THE JOURNEY

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BY JOSIP KOVAČ

JOSIP KOVAČ
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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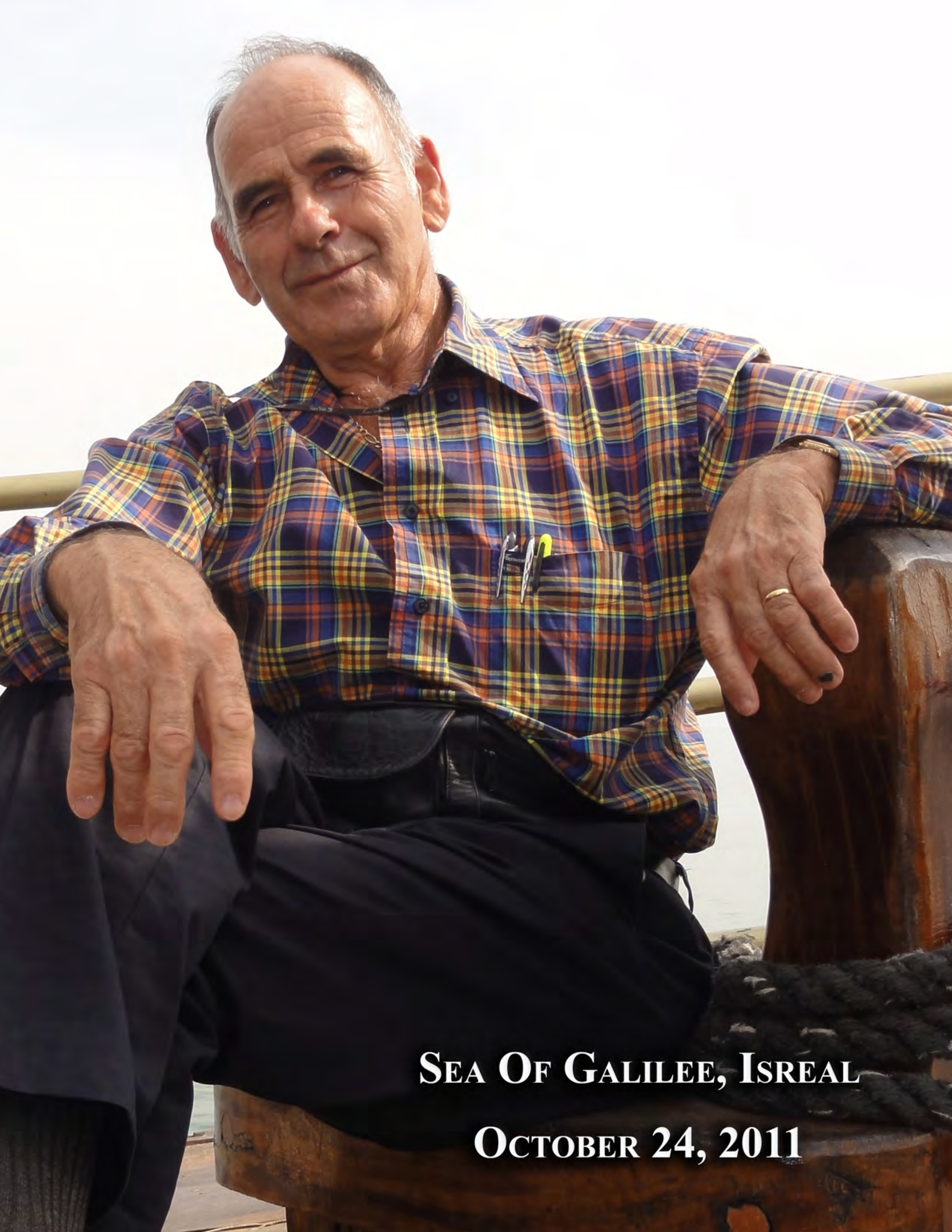
Sea Of Galilee, Isreal
October 24, 2011

FOREWARD

My dear family, I realize that God is calling me home now and I will shortly be leaving this earth. I have so many cherished memories of you, your parents, and your grandmother Zora to share. I have lived such a full life with experiences as a child, a refugee, a husband, a father, a grandfather, an immigrant in Australia and America, and some additional surprises along the way. These experiences helped define me just as your own personal experiences will define you. I want to share these stories with you and my friends. I want all my grandchildren to have the opportunity to understand what I went thru and appreciate God's blessings that we have all received.

While I won't be around to tell you these stories, I hope you remember me when you read this book. Please continue to love and respect each other and as a family take care of each other. My spirit is so very proud of you all.

Gather around my beautiful grandkids, Dida has a Story to tell…

Front Covver: Fields of Vinica, Croatia on May 31, 2009

"Dida, tell us a story."

"What kind of story?"

"About you and Baba."

"Okay. Gather around.
I was born in the Shadow of World War II…"

Home in Huntington Beach, California
June 7, 2020

The Journey

by Josip Kovač

A Lifestory Autobiography
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Makarska, Croatia
August 9, 2018
Age: 78

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Chapter 1

BORN IN THE SHADOW OF WWII

I, Josip Kovač, was born on January 2, 1940. I was born to Marijan and Toka Kovač in the small village of Vinica, Tomislavgrad in the country of Croatia. Today, Tomislavgrad is part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but back then, before borderlines were redrawn, it was in Croatia.

Marijan, my dad, had grown up in Vinica. As an adult, he shared a house with his two brothers. As they each got married and started families, they divided the house into three separate homes, each family getting a couple of rooms. Marijan married but sadly lost his first wife during childbirth, and the child just months later.

In his 30's, he met my mother Tomica "Toka" Bilić who had grown up in the neighboring town of Studenci, in Lovreć. She was in her late 20's, and their love blossomed. Soon, they married, and she moved into the house. Together, they made it a home by having twelve children throughout their marriage. I was their eighth child.

Money was always tight, and the living conditions were hard. Six of my siblings died in infancy due to lack of nutrition. The few of us who survived were my brothers Ivan, Nikola, Živko, and Vinko, my sister Marija, and me. As rough as our lives were, my siblings and I didn't care. In our minds, we had all the happiness in the world. My earliest memories are cheerful ones—playing with my brothers and sister, running around inside the house, barefoot, half-naked, usually hungry.

The land around our house was mostly green with grass and low shrubs, but the earth was

rocky. Tall trees didn't last because they would get chopped into firewood. The roads were all dirt, and nobody owned cars. The homes in our and surrounding villages did not have power or water. (When I was a boy, Vinica's population was about 3,500. But when I checked in 2019, it was less than 300. Today it remains an undeveloped area because most of its former families moved out to the city.)

Our house was perched on a hillside from which we looked out on the valley below. In one direction, we could see the farmers working in their fields. In opposite direction, we could see the town's cemetery and surrounding fields where my siblings and I would often play.

Inside, we had two rooms—a small kitchen and a 20' x 30' main room. The kitchen consisted of a very tiny table, a stool, a few pots and pans, and a large cast-iron wood burner that we used as oven, meat smoker, and heater. The main room was everything—our bedroom, our playroom, our study, whatever it needed to be. At night, the whole family slept in that room. Our simple beds were just blankets laid on the wood floor.

We kept all kinds of animals—chickens, pigs, horses, cows, dogs, and cats (so many cats, because after the war our village became infested with rats and mice). At night all those animals slept in the basement of the house, and their body heat would rise up through the cracks in the floor and warm our room. Unfortunately, their pungent smell also came up through the cracks. In the summertime, it got unbearable, preventing any of us from sleeping well. But in the wintertime, we were grateful to have them underneath for their body heat. It was like our own natural form of heating. On particularly cold nights, we argued and fought over who would get to sleep over the biggest cracks in the floor. Even though the stench could get overwhelming, we were happy for the heat.

My father was not home throughout most of my childhood. He worked far away, only coming back to our village once every two or three years. When he would come home, it would be for a month at a time. He'd spend his days working on projects around the house, like building walls for our mother's garden. He was a good man—never drank, never smoked, and always worked hard. We all felt sad when the month would end, and he'd have to go away for work again. I have never stopped missing him.

My mother, however, was always home and always taking care of us. She was a very hard worker just like my father, and she did her best to make something from nothing. Her uncle once told her that if she ever got depressed, she should sing. She tried it and found that he was right. Singing calmed her down while also cheering her up. She sang a lot. So much so that some villagers perhaps thought she was crazy, but we knew it helped her to cope with the hard reality of our lives.

I was born shortly after the beginning of World War II, and its ugly battles raged on through the first five years of my life. My experience with the war had nothing to do with what was occurring on the front lines. Instead of concerning myself with the Allies or the Axis powers, I was too busy dealing with a different monster, one that rose to power in my own country.

Before World War II began, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a nation of six constituent republics—Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia, and Slovenia. But the bonds between each of those individual nations were weak. When the war began,

any sense of national alliance blew away like a spiderweb in a storm. None of the countries felt that they benefited from the union, so paranoia, whispering, and finger-pointing created hostility between neighboring republics.

During the war, the Axis powers invaded Yugoslavia. The Royal Yugoslav Army tried to defend against the German, Italian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian forces, but they ultimately had to surrender. Like thieves splitting the loot, the Axis powers began dividing up the Yugoslav nations amongst themselves.

As this was happening, a Communist-led resistance grew strong throughout Yugoslavia. They called themselves the Yugoslav Partisans. With the support of the Allies, the Partisans successfully fought off the Nazi invaders to our land, but with a terrible side effect—they grew mad with power. With no active enemy to fight, the Partisans turned their attention inward, focusing on controlling and eventually terrorizing their own citizens. To me, this was the true horror of World War II.

Throughout the war, troops of different soldiers passed through our village, but the Partisans, also known as the National Liberation Army, were undoubtedly the worst. Savage and filthy, they hardly ever wore military uniforms, only dirty civilian clothes. They were in the habit of terrorizing small anti-Communist villages like ours. They caused a panic everywhere they went. They robbed homes, stole food, burned houses, killed citizens, and essentially shot at anything that moved.

I'll never forget one of the first times they passed through Vinica. The commotion started when a man ran to the center of town shouting, "They're coming! They're coming!"

"Who?" called another.

"The Partisans!"

Hearing this, my mother dashed to the kitchen and quickly wrapped some food up in a rag. She hoisted one child on her back, took the hands of two others, and led the rest, me included, away from the village.

Hundreds of families like ours poured into the narrow road, everyone yelling anxiously.

"This way!"

"No, that way!"

"Hurry!"

It was pure chaos. People ran in all directions, all around me. I was not a very fast walker and had trouble keeping up with my family. My mother and siblings moved down the road at a much quicker pace than I could. As more and more people crowded between us, I began to get scared.

"Wait for me!" I shouted.

But in the noisy confusion, they couldn't hear me. I tried to move faster, but they continued to pull further and further ahead. Then they blended in with the masses and I lost them completely. Tears were rolling down my cheeks. I stopped walking and sat down in the middle of the road, still calling after them.

"Wait for me!" I yelled in between sobs. "Wait for me so we can all die together, and our blood will mix! Don't leave me alone!"

But I was alone.

When will they notice that I'm gone? What if I never see them again? How will I survive?

These thoughts poured from my mind like the tears running down my cheeks. I was lost.

Then, I noticed a figure running towards me, against the flow of the crowd. As it drew closer, I saw it was an older boy. My eyes widened as he stepped right up to me, saying that one of the adults had sent him to fetch me and bring me back to my family.

