 'we need to eat something' went into the emptied kitchen and cooked a flour soup. Our belongings were scattered everywhere.

But we were all alive.

Rye, 15 September 1997

Tata disappears

20 September 1943

20 September 1943 was a Monday. It was the day after our stable had been burned, and the home damaged so that we could no longer live in it.

On the preceeding day, the Sunday, we had thrown all our belongings out of the house, and they were scattered all around. As evening approached, my father decided that he would sleep outside on a mattress, to keep watch on the belongings, as the weather was still quite mild. Both Mama and Tata thought that, for us three children, it was better to be in a safer place, and we were to sleep in the underground cellar of a large neighbouring house, below our hill. Tata's nerves were reasonable then, but he wished not to be alone through the night, and asked Mama to stay with him. She later told us of her answer

'oh Milko, but I just have to look after the children', and that it pained her to be 'forced to choose between my husband and my children', as she knew very well how he needed her support.

But the night passed uneventfully, and in the morning we children stayed on at the cellar and yards where we had spent the night. Mama went up to our home to see Tata and make some breakfast for him. He seemed reasonable to her, but she still did not want to leave him alone, if at all possible, and they went together to the home, just below our hill, of a kind and trusted elderly neighbour, whom she told firmly 'Stay with Milko at all times, I beg you.'

She was busy for some half hour, perhaps with breakfast for us children or other chores, when she saw the neighbour again, but he was alone. To her question 'But where is Milko?' the neighbour replied that Tata went up to the house again to give water to the cows, and added, 'But he is quite all right, there is nothing to worry about.' With a 'But I told you not to leave him alone!' she rushed up the hill, back to our house. But Tata was nowhere, and no reply to her calls. By her recollections it was about ten or eleven in the morning.

She got us children, told us that Tata had disappeared and to look for him, to go around, wherever, and look and call for him. I remember going a little distance into the bush, behind our house, looking and calling out.

I also remember standing at the back of our burnt-out stable, next to the manure pit, just above the descending bush, on what was a bit of a vantage point where, as smaller children, we used to play and yell out to hear the echo from nearby hills, and calling with all my might ' Tata! ... Tata! ... Tata!' But only the echo came back.

At some stage during the day the rain came. It was a heavy downpour, typical of the season, which washed and cleansed the air, and was followed by sunshine again. I remember us all being at the outdoor table under the wisteria pergola at the front of the house, with Nona and Teta Dragica—who had come up from the village to hear what's happened. They talked with Mama in a long series of mutually comforting hypotheses about Tata's disappearance, and hopes of his return.

It was late afternoon. Mama sent my sister Miriam and me down to the neighbour's house with some errand, and we walked the usual way down the path past the water well and to the right. Here was a short path, which then turned downhill again, and was the only spot where, by squatting, we could not be seen from our house. There was no purpose and no talk, but we did squat, with knees on the ground, facing each other, and the words just came out of me, 'You know Miriam, it seems to me that Tata will never come home again!'

We embraced and cried. We stayed there only a short time, dried our eyes, got up and continued downhill.

It was the first crying, and the first recognition of possible truth. Later we embraced hope again, and cried little.

Rye, 5 November 1997

Upturned vats

22 September 1943

After 20 September some events moved quickly. Mama and we three children slept in the neighbour's cellar below the hill for several days. One morning the German army came with all its power. There was no resistance at all from the Partisans, it would really have been futile. The column of vehicles and armory was never-ending, and it was many decades later that I read it was part of Rommel's power moving towards Africa, and that the Partisan resistance of our region was considered a useful interlude to provide a little 'live training' to the German soldiers.

As the long motorized column moved on through our village, the elderly men, all veterans of World War 1, looked on and commented in awe about German might.

The column stopped for a break, and some of it moved into the large yard of the house where we had slept. I remember a few young soldiers cleaning their motorcycles, happy and laughing. Rihard, 16 years old but quite tall, was nowhere to be seen, and there was reason to be scared that he could be taken. After quite some time he reappeared and I asked him where he had been. He said he had hidden under an upturned vat there in the yard. There were several of these vats there, being soaked up in readiness for the imminent grape picking in late September. Anyway nothing happened, but Mama was concerned and got him to go into the cellar

and lie in bed pretending to be sick, with her sitting next to the bed. A young German officer came in to inspect, and got talking to Mama, who told him that her eldest son is not well. The officer smiled, he probably understood the situation. Mama and he conversed in French, he was in good spirits and confident, very happy to be talking with someone. I sort of remember the scene. Mama asked him 'When will the war be over?' He did not give a prediction, but she told me later how he reverently said, 'We have trust in our *Führer*.'

Later my friends Đenko and Franček (brothers) told me that, with their father, they had hidden in the main draft tunnel of the brick kiln, leading to the big stack, at the far end of it. There are no openings in there—it's dark, black, with a thick layer of soot on the floor from the coal burning. The Germans heard noises and threw a hand grenade in. The three of them came out of the tunnel quite promptly, spluttering out soot, and blacker than chimney sweeps. Their father spoke some German, and on questioning told them that he had been a soldier in the Austrian Army during World War 1. The Germans were friendly and surprised 'but why do you hide from us?'

Later in the day the whole German procession moved on beyond our village.

10 June 2007

The green grass

December 1943

On St Stephen's Day in 1943 shooting started on the other side of the river. I don't remember the time, but it must have been before noon.

St Stephen's Day is the day after Christmas, 26 December. There was no such thing as Boxing Day in Bilje. Mama used to say 'you were born the day after St Stephen', so I would be 13 tomorrow. But birthdays were no great deal either, only Name's Day got a bit of a mention, and perhaps a pancake, but I don't remember when mine was.

The river Vipava runs through Bilje, then Miren and on to Sovodnje into the river Soča. It is a small river, about 10–20 metres wide, depending on its position. Its path through Bilje was deep, or very deep, everywhere except downstream from the water mill where the concrete dam was. The dam provided the water head for the water wheel driving the milling stones. The water flow was slow as it is all in flat country.

There was no bridge in Bilje. Miren, about four kilometres downstream, had a stone bridge, which must have been destroyed at some stage in the war, because I remember it being rebuilt after the war. The other bridge was in Renče, a village about four kilometres upstream from Bilje. This was a steel bridge, which had been blown up by Partisans early, maybe in September 1943 or shortly after. I remember seeing it half in the water during the war, and was impressed by the spectacle.

Bilje, however, had a steel barge, a relic of World War 1. It was normally moored on the river just behind Boris' house, and it was chained to a steel cable slung across the river. The 'passengers' would step into the barge and pull themselves and barge across. I remember doing one such trip when I was very little, it was a great adventure, but I do not remember with which adults.

The shooting went on sporadically for some time. I was with other boys, and someone said that the Partisans, Vosovci, had attacked a group of Italians in a small cluster of houses on 'the other side', as we called that area, and had 'won'. The Italians—those still loyal to Mussolini after September 1943—were now under German tutelage. It was said later that their excursion was basically for looting—chooks and the like.

There were about four of us boys, but the only one I remember specifically was Berto. He was 'brave' and suggested we go 'to the other side'. He and some other boy knew where the barge had been moved to, about one kilometre upstream from its normal mooring, and away from houses. We found the barge, boarded it and started to paddle across. Berto was the most enthusiastic rower. We were just a little downstream of a river bend, where the river was relatively wide, and on the other side there was a grassed promontory several metres high, with a sheer drop to the river, where the river was eroding into the clay coastline. On the promontory, close to the drop, we could see a dead man, one of the killed Italians. He had been stripped, and I still have this vision of pink body and white underpants in the near distance. We were right in the middle of the river when shooting started again, not far on

the other side, and Berto the brave was repeating 'Don't be afraid, don't be afraid.' I was still paddling forward, but looked at Berto and noticed that he was still facing forward and paddling furiously, but backwards! So we all did the same—we were all brave. We tied the barge back where we found it and returned to the village.

Some time later we were just behind Stric Karlo's house, where a path comes from the river, about 100 metres away, to the main road. A group of men walked up from the river—it was two or three Partisans, with an Italian they had captured. They stopped a few metres away. I recognized only Čičurin, with a chrome plated pistol in his hand, and I stared at that pistol and thought how it is not a toy, it kills. There was some discussion, one of the boys said the Italian was saying he has two children. They started to move off along the road, up towards the brick factory. Alfons, a couple of years younger than me, got quite excited and said to me, 'Come, come, come. Let's go with them. They are taking him to *Pijončkevo*. They are going to kill him.' I could not believe the glee with which he said it. I did not go with Alfons, I went the other way and returned home.

Again, Mama was quite worried, as I had been away for some hours. She scolded me, and told how she had gone to ask Nono if he had seen me. He had not, and said to my worried mother, with a smile of boys-are-boys 'I bet he has gone to the other side (of the river)', the last thing she wanted to hear. I don't remember how much of the adventure I told her.

It was known that the Italian had been killed, shot in the head, in one of Pijonček's vineyards, about 100 metres from our burnt-out house.

In early spring of 1944 I was with Franček at our burnt-out house, and he told me he had seen the killing, and that he knew where the man was buried, that he could show me where. We walked to the vineyard. At first he could not find any signs of it, and was going from one row of grapevines to the other saying 'It should be here ... it should be here,' when we both said 'It must be here.' On the bare brown soil between two rows of grapevines there was a patch of bright green, newly sprouting grass, about a man's length and width. It is the memory of that grass that tells me it was early spring.

It gave meaning to that ugly expression which had come into usage then, when to the question 'And so-and-so? Where is he? What happened to him?' the answer would be, sometimes sarcastically but not always, 'Oh, him ... he is fertilizing the earth.'

The place was right next to the big slope where we used to sled in the snow, and next to the beautiful bush where Franček and I used to play Tarzan, not many years before.

28 July 2007

Village burns

December 1943

Two or three days after the Partisan attack after Christmas 1943 on the Italians on the other side of the river, the Germans retaliated. So it must have been 29 or 30 December 1943, when they came to give the village a lesson. I do not know how, but the message was clear that the whole village will be burned down. So people started to throw their belongings out of their houses. Mama told me to go up to our damaged house on the hill and save what I can of the remaining belongings in the lounge room. There wasn't much, mainly Mama's books from Egypt, and she said not to worry about the glassed cupboard itself as it was too heavy for me to shift.

So up I went, carried all I could out of the house onto the front garden to the right of the wisteria pergola, some four or five metres away from the house. It didn't take me very long, and then I just waited there looking down onto the village. The Germans started setting fire to each house systematically, starting from my end of the village—the furthest away from the return to Gorica, where they had come from. I was expecting them to come up to our house on the hill, but it must have looked damaged enough already, or too far away from the main road, for them to bother. So they never came, but I waited nevertheless.

I watched as all the houses below our hill were burning. There was a lot of grey smoke in the air, and I could not tell how far down the main road the burning was. I just stood on the edge of the embankment in front of the pergola and waited. I do not remember time passing, but it must have been a few hours, as I recall clearly that it was pretty dark already when the 'fireworks' started.

By fireworks I mean the stage at which the roof of a house is burnt enough to do the 'swing-over'. This is impressive enough in the daytime, but at night it looked beautiful. The burning beams traced a large and graceful circular trajectory of flames and sparks, and hit the ground outside with more sparks. With so many houses at various stages of burning, the spectacle went on for quite a while.

Eventually I thought it safe to carry the belongings back inside, leave the hill and return home. All Germans were gone. As in all bizarre situations, I got there and just walked into our house, still intact, with Mama and all the others in the house. All belongings were scattered outside. One detail was a mattress on the right side of the house, with our Telefunken radio on it. They told me how proud Nona was when she said that she 'saved the radio', by throwing it out the top window onto the mattress on the ground below. In those days a radio was a very delicate contraption, with its sophisticated valves of glass. The radio was already damaged and not working from the previous fire on the hill, but we had hoped it could be repaired. I remember picking it up from the mattress, and it sounded like a box of shattered glass, but who cared. We just carried mattresses, et cetera, back inside.

The story went that, at some stage, the Germans just stopped setting fire to houses and left the village, and that this followed the intervention of the crew of German soldiers who were manning the military radio station located between Bilje and Miren. These soldiers, in pairs on their motorbike with side-car, used to go often to the inn in Bilje's old village for a quart of wine, and if lucky a bread roll with salami or ham. They were friendly and, in a way, also befriended. Anyway when they saw that Bilje was to be burned down, they raced to 'Komand' in Gorica vouching that the people of Bilje are all 'good, friendly and innocent', and the village should not be punished, and that 'Komand' obliged and halted the burning.

So, many houses were left unharmed, but as irony would have it, the still unburned stable of Nono's property had already been set alight. Rihard told me that he was in the farmyard and saw the German soldier climb the ladder to the hay loft above, set the hay alight with a match, and climb down again!

One result of this was that, while we still had our Old Cow and Nono's cow, now there was no hay left at all, in mid-winter. I remember one day, after much talk and expectation, a man arrived with a large cartload of hay, drawn by an ox, and we quickly unloaded the hay into our practically empty hay loft. It was Vojko's father Dolfič (Nona's brother or brother-in-law), whom I had never seen before, who had come some 15–20 kilometres by road from Brda, the wine hills beyond the other side of Gorica. He left his home at first light, arrived around midday, and could not stop even for lunch, to be back home in daylight, as travelling in the dark was too dangerous. So the cows were provided for the rest of winter, but strictly rationed!

2 September 2007

Flag and funeral

Winter 1943–1944

Danila was the eldest daughter of Francili, Mama's first cousin. Her younger sister was Magda, my age. Francili was involved and very active with the Slovenian political movement against Italian Fascist rule in our region. I don't know when it started, but it became more active with the start of World War 2 in 1940. The Italian Fascist regime was quite vicious in its suppression of any sign of Slovenian existence, let alone rebellion.

Miriam told me recently, and I do not remember or never heard, how Mama told her that Francili tried to get Tata and Mama to join in.

One evening after dark, Francili came up to our isolated house on the hill, to talk to Mama and Tata. It was not safe to talk in the kitchen, so they went to the stable. The cows would be ruminating and looking. He talked of freedom for Slovenians in Primorje (land by the sea), our region. He then unfurled a Slovenian flag, saying, 'This is what we are going for.' It was great stuff, lofty and genuine ideals, against oppression.

Cows could be trusted, but if the mere existence of a Slovenian flag became known to the authorities, the certain consequence was political imprisonment with all its implications, very ugly. In their hearts both Mama and Tata would be for it, but Mama

certainly and Tata also, allowed reason to come in too, which demanded to choose between flag and family. At this choice Mama would have no doubts: children and husband first. So they did not get involved.

Francili got his daughter Danila also involved, as courier or whatever. Danila was arrested, I guess in 1941 or 1942, and jailed in Gorica. Jail was not conducive to good health at the best of times, with its cold and dampness, and for political prisoners it was even worse. I don't know what 'treatment' she got in there, but became very ill in jail, and was released not long before the collapse of Italy in September 1943. She was home for several months, but very ill, pneumonia Mama said. She died, probably in early 1944, in her late teens, 20 at most.

The funeral was just before dusk, with a grey and bleak sky. It was unusual time, probably because of lesser risk for a German incursion. We all went, and it was said that they will sing the *Nadgrobnica* (The song at the grave). This was the Partisan song for the 'fallen'. We had heard it, but not at a funeral, and learned the words only in recent months. I just loved the music of it—the slow, sombre, marching cadence—and the slow, idealistic words with it. It had to come to the mid-1970s for me to learn from Ivan and Belinda that the music is Chopin's funeral march.

After Danila's coffin had been lowered, with hand-held ropes, and the customary throwing of the fist of earth into the grave by those present, a choir of about six men assembled in semicircle near the open grave, ready to sing. I was determined to have a good position to hear the song, and climbed on a ledge on the cemetery wall, holding onto it. They sang the *Nadgrobnica* for Danila, and I felt an uplifting that had not experienced before. I was 13.

Danila had given her life for flag and freedom, but Mama did not approve of Francili's priorities. Once, it would have been after Danila's death, when he asked 'What about Miriam helping us? We need girls like Miriam.' Mama told him unequivocally 'You leave *my* daughter alone.'

Later

In 1986, my last trip to Europe, Jane and I spent many days with Teta Mila. It was summer, and one evening we went to a public gathering with Đenko and others. Afterwards we went to the inn in the church square, with a large group of men and women. We had a very long table outside. The group was, near enough, the singing choir of Bilje of people about my age. They sang a few songs around the table, and fireflies were circling around, as in childhood days. I had thought that fireflies no longer existed.

I did not recognize the woman sitting next to me until she told me who she was—my second cousin Magda, Danila's younger sister, my age. We hadn't seen each other for over 40 years. She lived in the old family home where I learned to distill *žganje* (burning water, grappa) in 1944–1945 from her grandfather Stric Drajčk, Mama's uncle.

Magda invited Jane and me to come and see her one day, which we did. In the reminiscing I told her that I remembered Danila's funeral, and that they sang the *Nadgrobnica*. Magda thanked me with emotion for telling her, 'because I was heartbroken, I was so sad, I do not remember any singing, but how beautiful to know now that they sang for her', and she showed a treasured photo of her sister, young and handsome.

We talked of our children, from us that both Ivan and Belinda studied music, and from her that her daughter is a professional concert pianist, studied in Russia, and now playing in many countries.

Much later

Only a few years ago, in 2003–2004, when visiting Philip in Balwyn, we talked of Arthur Koestler. I had read some of his books—*Darkness at Noon*, *Spanish Testament*, *The Call Girls*, *The Act of Creation*, and others. Philip had read several too, and he lent me Koestler's autobiography. In it Koestler describes also his early years in Budapest. He tells how, around the start of World War 1, some communists were murdered by the Hungarian authorities of the day. There was a very public funeral, with a big crowd attending, and he went too, as a young boy. During the funeral procession they were playing the Chopin funeral march. Koestler describes how elated he felt, in the idealism of the event and by the music. He was about eleven. It was good to read some of my old feelings at a similar age, described so well.

29 July 2007

Dead Cossack

March 1944

In the days immediately following Tata's disappearance, Mama tried to speak and question as many people as she could whether they knew anything and when they last saw or spoke with Tata. Nothing useful came out. One day as she was walking on the track below our house towards Rok's house, she met Šumpasc going the other way. She asked him too what he knew. His reply was that he knew nothing, but Mama kept questioning and, as she told us later, she 'wanted to look him in the eyes', but it was impossible, 'His eyes kept darting in all directions, he just kept avoiding my eyes all the time, he just did not want our eyes to meet ... I did not like that.'

Life went on.

We—Mama, Rihard, Miriam and I—lived in a relative's house with Tata's parents and one of his sisters—Teta Dragica—as their house was completely burned down.

One day in early afternoon, it must have been early 1944, probably around March, I was working around our old damaged home, while Nono was pruning grapevines in his own vineyard adjacent to ours. Pruning was usually done just before spring, just before the pruned vine would 'weep'. From where Nono was he could hear the talk that went on some 100 metres away, as people had congregated around a water pond. There were many such water ponds in Bilje, about 10–15 metres long and five to six metres wide, of varying depths, often deeper than man. They were the sites where clay had been dug out years before, and had then filled up with storm water, and were never dry again, as the clay was a perfect seal to hold the water.

Nono called me, and said that it seems that there is a dead man floating in the pond, 'go and see'. I do not remember whether he specifically said that it could be Tata, his son. There was no need to, I knew what 'go and see' meant. I went down to the pond. On the opposite end there was a group of women talking and looking at the pond. Alfons, a boy slightly younger than me, was there too. More or less in the middle of the water there was a cluster of black hair. It was the top of a man's head, all the rest was submerged, but nothing was visible below surface level, as the water in those ponds was not clear. Alfons took a clump of earth—it was very clayish earth there—and threw it, hitting the floating hair, and was pleased with his precision. I thought it was an ugly act.

I went back to Nono, told him that the man is still in the water, and went back to my chores. I do not remember what I was doing. After a while Nono called me again and said that it seems that they had pulled out the dead man, 'go and see again'.

I went. The dead man was face up on the ground, on the opposite end of the pond, with a cord lying nearby. He had had his hands tied, but they had removed the cord before I got there. I walked to the body, and after the first instant of thinking that it could be Tata, I looked better at the bloated face and at the body. He could not be Tata, and he was too short. It turned out that he was a Russian Cossack. His face was somewhat battered.

Looking from where I approached, the pond was on the left side of the 'Red Track' (*Rusa Pot* as we called it). The house where Šumpasc lived was to the right of the track, some 30–40 metres away. By that time in the war, it was known that Šumpasc's house was a place of killing. And no detective abilities were needed to see that the Cossack had been taken, kept at Šumpasc's house, but somehow escaped in the night, had fallen into the pond and drowned, with hands tied. They were saying that it takes one or two days for a drowned body to resurface.

Now I do not remember whether it was the first time I got to the pond, when the body was still in the water, or when it was out of the water, that Šumpasc's youngest son Vojko, about six years older than me, walked with long strides from their house towards the group of women, and was furious at them being there, swore at them 'damn witches ... go back to hell'(*preklete babe*), with his hand up in the air pointing at them to go away. I remember seeing him across the length of the pond.

I went back to Nono and told him that the dead man was not Tata.

25 June 2007

The gossip

Spring 1944

One day in 1944, several months after Tata had disappeared, someone came to Mama to tell her that they found the body of a man, in some village up from Bilje towards the mountains, and that they do not know who he is. Mama went, from memory she went by pushbike, to see if it could be Tata. She came back within the day. She told us that it is not Tata, that the body was unearthed from a shallow grave. I do not remember exactly how she put it to us, but basically that one could no longer distinguish facial features, and that she looked carefully at the dead man's teeth, and they were definitely not Tata's, because one particular tooth, she told us which, did not have a chipped-off corner like Tata's did.

Later, not many days later, it was 'gossiped' that someone said, 'What is she going around all over the place for, looking for him everywhere? He is not far from the house!'

I always had the memory that Mama never knew where that gossip had originated. As far as I knew it was the typical case of 'she told me that she heard from such-and-such, who was told by ...' when the trail of the gossip never gets to the prime source.

What was bizarre was that in 2005, I met again with a close childhood friend, Dorče Rusjan, who was living in Ballarat. He was born in 1930 like me, and it was more than pure chance that we met again after some 62 years, as we worked it out.

It was lovely to get together again at the dusk of life, with common memories of innocent childhood. As we reminisced, I told him the story of Mama going to look at that body. He remembered the find of the body, because he knew the man, from Bilje I think, who was ploughing the field and struck the shallowly buried dead man. Dorče told me who the plougher was, but I did not remember him. So it must have been early spring of 1944, perhaps April or May, when ploughing for the new crops starts.

26 June 2007

The bombardment

Spring 1944

Only air displacement

One day in early spring 1944 I was on my way to Gorica to school. My class started soon after lunch, as the school was running two shifts. So it must have been around eleven in the morning. We had no tyres for the pushbikes, so I walked the approximate one-hour distance, taking a shortcut across fields from Bilje to Vrtojba, which was about half the distance.

I had just reached the first houses of Vrtojba, by a track descending to a creek, when a rumbling noise started in the distance, and getting louder. I assumed that there must be a lot of airplanes coming for a bombardment somewhere, and wanted to see the spectacle. So I ran back up the track, and on to the top of a grassed hill, very familiar to me. From there I could see, in the far distance a little to my right, what appeared like a brown wall several metres high, slowly moving forward. The rumbling was getting stronger still, and I realized that the brown wall was earth dust from exploding bombs, and the rumbling a combination of aircraft noise and exploding bombs, so everything seemed to rumble and tremble.

This brown wall was advancing at a diagonal, or a big arc, getting closer but not directly towards me, so it was just a spectacle. As it swept past my direct view ahead and to my left, the brown wall ended because a hill came between it and me. The rumbling continued and in a flash it dawned on me that Bilje was right there behind that hill, where obviously the bombs were still falling. I started to run, and would have beaten any world champion, back towards home. By the time I covered the couple of kilometres and got home it was all over—no more rumbling and no more cloud. Mama was home and relieved to at least see me, as she was worried for me and for Miriam, both gone to school in Gorica. As it turned out, at the Ursuline Nuns where Miriam was at school, they

hardly knew there had been a bombardment, as they were at the opposite end of town, and some three or four kilometres away from the nearest part of the bombardment.

Mama was walking the back path from Nono's burnt-out house to where we lived in a relative's house, about 100 metres apart, when the bombs were approaching. She threw herself to the ground as the bombardment passed her, bombs falling all around, but she completely lost her breath. As she told us, she just could not take a breath, and expected she would die. But then, suddenly, she could breathe again! She could not explain whether it was fear or the bombs, but later she was told that it was 'only air displacement', thank you very much!

That was the education of what 'carpet bombing' meant, and what the Italian word *spezzone* meant. The area bombarded swept through many villages and their fields: Štandreš, Sovodnje, Miren, Bilje, Bukovca, that I know of. It was a sunny day of early spring, so the fields were being worked for the sowing—by man, woman, ox, cow.

The bombs were *spezzoni*, today called anti-personnel. They were not very large, and exploded immediately on contact with practically no crater, just a complete sweep with shrapnel and whatever all around, close to ground level. Inside a house it was already 'safe' as the bombs would explode on the roof. Excellent for killing the enemy, provided he cooperated by concentrating in the area to be bombed, and in the open.

We also learned that it would have been American aircraft because it was daytime, the nighttime was for the British. The 'strategic' value of the bombardment was zero (absolute zero). There were no Germans anywhere in the bombed area.