I was saved.

The boy picked me up and carried me down the road to my mother. I was happy and relieved. For years afterwards, however, I withstood taunts from the other kids in the village, teasing me about being a slowpoke on the day the Partisans came.

My dad came back home when the war finally ended, but he was broke and empty-handed. He never talked about what he had been doing or where he had been during the war, but he needed to find more work. He heard of a job in Montenegro, 200 miles away, and before we knew it, he was packing up to leave again. Sadly, from then on, my father only returned to Vinica once every few years, staying only for a few days at a time.

Meanwhile, my mother did her best to provide us with basic needs, including an education by sending us to school. Instead of building proper schoolhouses, the government confiscated suitable private residences to be used for classes. The house where I attended school was built on a large rock. Two windows in the front looked out on the yard where kids would play, and from there the house stretched back quite a way, long and narrow.

We walked about two miles each way to that school, keeping as warm as we could with the few articles of clothing we had. And, yes, for me the cliché is true—there were days when I would trudge barefoot through snow to get to school.

We had very few teachers in my village, and those we did have had been indoctrinated by the Communists. They were given free rein to discipline the students however they wanted, the most common method being to whack the students' fingers with a switch, or what we called *sipka.*

One day when I was twelve, our teacher made the mistake of trying to discipline me. At the time, I was a rather feisty boy, and when the teacher demanded that I hold my hand out, I simply refused.

Angrily, he insisted. I eyed the switch in his hand. It was twitching, as though preparing to hit me. I looked at him and refused again.

Overcome with rage, he used the stick to swipe at my ear instead. The pain was excruciating––I thought he had cut my ear clean off!

When I got over the shock, I glared at him. Then, looking around the room, my eyes fell on an axe resting by a pile of firewood nearby. I dashed over to it. With dawning horror, he watched me pick up the axe, and when I started walking in his direction with it, he turned and ran.

I gave chase. I had no intention of really hurting him, but I liked having the upper hand. After chasing him around the school for a while, I dropped the axe and went home.

That little rebellion got me suspended, of course. But thanks to my mother, who brought a nice ham to the parents of the teacher and politely asked them to encourage their son to allow me back into his classroom, I soon returned to school.

That teacher never tried to discipline me again.

We lived on the food we grew, so we all pitched in to care for the livestock and cultivate the rocky land around our home. We did the best we could with the primitive tools we had, and Mom took turns keeping each of us out of school so that she'd always have someone on hand to help with the season's work. This resulted in not much of an education.

As time went on, the government eventually did build a schoolhouse in my region, and that's where I attended junior high. The walk was over four miles each way, which became scary in the winter when it started getting dark early. Walking through the wilderness for miles, I always feared that a hungry wolf or bear might find me. The woods had a way of making the dark even darker. I kept my eyes wide open, and every time I heard the slightest noise, my heart jumped into my throat.

One day when I was 15, it was not a school day, so I was out working in the field. I came back to the house for lunch and saw my mother working in the garden. My four brothers were playing under one of our huge oak trees. When Mom saw me, she called, "Josip! Come help me! I'm tired and the church bell tells me it's past noon. I need to finish getting lunch ready."

I too was tired. And very hungry, which made me grouchy. "No!" I said. "I don't want to help you right now!"

"If you don't come over here and help, you won't get any lunch!" she threatened.

Instead of answering, I stormed into the house. There was a pot on the stove. When I lifted the lid, steam rose into the air along with the warm aroma of *pura*. Mom had already made the lunch after all.

Pura was our daily meal—a hard cornmeal mush, like polenta. Sometimes we'd have pura with milk, sometimes with cabbage, and sometimes we'd mix it with pig lard or oil or anything else that softened it up to make it easier to eat. After Mom cooked it, she would set the pot on the floor in front of all us kids. We didn't have plates. Whoever was fastest and grabbed the biggest spoons were always better off.

Now I stood there in the kitchen, looking at that full pot of pura, and feeling both hungry and defiant. I said to myself, *If I'm not going to eat, nobody's going to eat!*

Then I grabbed the pot, plucked up a spoon, and quietly crept out to the oak tree along the north side of the house. Holding the pot, I climbed to the top of the tree, then hopped onto the roof of our two-story house. I set down the pot, stood tall on the roof, and shouted down to my mother and brothers, "Now who's going to have lunch?! Me or you?!" I made a big show of sitting down in front of the warm pot and starting to eat as they all watched me.

My brothers laughed, but Mom was not amused. She demanded I come down with the pura immediately so we could all eat.

I refused.

Mom then ordered my oldest brother Ivan to climb up, get the pura, and leave me on the roof without any lunch.

Ivan started to climb the tree. I left the pot and went over to the edge of the roof. "Ivan, don't come up here!" I yelled. "Or I'll kick you in the teeth!" But he kept coming. So, true to my word,

I started kicking. I kicked at his face, effectively keeping him from getting on the roof with me. Finally, he gave up and climbed back down, crying from being kicked in the face.

I went back to the pot of pura and ate my fill. When I was done, I boldly scooped the rest of the food out of the pot and flung it to the ground. Some chickens strutted over, delighted to finish it up. Mom shouted at me. I knew I was in for a beating when I came down.

It hit me then that I might have to find a different place to sleep for the night. I waited up there on the roof until it got dark, then I snuck down and hid in a neighbor's barn, where I slept until noon the next day.

When I went home, I was relieved to see that Mom's anger had passed. Instead of rage, she treated me with utter tenderness. "Come here," she said with love. "Don't worry, I won't beat you, I'm not angry anymore. Let me give you something to eat. Come and sit next to me, have this piece of bread. You must be hungry, my poor child."

"It's true. I'm starving," I said.

She fed me, and then we were back to normal, as if nothing had happened.

Throughout my lifetime, I've visited forty countries across four vast continents, and in all my travels, after all I've seen, I have never encountered the complete happiness and endless love that I felt back then in my childhood home, as penniless and poverty-stricken as we were.

I pushed myself through eighth grade, but school was beginning to disturb me. We didn't have a principal, so there was nobody to stand up for the students. My teacher at the time was a disgusting man from the Serbian region of Šumadija. I say he was disgusting because instead of using a handkerchief to clean his nose, he wiped it on the sleeves of his military jacket, which he wore every day. As far as I could tell, he never washed it. Those sleeves looked like snails had used them for highways. Also, the man's clothes were jumping with fleas and bugs.

He was funneling students into the military and the UDBA *(Uprava Državne Bezbjednosti)*, also known as the Communist secret police. This scared me. The last thing I wanted was to join the Communists.

I discussed it with my mother, and she too had strong feelings against the Partisans. I learned that one had killed her younger brother, who was just a civilian during the war. She never forgave them for that, and she did not want to see me among their ranks. We decided the only way to keep me from being recruited by the party was to discontinue my education. I was sixteen years old.

It was also around this time that I saw my first movie, a cowboy film. I don't remember the title, but I immediately fell in love with the genre. The cowboy's lifestyle —where he owned his own land, owned his own horse, and enjoyed the freedom to do as he liked—really appealed to me. That's the lifestyle I wanted.

But I wasn't going to find it in Vinica anytime soon, that was for sure. The Partisans expected me to enlist in pre-military training. They even sent an official document to my home ordering me to report for duty. I learned that other villagers feared the Partisan's agenda just as much as I did. I overheard some of them saying that after pre-military training, cadets are forced to serve a minimum of three years in naval service.

This scared me. Day and night, I began worrying about my future. I did not want the Communists to steal my freedom and the next five years of my life. I brainstormed for a way out. Then I got an idea.

Flower Fields of Vinica, Croatia
May 20, 2009

Chapter 2

A DECISION IS MADE

My only option, I realized, was to leave Vinica. I needed to get away from the pressure of the Partisans. True, they were everywhere in the country, but I thought if I stayed on the move, perhaps I could keep one step ahead of them. But where to go? I decided to find my father and work with him, 400 miles away in Montenegro. I explained this to my mother, and she supported the plan. I was off to find Dad. I said goodbye to my family, took one last look at my homestead, and left.

Mom accompanied me to the train station, carrying my suitcase for the whole ten-mile walk. When we got there, she handed the luggage over to me and wished me well. I was sad to leave, and I didn't know what would happen next, but it seemed the only choice.

Neither of us knew at the time that 15 years would pass before we ever saw each other again.

Montenegro is a mountainous region, extremely cold in the winter, which is when I was there. I arrived and immediately set out looking for my father. I had no means of transportation except for my own two feet, and after wandering around and looking for him for several days, I had no luck. I did, however, find a job. My cash supply was very low, so I jumped at the chance to make some money.

The work was a military project, building a suspension bridge. I was only a kid, so my duty on the job site was to do whatever the workers asked me to do—go get water, fetch a tool, etc. Un-

fortunately, after two months, those in command learned that I had refused to join the Communist party back in Vinica, and I was fired immediately.

It seemed impossible to find my father. Losing the military job on top of that made me realize that there was nothing for me in Montenegro. I decided to move on. The central hub of the region was Sarajevo, so I thought maybe I'd find work there.

Sarajevo is about 160 miles from Montenegro, so I needed to take the train. To save some money, I chose not to pay for the tickets. Instead, I waited until the train left the station, then I ran next to it and hopped into an open boxcar. I sat in the back corner of the car until we neared Sarajevo, then jumped out before it pulled into the station.

In Sarajevo, I started searching for a job right away. But for some reason, I couldn't seem to find one. At night, I kept warm by sleeping in out-of-service train cars. I wasn't the only one with that idea, as several other down-on-their-luck souls made the train yard their makeshift home as well. It was very cold, and my clothes were thin. I was cautious not to spend the little money I had on anything before finding a job. I survived on water and a slice of bread per day.

Sadly, after two weeks of fruitless searching, I realized, it wasn't just my dear village that I had to leave behind, but my whole beloved country. With no work to be had and the Yugoslav Partisans breathing down my neck everywhere I went, my only hope seemed beyond the national border.

I thought about Austria, and I thought about Italy. They both bordered Yugoslavia, but Austria had a cold climate while Italy was a little warmer.

I set my sights on Italy.

My birth home in Vinica, Croatia
February 20, 1973

Chapter 3

FROM HELL TO FREEDOM

It was February 1958 and I had just turned 18. There was no way the Partisans were going to let me simply cross the border freely—I was the perfect age for their militia. They would make sure I was either serving them or serving prison time. If I was going to slip into Italy, I'd have to do it without their knowing.

So, I came up with a plan.

Saying goodbye to Sarajevo, I took the train over 300 miles northwest to Ljubljana, Slovenia. (This time I bought the ticket because it was such a long ride.) That was the first part of the plan. The next night, I caught a midnight train that wound its way south from Ljubljana to the coastal village of Rijeka.

I had no intention, however, of making it to Rijeka.

Near the end of the journey, the train made a routine pre-dawn stop in the small village of Divača. I stepped out onto the platform.

Just five miles west was the Italian border. So close.

Beyond that was the city of Trieste and a new world of possibilities for my life. I began to imagine what freedom felt like, but this was not a moment to daydream. It was time to execute the main part of my plan. As swiftly and quietly as a cat, I dashed away from the train station and tore through the darkened, sleeping village, making a beeline straight for the hills outside of town and the border just beyond them.

At this moment, I felt lucky to be alone on my journey. Usually, people crossed the border in groups, and they were usually caught because of overheard whispering and noises. But because it was just me, I didn't have to say a word to anybody or wait for anyone.

I raced to my new life.

Goodbye, Yugoslavia and good riddance, Partisans!

But just before I reached the end of the village, a strong voice behind me boomed, "Stop! Or I'll shoot you!"

I froze, and slowly turned around. It was a police officer. He was dressed in a Communist uniform, and he was pointing the barrel of his pistol right at my head.

"Where are you running to?" he asked. We were standing on a dirt road at the edge of town. There was only one more house ahead of me before the landscape turned to wilderness. I saw smoke billowing up from its chimney and thought fast.

"Uh, I saw that smoke coming out of that chimney up ahead," I lied, gesturing to the house. "I'm freezing, so I'm running there to get warm."

"Come back with me," the policeman replied. "We'll warm you up."

He ordered me to walk ahead of him. I did so. He followed behind with his gun pointed at the back of my head. He directed me to the police station and ushered me into a room occupied by two other officers.

Before asking any questions, the three men attacked me. They came at me like wolves taking down a lamb, beating me, kicking me, pulling off some of my clothes. They yanked my ears, tore at my hair, and accused me of being a bandit and a Nazi. They were being very rough, and I was afraid their punches would give me a concussion. I was certain that the way they kept throwing me to the ground was going to break my bones. I tried protecting myself, but it was three against one.

As they attacked, I yelled out that I was lost and looking for work. It didn't stop them or even slow them down. They didn't lay off the beating until they were good and finished. By that point, I was bleeding all over the office.

"We know you people!" One of them shouted at me. "You're all bandits and Nazis from the region of Mostar and you come here looking for work on the international border!"

I did come from the Mostar region, and I realized that was their big problem with me. Mostar was predominantly Catholic, and Catholicism did not jibe with communism. We were vilified. We were not bandits, and we were certainly not Nazis. But anyone who resisted joining the Partisans was seen as an enemy of the state.

Had they beat me just a moment longer, I do believe they would have killed me. Instead, they ordered me to take off my shoes and they marched me, barefoot and jacketless, through the freezing cold jail.

They threw me into a cell and locked it. I couldn't stop shivering, and my teeth were chattering so hard I thought they would break and fall out. I banged on the heavy steel door, pleading with them to let me out, but nobody answered. I had no warmth, no food, and no water. I was sure that after 24 hours in that frigid cell, the officers would return to find me dead from hypothermia.

But about 15 hours later, the door opened. It was evening, around 8pm. The officer who had arrested me tossed me my jacket and shoes and told me to put them on. He led me out of the cell

and into an office where an older man sat behind a desk.

The officer and the older man spoke to each other in Slovenian. I didn't understand a word of it. Then the man behind the desk raised his voice to me, saying something that seemed important. I didn't know how to respond so I just stood there silently. The officer kicked me and said, "Answer the *droog*!"

The Yugoslav Partisans commonly referred to each other as *droog*, a slang word for "friend" or "comrade." They avoided using real names to keep a general anonymity in the organization. Without knowing each other's names, they couldn't report each other's misdeeds. It allowed them to act immorally by taking away any repercussions.

"Answer the *droog*!" the officer demanded again.

"I don't know what he's saying," I nervously replied.

The officer kicked me a second time. "The *droog* is asking you what kind of soldier you're going to be if you can't even tie your own shoes!"

I looked down at my shoelaces. They were untied. I quickly bent and tied them.

"Come with me," the officer ordered, "We're going to the train station."

Making me walk ahead of him, he directed me through the streets of the village. Halfway to the train depot, he shouted, "Stop!"

I turned around and saw he had his pistol out again. It was pointed right at me. "You know," he said, "if it wasn't for that *droog* back at the station, I would just put a bullet in the back of your head right now and throw you in these bushes."

I didn't move and I didn't speak. I could see he was telling the truth, and I was scared. Could a policeman kill an 18-year-old boy in cold blood without provocation or reason? At that moment, it felt very possible. We stood regarding each other, the officer staring me down with disgust while I stared blankly back.

Finally, he holstered his gun.

"Walk!" he ordered, and we continued on our way.

At the station, the officer used my money to buy a train ticket to Zagreb. While we waited for the train, he also bought me some bread (again, with my money). It had been 24 hours since I'd eaten, and I practically swallowed the bread whole, I was so ravenous.

The train pulled in, and the officer handed me my ticket and leftover money. He walked me to the platform and ordered me to get on the train. I climbed aboard. To my surprise, he climbed in after me. He told me he was escorting me to Zagreb, where he would hand me off to another officer who would then escort me back to Mostar. There, I would be placed back in the hands of the local authorities from whom I was trying to escape in the first place.

I took a seat close to the door and watched the people piling in. The policeman stood next to me, saluting passengers he knew as they boarded. When he recognized two attractive young ladies, he flirted with them, asking where they were sitting. The officer was good-looking and clean-shaven, and I could tell the girls liked him.

"We're in the next cabin," one of the young ladies replied.

"Is there any room for me?" he asked wolfishly.

"Sure, plenty of room," she giggled. The women then led the policeman into the next cabin, leaving me unattended.

Throughout my ordeal in their custody, the police had never handcuffed me or bound my wrists in any way. I thought that was odd, but maybe it was because I came across to them so lost and confused that they figured I wasn't a threat. Whatever the reason, here on the train, I was grateful not to be in handcuffs.

At about 9pm, the train started moving. We got up to speed, passed a few stations, and then I heard the conductor's voice ringing out: "Tickets please, tickets!"

I looked down at the train ticket in my hand and began imagining the immediate future. First, I would hand my ticket to the conductor and wait out this long train ride. Then, when we arrive in Zagreb, I'd most likely suffer some more abuse at the hands of the Partisans. They'd entertain themselves until they got bored of me, then they'd throw me in prison. And then…what? I'd heard nightmarish stories about the prison in Mostar. It was said that very few ever left that place alive, and those that did were never in good health.

What am I doing with my life? I thought to myself. I'm still young, I still have energy!

"Tickets, please!" The conductor's voice came closer. I looked down at my ticket again and realized with horror that while I had been nervously thinking about the future, I'd involuntarily ripped up the ticket into tiny little bits! I stared at them, wide-eyed.

Now what?

"Tickets!" the conductor called. He was right over my shoulder.

If he saw that I had ripped up my ticket, I knew it would somehow get back to the officer in the next car. And that might be the last straw for a guy who seemed to be looking for any reason to kill me. I envisioned him shooting me and hurling my body from the moving train. No one would ever know what had happened to me.

My gaze then locked on train's door across from me. It was open. I watched the shadowy scenery rush by as the train sped along. *Well, I thought, one way or the other, I'll be going out that door. Might as well be on my own terms.*

I stood up and in one fluid motion, without knowing what was out there or where I'd land, I dove through the doorway and into the night.

The train had been moving at full speed. I knew that I was risking breaking my neck or twisting my knees, but my fear of the officer was greater than my fear of injuring myself. Miraculously, I landed without breaking any bones. I picked myself up and ran from the train tracks like a wild animal. I was running downhill, still listening to the noise of the train moving down the tracks: *clunk-clunk-clunk*. In my near-hysteria, I imagined that *clunk-clunk-clunk* was coming after me!

I ran faster through the darkness, getting scratched by bushes and branches as I raced through them. Then I came up to a small river and stopped short. My heart dropped.

I couldn't swim.

This is where the officer would find me, trapped here at the edge of the water, I was sure of it. This is where he would kill me.

But I got a hold of myself. I surveyed the riverbank. I walked along it until I found a leg of the river that was only knee-deep. I trudged through the water and crossed to the other side.

Then I started running again, picking up speed until I was flying as fast as I could. Trees slapped me in the face with their low branches. Pine needles poked me in the eyes. I ran uphill, sweating despite the snow on the ground and the frosty winter temperature. I was in pain, but I kept going.

Finally, I stopped, exhausted. I couldn't run another meter. Now for the next problem—where was I going to sleep?

DIVACCA-DIVAČA

Chapter 4

IN THE HILLS OF SLOVENIA

I spotted a tree with a bushy enough canopy that there was very little snow underneath. I decided that would be my camp. I broke off branches from the surrounding trees and made a big pile. Then I used half of them to make a bed. I lay down on top of it and used the other half of my branches to cover myself. Now I was protected by my own cage of branches. It was the best my exhausted mind could do.

Surprisingly, I felt comfortable. I made the sign of the cross and said the childhood prayer my mother had taught me. But I couldn't sleep. I kept wondering, *If I fall asleep, will I wake up again? What if a bear, wolf, or any other wild animal finds me while I'm sleeping?* So, I prayed more, deeper into the night, until exhaustion made me fall asleep.

To my joy and delight, I *did* wake up the next morning and had not been mauled by animals. It seemed my protective bed of branches kept me safe after all. But my next problem quickly became clear—I could not move my legs or feet. I had fallen asleep wet from the knee down, and now my legs were frozen. Is this how my journey would end?

I gazed up at the shiny morning sun and knew what I had to do. I rolled myself into a sunny area and began massaging my legs and feet. After a long while sitting there in the sun and kneading my muscles, I was finally able to wiggle my toes a little. After more massaging, I could move my feet. I stood up and was able to walk again, unsteadily at first, but as the blood returned to my lower limbs, I got back to normal.

I climbed a hill and looked around in all directions. I could see the town of Divača, where the officers had beaten me, and I decided I'd rather die than let them catch me again. If there was ever a next time, they would surely torture me in worse ways, maybe even disabling me for life. Wherever I was headed, it would be *away* from Divača.

My stomach was aching with hunger, so I explored the hillside, looking for food. I found wild rose hips, which back in my village we always called "itchy butt" because of their unpleasant side effect, but I ate them anyway.

As I searched around for more wild fruit, I heard an axe chopping. I followed the noise and spied a man chopping a big tree for firewood. I could not see anyone else around. On a nearby rock wall, I saw a lump of fabric that might be clothing, possibly a jacket. If I was going to spend another night out here on the hillside, I would need warmer wear.

I crept up to the garment without the man seeing me and realized that it wasn't a garment after all. It was something wrapped up in a rag. I grabbed it and ran. I kept running until I was far away from the man with the axe. Then I sat on a rock and unwrapped my booty. To my surprise, it was a large chunk of bread and a generous slice of smoked bacon. I ate it up quickly. After so many hours of hunger, there was food in my belly again, and it felt good.

As the sun began to set, I looked around for another place to spend the night. I found a narrow passage between two rocks and decided to make that my bed. I collected leaves and branches and repeated what I had done the night before—half underneath me and half over me. I said my prayer and fell asleep easily.

The next morning, I wanted to figure out the shortest route to Italy. Once I crossed the border, I'd no longer be a fugitive running for my life. I'd be free again. Out of survival mode. But first, I had to get there. I considered my options.

I had no map or compass, but I remembered that Italy was on the south side of Divača. I didn't want to get anywhere near *that* cursed place, but there were other villages just a short three miles away on either side of Divača. The winter days were short, so I needed to find a new campsite before the sun went down again. I was afraid to be alone on the hillside any longer. I hiked my way west to one of Divača's neighboring towns called Sežana.

Arriving quietly, I cautiously made my way into the village. After a little searching, I found a cozy outside area where I could possibly spend the night. But as I started to make myself comfortable, the dogs in the village sensed me and began barking.