The civilian deaths in Bilje were more than ten, in Miren about 60, other villages had their own shares. Cows and oxen were killed too of course, and many people wounded, mainly in the fields or otherwise in the open. We were not yet sophisticated enough to explain it as 'collateral damage'. One story of such damage came to me through *The Bread Kiln*.

The bread kiln

Boris Marega, my close friend from Bilje, migrated to Australia in the early 1950s like us. He lived in Melbourne and we were very close, as Mama was his godmother.

Sometime in the mid 1970s, Ana came from Miren to Melbourne to visit her brothers Miro and Adam, also migrants from 1950–1951.

Both in their early forties, Boris and Ana simply fell in love and they married, but in Miren, and Boris went to work and live in Yugoslavia, after some 25 years in Australia. But after only a couple of years he did not want to live there any more and returned to Melbourne. Ana followed him about one year later. So we became very close friends with Ana too. Jane was particularly fond of her, and vice-versa. Ana loved Ivan and Belinda.

Also in the mid 1970s I met Richard Salt at work, and we became close friends. We understood each other and liked each other's company and conversation. The frequent lunches together at the Pancake Parlour were a welcome break from the often meaningless existence in the offices of Comalco, our employer. We were both not the ideal 'corporate material'.

Richard lost his wife Elizabeth to cancer. She was Canadian. It was an enormous blow to him, and he was given a year's unpaid leave from work, during which he also went to Canada to see Elizabeth's people. He returned to his job before the year was over, worked for a short time, but just could not swallow the futilities of a corporate office any more and resigned. He started his small nursery from home in Monbulk.

Even before he left work, Richard talked of wanting to build a bread kiln. We discussed the idea, and I was also keen because of bread kiln memories from way back. When I was to go to Europe in 1978 and also visit Teta Mila in Bilje, he stressed for me to take all the necessary measurements of the old kiln in that ancestral home. When I returned and showed him my 'measurements' he laughed—all I had was a simple sketch on a scrap of paper of the kiln opening, its height, and the kiln diameter. It was certainly very limited information, to say the least. But we were both enthusiastic about it and I drew up a more detailed plan for the overall structure and we started, with the foundations.

As I talked to Ana about it, she said that her old uncle back in Miren, now of poor eyesight, had been a master builder, and had also built innumerable kilns through his working life. She could ask him for a few hints. She did, and within a few weeks she received neat and fully detailed and annotated drawings, made by a young nephew of the

uncle, under his instructions, for a kiln of our desired size. We realized that we really knew nothing on how to build a proper working kiln, and we were just about to do the base of the baking chamber. Those drawings put us on the right track, and we followed them to the letter, almost.

The kiln was eventually completed, a newspaper lit at the base of the chimney just to test, and in a few seconds the burning paper was sucked up the chimney and spewed out at the top, still burning. It was fantastic, the chimney 'pulled', as they used to say, and how!

The very first experimental bake produced bread with over-baked crust, but only because we left it in too long. It was good bread!

We made an inaugural bake with lots of people, lots of pizza, and lots of bread. Over the years I went on many, many weekends for a bake of plain wholemeal bread, sometimes also pizza. For many years we did Easter baking with Ana, who knew everything:—how to make plain bread, butter bread, *hubanca*, *panettone*, and *kančuni*—the plaited loaves of butter bread with eggs for faces, which Ivan and Belinda then painted. After Ivan's death I went only a few times, life had changed.

Richard sold his home to move to Daylesford. On his ads for the house he used a picture of the kiln.

During one of those happy bakes Ana told me the story of her parents in the bombardment. Her father was in the fields working, the mother at home with a young baby boy, the last of a family of two girls and five boys, and Ana helping her with the cooking. Ana must have been about eleven then.

When they heard the bombardment coming, Ana ran out the door to one side and headed straight for a cellar in a nearby house. Her mother grabbed the baby boy and ran out the door to the opposite side. As she reached the sloping street, the father was running from the fields towards home, and 'As he reached mother and baby the bomb came. Mother and baby boy were killed. Father was not really killed then. He was taken later to the hospital in Gorica with others wounded, on the back of a truck. He died there'. The whole scene was a butchery, Ana said, 'One young girl lost both legs. She lived. Also two oxen with cart were butchered'.

The younger ones of the family, Ana, her sister and three boys I think, were taken into the family of Ana's uncle, her father's brother, the master builder. He had his own family. He was the typical idealist of the time, communist of course, and as they sat around the table he said that 'whatever there is, we all share it' and so it was.

After the war, in the early 1950s when Tito fell out of grace with Stalin, the uncle was imprisoned and spent some years on Goli Otok (Naked Island), the prison island for political dissidents in the northern Adriatic, the Gulag of Tito's Yugoslavia. He survived and was eventually released, but never talked about it much. Ana told me how, many decades later, when she read of the horrors on *Goli Otok*, she showed the book to the uncle and asked whether those things actually happened. He replied, 'Everything that's there, and much more'.

I met him, and his wife, as an older man in the early 1980s, when I went to thank him for the drawings and instructions of the bread kiln. He was a lovely man. In the few days I spent there on that trip, I came across him getting off the bus I was catching. He had a bunch of flowers—he had been to a nearby larger village to get the flowers for their wedding anniversary. The idealist.

26 July 2007

Fig 25. The bread kiln we built at Richard Salt's place in 1980. It took us nine months of weekends.

Nono's vinegar

Summer 1944

In 1944, sometime in summer, a German aeroplane crash-landed in Bilje, in the middle of the day. It was a large plane, silver colour with corrugated surface. It came down onto fields next to the red road, about 100 metres from the main road, and from where we lived then with Nona and Teta Dragica. I heard the noise, but did not see it come down. We boys were there in no time, of course, and I remember being impressed by the deep ploughing the wheels had done across the field and grass area, as it came down crossways. It was now lying on grass, at right angle with the direction of the crash, leaning but not visibly damaged.

When I recalled this episode to Stric Karlo in Argentina in 1981, he remembered the event quite well, and was still annoyed because the plane had sheared off the tops of several of his fruit trees, as it came in over his field.

When we boys got there, a German pilot was already sitting on top of the fuselage, at the highest point in the front, and we saw him fire a flare. I thought that he was very brave, because it was certainly Partisan territory, but the brave Vosovci were nowhere to be seen. But as an airman he probably had no idea of conditions 'on the ground' as they say today. We didn't want to hang around, and went back home.

I don't remember whether on the same day or the day after, the Germans came, escorted by a tank, and started to disassemble and recover the plane, working into late afternoon and going away at dusk, presumably back to the Miren airport. This went on for about three days, and we were already joking that they must like the pastime, rather than being cooped up in barracks—it was nice summer weather after all. Without being aircraft mechanics, we thought that one day ought to be enough to recover the plane. But on the last day, just before dusk, the tank entering the main road from the red road, instead of proceeding away, it turned 135 degrees up towards where we lived, and we saw it stop soon after, right at the big gate of Nono's farmyard, only three or four houses down from us. We went back inside, as curiosity was not wise, and waited. There were Nono, Nona, Teta Dragica, Mama, Miriam, me, and Popsy our dog.

Nono's property, first burnt in September

1943, except for the separate stable and hayloft, which was burned in December 1943, had only one building left undamaged—the double pigsty with chook house on top. Nono, saying that he has to guard the property, had settled himself to sleep in one of the pigsties, next door to the pig. But Mama said, smiling, that he knows full well that there was nothing to guard, but that he was happier to be away from us all—and from so many women. He would only come from his pigsty to our house occasionally for a meal, as more often we took his meals to him. This I remember well, as I somewhat envied his peaceful straw bed on the floor of the pigsty. Next to the bed he had a nice small barrel full of home-made wine vinegar. He had no wine left, as it had all been lost in the September fire—in what Mama had called 'the beautiful blue alcohol flames'.

After some waiting, we heard the tank moving again, but instead of reversing and going away, it kept coming up the main road, and stopped, of all places, right in front of our house. This had a pretty entrance with two substantial pillars, so it looked a little more prosperous than other houses. A German got off the tank and paced through the two pillars towards our kitchen door, which we kept open, as closed doors were not advisable. Popsy leaped out of the kitchen barking furiously at the German, who went for his pistol, in good John Wayne style, even though I hadn't met him yet. But just as fast I leapt out of the kitchen, grabbed Popsy, and pulled him back into the kitchen. German John Wayne relented, put his pistol (a good Mouser, better than any of real John Wayne's clumsy revolvers) back into the holster, but left the holster open—another of those messages. The German came into the kitchen and demanded 'butter' (in barking German pronunciation, which Mama understood from English) and eggs (I don't know who understood that). Mama gave him what was in the house, not much. In the meantime Nono had walked out of the kitchen to the front pillars, and noticed, neatly tied to the tank, his vinegar barrel. He went wild. He faced the German and pointing angrily at the barrel yelled out, 'That is mine!' The German barked something back, but Nono, more incensed than ever, yelled that he will go to the *Kommand* and report. This really shook the wild German who yelled back, with risen arm and extended finger, for Nono to go back into the house. It was getting ugly, and Teta Dragica forcibly dragged Nono back into the house, trying to placate him. Eventually the tank turned, and they all pissed off, with Nono's barrel. While Nono had all the human rights to be furious, he did cool off as he was encouraged by Teta Dragica and Mama to think of the Germans when they will open his barrel for the wine, and their first mouthful of vinegar. We all laughed in the end. Even Popsy wagged his tail.

Fig 26. Teta Mila's farmyard in summer 1970, with her chooks. The red door in the building on the left goes into the cellar, where Mama saw the barrels of wine enveloped in 'the beautiful blue flames of alcohol' on 19 September 1943, the day before Tata disappeared.

Fig 27. Teta Mila's farmyard in winter 1970–1971, practically unchanged from 1944. On the left is the arched gateway from the main road, where the tank stopped. The building to the right of the gate is the stable and hayloft, burnt in December 1944, as was the house across the road, where the postman lived. The small building just behind the walnut tree is the pigsty with chook house on top. There are two doors —the one nearest to the tree is where Nono slept in 1944, next to his vinegar barrel. The pig slept next door.

The violin and the goat

Summer 1944

To put a complex political situation simply, there were for us two types of Partisans—those in the brigades, and the Vosovci.

Now, 2007, I looked up again a book Teta Mila gave me, *Gradnikova Brigada*, and found that *VOS* was the *Varnostno-Obveščevalna Služba* (Defence Intelligence Service).

The brigades were the troops, sleeping in the forests, attacking Germans and their hangers-on when they could. The Vosovci were in small groups, based in some villages well within the reach of Germans. They were daring in their exploits, and in the early and enthusiastic days of open Partisan resistance after September 1943, to us boys they were real heroes.

But the reality of the nastiness of war soon started to show, and the fact that the task of the Vosovci was not solely to fight the occupiers, but just as much, if not more, to fight the 'traitors', the 'spies', the 'untrustworthy'. This meant 'cleansing' (killing) anyone suspected to be one. And it did not take much to be considered guilty—a negative opinion from a 'reliable' individual could be enough.

It was summed up by what Mama said to me once. 'They are the killers. You can read it in their eyes.' Put another simplistic way, the idealist was in the brigade, the murderer was in VOS.

The leader of a group of about ten Vosovci stationed in our village was not from Bilje, but almost all the others were. They all had Partisan names (*noms de guerre*) and although we knew their real names, we referred to them by their Partisan names. So there was Beč the leader, Car, Slovenko and so on, just to name a few (murderers).

Our damaged house was conveniently close to wooded hills, and the Vosovci started to use it as a base sometime in spring or early summer of 1944. They would generally come and go, with their exploits often at night. They used the unburned part of the house, except for one downstairs room where we had packed some of our belongings and kept locked. All external doors were gone, and windows shot. The next door house, with a common wall, was occupied by the family of the late Tata Juže, Mama's step father, that is: his widow Teta Tina, her daughter Jelka, with her two very

young children Ivanka and Rudi.

The underground rainwater cistern, by now dry as there were no down pipes left to collect water, was used as a hiding place for weapons, with the concrete top and manhole covered with chips and stuff for camouflage, but still quite obvious. Mara, the elder sister of one of my friends, Anton, was Beč's girl, and she was at the house full time, and cooked for the whole group.

The Germans at that time had, at the Miren airport, a *Šturklja* (Stork). This was a very small single-engine biplane, which was able to fly extremely slowly, like gliding. It had space, from memory, for only two men. The Germans used it to survey the surrounding areas, and occasionally to drop propaganda leaflets onto the villages. It always flew very low, and it would circle around, and I had seen it more than once circle above our house too. We knew that the Vosovci, to prove they were not scared, cleaned their weapons unperturbed at the concrete table in front of our house, under the half bare pergola, while the Stork would slowly circle above. The Germans could see all they wanted from the plane.

One day in the summer I went with Frančko od Karline to the house to do some chores. As we got up the track to the front of the house, we saw Beč and others being handed out weapons through the manhole of the underground water cistern. We walked to the back of the next door house, and just waited for a little while. Teta Tina came out of the back door and threw some leftovers to the chooks in the backyard. She saw us and said something, which I did not hear, and went back into the house. Frančko said, 'Did you hear what she said of you? That your look is like that of an owl!' (*sova*, the bird of bad omens, of death). It was just one of the times when she expressed her visceral hatred for Mama, Tata, and us three children.

Either just before or just after this pleasant remark, Beč came from the front, and asked who we are and what are we doing there. I told him who we are, that it was my home, and that we are there to do some work. Beč said in clear terms, with the plural *you*, but directed more to me than to Frančko, 'You have seen nothing, do you understand? You have seen nothing.' He was referring to the weapons hiding place, which we knew was there well before. But we did 'understand' him, and nodded in agreement. He was more concerned with us being 'spies' than with the German Stork! It was the classic intelligence of Intelligence Services.

During that summer Mama had talked to bricklayers/builders in Bilje about the possibility of repairing our house enough to move back in. They advised her that it could be done, not a huge job, and that we could start clearing the rubble out of the burnt-out section. Mama was very keen to move out of where we lived temporarily with Grandmother and sister-in-law Teta Dragica, who had also lost their home. Teta Dragica was not pleasant to Mama much of the time.

So one day Mama went up to the house to talk with Beč. She told him that we would like to move back into our own house, that we could repair it, and could they, the Vosovci, move out somewhere else. Beč said that the place is very convenient for them and that they want to stay. Mama persisted with her argument that we would really like to get back to our own home. She noticed that he was starting to get annoyed, and as she talked he started to fidget with the sub-machine-gun strung diagonally across his chest 'as if he were playing a violin', as she told us later. She got scared, stopped insisting, and accepted that they stay.

Not many weeks later, one evening just before dusk, Germans came across the hills, not through the village and surrounded our hill. Only Mara was in our house, no Vosovci. She took an empty water bucket and headed downhill towards the water well, as if going for water. She passed through Germans surrounding the hill, without being stopped, and kept walking past the water well and away—another one of those bizarre and lucky escapes, and of wits.

The Germans went through the place, found no Vosovci, but took Teta Tina (probably aged around 60) and Jelka (around 30) to the prison in Gorica. Later both were deported to Germany to a concentration camp. They never returned. The two children were left in the house, and after the Germans left were taken from the house by neighbours (Đenko's mother Urška).

The news of what happened spread very quickly. The only question mark was why didn't they burn the house down.

The following morning Stric Karlo, Mara's brother Anton, and I went up to the house. I went with a wheelbarrow. Mama said to just take the books, not to worry about anything else, and come straight back. I suppose Anton was to bring back whatever Mara had left there, maybe a few clothes. Stric Karlo went because Mama had asked

him.

When we got to the house, Đenko and his mother Urška were already there, at the house next door. It seemed Đenko was to take away the goat, and his mother whatever, maybe clothing for the children.

In the room off the kitchen which we had kept for ourselves, now broken into of course, there was a glass door wardrobe, with Mama's treasured books from Egypt, some in French, some in Italian. Among the French ones I remember *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo, in three volumes, hard cover, whitish, which Mama often mentioned to us. I was loading the books in armfuls, from the room into the wheelbarrow near the front door. I was in the room when Anton whispered from the front yard '*Nemci, Nemci'* (Germans, Germans).

I came into the kitchen, and in a flash worked out that the escape was to the back, as the message had come from the front. I turned left towards the door from kitchen to back room, and already saw myself leaping out the back window into the backyard and into the woods sloping down. But in the same instant, my eyes saw two German soldiers, crouching forward with their rifles, ascending in the bush towards the house. So I turned and stepped out the front door. Anton was there between the front door and the table under the pergola, still. Stric Karlo must have been there too. I looked to the right just as a group of three or four Germans made the corner from the end of the burnt-out stable into the front yard, and marched toward us. More Germans appeared, but I was still thinking escape. The idea flashed that if I run down the main track, on my left, and reach the turn in the cutting, they will no longer see me, and if I run zig-zag even if they shoot they will not hit me. Again, in the same instant, Đenko appeared, slowly from the turn in the cutting, leaning forward and pulling a rope. My mind was quick with 'the stupid idiot ... coming back up' when at the end of the rope the white goat appeared, resisting, and my mind 'even the goat knows better' and soon after a rifle, with its German soldier prodding the animal to move! So all was explained, the scene was hilarious, but there was no time to laugh, not then.

I swept my gaze to the right, and, through Tata Juže's front vineyard sloping down the hill to a low embankment, saw a whole row of German helmets moving, just behind the embankment, towards the main track, towards the white fig tree. I realized how tightly the hill had been surrounded, and how silly my thoughts of escape were.

The Germans started to bark something at us, and Stric Karlo said that they wanted us to empty our pockets. I turned my pockets inside-out, there was nothing except a leaflet. It was in Slovenian, propaganda from the Germans for individual Partisans to give themselves up, dropped by the Stork over our villages. I piped up to the soldier in Italian, 'This is yours, this is yours.' He didn't understand and didn't care, but Stric Karlo muttered to me through his teeth '*mauči uosu*!' (shut up, donkey) in good Bilje parlance. I did as told and thought how stupid I was to open my mouth. Some more barking, and again it was Stric Karlo to translate, saying, 'They want us to go to the wall.' We all lined up against the wall just outside our kitchen window—Đenko, his mother Urška, Stric Karlo, Anton and me, I don't know in what order. In front of us, just in front of the pergola, about four Germans, the one in the middle with his light machine-gun hanging from his right shoulder, pointed at us. He fingered something on the gun making some metallic noises and spread his legs apart. I did not feel fear, just looking straight into the funnel of the barrel of the gun. After a little time, I don't know how long, things just seemed to relax, and we drifted away from the wall to the centre of the yard—it felt better there.

I remember, either just before the wall or just after, looking at Stric Karlo sitting on top of the books in my wheelbarrow. A young German officer was questioning him, very relaxed looking, bent slightly forward, with one foot on top of the wheelbarrow handle and his elbow resting on his knee, holding his pistol somewhat limply. He was looking Stric Karlo in the face while questioning, then with a long '*Waaaaaas?*' (what?) he leaned further forward with all his body and pistol, closer to Stric Karlo's face. Stric Karlo leaned slowly backward dropping his hands to his sides and implored 'ma signore', (but sir) and his face looked to me to be decayed, rotten, grey. I always remembered that face, and was told that fear does that, it was not my imagining.

But again things relaxed, and somehow I took my wheelbarrow and headed down the hill. The others too melted away, except for Stric Karlo who was detained. Again, for the second time, the Germans did not burn the house down, which should be normal procedure.

I was wheeling my books, already on the main road, towards home when Mama appeared. She was running towards me, leaning forward very much, but running so fast that she was balanced, with a smile of bliss and arms outstretched, and with '*Danilče moje!*' squeezed me to her. This scene returned to me ... *Later in Life*.

The whole saga on the hill might have been only a couple of hours, but the village knew that the Germans had come. It would not be fear to stop Mama to come for me to the hill, but her judgment told her that she could only make things worse, and lived each second of that long wait.

Stric Karlo was taken to the prison in Gorica. The normal thing to be expected now was his deportation to concentration in Germany. But Teta Lizi (his wife) spoke good German, she went to the German *Kommand* in Gorica (not the usual thing to do) and presumably explained successfully how 'innocent' Stric Karlo was. After a few weeks Stric Karlo was released and back home.

The brains of the Vosovci got into action, and their immediate conclusion was that they had been 'betrayed' to the Germans by Tončka (Mama), who else! Didn't she want us to leave the house? And why didn't the Germans burn it down? What more proof! The Stork probably never entered their brains, and there had to be a 'traitor'.

Right opposite the house in which we lived with Grandmother was Car's home. He had grown up there with an aunt; I think he was an orphan. Vosovci often gathered there, and the story was that one evening Car wanted to throw a hand grenade into our kitchen, to 'cleanse out the traitor', but that his aunt and some other women managed to stop him, as 'Tončka would just not do such a thing'. This must have been either on the same day or the day after the wall episode, but the story reached us within a day.

Another day or two passed, we did not dare go anywhere near the house again, but it was said that the Germans raided the hill again. Mama fell sick, she was in bed, I say it was fear of the Vosovci, not for her life only but for her children.

It must have been the fourth day after the first raid, the house was still there unburned, the evidence of 'treason', and I had the idea that I could go up the red track, beyond the last house on it, and through the back bushes to our house and set fire to it, and not be seen by anyone. I even thought that there ought to be some hay for the goat in an upstairs storage room of the neighbour's house. This was my intent as I walked slowly on the main road, past Teta Lizi's house, to where our house on the hill became visible. As I looked up at it, blue smoke was rising from it, neat and clean, I don't remember visible flames. I ran back home, up the stairs into the bedroom with '*Mama, Mama, Oberš gorì!*' (the house is burning). Her reply from the bed, with a sigh, '*Hvala Bogù!*' (Thank God!).

We used to call our hill and the house *Oberš*.

We just assumed that the Germans had done their final, unsuccessful raid, and set fire to the house. This was my unquestioned belief until ... *Gods' Mills*.

Later in life

There were some periods much later in my life, when I found it hard to cope. When the pain (not physical) is hard to bear, and the thought just comes that if existence had ceased at a previous occasion, the current pain would not exist. The two occasions that would always come back to me were the burning hayloft which did not crash on me and the cows, and the wall episode. But the really living vision was of Mama's running to me and her happiness with her '*Danilče moje!*'

And the mind, uncontrollably, weighs the two possibilities: continued existence then and pain now, or truncated existence then and no pain now. But no pain now would also mean no to Mama's happiness then. My conclusion each time was that pain now is a price worth paying for Mama's happiness then.

I am not talking of the loss of our Ivan, which transcended everything.

Gods' mills

In 2005 I met again, after some 62 years, my childhood friend Dorče Rusjan in Ballarat. We, Dorče, Viljem and me, were reminiscing and reliving the good and the bad of our childhood. Dorče told about two of his brothers: one in the Italian army sent to Russia who never returned, the other one (whom I remembered) in the Partisan brigades, killed by the Vosovci. I told my story above, but much condensed, and

Mama's 'Thank God!' when the Germans finally burned our house down. Dorče looked at me, and with an amused smile and nodding his head said 'Aaah, Germans, aaah?' It was the first time that logic said to me that it may well have been locals who burned our house down. But who cared any more, I did not even ask Dorče for more.

Still, it was a beautiful illustration of the proverb *'Božji mlini meljejo počasi, pa drobno'* (The mills of the gods grind slowly, but fine), which the professor of ancient Greek, in my only year of Slovenian high school in 1945–1946 in Gorica, wrote on the blackboard, together with the original Greek. For many decades I remembered the Greek version, which I loved, and then my neurons stopped connecting! All I can resuscitate now is 'θεόι μιλλόι ... ??? ... ???, αλλά μικρόν.'

The goat is the piglet

On one of my 'working' trips to Rome, in the 1980s, and the usual extra week taken to visit the old country, I was at Đenko's house and I recalled 'the goat' to him. He immediately corrected me: 'No, it was not the goat, it was the piglet. We took the goat down the night before!'

Well, what a lesson about the human brain. The goat to me did not appear decades later, it appeared the instant it came around the corner dragged by Đenko and prodded by the mighty Wehrmacht! I told the story to Mama for the first time on the same day, as part of 'and what happened?' We laughed about it then, and many times afterwards, but always with the goat.

Today, the scientist would illuminate me that it was a simple case of neurons connecting to the goat instead of the piglet, the behaviourist would add that I was probably somewhat stressed, and the psychiatrist would prescribe pills to improve my neurons' connectivity, to be taken for life.

Đenko added, 'But do you remember, when at the wall, my mother was not silent; she argued defiantly to the Germans "Well, and now what? Now what?"' I remembered none of that. The neurons must have gone on strike.

On recalling the episode, I have wondered what may have happened to that particular German soldier, who exhorted the goat/piglet to move. Did he survive? I wished him so. The minimum he deserved from the mighty Wehrmacht was the Iron Cross for 'extreme bravery in the face of imminent enemy fire, prodding the goat to move, in the service of the Fatherland ... *et cetera, et cetera.*'

21 July 2007

Jurije and the cabbage

Autumn 1944

After the upheavals of September 1943, and Tata's disappearance, some things returned to a kind of normality. Schooling resumed near enough on time in October–November. So in spring 1944 Rihard was in his second last (I think) year of high school in Gorica, which would finish normally in mid-June. Mama, Miriam and I lived in Bilje, while Rihard was staying with a relative, Teta Štefanja, in Gorica, for the school year.