I was afraid someone would find me and call for the police. So, panicked, I ran all the way back to the hillside and found my bed from the night before. I squeezed in between the two rocks, said my prayer, and fell asleep.

The next morning, I awoke hungry and already exhausted. Survival mode was taking a toll on my mind, body, and spirit. Still, I pulled myself up and set off looking for food. As the sun set, I came to a garden near one of the villages. I picked a cabbage leaf and began eating it when behind me a woman's voice said, "What are you doing here?"

I froze, not sure if I was going to run or fight. Instead of either, I turned and looked at her.

She was a stocky woman, about 50 years old. I said, "I'm very hungry."

She looked back at me a moment, then said, "Come into my house."

I glanced at the small house behind her, then I looked up at the sky. It would be dark soon. But was this a trap? I'd heard that many civilians in Slovenia would catch fugitives and hand them over to the Communist government for a reward.

On the other hand, I was beginning to fear I'd die of hunger, cold, or both if I continued living indefinitely out here in the Yugoslavian wilderness. As I gazed up at the sky, I imagined I was asking God what to do. *Should I follow this woman?*

My instinct told me: *yes.*

Exhausted and hungry, for better or for worse, I followed the woman as she led me into her humble home.

Inside, there was not much light.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Very hungry," I answered.

"I have some soup left over from lunch," she said, taking a pot off the stove in the dim kitchen.

"Anything, please," I said.

She poured some of the soup into a smaller pot, cut a large piece of bread, and put them both down in front of me. "Eat," she said.

As I did, she asked me where I came from and where I was going. I told her the truth. I explained how I had been captured and beaten, how I had jumped off the train on the way to Zagreb, and how I had slept three nights in the wilderness. As I talked, she listened wide-eyed. I could tell my stories were touching her heart. When I finished, she asked how old I was.

"Eighteen," I told her.

A tear ran down her cheek.

She told me she had two sons, and both had run across the border to Italy. She talked about communism, which she saw as bad and brutal. She talked about the Yugoslav Partisans, who were tearing through village after village, leaving nothing in their wake but misery and despair.

This reminder of the evil empire got me spooked, and I began to get nervous that a visitor might stop in, and I would be spotted. I thanked her for the food and told her I needed to be on my way. I had about a hundred *dinars* on me (Serbian currency) and offered to pay for the meal, but she strongly refused.

I asked, "Well, would you sell a small slice of bread I can take with me?" I wasn't sure when I'd be able to eat again, especially if they caught me at the border. She grabbed a big knife, cut a huge chunk of bread, and handed it to me. I stored it under my shirt, next to my chest. I thanked her over and over and insisted on paying at least for the bread, but she wouldn't have it. I thanked her a final time and turned to leave.

As my hand touched the door handle, she said behind me, "Do you know how to get to Italy?"

"I don't," I answered, again truthfully.

She joined me at the door and pushed it open halfway, careful that anyone who might happen by outside wouldn't see us. She pointed at the path I should take. "Do you see that vegetable garden? Follow it until the ground rises above the road. That's the main street in Sežana, and federal police run up and down it all the time. If you see any car lights at all, do not cross that street, no matter how far away the car lights seem to be. It's a very wide street and they will catch you before you can cross it."

I was memorizing everything she said. "After you get across that street," she continued, "you'll see a hill. Run up that hill to the top but stay low. Communist soldiers are stationed there in reconnaissance towers with binoculars—don't let them see you! You'll see about 100 meters of clearing between the towers with signs that read 'Danger: Do Not Cross the Border of the Republic of Yugoslavia.' That is where you must cross. It will take you south. You'll see the city lights reflected in the sky—follow that light. It will lead you to Trieste, 20 kilometers away (about 13 miles). Remember, cross the border at night and be very careful not to make a sound because they have dogs. Be careful that the dogs do not notice you."

I thanked her again. She had armed me with all her knowledge about crossing the border… but there was one key piece of information she did not tell me. I would find that out in a few hours' time.

Out of respect, I never asked her name. I wanted her to know there was no chance I would ever report her or turn her in. I made to leave again, but again she stopped me. "Just a minute," she said. "My husband is outside. I will ask him if the coast is clear so you can leave without anyone seeing you." She disappeared into another room, then returned, saying, "No, no, you can't go yet. My husband says two devils are still in the village." (Many people at that time called the Communist police "devils.")

I stayed there in her front room, waiting. About ten minutes later, a small rock hit the window. She disappeared into the next room again, then came back and said, "The devils left. You can go with God."

I thanked her a final time and left the house. I hopped her garden fence and disappeared into the trees and bushes. Moving quickly along the route she had laid out, I could not stop thinking about her kindness and goodness.

Just as she described, I ran downhill and then uphill. I came to the main street and, with her warning in mind, crossed it safely and unnoticed. Keeping a low profile, I made it to the top of the next hill and hid behind a large tree. Peering around the trunk, I saw exactly what the woman had described—two small watchtowers with a large clearing between them. Soldiers walked in circles at the top of both towers.

I got comfortable behind the tree and decided to wait for the dark of night to make my move. In the lonely quiet, however…I fell asleep.

God only knows how I woke up. I opened my eyes and saw that night had already fallen. I had no idea what time it was. A still silence lay all around me. I got up and slowly moved to the area between the two towers, watching the ground closely for tripwires. As I neared the clearing, I got down on my hands and knees to crawl—all the better not to be seen. Suddenly, a small animal leaped right in front of me, halting me in my tracks. For an instant, my heart stopped beating and

my lungs stopped breathing.

The animal skittered away, but directly in front of me was a soldier's foxhole. Had I kept crawling, I would have fallen right into it! This is what the kind woman had not told me, most likely because she hadn't known. A Partisan sat there in the foxhole smoking a cigarette. As quietly and as fast as I could, I crawled backwards from that trench.

When I was far enough back, I strategized a new approach. I moved about 50 meters to the south and began crawling again toward the soldiers, this time between one of the towers and the underground bunker. When I got close this time, though, a dog sensed me and started barking. "Quiet!" said a voice very close to me. I turned and saw a cigarette ember glowing in the dark not too far away. It was a Partisan yelling at the dog.

My entire body told me to get up and run while I still had the chance, and that's exactly what I did. Like a wild buck, I sprinted as fast as I could across the clearing to the other side. The dog started barking louder, and I heard a soldier ask another, "What do you think that noise is?"

"Wild animal," the other responded.

"Should I unchain the dog?"

"No, then it won't come back." The soldier pointed his gun at the sky and fired. "Whatever it is, it'll run even faster now," he said with a laugh.

And I did run fast. No longer was I the slow kid that everyone laughed at back in Vinica. I raced through the darkness, speeding over bushes and rocks until, suddenly, I toppled into a large hole.

It was about six feet deep and lined with dry rock wall. My first thought was that this was a military trap. I waited to see if Partisan soldiers would soon appear around the edge above me. But when it was clear that nobody was coming, I climbed rock by rock out of the hole.

Then I started running again. Like the nice woman had instructed me, I was running towards the city lights of Trieste that I saw reflected in the sky.

Early the next morning, I stepped across the border into Italy.

It had been six days since I leapt off the moving train, and at long last, I had finally made it out of Yugoslavia.

In Trieste, the inviting light shined everywhere. As I walked by a bar that was still open in the early morning hours, the people inside came out and surrounded me. They talked to me, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. One of them came closer and said, *"Paisano?"*

I strongly protested. "No! No, I am NOT a Partisan!" I insisted.

I understand now that *paisano* is Italian for "brother" or "friend," but at the time I thought they suspected me of being with the Communists.

Once we cleared that up, one of the men that knew a little Croatian told me I should get on a bus that had just pulled up. I did as he said. The man talked to the bus driver, giving him some instructions and some money. The driver then transported me to the police station.

The Italian police took everything from my pockets and then sat me down with an interpreter. I gave them my name, age, and provided all the information they requested. They put me in a police car and drove me to a refugee camp. At the camp they put me in a large empty cell where I

lay down and, for the first time in six nights, slept like a log.

I awoke at about 10 the next morning and was shocked to see more than 30 other people in my cell! I had slept through the arrival of all of them. Some were sleeping. Those who were awake, like I was now, were just waiting.

At noon the guard called us out for breakfast and showers. They burned our clothing and gave us new clothes to wear. They read us the camp rules, and then assigned us to rooms that held three or four bunk beds each.

It hit me then that this was my new beginning. I was finally safe.

My thoughts went back to that good-hearted woman who fed me, and taught me, and helped me fulfill my destiny. I promised myself that I would return someday and visit that woman. I would bring her a big gift, and I would hug her and kiss her and thank her again for what she did for me. But I did not return to Croatia until 34 years later, in 1992, during the Balkan War. (Since then, however, your baba and I visited Vinica every year for at least four months at a time.)

I regret that I never got that good woman's name or address, but like I said—at the time, it would have been dangerous for her. The thought has never left my mind, though, that if I ever learned where that kind woman was buried, I would build her a monument more beautiful than my own mother's.

Chapter 5

LIFE IN ITALY

There are not many stories from my time in Italy because I only lived there for a short period. The Croatians at the camp who had been there the longest warned us that breaking any of the camp rules would get us deported overnight back to Yugoslavia. This did happen to some of the younger refugees, particularly when the Partisans requested them by name from the camp managers.

The Partisans corrupted as many Italians as they could, offering rewards in exchange for the return of Croatian refugees. One pack of these corrupt Italian officers made a habit of rolling up to the camp in a big black van with no windows. We called it Black Mariah. The officers stood in front of Black Mariah and called the names of refugees. "Come with us! We're taking you to another camp a little more south for your own safety!" they lied, and instead of taking them to a safer area, they would drive them back to the Yugoslavian border and trade them for goods or money.

One time, a group being transported on Black Mariah saw what was happening and acted. They decided it was better to die than go back to Communist Yugoslavia. So, when Black Mariah took a sharp corner, they all leaned to one side, successfully tipping the vehicle. Two officers died in the wreck, as well as five or six refugees, and many more were hurt.

After I had been at the camp for a few days, I was taken to the immigration commission's office for questioning. They wanted to know who I was, why was I running, what education did I have, what family did I come from, and on which side of the war did my father fight. For many of the Croatian teenagers, the story was the same—most of their fathers had been killed by the Communists, either during the war or afterwards. My Dad had not been killed, but I truthfully did not know much about his actions during the war.

What caught the Italians' interest, however, was the military project I had worked on for two months in Montenegro. The project had been a wire bridge in the mountains of Durmitor, and we built it as passage to a military airport. I told the Italians all I knew, and they allowed me to go back to the camp while they sent someone out to verify my story.

A few weeks later, they called me back in and asked me to tell them my story again. They hadn't verified it yet, but they wanted to see if I'd accidentally change any of my details. Those who did change their stories were extradited back to Yugoslavia immediately and labeled as spies. I had nothing to hide, so I had told the truth. When I told it again, the story didn't change.

As I waited for them to check the facts of my story, I spent my time at the camp working. In fact, everyone called me a workaholic. I had a newfound energy because I was eating better than I ever had—spaghetti, macaroni, rice, butter, cookies—and growing stronger every day. Since I was still young and skinny, I ate less than the other refugees and always had extra food stored away for later.