Rihard was 17, and the war situation was such that, by that age, a youth had no choice but to join one side or the other. Mama was pressured by the local Partisan activists with the question 'well, and when will Rihard go into the Partisans?', but she could successfully claim that he should be allowed to finish his school year.

We all accepted that, at the end of the scholastic year, he would have to go into the Partisans, as the logical and conscientious thing to do, as ideologically we were all supporting the Partisans, as the only force resisting the German occupation.

The Domobranci (Defenders of the Home) party was already established in Gorica. It was the Slovenian organization, under German tutelage, which was against the Partisans. Simplistically, it could be called the party of the church, which chose to support Hitler rather than the 'godless Communists'.

Of course all sides needed their soldier recruits, their cannon fodder, or more accurately for the situation their bullet fodder. So now in the spring of 1944 it was the turn of the 17-year-olds, a year later it was the 16-year-olds, and, if the war had not finished in May 1945, it would be the 15-year-olds like me. Such was the demand for fodder.

One morning, about one month before the end of the school year, Rihard's class was doing a written test in mathematics with

Professor Grignaschi when Germans entered the classroom with a list of three names. There were three Slovenians in the class, the others were Italians. So Rihard and the other two Slovenians were taken, and later handed over to the Domobranci.

Some time later, Professor Grignaschi gave Mama the sheet of paper on which Rihard was doing his written test when the Germans took him away. It was a test in algebra, with two complex algebraic expressions to be simplified. Rihard had completed one answer correctly, and was halfway through the second, correct up to that point. Professor Grignaschi had completed the answer in red ink, and had marked the test 10/10.

I remember the sheet, as Mama kept it for many years, it came to Australia too. Mama must have destroyed it late in her life, in one of her clean-ups of 'life attachments'.

Professor Grignaschi had become a family friend through the war years, and remained one for life. He was extremely deaf, and there was no hearing aid in those days for his condition. After the war in about 1949–1950, when we lived in Sovodnje, I remember him visiting us. He had a new hearing aid, and went for a walk with Miriam into the bush surrounding the old ruins of a nearby castle. Miriam told me how he listened, turned the hearing aid up and, elated, told her that he can hear the birds singing.

One story of his teaching years, from Rihard, was how the students would start humming the powerful Russian song 'Volga! Volga!' slowly and almost inaudibly, gradually louder and louder, reaching a deafening level while Grignaschi was teaching and writing his mathematics on the blackboard, before he would become aware of the noise and turn to the class. The lovely students did not stop humming 'Volga! Volga!', they would just gradually decrease the volume, to just under his hearing threshold. If ever there was justification for corporal, or better still capital, punishment of cruel students, it was then!

Fig 29. Professor Grignaschi, 1948. He gave us this photo as we left for Australia.

Rihard was sent to the Domobranci barracks in Trst, for 'training' before 'deployment'. This meant getting stationed somewhere in opposition to the Partisans, under German control. It meant 'brother against brother'. It was against our grain. To me, aged 13½, the divisions were clear. The idealist was in the Partisan brigades, slept in the forest, his ideal was Freedom. The murderer was in the Vosovci. The opportunist was in the Domobranci, slept in barracks, ready to serve the almighty Third Reich for the next thousand years, 'knew nothing' about Dachau, Buchenwald, or whichever concentration camp where people like Vanda ended up—of dysentry, pneumonia, starvation, gas, whichever came first.

The intention of Rihard escaping was there from the start. But there were many aspects to be considered. A vital aspect was that, while many forced recruits were escaping into the Partisans, it was not uncommon for the escapee to be considered a spy on top of traitor, and be killed by Partisan fanatics. Evidence did not need to

be 'beyond reasonable doubt'. So Rihard and Mama had planned for him to escape to Štanjel, a village on the Kras mountains about 20 kilometres from Trst, where Stric Lado, married to Teta Milena, lived. He was active with the Partisans and could vouch that Rihard was 'genuine'. Still no guarantee!

So one day Teta Milena went to visit Rihard in the barracks, and pretending to be boyfriend-and-girlfriend, they walked out and went to the home in the attic of Teta Stefanja z Trsta, where Rihard changed into civilian clothes, left there previously by Mama. Still arm-in-arm, pretending to be boyfriend-and-girlfriend, they managed to leave Trst and reach Štanjel.

Stric Lado's words must have done some good, but not quite enough. After the war had ended and Rihard was back home, he told me very briefly that he was questioned by a high ranking *tovariš* (comrade) about his beliefs, and it was not a pleasant conversation.

Anyway Rihard joined the Partisans 'in the brigades', to use the expression of the time.

Rihard's escape from Trst was in early summer 1944, and the civilian clothes he had on consisted of a light summer jacket, not much cover for the life of a Partisan in winter, sleeping outdoor much of the time. He wrote to Mama, through the Partisan couriers, as regularly as possible, with the usual reassurances that all is fine. He used what he called 'Leandro's trick' for passing secret messages: the first letter of each line was the message. The usual message was to the effect that he was in a safe place. A blatant lie, as there was no such thing. But in spite of knowing the reality, Mama felt a little reassured. It usually took a week or ten days for a letter to arrive, so he would anticipate by about a week the date he wrote down, so that Mama often said 'look, he was well only two days ago', a pleasant illusion. In the letters nothing of importance could be written, as the risk of the couriers to be caught or killed was very real. But somehow, by verbal messages, it was arranged that we take him some winter clothing to a meeting place, a small village called Jurišče, in the middle of the mountains some 50–60 kilometres by road from Trst.

So in about October–November 1944 Mama took me with her on this expedition. It was safer for Mama to travel with her young boy, and I was to wear the thick padded wind jacket Mama had made for Rihard, not to raise any suspicions. Of course the jacket on me looked a full length coat, and with sleeves taken up appeared to be mine.

The itinerary was simple: train from Gorica to Trst, sleep overnight at Teta Stefanja z Trsta, train from Trst to Šempeter na Krasi (St Peter on Kras), later renamed to Pivka, the name of the underground river which over the millenia carved the Postojna caves, not far from there. From Šempeter it was about 1½ hours to Jurišče on foot, where we would meet Rihard and give him the winter wear. Return the same way. At most three to four days altogether.

It turned out differently. To Trst was easy, but on the morning we were to take the train to Šempeter, it was not running, and no forecast when it would. Mama simply said 'we start walking', and we did. We were well into the countryside when a horse and military cart reached us, driven by a single German soldier. He slowed down and gesticulated offering us a lift. It was bizarre, but Mama smiled and we jumped on, and he moved on at a fast gait. The soldier was a happy soul and periodically turned around and said something, which we did not understand, but Mama would nod and smile. The ride lasted about an hour and covered a good distance. We walked further, and before dusk Mama asked a farmer if we could spend the night in his hayloft. The story was that we are visiting relatives in Jurišče—one could not trust anybody. The farmer was very kind, and showed us the hayloft, but asked Mama to hand him any matches until morning, as the risk to strike a match in the pitch dark night to see was too high.

The roof of the hayloft was thick thatch, the first I had seen in my life, as I was used only to terracotta tiles, and could hardly believe that a roof made of straw could be waterproof. Mama loved it, and we snuggled under the hay before it was completely dark. Heavy rain came in the night, and I remember Mama saying how beautiful its sound was, and how lucky we were to be warm and dry. We slept beautifully. In the morning the farmer asked us into the kitchen and they gave us breakfast, *žgance*, the hot steamed clumps of maize flour with milk. We were very grateful, he bid us '*z Bogom*' (with God), and we left. They had probably guessed that we were not visiting relatives.

We walked most of the day to reach Šempeter, where we went to the only inn to spend the night. Again Mama said that we

were heading to Jurišče to visit relatives. In the morning we walked the stretch to this little village at the bottom of a valley surrounded by forests and rising mountains. The track there was the classic rough cart track of the Kras, with rocks of various sizes in the tracks. We stopped at the first house, number one, as arranged. They knew we were coming, sometime. It was an inn, so tiny one would never tell, but it had a room for guests which was given to us. The message was taken to the Partisans so that Rihard could come and collect his winter clothing. They said it would be a two to three days' wait for us.

While waiting, they told us that the Germans had been there only some days earlier, they had come suddenly and one or more Partisans had been killed. Behind the inn there was an upward sloping clearing, leading to a pine forest some hundred metres up. To the front of the inn, and of the whole village, there was also a clear rising slope to the hill top, and no forest there. These clearings were the classic Kras type: green grass for pasture, with boulders of grey-white granite sticking out of the ground.

I spent a lot of the waiting time with a small group of local boys, one about my age, the other two younger, maybe his brothers.

The boy my age said that the Germans had come from over the hill in the front, descending on the village, and that a Partisan who was in the inn tried to escape to the forest behind, and was shot from the opposite hill, about half way between the inn and the forest. The boy said that he knew exactly where, and he could show me. So we four boys walked up the clearing and the eldest was searching for the spot, on green grass between the boulders, muttering, 'It should be here somewhere.' Suddenly he said, 'Yes, here it is, this is where he fell, the blood is still here.' He went a few steps to pick up a stick from the ground, came back and gently disturbed the thick layer of dark red congealed blood between the green grass. Where he disturbed it, it was bright red. Nobody said anything. I had my own thoughts, and fears. I never told Mama about that blood.

On the day after our second night there, at about noon, Rihard came, in a group of three. The leader was a lanky Slovenian, in his mid-twenties probably, the second was a Russian, somewhat older, Rihard was the youngest. The leader gave time to Mama and son to embrace, and go to the bedroom for the winter clothing, then said that it was too risky there at the inn, right at the start of the village, and that we should move to another house at the other end of the village closer to the forests. There he gave one hour's time to us to be together. Some of that hour was spent with the three of us together, some Mama wanted alone with Rihard.

An hour is not long, yet there was enough time for Rihard to ask me one or two study questions, something about Latin verbs. I was so happy to see him, and felt disappointed that he would waste any of that precious short time together on Latin verbs, which I did not know anyway. It must have been his way of coping.

There was also enough time for Mama to say to the Russian that in Bilje too there was a Russian Partisan, named Sacha. The Russian was astonished: Sacha was his close friend, and they had not seen or heard from each other for a very long time. He asked Mama whether she would mind taking a very brief written message to Sacha, it would be only greetings and nothing compromising. Mama agreed and he wrote, on a small piece of paper in Cyrillic, his brief message. He told Mama what it said, as Cyrillic was unknown to us.

The three of them left, walking towards the forest. Mama and I returned to the inn, and she stitched the little piece of paper with the Cyrillic message into the hem of her dress. Innocent or not, there was risk. We spent that last night at the inn.

In the morning we left to walk the distance to Šempeter and hopefully catch the train to Trst. We reached the high point of the stony track, where it then sloped downwards, and Jurišče would be out of sight. Mama stopped and turned back towards the village, and said, 'Let's have a last look, how beautiful it is.' I was too young to notice the beauty of the place with my own resources, but Mama's comment made me see it. It was really the classic tiny village buried in the valley, surrounded by mountain and forest, with the sharp steeple of the little church higher than any house. It was an idyllic scene. But the congealed blood on that slope to the forest was also on my mind.

We reached Šempeter in time to catch the train, but there was no train that day, again with no forecast as to when there might be one. There was a group of women there at the station with large bundles, also bound for Trst. They were taking produce of various sorts to sell and make a few lire, and bring

back some other goods, some salt if nothing else. With no train, they decided that the thing to do was to walk as far as Divača, about half way to Trst, which crossed with another railway line for Trst, and reasoned that 'there will have to be a train there', they even had some idea of the timetable. So Mama and I joined them. They loaded their heavy bundles on their heads, and we started walking. But not before Mama had bought the largest cabbage I had ever seen from one of the women, as she had to partially unload herself for the long walk. And the cabbage was to be carried by me, while Mama carried the rest of our luggage. The cabbage was also the heaviest I had ever carried. We reached the Divača station, after some 25 or more kilometres, and a train arrived soon after. The instant it had fully stopped, the women were throwing their bundles onto it, and just as fast German soldiers appeared, and, barking away, were throwing the bundles back off the train. There were no people on the train, it was a German military train and nobody was to get onto it. It departed as it had arrived.

The next decision was simple: walk the rest of the way to Trst, another 25 or so kilometres. But the cabbage had become so heavy, that Mama thought she better cut it in half and I carry only half of it from then on. The second half was taken by one of the women and added to her bundle. She had been obviously underloaded, the bludger! We reached Trst before dark, and went to Teta Štefanja for the night. I do not remember, but I guess that Mama did the decent thing and cut the half-cabbage in half again, to give to Teta Štefanja.

In the morning we went to the station for the train to Gorica, but again in vain: no train, and who knows when. We were quite used to it by now and we just started walking the *Tržaška pot* (the road between Trst and Gorica). About five kilometres out of Trst, around Miramar, a horse-drawn cart caught up with us, with tyred wheels no less, loaded with bags of grain or maize. Mama asked, or pleaded, to the man to give us a lift, at least some of the way. The man let us climb onto his cart.

We sat on the bags of grain, and started to enjoy the scenery, as that stretch of the road is beautiful, right on the sea and cut into the rock. I remember passing through the short tunnel cut into the live Kras rock which I first saw with Tata as a very young boy. We passed also the road leading to the Maximilian Palace nearby, and looked in that direction. The palace was used by the Germans then.

The man with the cart was kind, and gave us the lift all the way to near Miren, where the road for Bilje branches off. We walked the last three kilometres and we were back home with Miriam. We had been away for ten days, and knew absolutely nothing of what had happened in Bilje during that time.

In the year 2007 I was reminiscing with Simon about the cabbage, and he said that he hoped Mama cut the half of the half cabbage in half, to give to Nona. She probably did, leaving one-eighth-cabbage for us!

8 July 2007

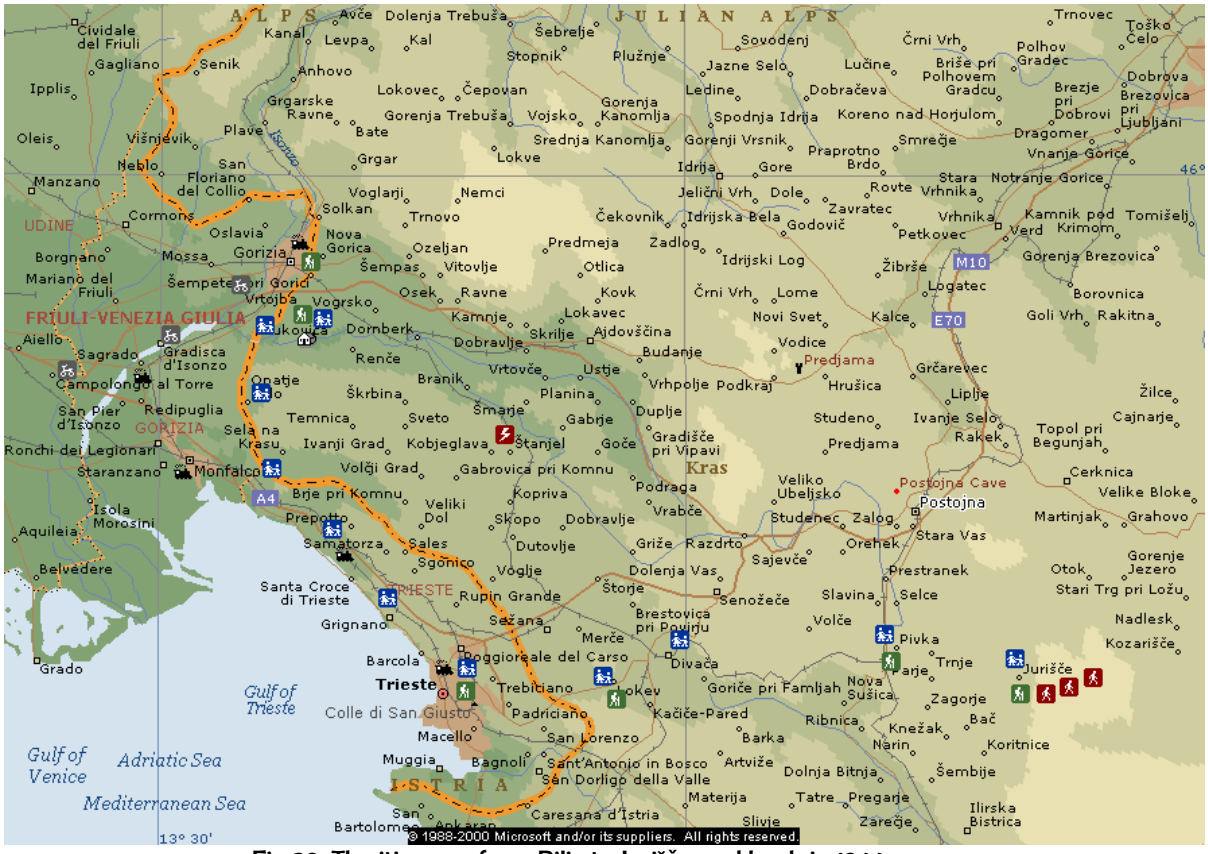

Fig 29. The itinerary from Bilje to Jurišče and back in 1944.
Pivka on the map was then Šempeter.

Train from Gorica to Trst

Walk from Trst to Jurišče

Rihard back to the forest

Walk from Jurišče to Trst, to Miramar at Grignano, ride to Miren, walk to Bilje, with cabbage!

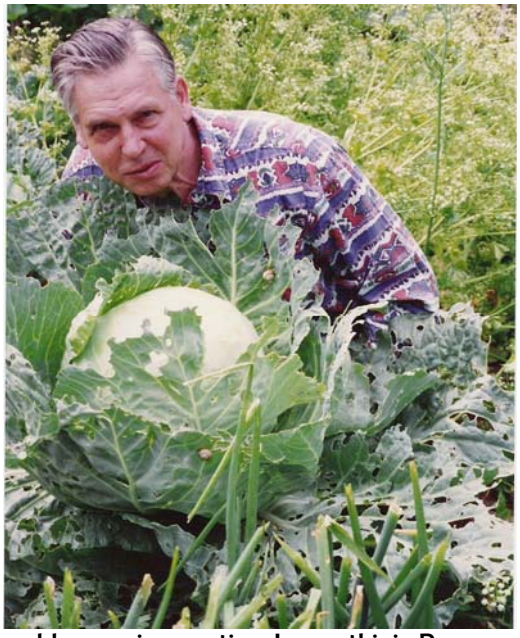

Fig 30. A cabbage reincarnation. I grew this in Rye, around 1994.
A modest imitation from 1944 after 50 years.

Deportation

Autumn 1944

Arbeit

In the days after we returned from Jurišče, Mama removed from her hem the little written message from the Russian in Jurišče, and took it to a girl courier to pass it to Sacha, the Russian Partisan around Bilje. The girl said simply, 'Oh, but Sacha has been killed'. Or maybe she said that he had 'fallen', the nice, to me revolting, political expression for those killed in war, in all languages. In any case, the greetings from his long lost friend never reached Sacha.

As Mama and I returned from the ten day trip, we took it for granted that Miriam was home. We then exchanged the major news, and Miriam told us that while we were away, one day the Germans came to Bilje and started systematically to go from house to house and take any young girls and boys above 15 years of age, or thereabout, but not elderly people. Miriam was taken too. They were all brought into the front yard of a large farmhouse not far from the church. The general message was that they would be sent to Germany to '*arbeit'* (work), so what's wrong with that! They were generally sorted into two groups, one for the young and fit for deportation to Germany, the other to be released. The sorting by age was rather rough, so anyone who looked 15 was in the group for Germany.

Miriam was there too. She gathered all her knowledge of scholastic German and said to the German guard that she was a student and 14 years old. The German sent her to the other group, the one not for deportation. Whether the German was a conscientious soldier following orders, or just softened by Miriam speaking in German, is irrelevant. The fact was that she was not sent to *arbeit* in Germany. The reality was that deportation to Germany meant into a concentration camp, from where they would work all right, for as long as the ration of 600 or so calories a day kept them alive, if dysentery or cold didn't kill them first.

There were two boys, not yet 15 but strong looking, who were taken and never returned. I remember one of them, hardly older than me, but I cannot recall his name. There were none, or very few, older boys to be found, they were already in the Partisans or hiding.

Many of the girls never returned. One of them was Verena, Boris' cousin. I think their mothers were sisters. Decades later, in Australia when we were reminiscing, Boris told me that 'I tried to save Verena. I was in the cellar of such-and-such a house in the village square when the group was assembled before being marched out of Bilje. Next to one of the cellar windows at ground level, Verena was right there and I whispered to her to just slip into the cellar. She could have, but she didn't want to, she said they go to Germany to work'. Naivety can be tolerated, but not deceit!

I remember the windows Boris was talking about, and I remember Verena. She was probably less than 20, a happy and pretty girl. Years earlier her mother had migrated to Argentina and left little Verena in Bilje in the care of relatives. She was to get her to Argentina 'later', but later never came, the war came.

Later

In 1981, before one of my 'working' trips to San Francisco, I really felt that I should turn one of those useless company trips to some human benefit. So I took an extra week off in my own time and extended the trip to Buenos Aires, where many relatives had migrated after the war, at the time we migrated to Australia. I told Boris that I was going, and he immediately said, 'You have to see my aunty and give her my regards.'

I spent six days in Buenos Aires, seeing, after more than 30 years: Aunt Lizi and Stric Karlo Savnik, their eldest daughter (my second cousin) Silva and Dragotin her husband, Aunt Lizeta and Kristili Soler and their children (my second cousins) Anton, Jožek, Andrej and Marlita.

It was like a dream after all those years, for them and for me. Anton and Boris were close neighbours and friends in the Bilje days. I told them that Boris asked me to see his aunt. They knew where she lived in Buenos Aires, and one evening Andrej with Aunt Lizeta drove me there. We found the aunt,

very old but fully alert. I passed her Boris' greetings and told her that we see each other a lot. I told her that I knew her daughter Verena, and what a beautiful girl she was. The aunt went to her room and returned with a photo of her Verena already grown up, and as she had never seen her, as she had left her as a child. Aunt Lizeta told me that Boris' aunt 'used to drink, but she is better now in old age.'

Andrej, one or two years younger than me, told me that on the day of the deportation he was working in the fields just outside Bilje towards Gorica, and watched the group, mainly girls, in neat and compact squad, marching briskly with German guards around them.

Teta Lizeta told the story, which I had not heard before, that, on the day, one German officer went ahead of the soldiers who were going house to house, and entered Binče's house, right opposite the brick factory, under the hill of our burnt-out home. There were three sisters in that family, Ivana, Irena and Mila (my age), and a boy a little younger than me. The father Binče, my father's close friend, was in the Partisans, also Irena, but Ivana was home with the rest of the family. She was a tall healthy girl, early twenties. The German officer, in German which nobody understood, was saying something, and gesticulating for Ivana to go upstairs to the bedroom. All they could understand was *shlafen* (sleep), and they thought that he may want to rape Ivana. Eventually it dawned on them that he was indicating for her to lie in bed and pretend to be sick, which Ivana did. The officer left, and when the deportation soldiers came to the house they left the 'sick' Ivana in bed. Well, he did save one girl, he could not save them all.

Fig 31. Souvenir from Argentina. Matè tea pot given to me by Silva's son Yeki. When I was taken to Andrej's home, and there were a lot of us there reunited after some 35 years, Andrej said 'we must drink tea!' I agreed, and expected that cups of tea would eventuate. But, after some time, a matè pot, as above, was being passed around with each person taking a drink in turn, as we were all standing in a spontaneous circle. It was the way of solemnity and togetherness.

In the months after the war ended, Miriam spoke with one of the girl survivors from concentration. She was Evica od Karline, my friend Frančko's sister. Eva had been in the Partisans, but had been missing and thought probably dead, before the big deportation from Bilje. It turned out that she had been caught by the Germans somewhere earlier and deported for *arbeit*. She had survived a longer time in concentration than the other girls, and one day in the summer of 1945 returned to her Bilje.

Eva told Miriam that at war's end she and some other girls from Bilje grouped together, to try and return home. The next immediate danger was avoiding Russian soldiers, as they reputedly raped any women they came across. It was their revenge on Germany, never mind details. The group had to cross a river, no bridges, so they swam across, two of

them supporting a girl who could not swim. This story convinced Miriam that, had she been deported, she would never have come back, as she could not swim, and would have been too frightened to enter the deep river.

Eva also told Miriam how she behaved at the regular morning assemblies of prisoners in the concentration camp, parading in front of the German officer who would deem who looked unfit for work, and point them out. For those it was the end. Eva said she always marched briskly, arms swinging wide and head high—a picture of health regardless of reality, to live another day the life of concentration camp.

12 July 2007

An unrelated story

This story has nothing to do with me, but I cannot resist telling it here. When Viljem and I visited our childhood friend Dorče in Ballarat in 2006, for me the first time I saw him after 62 years, we told each other stories. Viljem told that of his eldest brother Joško, whom he had visited in Sao Paolo, Brazil, only a few years earlier. Joško had since died, of good old age.

Joško too had been caught by the Germans and finished up in a concentration camp. He told Viljem that in the camp they had been 'hiding' a young, 17 or less, Jewish youth. The usual question, 'But how could you "hide" anyone in the camp?' The answer was that, when another prisoner had died, they managed to strip the dead man of his clothes and dress the body in the 'Jewish camp uniform' of the Jewish youth. The youth then put on the dead man's clothes. This moved the youth from priority one to some lower priority, when sorting the fit from the unfit for *arbeit*, the latter for the gas chamber. Both Joško and the boy survived.