While others spent their wages on smoking and drinking, I saved all the money I was making. The United Nations sold some items at the camp like magazines, clothing, and shoes; but refugees would buy and trade other items. One guy offered to trade me a Soviet shirt for two cigarettes. I saw that it was a very nice shirt, made of nylon or polyester, so I agreed. I got the cigarettes from someone else and traded with the man.

I decided the shirt would be a good gift for my brother Ivan, so I packaged it up. Because they still hadn't verified my story, I was afraid the camp officials wouldn't trust me enough to let me send the package to Croatia, so I decided to ship it on the sly. I threw the package over the camp wall when no one was looking, then climbed over after it. Unfortunately, my throwing had made it land too hard and the package had completely broken apart.

I went to town, got a new wrapping for the shirt, and shipped it to Ivan.

I had no idea, of course, that it would bring him harm.

Back in Croatia, Ivan had just returned from a tour of duty in the army. He received the shirt I sent and wore it proudly around the village. But when a policeman noticed it, he approached Ivan aggressively, saying, "Where did you get that son-of-a-bitch shirt?"

"It's mine," Ivan said.

"You stole it!" the officer declared.

Ivan could not admit that I had sent it to him from Italy because that could have gotten him killed. They would have questioned him more about me and beat him severely. So, instead, he bravely replied, "It's mine. Why don't you leave me alone? I just got back from the army where I did my duty for our country."

“Oh, your duty isn’t over,” the policeman said. “Come with me.” And with that, he led Ivan away to the police station where they proceeded to insist that he stole the shirt. They began to beat him, and they ultimately tore the shirt to pieces.

About two months after I first told them about the bridge, the Italian officials called me into their office to say my story had been verified. I had proven to them I could be trusted. They granted me a certificate of political asylum from the United Nations.

With that document, I was protected.

The Partisans no longer had a right to pick me up and drag me back to Yugoslavia.

I was finally free.

A few months after I was granted UN asylum, I was called to move to a new camp named Latina which was close to Genoa, a harbor town where many ships would set out, transporting refugee emigrants around the world.

The Latina camp was much nicer and cleaner than the one in Trieste. The food was better, and my fellow emigrants seemed happier. We were so far from Yugoslavia now that even the long hands of communism couldn’t reach us anymore. But one thing that always confused me—still to this day, over 60 years later—is that the Italians put the Croats and the Serbs in the same camp, knowing full well they traditionally didn’t get along. Even though we were in a better place, fights broke out daily and nightly. We were free to look for jobs, which I did often, usually finding work as a laborer on farms.

Sometimes farmers tried to take advantage of us. They would come to the camp, pick a few guys, drive us over to a farm a few miles away, and give us some tools. They would instruct us on what to do and tell us to get started, saying they’d be back with some food. Many times, no one would come back with food or water. We would work all day, and when the sun went down, we’d hope the farmer would come pick us up, pay us, and bring us back to the camp before dinner was over. Sometimes they just didn’t, and there was nothing we could do about it.

One day a man came by the camp looking for three workers. I volunteered along with two other guys, and he drove us to the animal stockyard at the train station. The job was to use pitchforks and shovels to clean out the train cars used to transport animals. He told us what to do, said how much he would pay us afterwards, and then retired to his office which was close by.

It was a lot of work, but the other guys and I pushed ourselves through it and we ended up finishing faster than the man had expected. When he came back to check on us, he saw our progress and said, “Good, good, good.” Then he took out his wallet and paid us only half of what he had promised.

“I won’t take that money. You promised us much more!” I exclaimed in my broke Italian.

He stepped very close to me and in a loud voice said, “Leave my tools and take the money! If you don’t want it, then just get the hell out of here!”

I looked at my coworkers. The two of them just stood there, silently watching us.

I felt insulted. I grabbed a pitchfork and pointed it at the man. He immediately backed away, then turned and ran, swearing at me and yelling, “I will send you back to Yugoslavia!”

I picked up all the other tools we had used—the shovels and the other guys' pitchforks. I put them over my shoulder and started walking back to camp. These would be my payment.

The man saw this and began chasing after me, screaming, "Leave my tools, you *bandito!* I will send you back to Yugoslavia!" But every time he got close to me, I would throw everything on the ground except for one pitchfork, and I'd chase him with it. This happened three or four times. Each time I'd chase him about 200 feet away, then resume my walk with his tools.

We got back to the camp around 6pm. The man was still pursuing me, demanding back his tools. I think he was hoping I'd chase him again with the pitchfork in front of the other refugees who were watching us through the fence, but I just calmly walked into camp with his tools.

Two camp officers came out of their booth. They saw the angry man behind me and asked what was going on.

"He stole my tools!" the man screamed at them while pointing at me.

"Quiet!" one of them shouted back. They turned to me and asked why I was carrying the man's tools. I told them the story. They shook their heads and commanded the man to pay us what he had promised. "Give these men the full daily wage you promised, not just half, or we will report you to the labor commission."

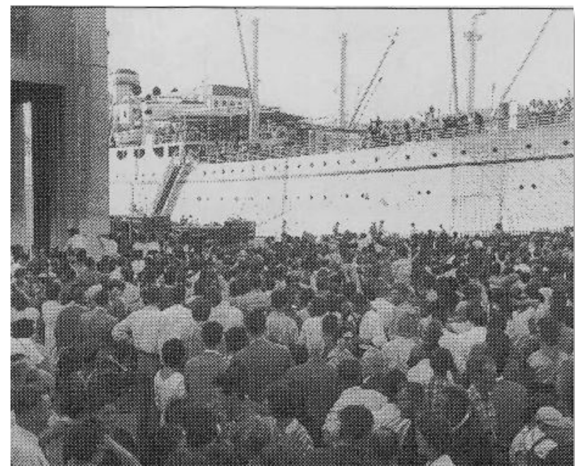
The man opened his wallet and paid us the full amount according to the Italian labor laws at the time. I dropped the tools. He picked them up and scornfully trudged away.

After that incident, I stopped working because I feared something like that could happen again. I didn't want to get in trouble and end up in jail for hurting a bastard like that guy. Even worse, I didn't want to get sent back to Yugoslavia.

A few weeks later, a camp official called a bunch of us into a huge room and said they were looking for volunteers who wanted to start a new life in a new country. They presented us with three choices:

1. To move to the United States, we could sign up and wait two years in the camp.
2. To move to a European nation like Germany, Switzerland, or France, we could sign up and wait one year in the camp.
3. To move to Australia, we could sign up and leave immediately.

Australia it was. The decision was easy. I reported to the proper office and found that I was one of the first in line. An officer took my information and the address of my closest relatives in case of an accident. I had to get a chest x-ray and some dental x-rays. They insisted that all my teeth be checked and all cavities be filled. None of us could travel to Australia until we were 100% healthy, per orders of the Australian government. I was in very good shape and passed the health exams with no problem.



I was moving to Australia.

Chapter 6

THE TRAGEDIES OF WAR

During WWII, the Serbian army, known as the Chetniks, was made up of over 700,000 drafted soldiers, which included the old, the young, and even priests. The Croatian army, on the other hand, didn't draft anyone during the war but only asked for volunteers. Croatians were proud to serve their country of their own free will, and over 200,000 volunteer soldiers signed up.

Throughout the war, the Communist Partisans rose within the Croatian government. They formed an army of their own, populated with thieves, arsonists, and brutal killers who acted without discipline and without military uniforms. They were a ruthless, harmful force terrorizing our country.

There were so many unfortunate casualties of the war. Innocent people were the victims of power-hungry governments. One such tragedy occurred in Bleiburg, Austria. Please take a moment to research and read about the Bleiburg Massacre where over 200,000 surrendering Croatian soldiers and refugees, including the elderly, women, and children, were murdered by the Communist Yugoslavs.

In 1950, the Yugoslav Minister of the Interior gave a speech proclaiming that hundreds of thousands of Croatian traitors had been arrested as political prisoners after the war and that they had been placed in hard labor camps throughout Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, you will not find one family who hasn't had a member killed by the Communists. The Partisans murdered thousands of people without court orders or justification of any kind. Simply pointing a finger at someone or making an accusation was enough to make them guilty in the Partisans' eyes. Over 600,000 Croatians lost their lives during World War 2.

As the other refugees and I prepared to leave for Australia from our Italian refugee camp, we talked about the Partisans. We discussed how we'd like to forget all about them, but we knew that was impossible. Therefore, I wanted to include the following story in this book for my grandchildren, to remind them always about the danger of communism everywhere, even here in the USA. This history will help you appreciate the great country you are now in, the United States of America. Please read, and don't forget about the Bleiburg Massacre.

During my time in the Latina, Italy refugee camp, I heard many horror stories about the Partisans. These horrifying accounts steeled my heart against the Communists, and I will share just one of them here. A 30-year-old camp refugee told me this tale about the Yugoslav secret police—also known as the UDBA and the State Security Service. Despite having such an official name, they committed terrible atrocities. As the man related this story to me, I watched tears running down his face:

My father was in the Croatian Army, After the war, the Communists came to pick him

up. Four Yugoslav Intelligence UDBA officers visited my house. My father knew that they intended to kill him, so he hid.

When the officers asked my family to send him out, we responded that he hadn't come back from the war yet. Other villagers gathered around, watching the exchange. The UDBA didn't believe us and continued asking for him. Informants and finger-pointers were rampant back then, and someone had already reported to the Partisans that my father had returned. But we insisted he wasn't home.

The UDBA knew we were lying. They called for him to surrender, threatening to kill someone from his family if he didn't. My father thought they were bluffing. My 15-year-old brother was standing close to one of the officers, and the officer grabbed him by the front of his shirt, threw him down to the ground, and shot him dead.

"Guard him!" he barked to two other officers. "Don't let anyone bury him or move him from this position!" The villagers were so frightened, they ran home and locked themselves inside. My father still did not surrender. He was thinking about revenge.

But after three sunny days, flies started to collect on the body, and it started to smell. Villagers began covering their mouths with handkerchiefs and asking for my father to give himself up, calling out, "Jozo, wherever you are hiding, please surrender! Or we will all die from this horrible smell!"

My father finally did turn himself in. He was arrested by the police and given over to the UDBA. The UDBA officers then ordered a hanging gallows to be built next to the town bridge. Once it was constructed, they hung my father. They put signs on him that read TRAITOR and NAZI, and left his body hanging. After that, people in my village, for the most part, stopped pointing fingers at each other.

The man who told me this story was also one of the refugees traveling to Australia. He went on to live out the rest of his life in Australia, and he never got the chance to avenge his brother and father.

We took a train from the Latina camp to the Genoa harbor, where a ship called *Aurelia* was waiting to bring us to Australia. About 1,200 refugees, including me, boarded that ship. An official read us the ship rules, showed us where we'd be sleeping, and explained when breakfast, lunch, and dinner would be served. The ship then blasted its loud horn, and I saw all the people on the dock waving goodbye to us. We were on our way.

The first stop was the Suez Canal in Egypt. The British had recently bombed it, making it a safe passage secured by the UN. As we coasted through, Communist Arabs stood on the banks of the river, half-naked and shouting furiously at us about the glory of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito. We shouted back that Stalin and Tito were pigs.

Aurelia made a stop in Africa, where some men came aboard to offer us work in the African mines. They said the work was easy and the pay was good. All we'd have to do is watch the miners and make sure nobody steals any gold or diamonds. A few of my fellow refugees took the jobs and the rest of us moved on to Australia.