Joško migrated to Brazil after the war. Some years later, he went to some get-together there of ex-prisoners. A man walked up to him, Joško did not recognize him. The man asked, 'Are you Joško from Buchenwald?' It was the 'Jewish youth', now happily settled in Brazil, who wished to say thank you to Joško.

Every year from then on, Joško's children received Christmas presents from the 'Jewish youth'. After many years the presents stopped. The 'youth' must have died.

November 2007

Professor Alesani

Autumn 1944

In the school years 1943–1944 and 1944–1945 I was doing high school (*Scuola Media*) in Gorica. The six to seven kilometres each way was mainly on foot as bicycle tyres were unavailable. My teacher was Professor Attilio Alesani. He was the main teacher of my class as he covered *Lettere*, which included Italian, Latin, history and geography.

Alesani was born in Zara, from very old (some 400 years) Italian settlers there. The city of Zara (Zadar) is in Dalmatia, on the Adriatic sea. Like all that region it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of World War 1. The city was then made part of Italy, with a very small area of surrounding countryside, while the rest of Dalmatia became part of the then new Yugoslavia. This redistribution of 'ownership' was based on the dual concepts that Italy was on the winning side of that war, and that many Italians lived in Zara.

From early years of Fascism, Alesani had been politically exiled to Gorica, '*perchè io sono socialista, ed il regime voleva punirmi, ma il regime era troppo ignorante per sapere che questa città è un gioiello per un insegnante. Così non è riuscito nemmeno a punirmi.*' (because I am socialist, and the regime wanted to punish me, but the regime was too stupid to know that this city is a treasure for a teacher, and wasn't capable to even punish me') he explained to the whole class, in times when such things were not said.

They were dangerous years for what today is called free speech, but his lectures were always punctuated by what is known as a free spirit, and frequently illustrated by his own life experiences.

He was probably in his late forties or early fifties then, and had an abundance of true life anecdotes, with which to educate. So I was just one of the many youths to whom he was imparting enrichment for life.

The school year October 1943 – June 1944 started late because of war disorders: Italy had collapsed, Germans had occupied, the Partisan resistance got into full swing, German reprisals into full viciousness, internal hatreds given free rein. On 19 September 1943 our house had been burned down due to fighting. The following day my father had disappeared, but this had nothing

to do with Germans.

My mother was left alone with three children: myself almost 13, my sister almost 14, and my brother 16½. Alesani knew from my Mother the basic facts of our condition.

The 1943–1944 classes, although frequently disrupted, went on and the year finished in June 1944, let's say normally.

During the spring of 1944 the Germans started construction of a new line of defence (fortifications, trenches, anti-tank concrete blocks, et cetera) right through our region, including our village. Every adult over 15 years of age had to work; the Germans were paying some nominal wage plus one or two cigarettes a day. The name of the German employing organisation was *Todt*, but what this name stood for I still do not know. Miriam, then almost 15, also had to work digging trenches, but I was not yet 14 and didn't have to.

When time came, in October 1944, to enrol for the third year of high school, Mama decided that I would not return to school, as I was the only 'man' available to work the land. Rihard was already in the Partisans from mid-summer of that year. Professor Alesani noticed that I was not enrolled, and he sent a message to Mama inviting her to come with me to Gorica and see him; he wished to talk to us.

On arrival at his home, Professor Alesani greeted us warmly and seated us at a long rectangular table. I was seated, opposite Alesani, at one of the narrow ends. Mama was at the long side of the table, to my right.

Alesani talked to us both, but primarily to Mama as she was the decision maker. The gist of his point was that I should continue schooling, regardless of the work difficulties at home. According to him, school was too important for my future to be abandoned now. In his words: '*signora, suo figlio* deve *continuare gli studi, per il bene dell'umanità*.' (your son *has* to continue his studies, for the good of humanity).

Then he changed subject a little, and told us how he, too, had to work that whole summer for the Germans, digging trenches and the like. But with school starting again he had now been released from that duty.

He told us that he was completely hopeless, that he couldn't even hold the shovel or the pick properly, but did what he could. The German soldier guarding that group of workers, seeing Alesani's clumsiness and inefficiency, laughed heartily at him, and repeatedly. It reached the stage when Alesani, who spoke German also, just had to give the guard a little lecture.

In brief it was, 'The lot of man on Earth is to labour, and each does it in his own way and call. Some labour with the shovel, others with the pen, and some even with the rifle. I myself am a pen man, and completely hopeless with the other tools, but regardless of the tool, the labour of each is noble, and not to be scorned.' *(la fatica di ciascuno è nobile, da non deridere*).

'And anyway', Alesani added to the guard, 'I am actually so aware of my complete incompetence with the shovel, that even the few lire payment I am receiving from the Todt are not deserved, so at the end of summer I will give my earnings to a needy student of mine.' The German guard laughed with disbelief, but that was irrelevant.

At this point Professor Alesani leaned over the table and handed me an envelope, with the inscription '*Da un pessimo operaio a un ottimo studente*' (From the worst labourer to the best student). Inside the envelope were his complete earnings of that summer.

Mama decided that I should enrol for school!

Rye, 6 September 1997

Rihard breaks his leg

Early 1945

The letters from Rihard, in the Partisans, to Mama were not very regular, naturally. Actually it is really unbelievable that a mail like that could exist at all. After one of the longer silences a letter arrived. In it he wrote that he had broken his leg, but there is nothing to worry about, it is healing well. He is well. And with Leandro's trick (the first letter of each line) he even wrote '*sem na varnem*' (I am in a safe place). It was his usual way of reassuring Mama, who knew that there was no safe place anywhere, but chose to believe.

This was in early 1945, winter, still snow time, perhaps March. Rihard's 18th birthday was on 27 February.

It was only after the end of the war that we could learn a few details from him of what happened. He told me, very briefly, that they were on patrol through the forest, a

group of three, the ground covered in snow, and that they came across Germans, dressed in white! Two in the group went for their life to one side, Rihard ran the opposite way. He said that the other two were not as lucky as him. He jumped off some rocks, and broke his leg on landing, but was out of sight. The immediate danger passed, but he was alone in the forest, unable to walk. It was in the afternoon. He dragged himself to a somewhat sheltered spot under a rock, and spent the whole night there. He told me that, although it was winter with snow on the ground, the night was not very cold, that actually a very light warm breeze came before dawn. It must have been blowing from Egypt, for Mama and her son. Frostbite would have been more normal.

In the morning, he did the conventional call for help—three single shots fired at ten-minute intervals. Eventually during the day he was found, and carried to one of the Partisan hospitals for the wounded. These were in very inaccessible spots, usually in mountain ravines, not visible from the air, wooden huts with whatever medical attention could be provided. The locations were kept as secret as possible—any wounded taken there were blindfolded. His leg was plastered or tied in splints, and he was there for many weeks, until fit enough to walk again.

He told me, amusingly, of the ingenuity of one of the wounded who happened to lie under a dripping roof—he tied sloping strings, just above himself, that would catch the falling drops, and carry them away from him.

1 August 2007

War ends

May 1945

The last few months

It was probably early 1945 when I got scabies quite badly, with its terrible itch all over the body. Mama got some strong smelling sulphur lotion, which I dabbed on myself after a good wash. It relieved the itch for an hour at best, than back to 'normal'. It lasted a long time.

Before that I had bad boils, they appeared all over my body and were very painful. Dottor Beviglia, who lived in Gorica, still visited Bilje and other villages in his care, regardless of the dangers from all sides. He was the caring doctor of novels—they don't make them like that any more! Trouble was that at my worst of boils —I was actually in bed—he would call in, look at my boils and select the 'ripe' ones and squeeze them. I saw stars with pain, and wished that he would never come to see me, but I felt better after each visit.

It might have been spring 1945 when Dottor Beviglia was arrested. Someone must have reported on him that he had also treated wounded Partisans. He was imprisoned in Trst, and was in the cells of prisoners destined for execution: the ten-bandits-for-one-German queue. Mama heard that his eldest daughter, late teens, made a vow that if her father lives she will never marry. Whatever the truth of this, the fact was that he did live (the war ended) and the daughter apparently never married. Miriam and I visited him once in 1973 in Gorica. It was nice for us and for him.

Another 'news' was when Teta Ema, Vojko's aunt, came to tell us that Vojko had been captured by the Germans, and was back in the Gorica prison, of all places, where he had been in 1942. Teta Ema added 'and he was caught fully armed', with a sigh of resignation meaning that there was not much hope for him.

Later, decades later, Vojko and I decanted a lot of wine we made, at his place in Yarraville and at mine in Hawthorn, during the 1970s and early 1980s. We often reminisced on old times, and once he told me a few more details. It was Easter week in 1945, at the end of March, when he was caught. It was in a major 'surge'—to use today's stupid parlance—by Germans and various hangers-on against Partisans in our region. It was around Trnovski gozd (Forest of Thorns) where Vojko, with two others and one machine gun, bunkered in a manure heap, were 'holding', as instructed, and hoping for the promised reinforcements, which were never meant to be sent. The machine gunner was killed and they were being over-run. Vojko went for his life and down a slope 'much more on my arse than on my feet'. When he stopped, at the bottom

of the slope, he was in the middle of Germans, who were just as surprised as he was. He had studied German at school, and understood the discussion 'and what do we do with this bandit?' Because he knew the expected answer, he 'looked at the ground around me to see where I will fall'. But some officer came, saying 'I want to question this one.' So he was walked away through the village. 'There were many dead civilians, women too. They bandaged my leg, lightly wounded' he added with a smile and shaking his head. Such bizarre stupidities do happen in war occasionally. It's part of being civilized!

So he finished back in the prison of old, this time in the cells of those intended for the ten-bandits-for-one-German treatment. I told him once that I had read *Spanish Testament* by Arthur Koestler, where he describes his own experience, in the Spanish Civil War, how Franco's mob would call from a list the names of the prisoners to be taken out to be shot, in the middle of the night. Vojko said, 'But with us it was different, they had no lists, they just emptied the cell.' But here too, the war ended and Vojko lived, to make wine in Yarraville.

The fate of Vojko's young and only brother, Danilo, was different. In 1944–1945 he was about 18, in the Partisans as a courier. Vojko had tried to talk him out of being a courier: 'Come into the brigades, it is not an easy life, but at least you are not alone. As a courier you are completely on your own.' We heard that he 'fell', also in the last few months of the war.

In the late 1970s Vojko came back from one of his few trips to Yugoslavia to visit his sister, and told me that he had attended the official unveiling of a plaque in memory of his brother Danilo, at the farm house in Brda where he had been killed. It was more than 30 years after the event. I call it another case of the 'authorities' using and abusing the dead, for their own advantage, for as long as they possibly can. He had photos of the plaque, and of the soldiers firing the salute.

It was on this occasion that Vojko told me a bit of the story. Danilo and another courier spent the night at the farmhouse, and had just washed themselves outside in the early morning, when the Germans approached. The other courier went for his life, and apparently got away. Danilo ran back into the house to grab the mail bag, then out into the bushes, and was shot after. He was found later, sitting at the base of a bush with his head bent onto his chest. The first impression was that he was asleep. He was, forever.

When I was ten or so, cousin Danilo from far-away Brda (not 20 kilometres!) had spent a couple of summer weeks at our house in Bilje. Mama had arranged 'for the two Danilos to play together'. He was older than me, but not much taller. We got on well and he helped with the chores. I remember us carrying water to the stable for the cows, one bucket each, from the big pond just beyond the small Isabella grapes vineyard.

The end

So this was the atmosphere of the last months of the war. Any sense of adventure that some war events may produce had worn off. I remember wishing for it all to end.

And the end did come, in a disorganized way as befits madness, towards the end of April. The 'big picture' of strategy was that Tito wanted to be in Trst before the Allies, who were moving closer from Italy. The Germans had apparently given up and wanted to surrender themselves to the Allies, from Trst. But Tito wanted it at any cost, and he succeeded and pushed the Germans out, and Partisans met Allies at Monfalcone, about 14 kilometres beyond Trst. The 'cost' was said to be about 8,000 Partisans 'fallen', to take Trst a couple of days before the Allies would be there anyway. I do not know about the accuracy of the 8,000, but do know that the son of Stric Cekat and Teta Urška, the relatives in whose house we lived next to the church, was one. Milan had 'fallen' in those last few days. He was married, one daughter, and lived in Gorica. I remember the sadness of the parents.

So, strictly speaking, Bilje was 'liberated' from the Germans by the Partisans. It was some days or a week later that the Allies also arrived in Bilje. They were the British, and were stopped with trucks in the village square. Mama got talking with an officer, who told her that it had just been announced, on their radio, that the war has ended. I remember Mama telling us, it was 'good' news. It must have been the whatever-day-it-was, in early May 1945.

In those crazy weeks, at some stage there were a lot of Partisans in Bilje, for a few days only. They were not locals, but *Bosanci, Črnogorci*, (Bosnians, Montenegrins) and

whatever. They were a tired, poor looking lot, and Mama told me to go to our hill, pick a basket of early cherries and give to them. I did, and wanted to give the cherries, but they insisted on paying me. They would not accept my cherries if I did not accept their money. So I took the money. They were Kuna, from the Croatian Ustaši government, now completely evaporated. I still remember one *Bosanac*, he was little and so young, he looked no older than me, 14 or so—he also insisted with his Kuna. But what struck me was his somberness, his sadness, not a hint of a smile. Frančko told me later he had talked to him; he had a sad life story.

I finished up with pocketfuls of various Kuna notes, of no value whatsoever, but kept them for many years, until we left for Australia. I should have brought them with me, they would now be worth millions (of Ustaši Kuna!) to a philatelist.

Summer 1945

The war was over and reason for celebration. There was some of this on the surface, but the substance was different. Very soon, the Partisan authority in Trst and Gorica started to arrest 'collaborators', 'traitors', and the like. In practice it meant that many, and mainly Italians, were arrested and many killed, dumped into the *foibe*. This went on for a few weeks.

But what Tito had not realized was the high value of a 'gentlemen's agreement'. In Yalta there had been a meeting of three gentlemen: Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, in alphabetical order, to be democratic, because they all talked of democracy. These gentlemen agreed, amongst other things, on 'spheres of influence'. The populus living there was, apparently, not part of the 'spheres', and was never asked for an opinion. Only a few weeks after taking Trst and Gorica, Tito had to pull his Partisans out—he had overstepped the 'sphere'. Two temporary zones were created, Zone A under Allied control, and Zone B under Tito's control. Bilje was in Zone A. Some ten kilometres further east was the start of Zone B. The two zones covered approximately the territory which would be disputed between Italy and Yugoslavia. The final border was yet to be determined via the 'International Commission'.

The Americans administered Zone A, and Bilje recovered some of its rightfully deserved importance. The derelict building in the square, which used to be the Council in the Golden Age of Franz Jožef, was eventually repaired and offices were established in it. There was an American officer, Major Frazer, in charge of Bilje and other nearby villages. He settled himself in a villa that had survived the burnings, just ahead of Nono's house, and had a few offices there. Teta Lizi got a job as interpreter.

In the early months of Major Frazer's reign it was decreed that everybody (or men only, I don't know) was to be fingerprinted. I was not yet 15, but apparently within the required age, and went for the fingerprinting. An American soldier grabbed my hand, expertly rolled my thumb in some black dye on the table, and rolled it again on some piece of paper—I was recorded! But I was not impressed: either by the gruffness of the procedure, nor by the stupidity of the idea. We knew the word 'gangster' from films and comics, but in Bilje there were no relatives of Al Capone.

Still, after the Italian Fascists, the Germans, the Partisans, the X-Mas, the Četniks, the Cossacks, and now the British, the Indians with turbans, the Indians with shaven heads and a single tassel of hair, and any other bums-and-their-dogs, the Americans were 'OK', as we soon learnt to say.

The summer of 1945 was a happy, carefree time. There were Indians camped on grass fields in several places. An Indian driver, shaven head, befriended me and let me ride in his military truck up and down the village. The Indians set up an outdoor cinema, and were showing Indian films, love stories but so slow! We boys loved going to them too, no matter the language.

To keep the troops busy, the British organized an 'outdoor theatre' as well. They worked on it for many weeks. On the other side of the river they cleared the side of a hill and with bags of soil, turned it into the sitting area for the public. They built a footbridge across the river on shallow water, just below the mill. They had good electric lighting, presumably self-generated. After dark the performance would start, we boys all went and watched the various military 'games': building a pontoon bridge across the river, sending a truck across it, lighting smoke screens of various colours, the final accelerating tank going up a ramp and

breaking through a Japanese flag, and then the flares of various colours! It was repeated many nights. It was summer, the weather perfect. Great stuff for us boys.

What we liked best though, was what we could pinch from the troops: cigarettes, flares, smoke screens, bundles of gunpowder spaghetti and whatever. We managed to find a way of using everything, for our amusements.

Rihard returns

Rihard was faithfully letting Mama know of his whereabouts. As the war finished he was in Kočevje, a town further away from Ljubljana. As soon as trains were running again, Mama, with me in tow, went to see him, probably in June 1945. On the way there we had to spend a night or two in Ljubljana, waiting for the next train, and I remember loafing around the Trimostovje (Three Bridges), to pass the time. Miriam also went to see Rihard a few weeks later, with Teta Stefanja from Gorica, who was visiting her daughter Milli, a 'political' prisoner in a nearby town. Rihard had seen her in a 'working' gang there, by pure chance—nobody knew until then whether she was dead or alive.

Miriam recalls that Rihard was at a desk, busy recording peasants' declarations of their 'assets'. It would have been something like 'one bag of beans, ten chooks and one rooster' or capitalistically 'three cows, one ox', when Miriam from the queue said 'five chooks and one rooster'. He looked up and 'Miiiiiiriam!', a good reunion. Later Rihard went to Hungary, with two other soldiers. They escorted a train of foodstuff destined for Russia. Their duty ended in Kaposvar, and the three were walking on the street chatting in Slovenian when a gentleman stopped them. He was Ladika's father, who had lived in Slovenia until the war displaced him back to Hungary, with family. He invited the three soldiers home, and that is how Rihard and his future wife Ladika first met.

Rihard was finally released from Tito's army, sometime in late 1945, and came back home to Bilje. This time he did not write to Mama, as he wanted to surprise her, and us.

Stric Janko returns

Stric Janko was a soldier in the Italian army, in the *battaglioni speciali lavoratori* in Sardinia. At some stage they were taken as prisoners of war by the Americans. But nothing was heard from, or known about him, for a couple of years, until after war ended.

He returned home eventually, about September 1945, and I remember well his return, as we knew the day it was supposed to happen. With others they were dropped by truck in Bilje, in front of the church, and each walked in search of his own people. We were waiting for him in the house where Nona and Nono lived since they lost their home at Bilje 113. He would have to pass 113 to reach our house, so I now assume that Nono would have waited for him there.

After the first embraces, he smiled at me and said, 'I brought you a "dinner"!' and pulled out a packet with 'dinner' written on it. This was an American military ration they were given for the trip, and he had saved it for me! I loved the 'dinner', it even had a small chocolate in it. But I loved Stric Janko more. The war had done damage to him, but had not changed his heart.

When Miriam and Simon went to Bilje in 2003, and succeeded in selling Nono's house, Miriam salvaged many of Teta Mila's papers. Among them there were some letters which I had never seen before, from 1945 immediately after the war, by Stric Janko to his parents, and also one to Tata, his brother Milko. Tata never saw that letter, addressed to him, because he was no longer with us, but Stric Janko knew nothing about that yet. Teta Dragica wrote to him about Tata's disappearance in 1943 in her reply, also salvaged by Miriam.

He wrote that from Sardinia they were sent to Corsica and later to France, from where these letters were written. From what he wrote, and the address he gave, he was in Miramas, which at first I thought was Miramar and it made no sense. I found Miramas on my CD atlas and saw that it is close to Marseilles. He wrote that now, with war ended, all prisoners were advised and encouraged to write to parents, family, relatives, whoever they can think of, to find out who was still here and who wasn't. His letters were written in bad Slovenian, just as we spoke in Bilje, but they are beautiful letters, full of feeling, heart, worry, and pain, as he did not know anything of who was dead or alive. The pathos of a torn and homesick soldier is so palpable.

Fig 32. Stric Janko as I remember him at war end.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction of the many houses in Bilje, and other villages in Zone A, damaged or burned during the war, started in spring 1946 and was completed before December. This was part of the Marshall Plan. Large billboards were put up declaring that 'in recognition of the sacrifices and in gratitude for the victorious struggle against the common enemy ... blah, blah, blah ... this village will be rebuilt ... by the Allies'. It was nice reading, and it was in Slovenian, now allowed to be, so quite appreciated.

The political reality was a little different from the billboards, as the reconstruction in Zone B was nil. I still recall the image I had of destruction. Sometime in 1944 I went with a man from Bilje to Štanjel, a village up in the Kras mountains about 20 kilometres away. We left early in the morning and were taking a calf to Teta Milena there. I went for three reasons: it was to take the pushbike with which we would return home within the day, I would prod the calf from behind to move if it became stubborn, and it was safer for the man if accompanied by a boy. For me it was an adventure—passing a burnt-out small tank on the side of the road, being a little scared to pass under a locomotive that was lying at an ominous angle and blocking the road at a blown up railway overpass, and being stopped by a Partisan to whom the man showed his 'pass'. The return trip was easy, all downhill, me sitting on the pushbike bar and enjoying the scenery. From high up I could see many villages in the valley below, with most houses burned out—a scene of real destruction. But in 1945 this became Zone B, and the 'gratitude' of the Marshall Plan stopped sharply at the line where Communists started. The three Yalta gentlemen had had a falling-out about 'spheres'.

Fig 33. The three gentlemen in alphabetical order. Discussing Freedom, Democracy and 'spheres of influence' in Yalta. I took the liberty to Google and crop them. Google coloured them, they were black and white in February 1945, Google says.

We young boys, I was 15, all got jobs working on the rebuilding, usually on our own homes, and we were paid! I was very pleased when, after a few weeks, my pay reached just over 1,000 lire. My weekly envelope went straight to Mama, and she would give me a little back. I worked on our house on the hill, Frančko on his, Đenko and Franček on theirs, and so on, so that the master builder had somebody handy to ask, 'How was it before?' When the time came to cover the roofs, they needed many hands to pass the roof-tiles up, and they used to send us boys from one house to the next, about one week each house. The custom was that when a roof is finally covered, a fresh green branch is put up and the owner of the house has to provide a good feed for all the workers, and wine too. This we loved, for the feed.

So I was on the roof covering work for Teta Mila's house also, and remember very well the pasta and tomato sauce, and how Nona piled more pasta on my plate than anyone else's. We ate in the open, at a long table (improvised from building planks), exactly where Nona, Teta Karmela and Douglas are in the photo below. The chain that hangs just in front of Douglas is part of the cart, where Stric Janko's ox would be tied. The cylinder near Douglas' knee is an upturned grenade shell from World War 1, defused and emptied and now used as a valuable steel base.

Fig 34. Douglas, Teta Karmela and Nona in 1950. This photo was found by Miriam in 2003 in Teta Mila's box of treasures in Bilje. On the left of Douglas is the pigsty, Nono's Hilton Hotel in 1943–1945. It is the only photo of Nona I have, and she looks exactly as I remember her, when she used to 'bite' me on the cheek with her one and only tooth. I sent this photo to Douglas in 2004.

Tata found

20 December 1946

The manure pit

In late December 1946 we were preparing to move into the newly rebuilt house, from where we lived—right next to the church in Stric Cekat's house.

It was 20 December, while Rihard was painting the kitchen and sitting room, that I decided to clean the manure pit of rubble, so we could reuse it when we moved in, in the next few days, with our two cows. There were broken tiles and some bricks on the bottom of the concrete manure pit, in about 15 cm of black water. There were also the thick tree trunks, some slipped off their support, which had been the floor supporting the manure. The pit had been emptied of all manure some three years earlier, subsequent to the house being burned down, and never used again because we no longer lived there after September 1943.

The pit had two floors, the bottom one some 75 centimeters high, into which the cows' urine drained and collected, and a top floor some 1.5 metres high where the cow manure, straw and dung, were put and then fermented to proper manure. The floor which supported the manure was one third concrete slab at each end of the pit, while the centre third consisted of tree trunks abutting each other. They were acacia trunks from our own bush.

In one corner of the pit there was a manhole in the concrete slab. When the pit was in normal use, this manhole was covered by a wooden lid, and no manure on top of it.

When I went to clean the pit I thought that I needed only to reposition the fallen or slipped tree trunks into their proper place, and stepped into the pit on some bricks in the black water. But I noticed that there was a fair bit of rubble on the bottom, partly under the black water. I decided to lift all the tree trunks out of the pit and do as good a clean out of rubble as I could with a pitchfork.

With the pitchfork I threw several bricks, half bricks and broken roof-tiles out of the pit, when I noticed the point of a boot sticking out of the black water. Without much thought I went with the pitchfork under the water to grab the boot to throw it out, but as I lifted it out of the water some large bones fell out of it, and as I lifted a bit further the black water was running out of the boot, with smaller bones. I do not remember what I thought immediately, whether that it could be Tata, or just a body.

I went into the house to call Rihard, who had just about finished his wall painting, and told him I found bones. There was the immediate awareness, I do not remember words, that we may have found our Tata. We started feeling with our hands into the black water, felt and found more bones, saw a little further up, partly hidden by the concrete slab, the skull. We started to collect all the bones, and the skull, and the boots, and a belt, and a wallet. We used a wooden box for the bones.

Rihard was taking the bones into the house where Miriam was washing them. We finished up scooping with our hands all the sediment and whatever in the area, so as not to leave behind any bones, however small. Miriam cleaned and washed every little bone. From memory, none of us three recognised the boots or the belt as being Tata's, but Mama did later. We handled the wallet very carefully, and gently opened it and found two items I remember. One was a 1,000-lire note, Italian currency of the time, very neatly folded into a small rectangle, as these notes were very large, larger than a half page. The other item was a folded paper document, which we gingerly opened and could still quite clearly read. It was a receipt from the government to Emilio Nemec for a calf, which he had delivered to the Italian authorities towards the war effort, without payment, which would occur after victory!

We had no doubt that it was Tata. Only later in the 1970s, from the inscription on the gravestone, I realised that we found Tata exactly three years and three months to the day after his disappearance.

Mama was not with us at the time, she was at home. Rihard went down from the hill to tell Teta Lizi, and they decided that we should not tell Mama immediately, because if we did she would not want to move back to the house. So we put all of Tata's remains into the wooden box, hid the box under the roof, and kept the fact to ourselves until we had moved, within the next few days. It was Christmas Eve when we finally finished the move, and it was to be our first night back in our own home. It was evening, and we were

all, let's say happy, when Rihard said to Mama that we have 'something to tell you'. She looked at us three and said, 'It's Tata.' We said 'Yes.'

It must have been after Christmas, when Rihard took the box of Tata's remains to Gorica, to the mortuary for an examination. Today we would say for a forensic opinion. The doctor who examined the remains said to Rihard that there is no obvious evidence of the cause of death. That there may be sign of a lesion on the skull, but not very definite, perhaps a lesion on some bone around the waist, but not very definite. All vague and, as far as I know, only verbal—just another skeleton from the war. We reasoned that any vague damage to the skull could also be the result of the motorbike accident Tata had several years earlier.

The burial

Mama arranged for a private burial of Tata's remains in the grave where Nono, his father, was buried. I remember the day. We went to the tiny chapel at the cemetery. The remains were arranged in a small open coffin made by the village carpenter. Some sort of palm leaf along the length of the little coffin partly covered the bones. Rihard adjusted the skull at the top end of the coffin, we did the customary sprinkling of the remains with an olive branch and holy water, and there must have been the priest to do the simple prayers, but I do not remember him being there.

Mama did not want any villagers at the funeral, because 'it was the village that killed him'. We did not know the truth of Tata's death, but in a way the feeling that the whole village could be guilty made me feel alienated from most of my friends. I did not want to talk with anyone, I distrusted just about everyone. It was really unjust of me to many, specially to truly loyal friends, but I could not help it.

In the period from Tata's disappearance on 20 September 1943 until we found him, hope had not died. Between the disappearance and the end of the war there was some reason to be hopeful for his return. When the war finished in May 1945, and people were returning home from various places—the Partisans, prisoners of war, concentration camps—unexpected returns of people who had not been heard from for some years, I remember how there was inside each one of us the unspoken hope for the miracle. We did not talk about it, but it was there for a few months. Finding Tata on 20 December 1946 ruled out hope, but the certainty of knowing was more valuable than false hopes.

After Tata's disappearance, I frequently dreamt of him. I would tell Mama 'I dreamt of Tata' and she would brighten up, 'Oh, did you? And how was he? How did he look? Did he smile?' The usual answer was 'No, he was serious.' As a matter of fact, occasional dreams persisted for decades, sometimes he actually 'returned', sometimes he was 'just there'. The last dream I remember was in Hawthorn, I had my own family, and he had 'returned'. But he was not talking, he was just there, and we were alienated, I just accepted that in the dream.

Decision to leave Bilje

The new borders between Italy and Yugoslavia had been defined by a so-called International Commission during 1946, and it was known where they would run. Our region was Zone A, administered temporarily by the Allies since the end of the war, while Zone B was administered temporarily by Yugoslavia. With the new borders some of Zone A would be ceded to Yugoslavia, and some would remain Italian. There had been four proposals for the new border to the International Commission—the American line, the French line, the British line, and the Russian line—the victors were deciding. The politics of the Cold War were already in full swing, and the four lines reflected fully the political blinkers of each: the American line wanted to give to Italy large territories, the Russian line wanted to give Yugoslavia large territories, the British proposed to retain the pre-war border (that is, retain the basic cause of the conflict!), the French reasoned that the local problem was ethnic, and drew a line-of-best-fit to separate Italians from Slovenians. The population was of course mixed, high concentration of Italians in the cities, practically only Slovenians in the villages, so the border was rather ridiculous, cutting the cities away from the surrounding countryside. But the French line was adopted.

The new border was to be implemented in September 1947, and it was accepted knowledge that people traffic across it will come to a halt. This was in effect the line

dividing East from West, the Iron Curtain.

Rihard was already doing his veterinary course at the University of Milan, and he was going to stay in Italy, he had decided that. Mama, Miriam and I would be in Bilje, in Yugoslavia, and the family would be split, which Mama found difficult to accept, but she might have if we had not found Tata.

I remember Mama struggling with herself for a few weeks, through January 1947 in our new house, trying to decide whether we three stay in Bilje or not. She decided that we go, and told us of her decision. I remember how light I felt, elated really, that we go away, leave Bilje and our home behind.

Over January and February I rebuilt the wisteria pergola at the front of the house, using for the four corner posts the acacia trunks removed from the manure pit. I was pleased with it, and thought that it should last a long time.

Some villagers tried to talk Mama out of her decision. Some by political conviction: 'But we will finally be part of Yugoslavia, it's what we always wanted'; some from genuine concern for her future: 'But it's your and your children's home here.' One of these genuine friends was David from under the hill, Rok's son. I remember him coming to the house one evening and trying to talk Mama into staying. I remember her saying, 'But David, they killed my husband, I can't live here', and also 'But David, when I walk around, trees talk to me. I can't live here.'

Mama arranged that we rent a couple of rooms for us, and space in the stable for two cows in Sovodnje, six kilometres away from Bilje and three kilometres beyond the future border, on the Italian side. In March 1947 we moved, with two cows and Popsy. The border was closed on 14 September of that year.

10 June 2007

Sovodnje

March 1947 – January 1950

The name

Once Mama had decided that we leave Bilje for good, and would not stay in Yugoslavia, she arranged with a relative in Sovodnje that we would work some of his fields for 50/50 share. The house where we rented two rooms, kitchen and one bedroom, was a nice villa right next to the road bridge across the river Vipava, the same river that runs through Bilje some six kilometres upstream. Some 50 metres downstream was the railway bridge, a much bigger structure all in stone. We moved there in March 1947, when I was 16.

The river Vipava runs into the river Soča in Sovodnje. The triangle of land where the two rivers meet was owned by our relative, Pepe Cotič, the father of Teta Slavica, the wife of Mama's brother in Ljubljana. The land was partly just mixed bush, some was a plantation of silver birch, and some was meadow. The meadow was for us to work for hay, so I used to go there. At the confluence of the two rivers it was low land, prone to flooding and away from all houses. The Vipava became quite wide just before the confluence, and one could see clearly its murkier water, from clay land, blending into the clear blue of the Soča, which here had a very wide bed, and whose water knew only rocks, pebbles, and sand. The whole area was so peaceful, so quiet, idyllic really, and I loved to go there.

It is strange how we just accept names of places without thinking of their meaning, unless very obvious. So I had to be an old man, before it hit me only a few years ago, when I resuscitated the photo below, what Sovodnje means. 'Voda' is water, and the prefix 'so' is like the English co-, 'vodnje' is hard to translate, but it implies a 'place' of waters. In a nutshell, it can be translated as 'where waters meet', a poetic name.

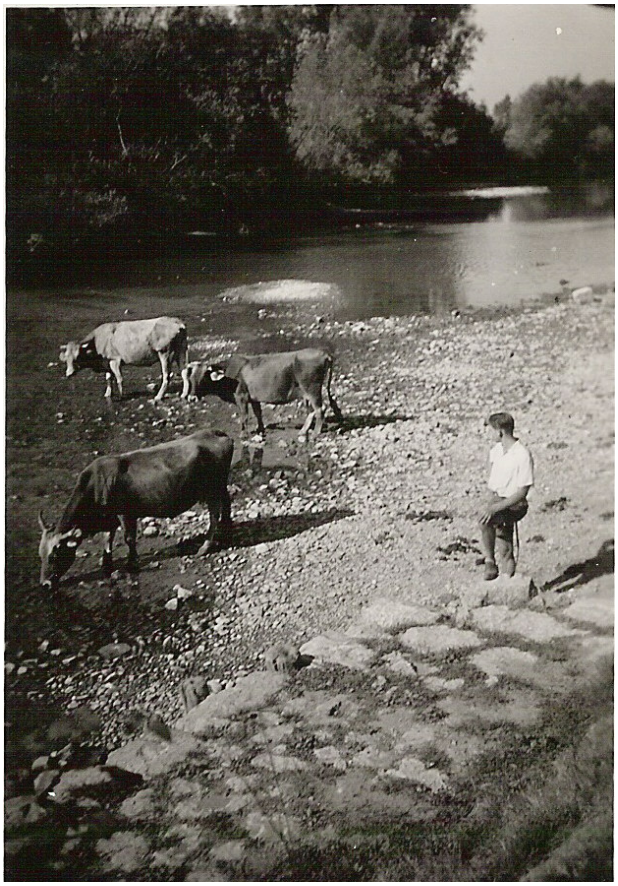

Fig 35. The cows and me on the river Vipava. This is in Sovodnje in summer at low water. A special Sunday treat for the cows, as usually they were given water in the stable. The picture is just downstream from the railway bridge, looking downstream. One kilometre downstream is the confluence of Vipava into Soča, 'where waters meet'.

Fig 36. Rihard in Sovodnje.

Fig 37. Miriam when we lived in Sovodnje.

Fig 38. Miriam and Simon
at our second house in Sovodnje.

Fig 39. Danilo, Mama and Rihard in Sovodnje.
Mama kept this photo from 1948–1949.

Fig 40. Me, Miriam and Rihard in Sovodnje.
Simon was the photographer in those days,
technologically the most advanced of us all!

Ear operation

It must have been shortly after we got to Sovodnje when I had the mastoid operation on my left ear, in Gorica. I had ear trouble most winters, but it was during the time I worked on our house reconstruction that it got really bad. It was always very drafty in the open house, and the ear infection was very advanced and I could hardly hear on any ear, but it was the left one that really ached. Actually I must have been quite deaf, because I remember the master builder yelling at me from upstairs to pass him a tool, and I could not hear what he wanted. His face was getting redder with frustration as he kept yelling the tool's name and I kept picking up the wrong ones. But if I stayed out of drafts and kept the ear covered, the ache subsided.

Mama took me to Dr Comelli (Italianised from Komel) in Gorica (I learned the word *otorinolaringoiatra* then), who advised her that a mastoid operation was necessary, as the infection can spread to the brain.

I remember being in hospital, and the operation itself, as it was done with local anesthetic only. The surgeon's job was to break through the outer bone behind the ear and then scrape the infection from the inner bone. Before the start the male nurse (a friar) gave me a piece of rubber hose to hold between my teeth, so as not to bite my tongue. The hose was red rubber, it could have been cut off from a wine decanting hose!

I was lying on the table covered by a white sheet, with my eyes shut. I remember the needles of local anesthetic into the back of the ear, unpleasant, but the numbness soon took over. Then some rasping sounds, probably the incision, but no real pain, so I got curious and opened my eyes. With the bottom eye I could see the wall opposite, with a big mirror on it, and my immediate thought was that I could watch the operation. The surgeon was behind me, and I saw in the mirror two white hands (gloved I suppose) but with all fingers red with blood, just above me. I closed my eyes again and did not reopen them to the end. I remember the hammering on the head as he was breaking through the outer bones, and the sound as he was scraping away the infection, but no great pain.

I remember being back home in Sovodnje with a bandaged head, and anxious to be rid of the bandages. The bandages went, the wound healed eventually, I was 85 per cent deaf on that ear, and I was told to never go under water when swimming. But the infection was not eliminated completely, and the saga of my ear problem continued. Another *otorinoloringoiatra*, in Trst, said that I should not have lost my hearing in the operation. The next doctor always knows better than the previous one. There was the advent of new penicillin drops, then on to Australia, when it finally subsided a few years after we arrived.

Summer job

The road bridge across the Vipava, next to where we lived, had been hit by a bomb and damaged, but still had a narrow width to squeeze a cow and cart across. It was to be rebuilt through the summer of 1947, and I got a job there, as builder's labourer. I remember having to go to Gorica to get the 'labour ticket' from some office, to get the job. I think it was a requirement of employment and unions.

The bridge was in reinforced concrete, and we carried water from the river in buckets to mix the concrete. I remember the foreman, a kind Furlan. He was good, as he kept us younger boys employed as long as he could. Each of us spent our final week of employment straightening nails to be reused for scaffolding, while he sold the new nails. Today it would be called recycling.

Another unusual thing was the movement of rails. The approach road to the bridge had also been damaged, and rails from the nearby railway station had been used for makeshift repair. These we removed over several days, and each evening there was a small pile of rails there, but the following morning there were none! The good Furlan was selling them too.

In the afternoons, most of the foreman's supervising was done from a table in front of the inn next to the bridge, with his glass and carafe of wine. One day I was breaking up some damaged reinforced concrete with a sledgehammer, and a splinter of rock flew into my shin. I was wearing shorts as usual. I felt the sting and pulled out the small splinter. Blood just 'pissed out' from the pierced vein. Later in Gorica they gave me an anti-tetanus injection. Tetanus was feared in those days, from soil infected wounds, but I thought even then that the injection was stupid and meaningless, as clean rock has no germs and the blood flowed out.

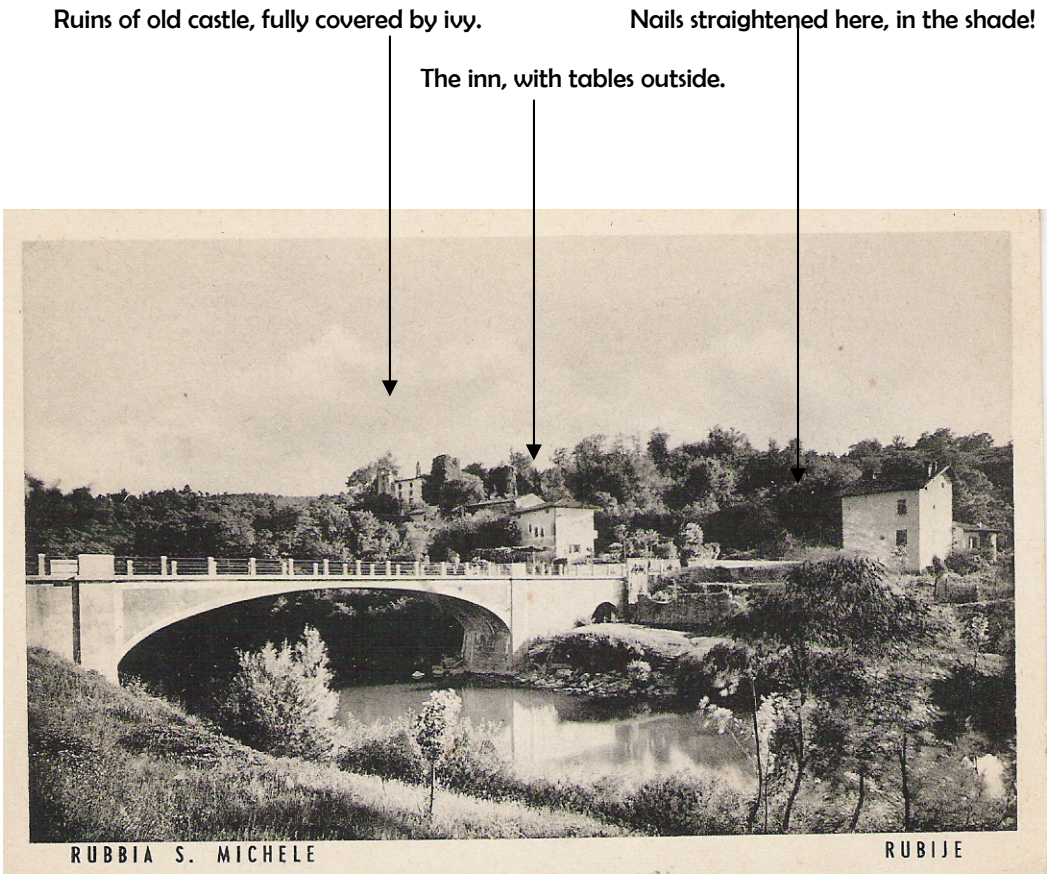

Fig 41. The bridge from Sovodnje to Rubije across the Vipava, looking upstream.
I worked on its repair in summer 1947.

Fig 42. Romano, close friend in Sovodnje.
We straightened a lot of nails
together, laughing.

Identity card

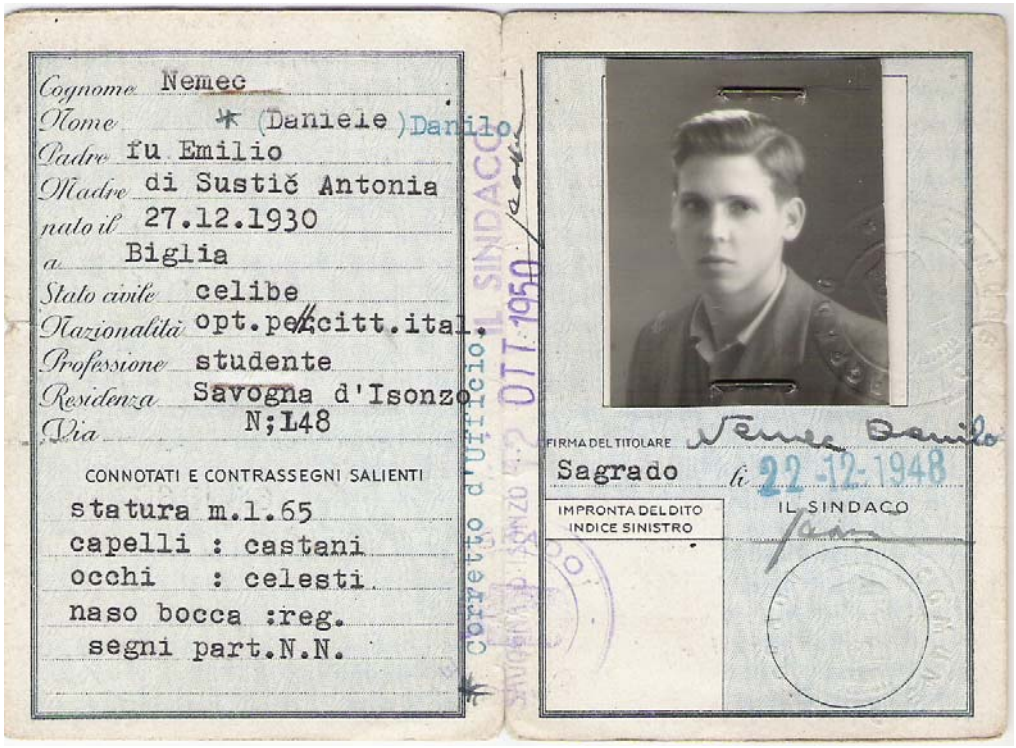

Fig 43. My identity card from 1948, after we moved to Italy.
It shows my name officially corrected from Daniele to Danilo in 1950
to be consistent with other documents for migration to Australia.
The immigration officials could not understand that it was the same name.
My height of 1.65 metres (5 feet, 6 inches) means that I was still growing, but ...

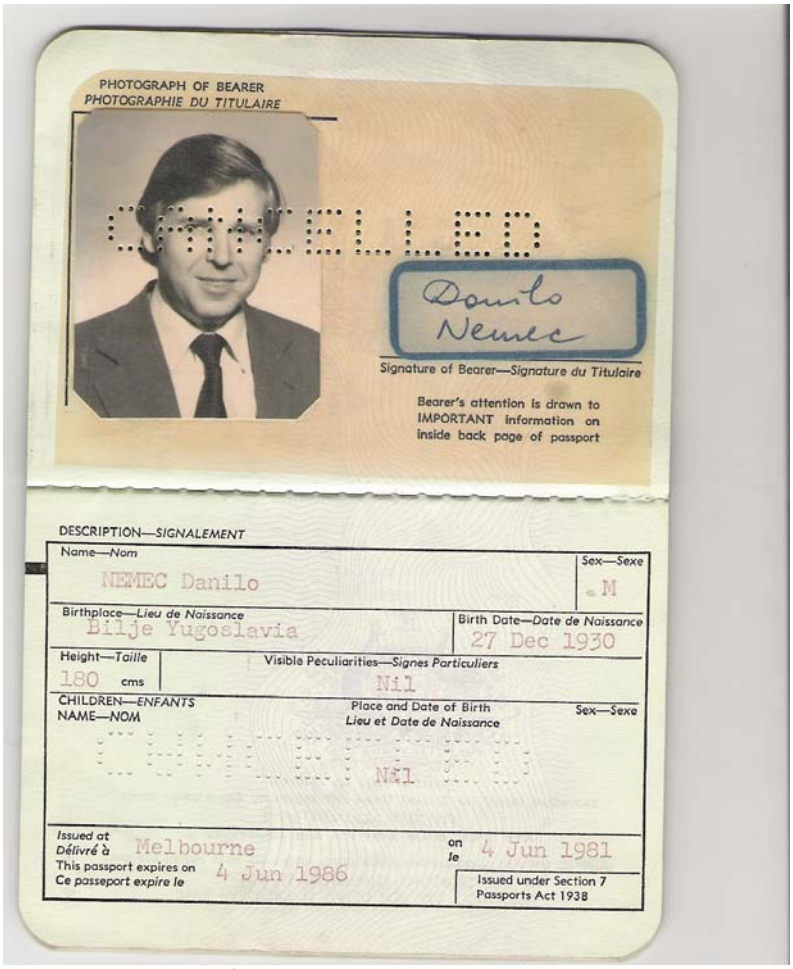

Fig 44. Proof that I eventually grew to 180 centimetres.

The identity card also shows that my nationality was 'opting for Italian citizenship'. Because we were from Bilje, we would have become Yugoslav citizens, even though we lived in Sovodnje, now Italy, which would make us foreigners and not able to work. But there was a provision that by proving some Italian ancestry we could opt for Italian citizenship. Mama said immediately, 'No problem there, Justulin!'

Mama's grandfather, a Peric from Bilje, had married twice. His first wife died (maybe in childbirth) and he remarried, to 'a beautiful Furlana, surname Justulin'. There were many children; one was Judita, Mama's mother.

Mama never knew her grandmother, but she always remembered from which village the 'beautiful Furlana' was, and just said to Miriam, 'Get on the bike and go to Campolongo (Miriam remembers the name!). Go to the priest, and ask him for the birth certificate of my grandmother.' And Miriam pedalled from Sovodnje to the village in Furlania, about 1½ hours' ride—not far at all now that I found it on the Encarta World Atlas! She was back the same day, with written proof that we have Italian ancestry. So Mama applied for citizenship for the whole family. But State's mills grind even more slowly than Gods' mills, and we received Italian citizenship more than five years later, in Australia, when it no longer mattered.

At least I know that, genetically, I must be 12.5 per cent Italian, Furlan really, and Ivan and Belinda must be 6.25 per cent Furlani, 46.875 per cent Australian and 46.875 per cent Slovnik.

So, at less than 50 per cent, we all fail the 'Test of Australian values'!

Farming 50/50

The first summer in Sovodnje was really quite a happy time, most of the time. It was before the border was closed, and we used to go around on pushbikes to various villages nearby on Sundays. It was a good, light-hearted time. Only once I remember, when there was an open air fair with dance in the village and I went in the evening by myself, and realized that I knew nobody there, and felt very much alone, but never wished to be

back in Bilje.

We worked the land, nominally 50/50, but I don't think we ever gave Pepe Cotičov any produce, as there wasn't much to be shared anyway. As a half joke I remember how, when we ploughed out the potatoes, I would often pick up what looked like a potato but its weight told me it was a pebble. The land there must have been a river bed in ancient times, and was loaded with smooth pebbles, browned by the soil. I recall taking several times, on pushbike, a basket of zucchini to a nearby village to a wholesaler who trucked various vegetables to Trst, for a few lire.

Pepe Cotičov did not need our half produce anyway, as he had a prosperous marble working industry. His younger son was running it now, his elder son had been killed by the Vosovci. He had bad legs, but managed to travel by pushbike, and I remember him coming to see us often. One day he was very pleased as he now had a 'motorised' pushbike, and could move without pedalling on level ground. He liked to have a chat with Mama, and various people would crop up in their conversation. His assessment of someone untrustworthy was simply, 'Ah, him ... but he goes to mass!'

Technical college

When the war finished, they re-established the Slovenian gymnasium (high school) in Gorica, and I did one year there, year four of eight. That was the 1945–1946 scholastic year, which I completed from Sovodnje. But the gymnasium was geared for university entry, which was out of the question for me, and Mama thought that I better go to a technical college, five years, with employment at the end, hopefully. The choice was between Udine and Trst, both the same distance by train from where we lived, in opposite directions. Mama told me to go to the colleges in each city and choose. In Trst I felt intimidated and did not like it at all. The Udine college, in Furlania, just felt warm and welcoming, and I enrolled there in the autumn of 1947, about one month after the start of the year.