The journey was smooth until we crossed the equator. Then, the waves got rough. The ocean began tossing us like we were no more than a box of matches. It got so bad that I was sure we would tip over and drown. I was especially afraid because I couldn't swim.

One afternoon we stepped into the dining area for lunch and saw all the pasta-filled plates on the table. But before we could start eating, an enormous wave rocked the ship and all the plates slid off the table, crashing to the floor. Some of us fell as well, right on top of the mess.

For the rest of the journey, many of us stopped sleeping in our cabins. We began staying on deck all through the night, because everyone was seasick, holding their bellies and trying (without success) not to vomit. Then, after 33 long days at sea, we finally weighed anchor in Melbourne, Australia. It was July 1959.

We disembarked and took a train to a Migrant Reception and Training Camp in Bonegilla, Victoria. Some of us settled there while the rest of us moved on to Camp Greta in New South Wales.

I made friends on that long ship voyage. But once I settled into the camp, I never saw many of them again. Camp Greta was a good place for me. I grew strong on the food, and I was really loving the sugar and butter that had made its way into my diet.

Every day, Australian farmers came to the camp to recruit 20 or more workers. Sometimes we would agree to the jobs before even knowing where the farmers would be taking us.

Richmond, Queensland, Australia 1960

Chapter 7

LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, I grew stronger and matured into a full-grown man. One day, an old farmer from the town of Richmond in Queensland rolled up to the camp looking for ten men. He sought workers willing to go live with him back on his farm and cut sugarcane. He asked me to be part of the team, and I agreed, not knowing what sugarcane cutting was.

He took me and nine other guys to the train station, bought us tickets to Richmond, and gave us a supply of dried food. He told us the train ride would take one day and one night, and that he would be waiting for us at the station. Then he took off in his own car.

As the other guys and I enjoyed the 1,300-mile train ride through the Australian outback, we were delighted to spot hundreds of kangaroos jumping and playing on both sides of the train.

In the late afternoon of the following day, we pulled into Richmond near Mackay, Queensland. The farmer was waiting for us with a tractor pulling a trailer. We loaded our belongings and sat up on the trailer and the farmer drove us back to his farm.

After an hour's ride, the farmer stopped at a lone shack. This was our barracks. We hopped off the trailer and filed inside. It was a single large, dirty room with twelve old beds and a big kitchen table in the middle. The farmer gave us some food for dinner and said, "Good night. I'll see you tomorrow." He left and we spent the night in the shack.

The farmer returned the next day at 10am. He asked who among us could understand English. When nobody spoke up, I told him I knew a little. "Okay," he said. "Tell them that I want

you guys to pick a foreman. The foreman will be responsible for making sure the work gets done, and I will pay him an extra £2 more a week."

I communicated this to the guys, and suddenly everyone wanted to be the foreman. We were all young—the oldest among us was 19—and we could not come to an agreement. One of the smallest guys in our group proposed a crazy idea. "If we can't agree," he said, "let's fight each other! The last man standing will be the foreman." All the other guys started puffing out their chests like roosters and putting on their mean faces. We were flexing our arms and getting ready to fight.

The farmer watched all this with growing alarm. He didn't want to lose his crew, and all over a measly extra £2. He sized me up. I appeared to be the strongest and I spoke a little English. The latter probably sealed the deal. He pointed at me and said to the guys, "He will be your foreman."

The farmer gave each of us machetes to cut the cane and took us to a large field where the sugarcane had grown almost three meters tall but had been blown down by heavy winds and rain. The farmer explained to us that this sugarcane is where we get sugar, and that it takes two years for the sugarcane to grow.

Brown and white sugarcane had been planted in straight rows, but the storms had knocked them all down. (It wasn't until later that I learned fallen sugarcane was much harder to cut than standing stalks. Plastered to the ground, the cane was extra firm and hardened.)

The farmer then pointed a small distance away, saying, "Every morning over there I'll bring a few small railroad cars. I want you to cut the cane one inch off the ground. Chop off the green tops and make some big bundles. Then throw those bundles over your shoulder and load those train cars with clean cane. Every afternoon I will take the full cars to the sugar mill and get you empty cars for the next day. You will be paid per ton. The faster you work, the more money you can make. Your payday will be every Friday afternoon."

We went back to the barracks. Because I was the foreman, the farmer gave me money to buy food for the week for all my workers. He told me the store was a two-hour walk away, and then he drove off on his tractor.

Now I had to figure out the work schedule. I was responsible for getting the guys up for work in the morning, and I had to choose someone to cook lunch. The assigned cook would leave the field one hour before we broke for lunch to prepare the food. I would go to the store and buy supplies for us every week.

That first day on the job was a rude awakening for all of us. We expected it to be easy, but it was one of the hardest jobs I've ever worked. We pushed ourselves to the limit cutting the cane and loading those cars. That evening, everybody had blisters on their hands from cutting and blisters on their shoulders from carrying the sugar cane. The next day, we covered our shoulders with rags. This became our life for the next three months. I quickly got tired of my long weekly walks to the food market, so I bought myself a new bicycle.

The only problem was that I couldn't ride it. I discovered how difficult it was on the day I bought it. Every time I mounted the bike, I would fall over. Instead of the bike carrying me back to the barracks, I carried the bike.

I decided to teach myself how to balance on the bike by taking it up a nearby hill where I found two trees close together. I set the front wheel between the trees and practiced balancing. I did this for a few weeks, got better, and soon grew into a very good bike rider.

After those three months in Richmond, the sugarcane season was over. There was no other work for us in that area. The farmer paid us and asked if we would come back to work for him next year during sugarcane season. We told him we would, but as far as I know, nobody returned.

Now we had some money to spend. The guys and I caught a train back down to Sydney, 1,100 miles south. In that big city, the ten of us stayed connected for a period but eventually lost contact. After a while, I left Sydney and headed down the eastern coast of Australia to the city of Wollongong where I found a job in an ironmonger's foundry.

I worked there for a few months, then quit when I heard of an opportunity about 1,600 miles north in the city of Cairns, North Queensland. A friend told me I could find year-round jobs there. They cut sugarcane four or five months out of the year, and when that season ends, the tobacco-picking and potato-picking season begins, which lasts another three to six months.

I traveled up to North Queensland and found a Croatian immigrant community just outside of Cairns in the small town of Innisfail, Queensland. We were all roughly the same age and we came from the same region, and we all had the same problem—Communists had pushed us out of our beloved homeland.

I quickly became part of their community. We banded together by organizing protests against the Yugoslav government every Sunday, carrying placards with slogan such as PLEASE DON'T CALL ME YUGOSLAV! I'M CROAT! and YUGOSLAVIA IS SLAVERY OF THE PEOPLE!

Most Australians never accepted our point of view. They saw Yugoslavia as a democratic country. An earlier wave of immigrants from Yugoslavia had proudly referred to themselves as Yugoslavs, and the Australian government kept a good relationship with Communist Yugoslavia. It was very challenging for my community to convince them otherwise. But our good behavior and hard work spoke for us. The Australians began loving and accepting us more and more.

I worked in the sugarcane fields with a crew full of single guys. They played card games every night, where most of them would lose their entire day's earnings. I let them deal me in for a few hands, but quickly stopped attending the games when I saw how easily the pros kept cheating the inexperienced guys (like me).

Local farmers came to Innisfail daily looking for workers, usually needing between six and twelve guys each. Friends stuck together as working crews, and I was part of a team that included Angelo, Vujčić, Cista, Andjelko, Radoš, and ten others.

One day, a farmer hired us for sugarcane cutting. He took us to his property, showed us the barracks, gave us our machetes, and asked us to pick a foreman. Because he was the oldest (about 30) we chose Vujčić as foreman.

Work began next morning. It was a huge farm, and the working conditions were much better than they had been in Richmond. For one thing, the sugarcane was standing, not blown to the ground, making it much easier to cut. The farmer had planted straight rows, and the stalks were three or four inches thick, standing tall at six to eight feet high. You couldn't see through the rows, and I loved how nice and straight they all were.

Each one of us would stand between two rows, then work our way down the line cutting both rows at the same time. I always liked challenging Vujčić, even though he was strong and fast. When we raced, I stayed either right next to him or ahead of him. We would arrive at the end of our rows before all the others had gotten even halfway down theirs. Vujčić and I started new rows and finished those before some of the others had finished their firsts.

Every day Vujčić would send out the weakest worker to make lunch for the others. When we'd have meat, the cook would portion it out and place all the pieces on a large plate. On one day, we were having chicken. Some of the workers came in and washed their hands, while the others gathered around the table, waiting.

The cook was the first to step up to the plate of chicken, choose a piece, and put it on his plate.

"Hey!" one of the other guys shouted, "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Why?" asked the cook.

"Because you're taking the meat first AND you're taking the biggest piece!"

The cook said, "Well, if you were taking the meat first, which piece would you take?"

The man angrily replied, "If I were picking first, I would take the smallest one!"

The cook smiled, saying, "Good. You can have the smallest piece then. It's on the bottom the plate. Go grab it. Don't worry about me."

The entire room broke into loud laughter after that.

For months, the foreman and I continued our competitive daily races cutting sugar cane. Then one day, he gathered everyone around and made an announcement. "Boys, we can't continue working like this. Josip, Žerko, and I do double the work some of you do, but we all get paid the same amount. It isn't fair. Starting tomorrow, we will each take ten rows. When you finish your ten, you're free to leave the field because your workday is done."

Nobody protested. It was a fair plan.