It was one hour's train ride from the nearby station Rubije to Udine, with about eight stations in between. Through the first year all carriages were goods carriages, there were no passenger carriages on that line. I soon made friends with Gigi Gujon from Subida, in the same class, who walked the two to three kilometres from Subida to Cormòns, to catch the same train. He was much more gregarious than me, and through him I soon knew a lot of other boys who picked the same train to Udine at various stations. We just loved travelling in the cattle wagons, with all sliding gates opened, and shunned any wagons that had a few backless seats bolted to the floor—business class I suppose! Of course I only remember the sunny, warm days of those trips.

One day Gigi asked me to come with him to his house in Subida, and he would explain some geometrical drawing principles which I did not know, because I had missed the first month of lessons which were crucial. So I met his family—mother, older brother, two sisters. Their father had died, not many years earlier. Gigi and I remained true friends for life.

The trains improved in year two, with passenger carriages and heated in winter, but we missed the carefree travel of year one. Also the timetable was such that I had to catch a train at about six in the morning, as the next one was too late to reach Udine in time for school, which started at eight. So Gigi and I had a whole hour to spare at Udine station, which we used for study most times. I remember looking out from the train for Gigi at Cormòns station, as the train pulled up in winter, with rain pelting and Gigi struggling with his umbrella in the wind. The heating in the train was very welcome then.

There is one very pleasant event I remember from year one. Once a week we had physical education—various exercises in a well appointed gymnasium. One day the teacher organised some sort of competition between the various classes of year one. Part of the games was the pole climbing, on smooth steel poles about four metres high, and rope climbing, on loose, thick ropes of the same height. Our class must have been pretty even with the others, when the climbing of pole and rope came last. I was to do it for the class, and excelled! With the experience of all the tree climbing with Franček and the other boys in Bilje, I went up the pole and the rope like a monkey, and our class won. There was jubilation, and I was grabbed by a group of students onto their shoulders and carried around in triumph. I did not care for the win, the climbing was so natural to me, but the affection with which they did it touched me.

Fig 45. My class at the Technical College in Udine in 1949.
I am in the top row, last on the right. Gigi is missing; he must be the arm and knee on the lower right. On the right is the photo Gigi gave me when we left for Australia.

As always for me, the study at Udine too was hard—always uncertain and lacking confidence. But I worked hard, and even earned a little 'commission'. One of the students was the son of an innkeeper, so of a well-off family, nice boy but lazy as he had no pressure to study for survival. His surname has just come back to me: Pascolini. One day he asked Gigi if he would make a technical drawing for him which was due to be handed in shortly, for payment. Gigi refused but offered the 'job' to me, as I had already handed in mine, well ahead of time. We agreed on a 'fee' and I had it ready on time. He handed it in with his name on it. I still remember that it was a simple aircraft component—plan, elevation and cross-section, a good job which got a pass. Pascolini kept promising me the payment, and asking for my patience. With Gigi we deduced that he probably had to pinch the money from his father's till, and he had difficulty, but I kept pestering him until he paid. I had no sympathy for him, because of his laziness and I thought he was dishonest to his parents. I would have easily foregone the few lire if he had been in need.

I did three years at this *Istituto Tecnico Malignani*, out of five, and passed each year, which was no mean feat, as many students just failed. The college speciality was aeronautics, but it had also mechanical, electrical, and civil courses. In the fourth year I would have chosen electrical, but that never came, because we migrated to Australia.

Through this period Miriam was at home, helping Mama with home and field work. She did not have a job and could not get further schooling—such was the economic situation and the acceptance at the time that the sister sacrifices herself for the brothers. She would have done better than me with further schooling. In the periods when there was some spare milk from the cows, Miriam would take it to Gorica, for a few lire. Mama was receiving a war widow's pension.

Gigi continued his course and got his mechanical diploma—*Perito Industriale.* He must have graduated well, as he got a job at the college to teach mechanical workshop—machine tools, and moved to Udine to live. He was still teaching there when we were in

England in 1969–1970, and came to London with his class on a student visit in 1970. He kept the old home in Subida going, and after he retired in the late 1970s he moved there permanently.

Fig 46. Subida in 1970 with Ivan driving Gigi's tractor.
At Gigi's old home with Gigi, Daniela his eldest girl, and Dani his wife.
How green was the garden!

Gigi died in the summer of 2000. His wife Dani told me on the phone that he 'just collapsed in the middle of his tomato patch, tying the plants, with a big sigh!'

When I wrote to Gigi about our loss of Ivan, and that the day of the funeral was sunny with white clouds, he wrote me the warmest letter, and 'From now on, when I will look at white clouds, I will remember Ivan.'

Trip to Rome

The year 1950 was Jubilee Year for the Catholic Church, every 50 years, and a great occasion for pilgrimage to Rome. An organization in Rome, Roma Mater, was giving prizes to high schools of various cities, and Udine got ten of them, to distribute to 'deserving' students in the various colleges. Our technical college received three—two went to students in the fourth year and one to me in third year. I was truly surprised, the selection was primarily on scholastic merit, with, they said, some consideration to 'economic circumstances'. I was probably the one with the most 'circumstances', with the other two not far behind.

The prize was three nights of free accommodation and meals in Rome, travel paid, and some spending money. The only condition was that we had to visit three nominated cathedrals—St Peter's, San Giovanni, and one other.

I knew one of the other students, Ennio Gasperin, from Cormòns, and we agreed to go together in early summer 1950, as the third student went at a different time. It was the first big trip for me, and Ennio wanted to see his aunty in Venice on the way to Rome. So we had a brief stop there and I remember rushing with Ennio from the station through the narrow Venice *callè* to his old aunty in some tiny loft apartment, and then quickly back to proceed on a night train to Rome.

We had three very pleasant, and of course interesting, days in Rome. Apart from visiting the three cathedrals, my only other formal task was, from Mama, to buy a rosary to be passed on to Nona in Bilje, which she would treasure. Nona used to say the rosary every night, and forced the not-too-religious other members of the family to join in. When I was a boy, Tata, telling Mama about his evening visits to his old home, would add 'and then we had to say the rosary'.

At some cathedral, there were large tables of religious items to buy, rosaries included. I was looking and fingering one I thought would be nice for Nona, when this most imposing figure, in purple vest, on the other side of the table said firmly in French '*mille cinq cents*!' I knew no French, but that was easy to understand—1,500 lire, and it was exorbitant. My opinion of cardinals in purple dived, and I bought a rosary for Nona from someone less close to God. Pepe Cotičov

would have said of the cardinal, 'He certainly goes to mass!' I do not remember how the rosary got to Bilje, then truly on the other side of the Iron Curtain, but local people had permits to cross the border to work their fields, and someone must have carried it.

Migration

1 January – 14 March 1951

Departure

Through 1947–1950 many relatives and friends, displaced from their original homes like us, were migrating to various countries: Australia, Argentina, Canada, United States, Venezuela, Brazil, New Zealand, et cetera.

Teta Lizi and family had gone to Argentina, the Soler family also, Vojko had gone to Australia, the family who ran the inn next to the bridge also, and many others. The idea of migrating was always there, but Rihard wanted to finish his veterinary course in Milan, and Mama thought that I also should finish my technical course. Rihard was finishing in June 1950, but I had two years to go. Miriam would eventually marry Simon, it was assumed, as they were well and truly in love.

Life in Sovodnje was difficult, and Teta Lizi wrote to Mama from Argentina, saying quite emphatically not to give my study too much importance, to just come to Argentina for a better life. I have that letter now, as Miriam found it in Mama's papers and kept it.

I don't know why, but Mama just did not fancy Argentina very much, and other South American countries were completely unknown. Canada was just too cold and unknown. In Mama's mind the alternatives were Australia or America. When asked why she chose Australia her answer was simple—she had three reasons:

The first was that when she was very young, before Egypt, she had read a book, *Australia and its Island.* This was before World War 1, and Australia was much further away than the Moon, which could be seen often, and that book left Mama enchanted with its romantic descriptions of far away places. It probably talked of south Pacific islands as well. She never forgot the effect that book had on her at the age of idealism.

The second reason was from Mama's time in Egypt. During World War 1, an Australian war correspondent was courting Mrs Rabinovich, whose two little girls Mama was looking after. He was Mr Schuler, a Melbourne journalist. He used to come to the Rabinovich house in Cairo often, and tell stories about Australia, about himself, his sisters back in Melbourne, and so on. He was liked by all the household, and Mama had told us about him when we were children, always with affection. Mr Schuler was killed in the war, to the sadness of all. It is worth reading the pages in Gabriel Josipovici's biography of his mother Sacha, *A Life*, where he describes the breaking of the sad news, in the night. The memory of Mr Schuler, and his stories about Australia, lived on with Mama.

Thirdly, there was Father Alfons in New York. During my childhood Bilje produced many peasants, some murderers, an innocuous Fascist, and a priest. This was Father Alfons, and I remember all the fuss and talk there was in Bilje when he was to give his First Mass. It was before the war started, during my primary school years. Mama used to say, amused, 'They cooked for three days for the celebration.' He was a clever man, and his church career eventually took him to New York. Mama had a very high opinion of him, and wrote to him, asking his thoughts on her dilemma of whether to migrate to America or to Australia. He replied, described his view of America, suggested that we could make a good life there, and admitted that he cannot genuinely have an opinion on Australia, but still gave his thoughts of it. He concluded his letter saying that all in all he thinks Australia would be better than America for us.

That sealed Mama's decision that we migrate to Australia. In early autumn of 1950 we, the family of four, went through the IRO (International Refugee Organisation) checks, and were accepted for Australia. Simon, a few days after being told that we were migrating, his Miriam included, went straight to IRO and got himself accepted for Australia too.

Now it was only a matter of waiting for the departure. Rihard, just graduated, was temporarily employed at the University in Milan, working for his professor on research

for milk pasteurization, which was not yet widespread. I did not even enroll in the fourth year of my course, as departure was imminent. We knew how much baggage weight we were allowed for the sea voyage, and I remember going to Gorica to buy aluminium strip and nails, and reinforced all the edges of a large (almost one cubic meter) wooden crate, and of a *baulle* which Mama still had from her return from Egypt. As Australia was beyond the Moon, we decided that it was wise to take our pushbike with us, the one with wooden wheel rims. Dismantled, this fitted nicely into the wooden crate, as well as Mama's sewing machine, her Veritas, which she would have taken to Jupiter if necessary. Gigi, who was much better than me at it, came to dismantle, oil, and pack it. We took items of sentimental value—the fragile large flower pot Professor Grignaschi had gifted to Mama, Tata's motorbike headgear, which I still have, some of Mama's books from Egypt, and so on.

I went to say goodbye to friends, to Professor Alesani in Gorica, on Mama's urging wrote a letter to Franček in Bilje, the one of the popcorn in the chamber pot. He replied beautifully. I still have that letter. After three decades of no contact with him, in the 1980s I took the letter with me on my first trip to him in another village, and showed it to his teenage children. His daughter said, 'Yes, everybody says my Tata writes well.'

On the evening of 1 January 1951, after almost four years in Sovodnje, we took the train from nearby Rubije for the refugee camp in Bagnoli, near Naples, where we were to wait for a ship. Simon boarded the same train in Gorica, the next station.

I still had two flares, pinched from the British Army in Bilje in the summer of 1945. At that time, as we did not have the required firing pistol, we used to fire these by making a hole on the side of the cartridge with a nail, putting a splinter of gunpowder 'spaghetti' and lighting it, which in turn lit the powder inside the cartridge and fired the flare high into the sky. Now, using the same technique, I lit these last two flares from the parapet wall of the station, successfully into the night sky, as goodbye.

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Serial № 165754

Issued at TRIESTE

INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE ORGANIZATION

CERTIFICATE OF IDENTITY FOR THE PURPOSE OF IMMIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

1. The holder of this Certificate is the concern of International Refugee Organization.
2. This Certificate is issued by the International Refugee Organization with the approval of the Allied authorities of Occupation in Germany and Austria to Refugees and Displaced Persons recommended for emigration to Australia. It is issued without prejudice to and in no way affects the holders's nationality.
3. This certificate is NOT valid for travel unless it bears the signature of the I.R.O. certifying officer AND an australian visa, and the appropriate military exit permit has been granted.

FAMILY NAME: NEMEC
CHRISTIAN NAMES: Antonia
MAIDEN NAME (where applicable): Sustic
DATE OF BIRTH: 20.7.1891
SEX: F
DP NO.: 0439
PLACE AND COUNTRY OF BIRTH: Tolmin - Gorizia - Yugoslavia
NATIONALITY: Und.V.G.
OCCUPATION: Housewife
FATHER'S NAME: late Andrea
MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME: late Peric Giuditta

Nemec Antonia
(Signature of Applicant)

Description of Holder

Height 1.60 cm Weight 54 kg
Hair dark-brown
Eyes blues
Nose regular
Shape of Face normal
Special Characteristics none

K.P.MANNOCK
Chief Resettlement Officer
Northern Area - R&R Division
(Signature and Position of I.R.O. Certifying Officer)

Date 21st November 1950
Place Trieste

Children up to 16 years accompanying holder.
(Dependents over 16 years of age must have separate document).

NAME	SEX	PLACE AND DATE OF BIRTH

Exit Permit Visa No.
dated issued

For insertion of visa

AUSTRALIAN MILITARY MISSION 10 GERMANY

Fig 47. Emigration paper for DP NO. 0439, weight 54 kg! (Displaced Person)

Bagnoli

We stopped in Rome on the way for a quick goodbye to Professor Grignaschi, staying there at his daughter's. Rihard forgot his briefcase at the Termini station, on a bench. In a panic, he found it about an hour later at the same spot. It made one question the theory that thieves and pickpockets were everywhere.

We were in Bagnoli a few weeks, and Rihard, Miriam and I managed to make the trip to Naples and take the ferry to Capri, where Franček's eldest sister Eudoksia lived. She was married then and was running her little pensione for tourists there. It was just to say goodbye and say that we have been to Capri. She actually lived in Anacapri, on the opposite side of the island, and I remember that we had to rush to catch the boat back, as we could not afford a taxi. I also remember that she said that they were very limited with water, and she would set the tap dripping to fill a container overnight. That water was 'free'.

The Bagnoli camp was full of the typical refugee crowds of post-war Europe, from every country imaginable. We were only on transit, happily, but many were people who were rejected for migration for various reasons. The generosity of the countries taking migrants did not extend easily to those with poor health. Only healthy, strong, young labour was accepted readily, and we certainly had that asset.

There were also many unwilling to migrate anywhere, and just biding time hoping for 'better times'. I remember one of them—the Russian Karahotka. Refugees came and went through that camp, but Karahotka was always there—a fixture of Bagnoli. When we were settling in the early years in Australia, and would meet various refugees who transited Bagnoli at various times, they all seemed to know Karahotka! He would have been in his thirties, maybe 40, a real character, who would entertain by telling stories of his past, or so he said. But they were all stories of high living in Russia—society balls, dances, parties. In his Russian, of which we picked up enough, he would describe these grandiose and fantastic events in detail, a true storyteller. We loved listening to him.

But I still wonder how much was fact and how much imagination or dreaming. By his age, he would have had at least the last 25 years of his life in Russia after those things were gone, and life was not parties. The other possibility is that it was all true, in his very young years, and that his life had stopped at that time, and he lived in that time warp maybe forever. In Bagnoli, with regular meals and a bunk in a dormitory, he could indulge in his dreams.

Castelbianco

After about four weeks of Bagnoli we were to board a ship, but the ship would pick us up from Germany, around Bremen, on the North Sea, it could not be further away. So two trains were filled with emigrants and in two days we were in a refugee transit camp near Aurich, very northern Germany. It was much cleaner than Bagnoli, and run very professionally. It made me think that the Germans on the staff may all be ex-concentration camp 'employees', they were so efficient, specially in showing us where the showers were!

One day we, that is Rihard, Simon, Miriam and I, walked to a nearby forest, it was beautiful and peaceful. Another day we went (walked?) to the nearby small town of Aurich, and I remember the beautiful cream cakes in the window of the only café in town. I think that we actually had a cake between us. It was still early years after the war, but the cakes were back.

After a couple of weeks in Aurich we were sent by train to Bremenhaven, not very far away, and boarded the Italian ship *Castelbianco* in the afternoon. With the usual logic of bureaucracy, the ship had come from Genova, for us and some additional refugees from German camps, about 1,000 passengers altogether. Any idiot would have had the ship sailing from Naples, and save eight days.

It was a very bleak, overcast, northern day, and the ship sailed at dusk in February 1951.

12 September 2007

We landed in Melbourne on 14 March 1951, disembarked the following day and reached the Bonegilla migrant camp the same day. It was like landing on the Moon, before television and no hype.

24 November 2007

Stric Janko and the ox

15 August 1972

Stric Janko and Teta Mila lived together in the ancestral home after the war, for the rest of their able lives. She had been widowed by the war, and he never married. He had wanted to marry when he was young, before the war, to a Bilje girl. Miriam remembers being told by Mama that Nona did not like the family of the potential daughter-in-law, I don't know why, and she prevented him getting married then. Mama disapproved of Nona on this one.

The war came and he was drafted into the Italian army, around 1942 in his early thirties, into the *battaglione speciale*. These were the recruits from our parts, Slovenians whom the Italian Fascist regime did not trust, because of the underground rebellion against it. These recruits were sent into isolated regions and were not armed. Anyway, Stric Janko was in Sardinia, with many others from Bilje and neighbouring villages. But I do not remember knowing then where he was, only that he was '*pri vojakih*' (at the soldiers, as we used to say). It was in 1970, when I was in London for the Eurallumina job in Sardinia and we visited Teta Mila and Stric Janko, when he told me he had been in or close to Cagliari.

It was a bizarre, but pleasant twist of life that I should finish up working and living in Portoscuso, some 40 kilometres from Cagliari. While we lived in Portoscuso I was told by Tullio Bertoja, work colleague and close friend, that in Carbonia, ten kilometres from Portoscuso and where we often went, there is a section in the cemetery where 'Yugoslavs' are buried, from those war years. They were accidental deaths of those recruits. Tullio and I meant to go one day and visit that cemetery, to see the names, but we never did.

After the war and the reconstruction of the burnt-out house, Nona, Teta Mila, and Stric Janko lived there. Nona died in 1952, and Stric Janko continued to work the land. Even in Bilje, and in spite of the desperate economic situation in the isolated Yugoslavia through the 1950s, some progress was occurring. Large areas of land were converted to state-owned consortia for fruit and vegetable production, and large vineyards developed from previously forested hills. But for Stric Janko and Teta Mila there was no change. He continued his life of working the land, in the good old ways, and part of it was having an ox, to plough the land.

Teta Mila said to me that the ox and Stric Janko 'understood each other'. She told me stories about the ox. The one I remember was how one day the beast just walked out of the yard through the big gate into the middle of the street, and just stood there. Stric Janko did nothing to get it back—he respected the will of the ox. The street is narrow just there, and restricted on both sides by buildings. Several trucks, normally tearing through that section, just had to stop. The ox did not budge, Stric Janko respected his will, and enjoyed the situation, until the beast decided to return to his stable, of his own accord. Only then could the Bilje traffic return to normal.

It was amusing to me as I realized that the ox parked himself exactly where the German tank had stopped in 1944, to steal Nono's barrel of vinegar.

In my early days in Portoscuso in 1971, Tullio heard from me stories about Teta Mila, and said he is fond of her even without knowing her. When he was due to go on leave to his family in Trieste, he said he wants to visit 'your, *and my*, Teta Mila' and take her a parcel of coffee, still a valuable commodity there, and refused any money from me. So I asked him to take something for Stric Janko from me, and I got three bottles of different Sardinian wines, including a Vernaccia, of course.

Stric Janko had a bit of a 'drinking problem' in today's jargon, and while I knew he would value the three bottles, I expected him to also consume them rather quickly.

My next visit to Bilje from Portoscuso was about one year later, and in the evening at Teta Mila's he said to wait and went upstairs, returning with the box of the three bottles of wine I had sent him. He had not drunk them but saved them for us together. It was a repeat, to him unknown, of his saving the 'dinner' for me in 1945. That evening he also did a short solo Sardinian dance, he still remembered the steps 30 years later. He said the Sardinians were a good people.

Stric Janko died on 15 August 1972. Miriam brought this date back from the family tombstone on her latest visit to Bilje in 2007. I do not remember when I got the

news of his death, but it was not immediate. From Jane's diary I now see that I returned from Melbourne to Portoscuso on 4 August. I had gone to visit Mama who was very ill with strokes, and was the last farewell from her. Mama died on 28 August 1972.

I next saw Teta Mila a few months later, and she told me that Stric Janko had been sick for some time, and died in his bed, in his room. She said that the ox went berserk, for several days. She was convinced the animal sensed Stric Janko's death, and I believe her.

I loved Stric Janko, when I was a boy, a teenager, and an adult, and I love him now, old.

October 2007

Fig 48. Stric Janko, about 21,
as drafted into the Italian army.

Fig 49. The front of Teta Mila's house, where Tata was born. Jane took the photo in 1970: Teta Mila, Belinda, Stric Janko, and me.

Walkabout in Bilje

November 1978

In November 1978 I made my first trip to Rome since our return from Sardinia to Australia in September 1973. It was a 'working' trip for a Eurallumina technical meeting, and I took an extra week of my own time to go to Bilje and Gorica.

It was winter time and winter weather, but not very cold. I arrived in Bilje at Teta Mila's house in the afternoon, and went for a short walk towards the brick factory and towards our old home, and around some side tracks and footpaths. Teta Mila, living alone since Stric Janko's death in 1972, made the usual lovely dinner, and we had a happy evening together. She made the bed for me, Stric Janko's bed, using her old glory box sheets of home woven linen. She said it was nicer than any modern material, and she was right—I slept beautifully. Teta Mila was happy that I slept there, as nobody had used Stric Janko's room since his death.

In the morning Teta Mila was up well before me, had the fire going in the stove, the kitchen was warm, and we enjoyed the breakfast together—the classic hot white coffee with last night's polenta and clotted cream. Teta Mila did not have a cow, but she used to buy milk from a neighbour, and she made the cream for me.

I felt really good and happy, and wanted to enjoy the morning by just wandering around Bilje. Teta Mila asked me to be back for lunch around noon.

I walked towards the church, slowly, absorbing the place. In the little church square I looked at the house and front door of where we had lived in Stric Cekat's house in 1944–1946. The first door, nearest to the church, of the long building which in those days comprized four homes. The big double gate to the yard of our old home was open. Everything was so familiar, that I just walked in through the gate corridor (there were bedrooms above it) into the back yard, and knocked on the familiar back door. To the woman who opened I explained who I was and that we had lived in that house through the war—would she mind if I looked around a bit for old times' sake. She was very welcoming. I went in, looked at the various rooms, recounted odd memories to the kind woman. I walked also into the room off the

kitchen where the bread kiln had been, built into the wall. That room was more than half below ground level, with a small barred window just under the ceiling, looking level into the neat, grassed grounds behind the church. In earlier days, long before my existence, that had been the village cemetery, which was later moved. I told the woman how Mama wanted to use the bread kiln during the war, and had me firing it for hours, because it just refused to reach the required temperature, when the black soot burns off and the kiln inside becomes a clean white colour. The kiln had not been used for years, and the moisture of the ground had permeated it deeply. Eventually I did achieve the 'white kiln' and Mama put the bread loaves in, but they never baked, the dough was raw inside—the kiln had cooled faster than the baking. We did not try to use it again.

Suddenly the church bells started ringing, very familiar sound, loud and close. The woman said that they must be tolling for such-and-such a young woman, who had been killed in a car accident. She said that I probably know her, that I should know her, her name, et cetera, et cetera. It all meant nothing to me, and I explained that I had been away from Bilje for 30 years. The woman was a bit insistent that I should know the deceased woman. I left while the bells were still ringing, thanking her sincerely.

I paused at the doorsteps two doors down, where Rosalia had been killed with her daughter's baby in her arms. Rosalia was about Mama's age. It was in summer 1943 before the collapse of Italy. Two Partisans came one day at dusk, it was said that she refused to put the baby down, so they killed her and baby. She was 'a spy' they said! It was in 2006 that my long-lost childhood friend Dorče, in Ballarat, told me who the two killers were—one was from Bilje.

I crossed the small bridge over the creek (*Potok*), to the crossroads just before the old school, with the corner building which had been our kindergarten.

At this crossing, after we had left Bilje in 1946, and after the closure of the border, they had built a monument to the 'Fallen for Freedom' of World War 2. It was a steep pyramid shape, truncated at the top, of *Kras* granite stone. On each of the four side were the names of the dead, each side different—one for fallen Partisans: Brunče, Gabriel, and so many others; one for those who never returned from German concentration camps, Vanda was there too with many others, one for those killed in the bombardment of March 1944. I cannot recall the fourth side, but on squeezing the memory, I think it was dedicated to Car, the National Hero from Bilje.

My thoughts went to the story how the 'Authorities', at the planning stage for the monument in about 1948–1950, approached Nona, Tata's mother, proposing to include Tata's name on the monument, reasoning that he also had 'fallen for freedom' after all. Nona said, and she would have been loud, clear and convincing, that 'Milko did not die for freedom—Bilje people killed him. And if you put his name onto that monument I will smash it up on the first day!' So Tata's name did not appear, and the monument was not smashed.

I walked on, went through the grounds of the old primary school, and on to the cemetery at the edge of the village. There were some people around, it seemed strange to me, on a week day. I went to the grave of Nono, Nona, and Tata.

With a little difficulty, because the tombstone was different to accommodate new arrivals, I found the grave of Mama's mother Judita, where as children we used to go each November to tidy up the grave for The Day of the Dead. I saw Anton Orel's grave, the teacher shot in the castle, it was a family grave by now, a photo of him young.

I spoke to a woman of about my age, told her who I was. She remembered me, told me who she was, Amelia, that she remembers how shaken she had been when we found Tata. I had not brought the subject up. Another, older woman came along, told me that she remembers Mama very well, what a good woman she was, and she mentioned Egypt, she had been to Egypt too and returned. She had come to see where the young woman who had been killed in the car accident would be buried, the woman for whom the bells were ringing. It was a bit further on that a grave was being dug. We walked over, the gravedigger was not Slovenian, but Bosnian or something, he was an 'immigrant' to Bilje. I had difficulty understanding him.

Both women said that I ought to know the deceased woman—she was from, or grew up in, my end of the village. I explained again that I had been out of Bilje for 30 years! Their gentle insistence that I 'ought to know her' was starting to annoy me a little.

The woman my age told me she was

married to Marjan, a couple of years older than me. Marjan and I were good friends, we used to often walk together to Gorica during the war years, I to school, he to his apprenticeship in a grocery shop under the castle. Later, I don't remember if on the same trip to Bilje, I went to see him one evening, it was a warm reunion. Marjan told me that he has had a nervous breakdown a couple of years earlier, was in hospital for more than three months, but he is well again now. He added, 'I wouldn't wish what I went through on the worst German SS.'

I left the cemetery, and walked back towards the village, and branched off from the main road to the right, along the track leading towards the river and the water mill, in the older part of Bilje.

29 June 2007

About 100 metres from the branch-off, in a small clearing just off the track, there is a public water well, one of several in Bilje. They were used until piped water came to Bilje in the 1950s–1960s, but had been preserved, as part of Bilje's culture! They were good wells, with cool fresh water, with the top rim in thick *Kras* stone, and an iron arch across with a pulley to pull the water bucket up with a rope. But this one was a very special well, a little bigger than most, with two pulleys diametrically opposite, so two women could get their water at the same time. A good meeting place for the spreading of gossip!

The well clearing had been extended a little into the embankment, to accommodate a monument, which I saw then for the first time. The monument was erected sometime in the early 1970s. I knew about it because Boris and William—my two Bilje friends from Melbourne—had been in Bilje visiting about that time, and had told me how it was contended by most villagers that the monument, in that position, was not representing what it should and was false. The monument was dedicated to Car, the National Hero, while the location was very close to where Beč had 'fallen' in the winter of 1944–1945, and should be dedicated to Beč. The story was that to get the 'funding' from the government in Belgrade, it had to be dedicated to the National Hero, and that the whole thing was driven by a local politician for his own glorification. The monument consisted of two human figures close to the ground in a falling position. The material was *Kras* stone. The sculptor was well known locally, with many works to his credit, a young Nemec from Bilje.

While I was there, a man was nearby on the embankment and I asked him where exactly had Beč been killed. The man raved on rather incoherently, 'how terrible it was ... Germans' pointing generally to the fields behind him. I thought that he had a few marbles missing. He was probably a young boy at the time.

I have written the above monument story, because, as I was looking at the monument, the inscriptions, the knowledge of what the site really was, aware of the political machinations more than 30 years after the real event, seeing the obvious using and abusing of the dead for one's own ambition, with truth and facts nowhere to be seen, a thought hit me strongly: that no matter how ignored, buried, masked, invisible, unknown Truth was, it still existed immutable forever. I felt good about that thought.

I walked slowly on, and some 100 metres further along came to where the track starts to drop towards the water mill on the river. Just there to the right, on level ground, is the open front yard of one or more houses, still unchanged from what I remembered. As I looked at the yard while walking I saw a man also slowly walking in my direction, inquisitively. I just veered towards him, said '*dober dan*' and told him who I was. He remembered me immediately, and we started talking. He told me he was Vojko, son of Šumpasc, long dead by now, and lived there in the house to the left. He told me how well he remembered Rihard and Miriam, 'but especially your mother, she was good, very good, so kind'. Tata was mentioned, his disappearance and the finding of him later. Without any preambles, Vojko asked intensely, 'But what? What do you thing happened?' The stress was on the *you*, plural. I said simply what I thought: 'We think that he was killed.' He replied, 'This is what I wanted to hear from you!' Again the stressed plural *you*. The meaning was that he wanted the answer to his question to come from us, the family, not from any other village opinion or gossip.

He said that he had not slept all night, his daughter had died, a car accident, 'She was clever and liked by everyone, so capable, so good, left a young schoolboy.'

So I finally knew who the bells had tolled for, and whose grave was being dug.

He added that he also has a son, 'He

should be here soon to tell me; he is making funeral arrangements. It will be a great funeral: three priests.' And truly a car pulled up, with two men, one was Vojko's son, late twenties, an alert young man, told his father that all is being arranged, and gave him some details. As Vojko told his son that I was originally from Bilje, neighbour, now from Australia, the son asked me what I thought of Yugoslavia now, he was obviously proud of his country. He left for more funeral arrangements.

Vojko invited me to come in. He said that, as he could not sleep, he got up in the middle of the night and started cooking *žganje* (firewater, grappa) to get through the night, and 'Please come in, and taste my *žganje*'. I went in. A schoolboy of maybe nine years was at the kitchen table doing homework, and looked at me with curiosity. Vojko told me he is his daughter's little boy, 'We kept him home from school today.' We sat down and tasted his new *žganje*. Practically straight away he asked again 'But how, what happened?' I told him briefly when, where, and how we found Tata's remains three years later. He listened, but he interrupted me with 'No, no, no ... not that ... not then ... when he disappeared, what happened then?' I felt a little drained now, but I told him very briefly how Mama had seen Tata that morning when she took him coffee, then left him with Rok at his house at the base of our hill, it was around ten in the morning. When she saw Rok a short time later, and Tata was not with him, she queried him and was angry that he had let Tata out of his sight. Rok said that Tata went up to the burned house to give water to the cows, and said 'But don't worry, he is quite all right, don't worry.' Mama rushed up to the house, but Tata was nowhere, she called for him in vain. She came back down to us to tell us, and to go and look and call for him everywhere.

I said it was around ten or so in the morning, and in all no more than half an hour had passed between Mother seeing him and his disappearance. Vojko was just absorbing what I was saying.

Now I felt more drained, said I must go, got up, we left the house, walked together across the yard to the track and as I was to leave we were facing each other. I looked at him, he was so sombre, so sad, I felt deep pity for him and spontaneously embraced him. We said nothing and I left.

I walked to my intended destination, down the track to the water mill building. This was completely abandoned and dilapidated, all machinery inside gone, the water wheel on the left side of the building either a ruin or not even there any more, as I may be mixing this memory in 1978 with the ones from 1970 and 1972, my only visits to the mill since I used to take maize or wheat there, as a boy, to be milled.

I returned to Teta Mila's house. It was lunchtime.

That afternoon or evening Teta Mila and I went to Gorica to Teta Dragica's flat.

We talked late into the night. Later in my bedroom, as I did not want to lose the basics of the meeting with Vojko, I wrote them down. I concluded that my belief is that Vojko suspects strongly and with good reasons that his father killed Tata, and was still looking for the final truth, 35 years later.

I am not certain whether it was on this trip or some other time later, when I was with both aunties in Teta Dragica's flat, and the subject of Tata came up, that I recalled the 'he is not far from the house' gossip, and wondered about its source. Teta Dragica said 'What, don't you know where it came from? It was *Šumpasc* who said it!' She was quite definite.

My own inner court, with me as jury, concluded without reasonable doubt who did it. On my next trip two years later, I told my friend Guido the whole puzzle again, and my conclusion. He saw that I was still adjusting the pieces of the puzzle, in my mind, and still trying to eliminate the word 'reasonable'. He said 'Yes, it is a wonderful solution, and a beautiful complete mosaic, and you have done it. But now so what? It is time to lay it to rest.' It was the caring advice of a loving friend, and I did put my mind to rest.

2 July 2007

Epilogue

From Sanskrit to now

Surname flashback

The origin of *Nemec* as a surname makes a good story. I had never thought beyond its modern meaning for 'German'. A few decades ago in a short article of Slovnik surnames it had a short paragraph devoted to it. Here it is, expanded a little by examples.

There are two Slovnik words that need to be understood. The first is *slovo* which means simply 'word'. From it comes *Slovan*, meaning no more than he-of-the-word, he-who-speaks-the-same-word-as-me, the one I can understand, simply the Slav. There are many words from the same root: *slovar* for dictionary, *slovnica* for grammar, of cultured Slovniks. Also *slovò* for last word, goodbye, of poetic Slovniks.

The second is *um,* which means mind, intellect. It is still the old Sanskrit word of exactly that meaning. Many words come from this root: *umeti* to understand, *umetnost* for art, *umetnik* for artist, of peasant Slovniks.

The prefix *ne* is the Slovnik negation of what follows it. So *ne-um* is simply non-mind, the root of words like: *neumen* for mad, *neumnost* for stupidity. The noun *neumec* means He-who-does-not-understand, and simplifies naturally to *nemec* and on to *nemc,* the German in the cave across the valley. The whole tribe across the *dolina* are *nemci!*

So here we have, from Slovnik perception, the two neighbours of old times: *Slovani* and *Nemci*, of different words. Where distance allowed, they mixed, misbehaved, or simply dragged the '*vuman*' into the cave, and some Nemci became Slovniks.

That I am '*He-who-does-not-understand*' was no news, I could have told them so!

Later

Much later, *He*, in the Antipodes, and without understanding why, went looking for *vuman*. Not just any *vuman*, but 'a good sort'. He found 'the' good sort, and she did not mind being dragged into the cave, eventually. *He* did everything he knew how, to appear 'cultured', but *She* liked him because he told her he was a peasant, and loved cows. She was Jane, *née* Kay.

Only now I connect the Slovnik *kaj?* meaning *What?* to the identical sound Kay.

Thus *He who does not understand* coupled with *What?* This is how the pair looked:

Fig 50. Jane and I in 1958, in St Kilda.

Fig 51. Jane and I in 1958, with my deaf ear away from her.

Fig 52. Jane and I, 27 October 1961.
In the background: happy Philip, Miriam's son, Mama, and Miriam.

Fig 53. Mama, me, Jane, handsome Philip, and Jane's mother Phyllis.

Fig 54. Jane's Dad Jim, me, Jane, Rihard.

Fig 55. Jane with Dad in 1961.

Fig 56. Jane, *née* Kay, on our honeymoon in 1961.
Her much travelled uncle, Stanley, warned her:
'they are savages you know, they live in caves',
but she laughed, she fancied the cave.

Fig 57. Jane and I back from our honeymoon.
Jane painted the bedroom walls with sprigs of violets,
forget-me-nots, and lily of the valley.
Her dress she painted also with daisies.

Fig 58. The back of the cave in 1962,
with Ivan's pram. The lemon tree and the
silver birch that Jane planted are
one year old. Jane had found the cave.

Fig 59. Ivan, born 1 September 1962.
This photo was found by Miriam in Teta Mila's box of treasures
in 2004 in Bilje, before the ancestral home was sold.

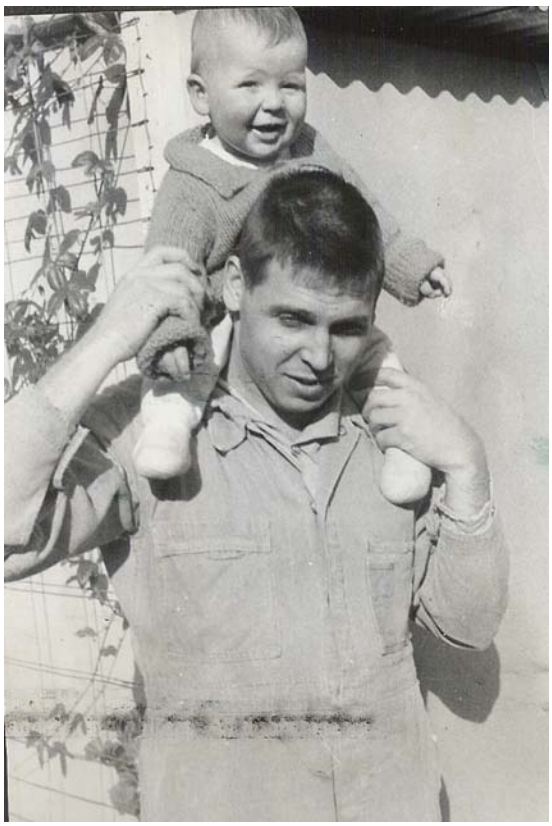


Fig 60. Ivan and I,
still trying to understand, in 1963.

Fig 61. Ivan on the beach at 18 months.
This photo was also found
in Teta Mila's box of treasures.

Fig 62. Belinda arrives on 3 August 1964, surprised.

Fig 63. Belinda and Ivan in the back garden.

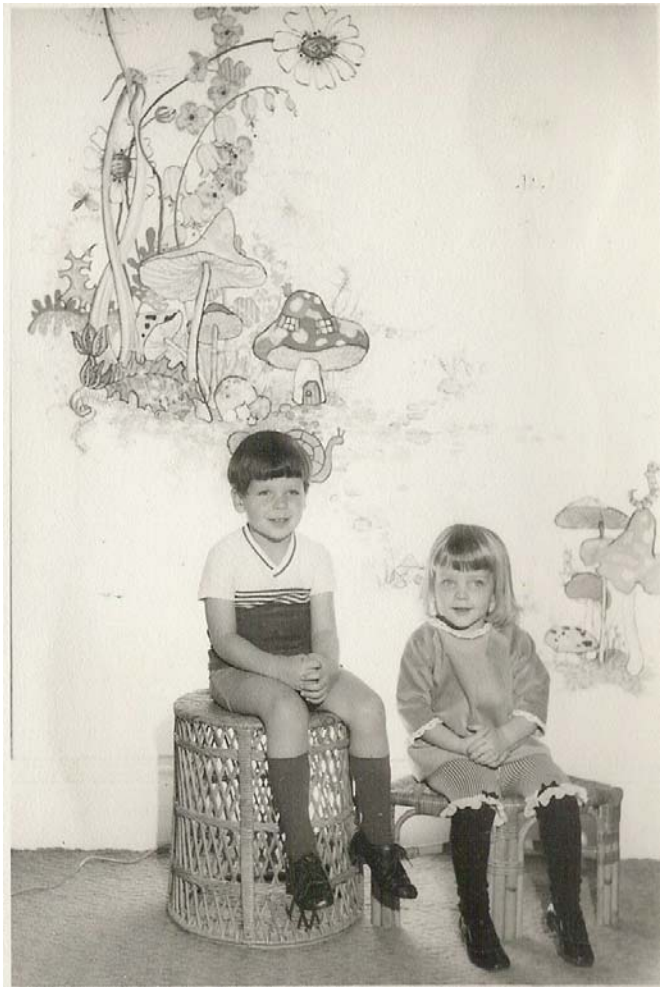


Fig 64. Ivan and Belinda, in their bedroom.
Jane did the cave painting while expecting Ivan.

Fig 65. Ivan, me, and Belinda, trying to understand. At Point Leo beach in 1965.

Fig 66. The back of the cave in the early 1980s,
when everything was green in the garden.

Fig 67. The front of the cave, early 1980s.

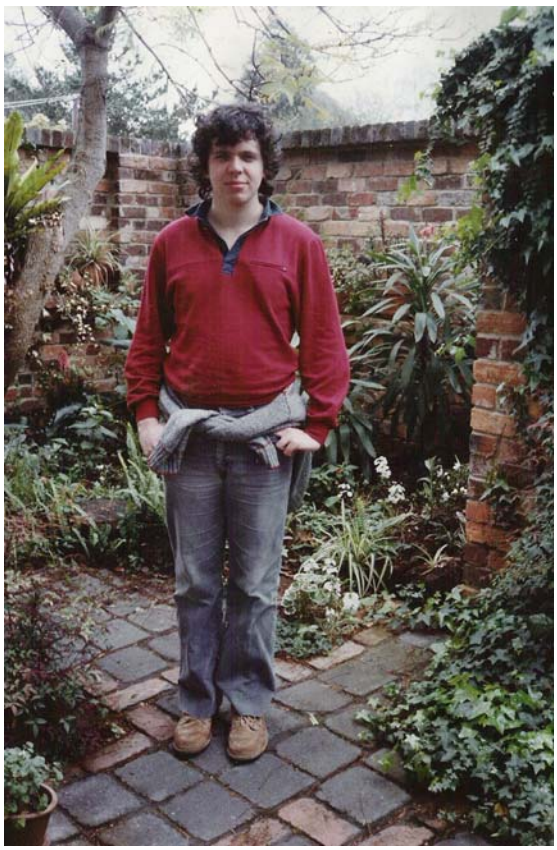


Fig 68. Ivan in the front garden, aged about 19.

Fig 69. Ivan at Rye, early 1990s, in his early thirties.

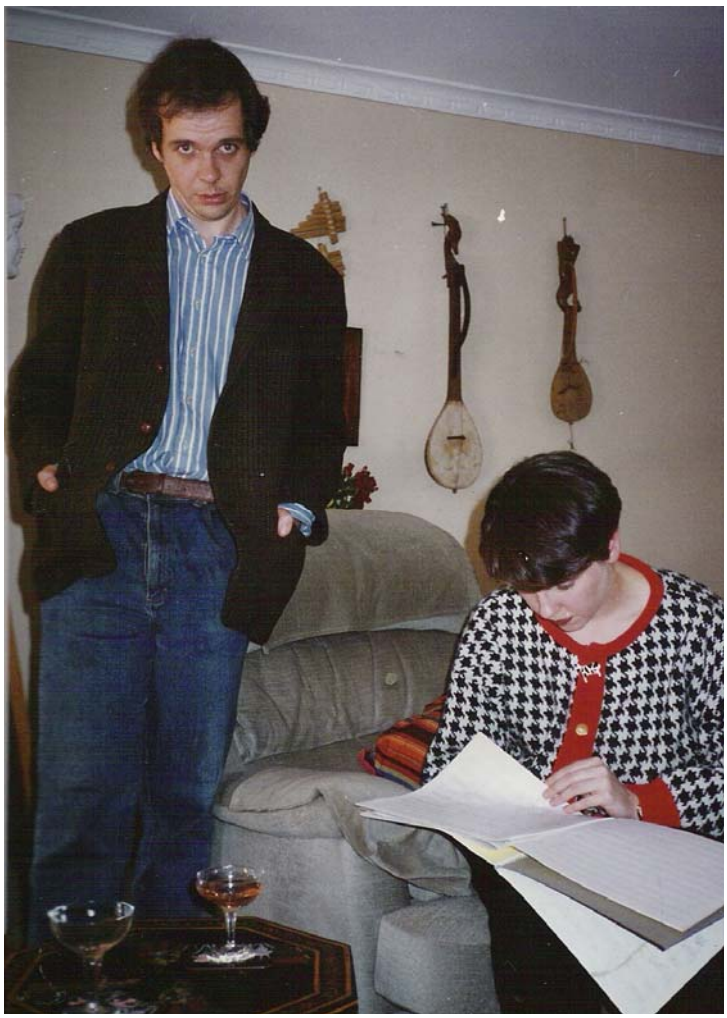


Fig 70. Ivan and Belinda, reading his score, at Rye in the mid-1990s.

Fig 71. Me, Jane, Ivan and Belinda in 1996 after Belinda's return from America.

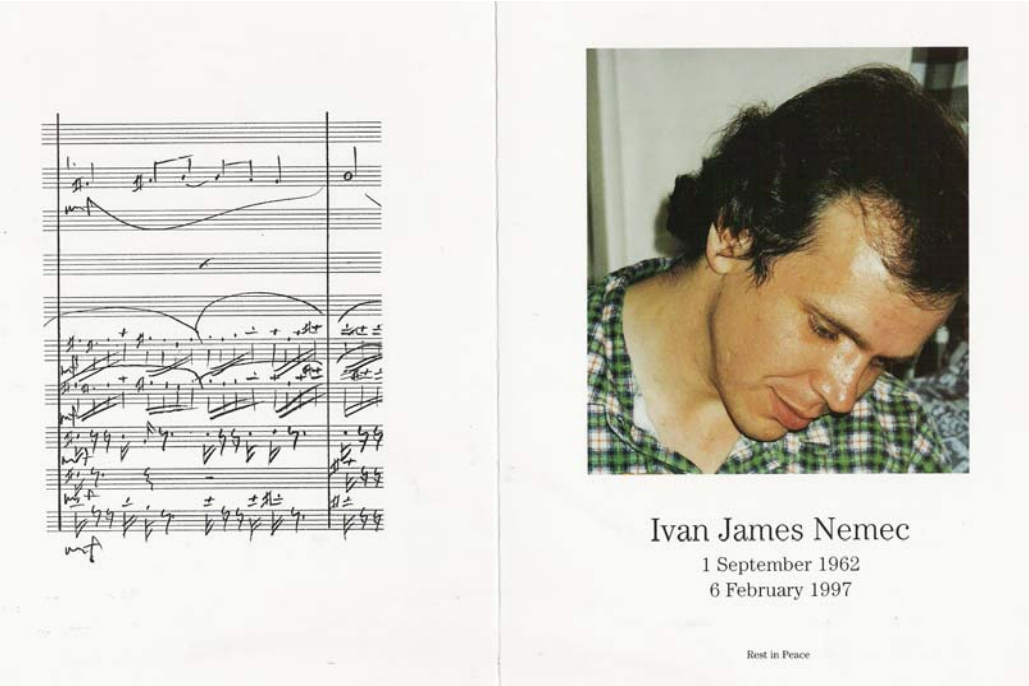


Fig 72. Ivan dies on 6 February 1997. He was 34 years, five months and five days. He often said he would 'like to leave a legacy'.

IVAN NEMEC

Compositions

1983 Two Pieces for Jazz Orchestra
Fantasy on a Theme by Jerry Goldsmith

1984 J. S. Bach Prelude and Fugue in A Minor (BWV 904) – Orchestration

1985 J. S. Bach Prelude and Fugue in C♯ Minor (WTC Book 1) – Orchestration

1986 String Quartet

1987 Symphony No. 1 for Jazz Orchestra
Fugue for Piano
Prelude and Fugue for Guitar

1988 Three Pieces for Jazz Orchestra
Prelude for Piano

1989 Sonata for Solo Violin
Waltz for Flute Ensemble
Sonatina for Solo Flute

1990 Spanish Rhapsody for Piano
Ballade for Piano

1991 Symphony No. 2
Two Pieces of Film Music

1992 Symphony No. 3
Four Popular Songs
Woodwind Quintet

1993 Symphony No. 4
Music for Wind Quintet
Music for Jazz Piano
Music for Jazz Orchestra
Two Popular Songs
Trio for Flute, Oboe and Guitar

1994 Piano Sonata No. 1
Piano Sonata No. 2
Music for String Orchestra
Fantasy for Jazz Piano
Fantasy for Jazz Orchestra
Eight Popular Songs

1995 Sonata for Trumpet and Piano
Sinfonietta
Two Popular Songs
Two Pieces for Jazz Orchestra
Brilliant Lies
Two Popular Songs
Three Pieces for Solo Oboe

1996 Twilight's Last Gleaming
Music for Piano Trio
Euphorus – for Orchestra

1997 Waltz for Flute Ensemble

Performances

1985 Two Pieces for Jazz Orchestra,
performed by Victorian College of the Arts Jazz Orchestra

1992 Two Pieces of Film Music,
performed by Students from the Victorian College of the Arts

1995 Woodwind Quintet,
performed by Clare Nicholson Quintet
Sinfonietta,
performed by Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra

Fig 73. Ivan's music legacy.

No llores si me amabas

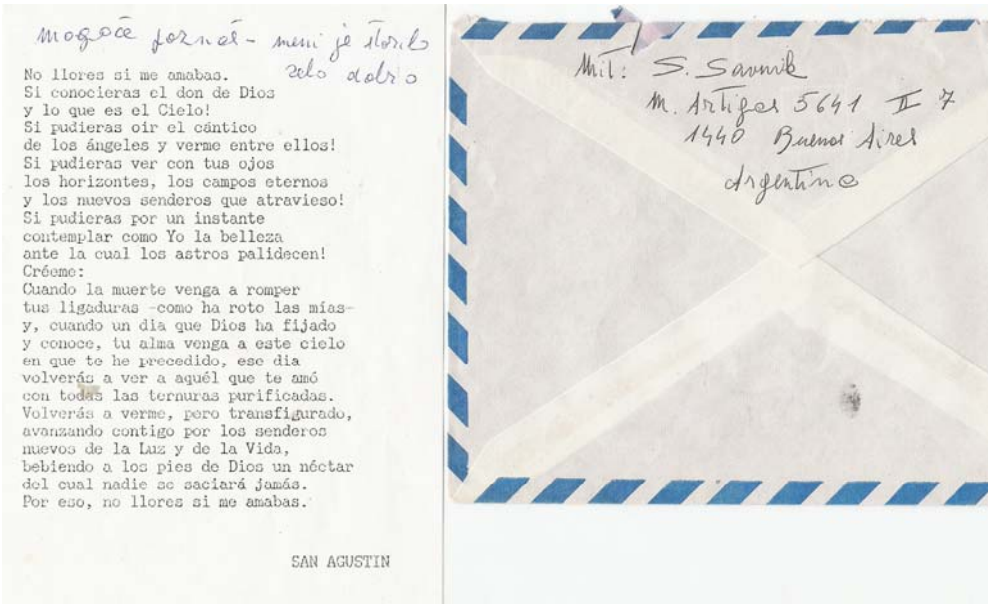
Over a few weeks after Ivan's death I wrote to friends and relatives overseas: Argentina, Italy, Slovenia, England. To Silva and sisters in Buenos Aires, to Anton and brothers and sister in Buenos Aires, to Dario, Enid and daughters in Parma, to Guido in Podgora, to Gigi in Subida, to Franček and Đenko in Bilje, to Iko in Ljubljana, to Anna in London, to Gabriel in Lewes. The replies were so soothing, all heartfelt.