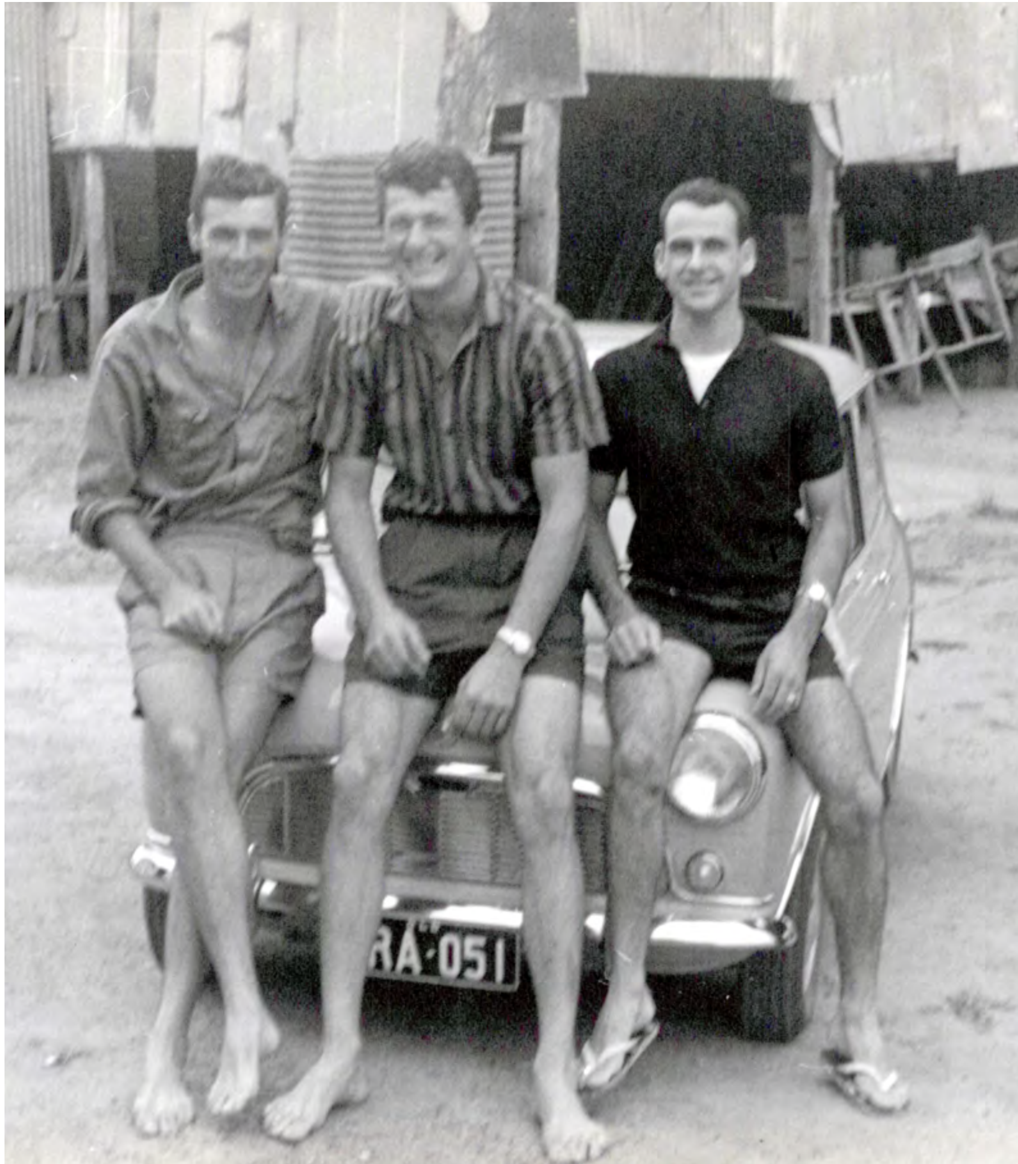
I knew Vujčić's intention was to finish his work fast so he could play cards. He was a good card player and enjoyed gambling often. Being the fastest, Žerko and I usually finished work about 4pm. We'd leave the field and head into the city. The other guys would work until later, some going late into the evening.

When cane-cutting season was over, I had made some good money and I went north about 500 miles to a small town called Mareeba, Queensland. (Little did I know that two of my sons, Branimir and Kresimir, would later be born in that town.) I found work on an Italian farm where they taught me how to pick tobacco.

I worked most of that season, then moved south 20 miles to the little town of Atherton,

picking potatoes. A tractor would turn all the plants over and my friend Medic and I, as well as some others, would select the good potatoes and put them in bags. This job was very hard on my back because I was bent over with my nose almost touching the ground all day long. I'd return home with a sore back every night.

After that season was over, I returned to Mareeba. Now I had a good deal of money, but to spend it on what?



Žerko and Ivan Bašić with Josip Kovač
Mareeba, Queensland, Australia, 1964

Ford Zephyr in Cairns, Queensland, Australia in 1963

Chapter 8

MY FIRST CAR

For my 19th birthday, I decided to buy myself an automobile—a very nice blue Ford Falcon. After I signed all the necessary documents and paid for the car in cash, the seller wished me good luck and proceeded to hand me the keys.

I just stood there, staring at the keys in his hand.

He looked at me, saying, “You’ll need to take these. You can’t go anywhere without them.”

“I can’t drive,” I told him.

“What? Well, what are you doing buying a car? People learn to drive before they get their own car!”

“Where do they learn?” I asked.

“I don’t know!” he replied.

“Okay. Then I will learn to drive with my own car.”

“Well, I hope that you don’t end up killing somebody. And you can’t leave the car here, so what are you going to do with it now?” I asked him if he could take the car to the Italian farm where I was working.

He ordered one of his mechanics to drive me out to the farm. On the way, the mechanic gave me some lessons about my new car. He showed me how to start it, and he explained the gears to me. He made it all look so simple.

But when I tried it by myself at the farm, it was not so simple. I could drive forward in a

straight line, but in reverse I went wildly crooked. Eventually, I built up enough confidence to take the car into town at night when everyone else was sleeping and traffic was very light.

In town, I practiced parking. I would pull into the space just fine, but I could not figure out how to back out straight. I needed two open parking spots to back up, or I couldn't do it. I thought I'd never learn to drive in reverse well. Three or four nights a week, I would practice like that, driving on the empty streets and pulling into parking spaces.

Finally, I grew confident enough to drive with oncoming traffic. My strategy was to stay very close to the edge of the street as far as I could to avoid the cars driving towards me in the other lane.

For several weeks I drove without a license. Then I decided I was ready for the driving test.

I drove to the smallest town with a police station I could find. It was 30 miles away and called Dimbulah. My thinking was that there would not be much traffic and with only one police officer working at the station, maybe he wouldn't go with me for the test drive.

When I stepped into the station and requested a driver's license, the officer asked me if I could drive. I said yes. I told him I had just bought myself a new car. "Okay, let's hop in," he said. He was coming with me after all.

We both got in my car and I drove. He directed me to a parking space between two cars and ordered me to park there. I did that fine but backing out was still a problem for me. I couldn't do it without a lot of back and forth.

Back at the police station, the officer said, "License denied. You need much more practice."

I thought that I had driven well throughout the test, except for that backing out of the space. I got the feeling that the officer just didn't like me. *Maybe he's just jealous of my new car,* I thought. I left Dimbulah without a license.

Sometime later I went back to the bigger town of Mareeba and took the driving test there. I passed easily and finally got my license. There was no oral exam, and the license itself was just a piece of paper with my name on it and no photo. You could tell the officer any name, and they would write it on the license.

I became very popular among my friends because I was the guy with the car. My Falcon was always filled with my buddies. I was very happy to be able to drive wherever I wanted. We'd drive to the bigger cities, sometimes 40 miles away, sometimes 100 miles away. We'd go to the movies and look for girls. (At that time in Australia, the ratio was nine males for every one female!)

One night, five of us went out on the town. First, we stopped at a hotel for some drinks. We sat at a large round table with another party of guys. Now my habit on nights like this was to always buy the first round. I never drank more than four or five glasses of beer, so I liked to pay for the first round because I wouldn't feel guilty later if I just want to leave at any time. I wouldn't owe anyone anything.

In the hotel on this night, I paid for the first round like usual. There were 12 of us sitting at that round table, and I bought the round for all 12. We all drank and had fun and took turns buying rounds for the whole table. The fourth round landed on a guy from my group named Danny

Zelenika. But instead of paying it, he tapped his pockets saying he forgot his wallet. The next guy in line took care of it, telling Danny, "Don't worry, I'll pay for you." And he did.

Some of us had planned to see a movie that night, so we got up to go. Danny decided to stay to keep drinking at the round table with the other party of guys. Later, when the movie ended, we exited the theater to see Danny waiting for us—we were 40 miles away from the farm, and he needed a ride.

Next to the movie theater was a 24-hour shop, and a few of us walked in to see if we wanted to buy any food for the next day. The prices were cheap, but we ended up not buying anything. We were shocked, however, to see Danny buying three grocery bags worth of food. He took his wallet out of his pocket and paid for it all himself.

"How do you have your wallet now, but you didn't in the hotel?" I asked.

"It costs too much money to buy drinks for 12 people," he replied. I immediately disliked him for that. I found it offensive.

"Let's go home," Danny said to me, holding the full bags of food in his hands. "I'm ready."

I looked at him and made a decision.

"In a minute," I said. "First we're going to run through town to look for girls. You wait here and we'll be right back."

The other guys and I got into the car, and I told them how I felt. "He is such a coward," I said. "I just don't feel like taking him back home."

My friends agreed with me, and as a group we decided to teach him a lesson. Cowardice is ugly, and sooner or later you pay for it. So, we left the city and headed back home, leaving Danny there holding his groceries and waiting for someone to give him a ride. In the car, we joked that if he was going to walk, he'd have plenty of food to eat along the way.

Later, Danny would become the first of us to buy a tobacco farm, but he never had too many friends.

A few months after I bought the car, I drove about 50 miles north to the town of Mossman, where I found a job on a farm run by a man named Charlie McCracken. The work was sugarcane cutting, and I was a pro. I was his only worker and he paid me a fair wage. The two of us built a strong friendship.

Some nights, he'd invite me into his house for dinner with his family—a wife and three young daughters. He was a very funny guy and could say anything in front of his wife. She didn't mind. He told me many great stories, but this is the one I've always liked the most:

> *My wife Valerie was a teacher when we met, but after we got married, I told her, "I don't need a teacher, I need a housewife who will take care of the place and cook for me while I'm working in the farm fields."*
>
> *She promised me everything I asked, saying, "No problem, my love. As long as I can see you from the windows of the house, I will be happy."*
>
> *But after two weeks, I came in for dinner one night and saw something was very wrong. Valerie was setting the dishes on the table in an unusual, angry way.*

"What's wrong, honey?" I asked.

"Charlie, I cannot live like this any longer!" she said to me. "I'm too lonely! I'll get sick! I have to go back to school to teach a class!"

"Okay," I said. "That's fine, honey. But if you're going to school, we'll just need a cook here at home."

She was so happy I supported her that she said, "I'll help you find one."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'll find someone, and then you can choose if we keep her or not."

"Okay," my wife agreed.

So, I found a few different candidates. Valerie selected the ugliest one, who also happened to be 10 years older than me. She began her teaching job and the new lady started cooking for us.

I worked daily in the sugarcane field. Every evening, Valerie would come home to a nice dinner waiting for her. The cook would wash all the dishes, and after dinner everyone would go to sleep.

But one day, the morning started with a light rain. I went out to the field and worked, but when I came home for lunch it was pouring. I couldn't work anymore that day. I ate my lunch and took a nap in my bed.

At about 1pm, Valerie called on the phone and asked to talk to me. The cook told her, "No, Charlie's in bed right now, and I'm not going to wake him." Then she hung up the phone.

When Valerie came home that evening, I saw fire in her eyes. She said in a loud voice, "Charlie, please, this woman has to go tonight and never come back!"

I said, "Why, honey?"

Valerie said, "Today she made me so nervous, I felt like I wanted to kill the students. Please, if she goes, I will stay."

"Okay," I said, and fired our new cook.

Since then, I haven't any problems with my wife.

When Charlie finished telling me this story, Valerie stood up and went into one of the bedrooms. She came back out with a nicely folded Croatian flag.

"This Croatian flag is over 120 years old," she told me. "My grandmother gave it to my mom, and my mom gave it to me. I'm keeping it to give to one of my daughters."

This surprised and moved me. I swelled up with pride, and I was honored to be her friend. I learned that Valerie was born in Australia, but her parents' name was Veger, and they came from the very poor village of Vrgorac in Croatia.

1959 in Cairns, Queensland with my Ford Falcon

Eventually, the cane-cutting season ended, and I left Charlie's farm. I again drove 75 miles to the small town of Dimbulah, where I had first tried to get my driver's license. I had heard there might be work on a tobacco farm there.

April 3, 1964 in Mareeba, Queensland, Australia

Chapter 9

LIFE ON THE TOBACCO FARM

A young couple by the name of Jim and Shirley Osborne were granted 200 acres of free land in Dimbulah, Queensland from the government to grow tobacco, and I found a job on their farm. Many other Australian citizens got this same kind of deal, for those willing to grow tobacco. The Osbornes needed to clean their land, build their house, and construct tobacco barns. It was hard work, and I was drawn to it like a thirsty man to water.