Silva, in Argentina, had lost her only son one year earlier, to a heart attack, aged 47, whom I had met 15 years earlier on my visit there in 1981. He had a beautiful soul, and his beautiful Uruguayan wife, no little girl yet. Before I left then, he gave me disks for Ivan from old 78rpm recordings of Argentinian tangos he had restored. He gave me the traditional silver vase for ceremonial *mate* drinking in a group, and stocked me with

matè tea. From her letters on her loss the depth of her sorrow was palpable.

Now she wrote, 'You are strong to write so soon, I could not do it for a long time.' I let her think that, but to friend Gigi of Subida in a subsequent letter I explained '*Dovevo scrivere, Gigi, erano I miei gridi di dolore—affievolisce il dolore, gridare.'* (I had to write, Gigi, they were my screams of pain. It lessens pain, screaming). It was also physically true, and easily done on the back beach at Rye, against the ocean, where Ivan and I had often walked.

With her beautiful letter, dated 5 March 1997, Silva included a poem, typed on a small piece of paper with some medieval typewriter. Her note says, near enough, 'Perhaps you know it, to me it did a lot of good.'



No llores si me amabas.
Si conocieras el don de Dios
y lo que es el Cielo!
Si pudieras oir el cántico
de los ángeles y verme entre ellos!
Si pudieras ver con tus ojos
los horizontes, los campos eternos
y los nuevos senderos que atravieso!
Si pudieras por un instante
contemplar como Yo la belleza
ante la cual los astros palidecen!
Créeme:
Cuando la muerte venga a romper
tus ligaduras -como ha roto las mías-
y, cuando un dia que Dios ha fijado
y conoce, tu alma venga a este cielo
en que te he precedido, ese dia
volverás a ver a aquél que te amó
con todas las ternuras purificadas.
Volverás a verme, pero transfigurado,
avanzando contigo por los senderos
nuevos de la Luz y de la Vida,
bebiendo a los pies de Dios un néctar
del cual nadie se saciará jamás.
Por eso, no llores si me amabas.

SAN AGUSTIN

Mit: S. Savnik
M. Artigas 5641 II 7
1440 Buenos Aires
Argentina

Fig 74. The poem from Silva.

I do not know Spanish, but I understood many words straight from Italian, and the Latin roots of many others. In the tiny Spanish-English pocket dictionary I had from my trip to Argentina I did not find '*llores*', I actually missed completely the only two columns of words starting with double-l, because I always thought there are no double consonants in Spanish. I could soon make sense of all the words, but *llores* remained foreign and unexplained. John, his sister Elči, Vojko and Angela came to see us in Rye only a couple of days later, on a consoling visit. John knew Spanish well from his young migrant years in South America, and said simply '*jokaj,* yes double-l'. The pocket dictionary then gave me '*llorar*', to weep—as if I hadn't known.

So now I could read the poem directly in Spanish, and understood it! I wanted to translate it, and did, into English, Italian, Slovenian. It was soothing doing that. But to me Spanish, although I do not know it, always sounded poetic, and none of the translations were comparable to Silva's original, for me.

How to translate *sí* in the first line?*If? that? although? because* as cause? *because* as effect?

How to translate *ligaduras? Ties? bonds? chains?* ... How to translate *senderos nuevos de la Luz y de la Vida*? No need to. But here are my attempts, anyway:

Don't weep if you loved me.
If you knew the gift of God
which is Heaven!
If you could hear the song
of angels and see me among them!
If you could see with your eyes
the horizons, the fields eternal
and the new paths I traverse!
If you could for on instant
contemplate like I the beauty
in front of which stars pale!
Believe me:
When death will come to break
your ties—like it has broken mine—and, when
one day which God has fixed
and knows, your soul will come to this heaven
to which I preceeded you, that day
you will again see him who loved you
with all tenderness purified.
You will again see me, but transfigured,
going forward with you
on the new paths of Light and Life,
drinking at God's feet a nectar
of which nobody can sate ever.
For this, do not weep if you loved me.
St Augustin
(literal translation)

Non piangere se mi amavi.
Se conoscesti il dono di Dio
il che è il Cielo!
Se potresti udire il cantico
degli angeli e vedermi fra loro!
Se potresti vedere coi occhi tuoi
gli orizzonti, i campi eterni
e i nuovi sentieri che attraverso!
Se potresti per un istante
contemplare come Io la bellezza
davanti la quale gli astri impallidiscono!
Credimi:
Quando la morte verrà a romper
i tuoi legami—come a rotto i miei—e,
quando un giorno che Dio ha fissato
e conosce, la tua anima verrà a 'sto cielo
al quale ti ho preceduto, quel giorno
rivedrai colui che ti amò
con tutte le tenerezze purificate.
Tornerai a veder me, però trasfigurato,
avanzando con te sui sentieri
nuovi della Luce e della Vita,
bevendo ai piedi di Dio un nettare
del quale nessuno si sazierà giammai.
Per cui, non piangere se mi amavi.
Sant' Agostino
(traduzione letterale)

Ne jokaj če si me ljubil.
Če bi poznal dar Boga
ki so Nebesa!
Če bi slišal pesem
angelov in videl mene med njimi!
Če bi ti videl z tvojimi očmi
obzorja, polja večna
in nove steze ki jaz prehojam!
Če bi ti za trenutek
opazoval kod jaz lepoto
pred katero zvezde pobledijo!
Verjami mene:
Kadar smrt bo prišla za pretrgat
tvoje vezave—kod je pretrgala moje—
in, kadar en dan ki je Bog določil
in pozna, tvoja duša pride v ta nebesa
v katera sem te presledil, tisti dan
spet boš videl tistega ki te je ljubil
z vsemi občutki prečiščeni.
Spet boš videl mene, ali preobrazen,
naprej hoditi z teboj po stezah
novih Svetlobe in Življenja,
pijoč ob nogah Boga nektar
katerega nihče ne more se nasititi nigdar.
Zato, ne jokaj če si me ljubil.
Sveti Auguštin
(dobesedni prevod)

I also wanted to read it in calligraphy, and here it is:

No llores si me amabas.
Si conoscieras el don de Dios
y lo que es el Cielo!
Si pudieras oir el càntico
de los àngeles y verme entre ellos!
Si pudieras ver con tus ojos
los horizontes, los campos eternos
y los nuevos senderos que atravieso!
Si pudieras por un instante
contemplar como Yo la belleza
ante la qual los astros palidecen!
Crèeme:
Cuando la muerte venga a romper
tus ligaduras—como a roto las mìas—
y, cuando un dia que Dios ha fijado
y conoce, tu alma venga a este cielo
en que te he precedido, ese dia
volveràs a ver a aquél que te amò
con todas las ternuras purificadas.
Volveràs a verme, pero transfigurado,
avanzando contigo por los senderos
nuevos de la Luz y de la Vida,
bebiendo a los pies de Dios un néctar
del qual nadie se saciarà jamàs.
Por eso, no llores si me amabas.

San Augustin

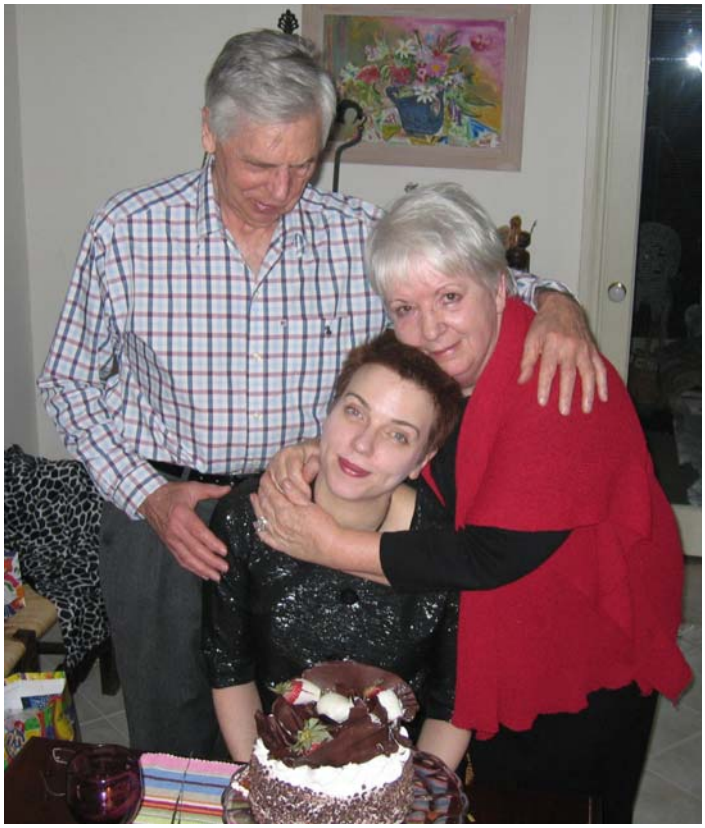


Fig 75. Me, Jane and Belinda on her 40th birthday, at peace.

27 November 2007

The end

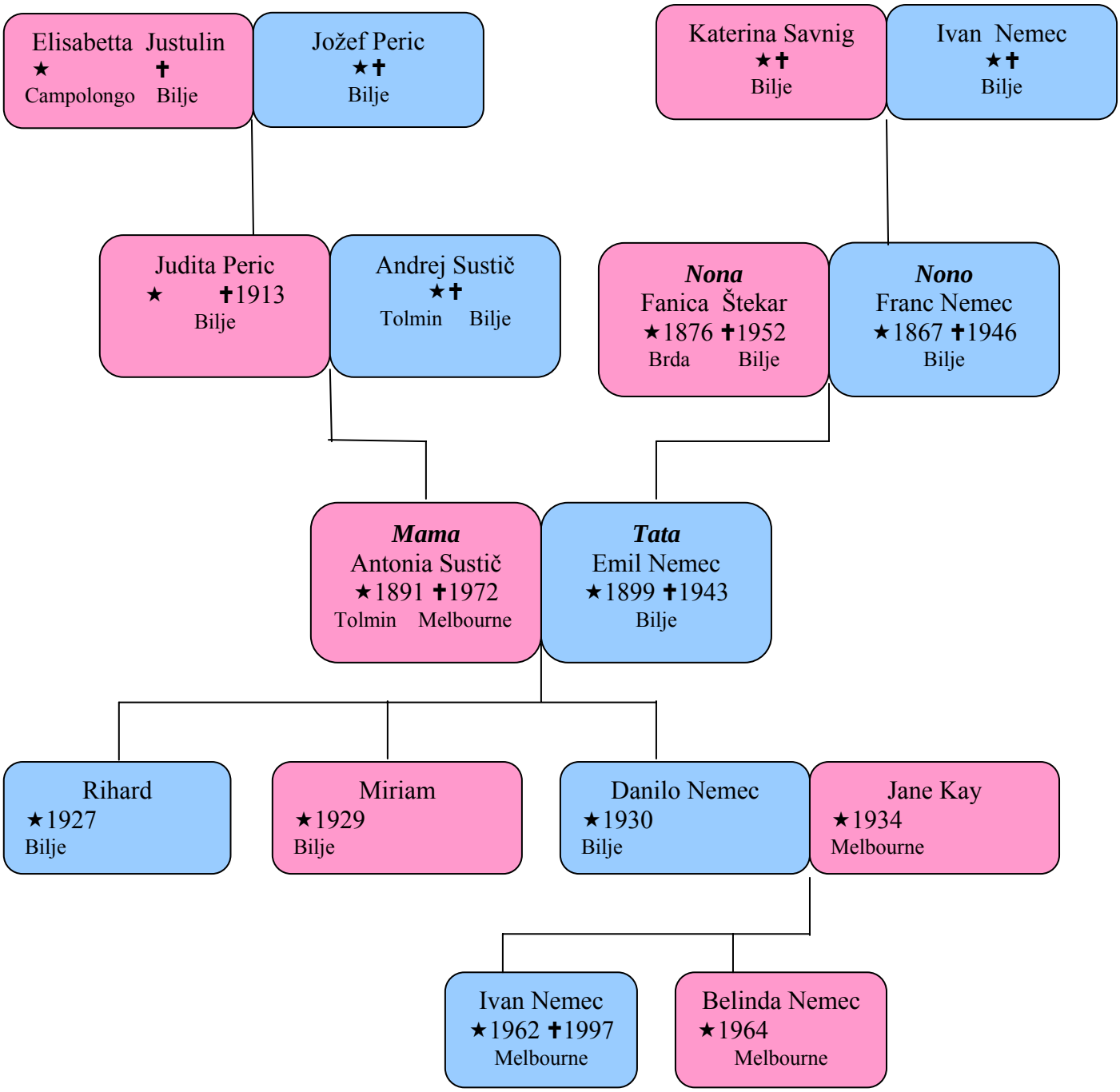
Appendix

Genealogical Trees

Family tree

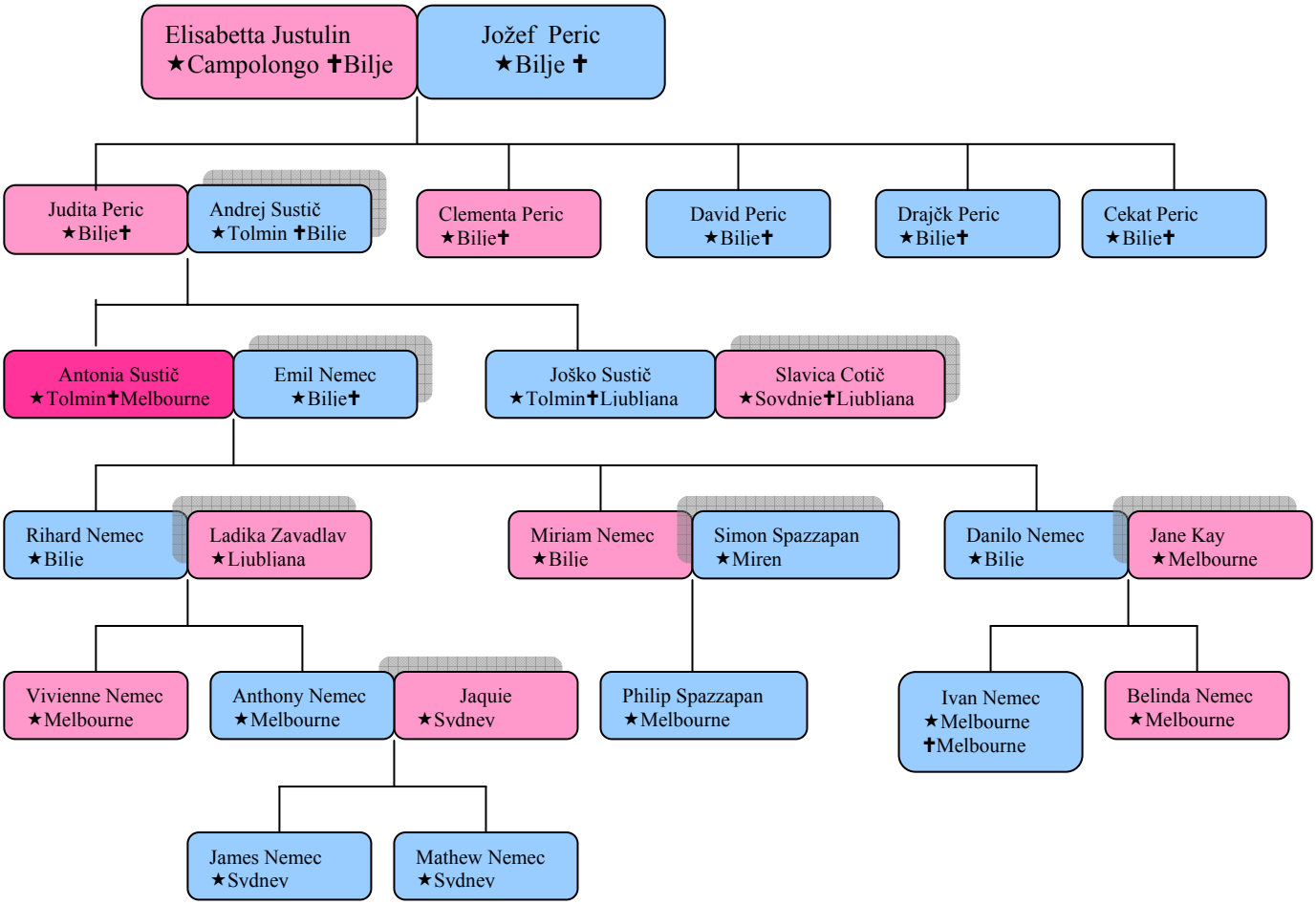
Mama, Tata

★ born
✝ died



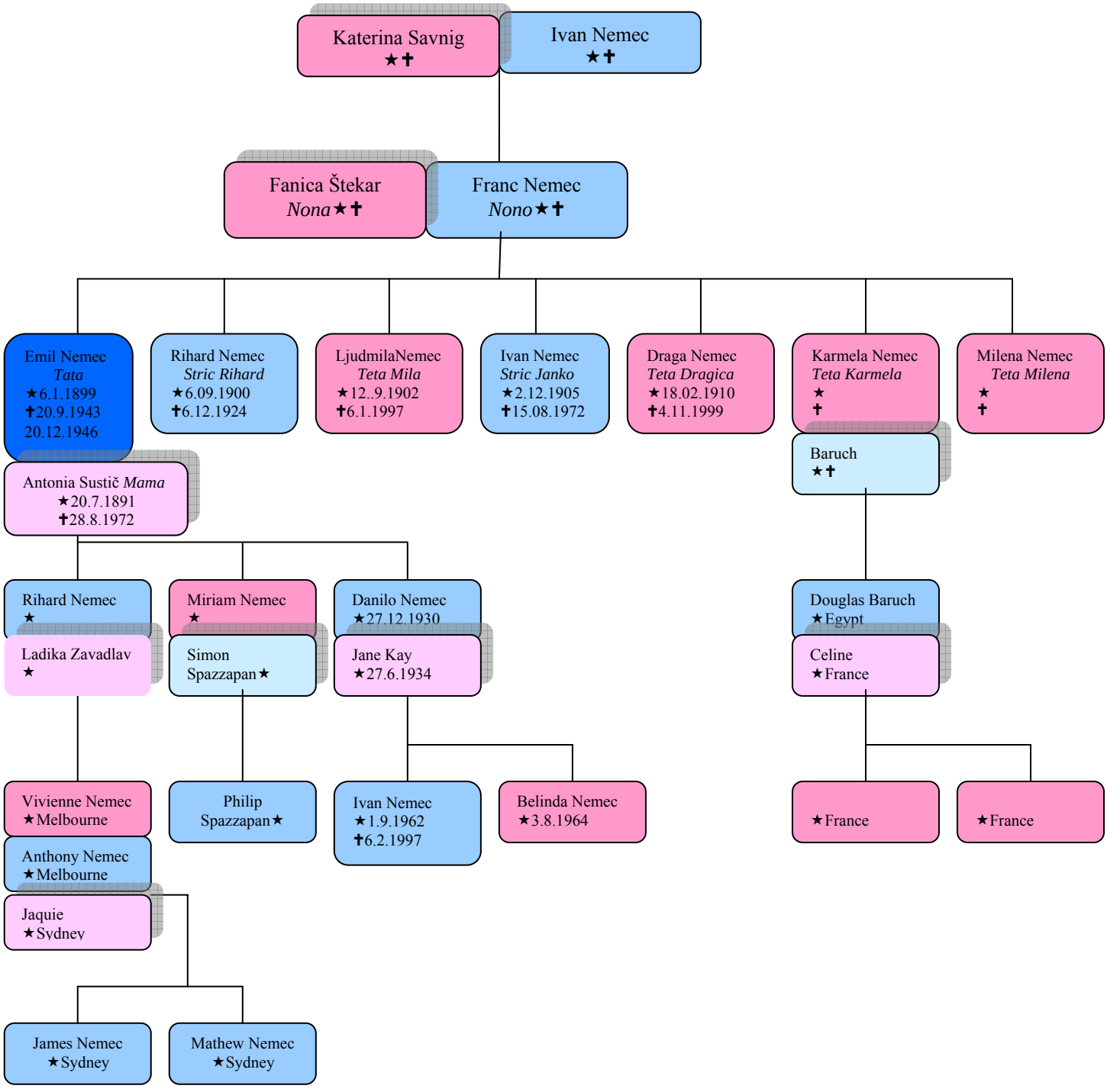
Antonia Sustič tree (Mama)

⋆ born
✝ died



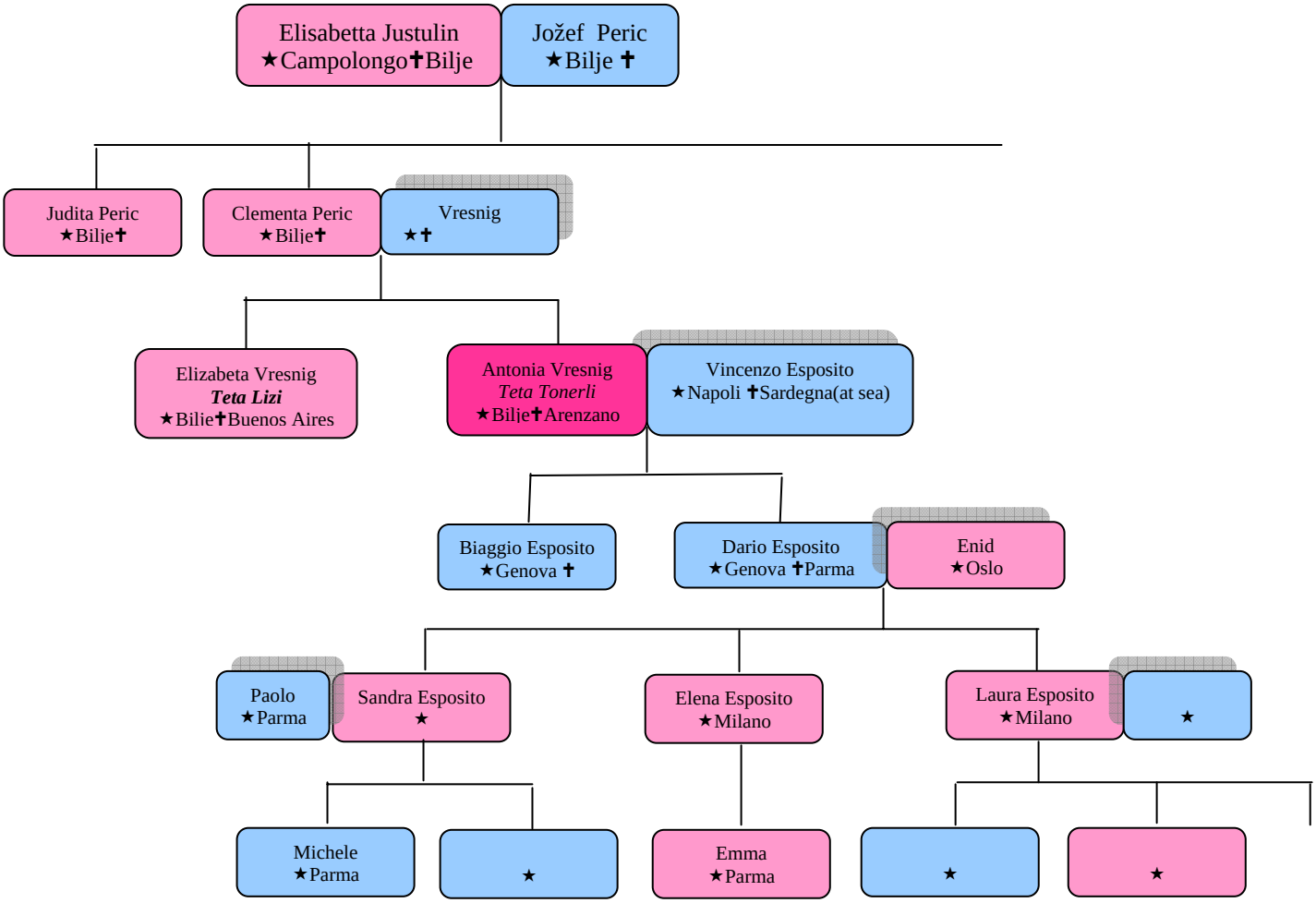
Emil Nemec tree (Tata)

★ born
✝ died



Antonia Vresnig tree (Teta Tonerli)

★ born
✝ died



Elizabeta Vresnig tree (Teta Lizi)

⋆ born
✝ died