They asked what my day rate was, and I told them 50-60 pounds a day. They replied that they wouldn't have the money to pay me weekly, but if I helped them clean the land and plant the tobacco and wait for the selling season, then they would pay me more than I was asking.

At the time, I still had enough money to support my needs for a while. "Okay," I said. "I will work for you."

I worked very hard for Mr. & Mrs. Osborne, and they started to like me. They spoke highly of me and my background. At a time when many Australians were brainwashed by the Yugoslav Communist propaganda, believing all Croats were Nazis, Mrs. Osborne stood up for me, saying to others, "Think about it—what kind of Nazis are born after the war?" I worked for them for a year, and it was a happy relationship. True to their work, when they did begin selling the tobacco, they paid me very well.

When my 21st birthday came around, I found myself alone on the farm while the Osbornes

were away on vacation. Because I worked seven days a week, I never had any time to visit the small nearby towns or make any new friends. So, I spent the night I turned 21 all alone, sitting by myself and feeling a little sad, lost, and confused. I missed my poor little home that I had left in Vinica just three years earlier. I spent that evening of my birthday remembering my home with an ache in my heart…

I remembered how my mom would only eat if there was any food left over. If there was none, she would go without food until the next day. Now, as I was turning 21 and remembering those early years, I realized that this happened over and over again—Mom would go to bed without any food. Understanding her sacrifice now, I cried for her. I knew that our little house in Vinica was still infested with rats and mice as I remembered, but we no longer had the cats to kill them.

February 20, 1963 on the Osborne Farm in Dimbulah, Queensland, Australia

After the war, Italian wanderers were known to kill cats for food. Then the Communists came through town with rat poison to kill not just the rats, but all the leftover cats as well. Many people got sick from that poison.

I remember my mother bought a stove for drying fresh meat in the winter, but it was the ugliest and cheapest stove she could get. It gave off more smoke than fire, making our eyes tear up more than making us warm. My mom stored the firewood high up under the roof in the kitchen, and she would hang fresh meat to dry in the smoke through the winter…

On the Osborne's farm, alone on my birthday, these memories twisted around in my mind, and I began to regret leaving the happiness of that poverty for the sadness of this…freedom.

But as I thought more about it, I began to realize that freedom was indeed better than spending one's life hoping for a better future. I started to think about my future, and I realized what I wanted to do. I would help free the Croatian people from that horrible Communist grip, and then I could return to my family in Vinica, where we would live happy and free at last.

Dimbulah, Queensland, Australia 1961

Chapter 10

THE FLAG GOES UP ON MY 21ST BIRTHDAY

I was so lonely on my birthday night that I started digging through my suitcase, nostalgic for my old things. I found my Croatian flag and took it out. I sat there looking at it for a long time, then I got an idea. I would hang it from the top of the tallest building on the farm, a three-story structure that I helped build.

I started preparing the flagpole. As I did, I talked to the flag. I said, “You will go with me wherever I go. Your symbol will fight their symbol—the red star. And I will fight them—the Communists. And I know we will win.”

I hung the flag from the pole and proudly let it fly.

When Mr. and Mrs. Osborne came back from their vacation, they were surprised. They told me they didn’t recognize their own farm.

“Do you like it?” I asked them.

They liked *me* and didn’t want to hurt my feelings, so they said, “Yes, we do. But what does it mean?”

I told them about my childhood and the five years of war in my country. I told them about our hunger and poverty, and how my mom would often go to bed with an empty stomach. I told them it was all the Communists’ fault, including my lack of higher education.

Mr. and Mrs. Osborne felt sorry for me. They said, “It looks good. Leave it right there.”

Not long after that, word spread quickly into the neighboring towns about my flag, and something interesting started to happen. Every day, between four and twelve Croatian guys would just show up at the Osbourne farm to hang out. We formed a little community—Croats enjoying the Australian freedom. We bought rifles and taught ourselves to shoot.

But as word of my growing Croatian community spread to the good people of Australia, it also spread to the not-so-good people. Communist, Serbian, Chetnik, and Yugoslav farmers also heard about us and our gun practice. Daily, they would send untrue messages to the Yugoslav consul in Sydney and many other Australian officials in Canberra saying that we were terrorists and warning that Nazism was on the rise in Australia.

One day, two big policemen from the city of Cairns, Queensland came out to the farm. Australian police officers did not carry pistols, but they were all big men—no shorter than 6 feet tall and no lighter than 220 pounds. They were required to be big enough and strong enough to handle any person.

They approached Mr. and Mrs. Osborne and asked what the story was with the flag. Mr. Osborne began explaining, but Mrs. Osborne suddenly cut in and told the officers the sad story of my childhood. When she finished, they insisted on seeing me.

I stepped outside and approached them. One of the officers said to me, "I want you to climb up there and take that flag down."

I looked up at the flag then back at the officer. "I can't climb that high," I said. "I'm too scared."

"How were you not scared to put it up there then?" he responded.

"I was very lonely on my 21st birthday," I told him. "I wanted to do something for my country, and I didn't care if it killed me."

The officers looked at me like they didn't believe me. One turned to the other and said, "Can you climb up there?"

"No, too tall," the other said. "What about you?"

"No, too damned tall," the other replied.

My flag rippled in the breeze, flying high and proud, as the two officers unhappily drove away.

A few months later, they came back, this time insisting that I climb up and take the flag down.

"I can't!" I said. "I'm scared. You climb up!"

One replied, "You put it up, so you take it down! Or we're taking you with us!"

But when Mr. and Mrs. Osborne heard the words "take you with us," they aggressively burst from the house and confronted the officers. "What's going on?" they asked.

The officers said they had an order from Canberra that the flag must come down. Angrily, Mrs. Osborne insisted that the flag stay, saying, "It is on my building, not the interior minister's building, and you can tell him that!"

The officers were confused by her reaction. They didn't know what to do next. Mrs. Osborne, however, did. "Just a minute," she said, and walked back into her house.

She picked up the phone and called the governor in Brisbane directly. They were related. She told him the situation, and his reply was, "It's your home, so it's your decision. I will call the Cairns police department and tell them to leave you alone."

"Thank you," she said. She called to the officers, holding out the phone. "Would you guys like to talk to the governor?"

"Uh, no, thank you," they said, heading back to their car. They drove away.

After that day, even more Croatians started came out to the farm to pay their respects to Mr. and Mrs. Osborne and celebrate the joy of seeing our flag waving high up in the breeze.

Debbie, Jim, Shirley, Scott and Jason Osborne in Dimbulah, Queensland, Australia, May 1967

In time, my Croatian community and I decided to start our own political party. We drafted up a membership booklet and started collecting donations as a relief fund for our struggle against the Communist Yugoslav propaganda. We were very supportive of the Croatian Youth organization in Sydney, and we communicated with the Croatian National Resistance, known as the HNO, in Valencia, Spain. The HNO was a radical group that wanted to destroy Communist Yugoslavia at all costs. They were led by a general named Max Luburić, who was ultimately killed in Valencia by a Yugoslav special agent.

Croatian Liberation Militia Queensland, Australia 1962

I continued working for Mr. & Mrs. Osborne, building new tobacco barns. After we'd pick the tobacco

leaves, we'd attach them to four-foot-long sticks and place them in the barns. Each barn was 20-30 feet tall and it would take us all day just to fill one of them. When the barn was full of tobacco leaves, we'd light the diesel burner at the bottom of it. This would dry the leaves.

When they were all dried, we'd take the leaves out of the barn, classify them by quality, and bundle them into 120-pound loads. We took those loads to the Tobacco Association and sold them. The whole process took about six months total, but it was not too physically hard. At the end of the season, I prepared the field for the next harvest by planting seeds. The Osbornes were very happy with my work. I became part of their family which included their daughter Debbie and sons Jason and Scott.

Queensland, Australia, 1963

Chapter 11

BUYING THE FARM

In 1964, Mr. Osborne had some financial constraints regarding another property he was trying to buy in the city of Mackay. He decided he needed to sell the farm in Dimbulah. Many Italians visited the 200-acre property and made offers. After a few weeks of this, Mr. Osborne approached me and said, “Josip, why don’t YOU buy this farm? You’ve worked so hard on it and look—your native flag still flies proudly on top of it.”

I looked up at the flag with pride. A light wind was gently rippling it, and it felt like the flag was talking to me, saying, *please buy the farm, and I will stay with you.*

I turned to Mr. Osborne, my head bent and my heart broken. I told him, “I can’t buy your farm because I don’t have enough money.”

“I’ll sell it to you for $5,000 cheaper than what I’m asking the other guys,” Mr. Osborne replied. “And the money you’ve made with me that I haven’t paid you yet can count as the deposit. I’ll even go with you to the bank and be your co-signer.”

At that, I agreed.

But we learned that the bank required two co-signers. I drove up to the city of Mossman to see my old friend Charlie McCracken. I asked if he would be my second co-signer, and he said, “I would do anything for you.” He came out to Dimbulah and co-signed the purchase of the farm.

I was 24 years old and now a farm-owner.

My closest neighbor was about five miles away, so it was a little lonely living there by myself. For the next two years, I tended the farm alone, always worrying in the back of my mind that if I got hurt, nobody would be around to help me.

I decided to ask my friend Nikola Štedul to become my partner. He declined at first, saying he didn't have enough money to buy into the farm. I told him not to worry about the money. I said we could be equal partners if he paid me his portion over time. He accepted and became my partner in 1966.

We worked together for two years, and I realized during that time that Nikola was not a very ambitious field worker. I discussed this with him, and we agreed to split the land but share the equipment. On the very first day of our split, Nikola hired a helper for his portion of the land. But even though there were two of them on that side, I would finish the work on my side before they were done every day.

Around this time, Nikola got married. This made me feel even lonelier than before. But I was still driven by outrage at the communists who drove me from my homeland. I talked to Nikola about both of us enlisting in the Australian military for the Vietnam War. I felt real combat would give us the professional training we needed to fight communism. Nikola agreed and found us a retired colonel to help us enlist. We signed up.

From the very beginning of our military training, Nikola and I asked our commanders to send us to Vietnam. But they never did. I think it was because without me, there would be no one to run the farm, and because Nikola was a newlywed. Nevertheless, we continued training.

When I realized I wouldn't be going to Vietnam, I started to dream about settling down with someone. With nine men to every one woman in Australia, odds were not in my favor. So many single men were moving to Australia from Europe that the Australian Parliament suggested they start letting women into the country for free, without having to pay any fees.

In any event, my plan was to travel down to the big city of Sydney and find myself a significant other that I could one day marry.

Josip Kovač and Nikola Štedul

Wollongong, Australia
July 11, 1966

Chapter 12

HOW I GOT MARRIED

The drive from Dimbulah to Sydney was almost 1,600 miles, which took me about 45 hours. When I finally arrived, I got in touch with some friends and asked them to introduce me to a few girls around town. One friend told me that a new girl had just come in a week ago from Croatia. Her last name was Grbavac, and she was living in Wollongong, about 55 miles south of Sydney. We decided to drive down that very day.

Though we left when it was still light, we didn't get to Wollongong until after dark. Once there, we asked a few people around town if they knew the girl we were looking for. Some didn't know, and others just pointed us to a large general area. I decided the only way to find out was to knock on every door, asking the occupants if the girl lived there. By 11pm, we still hadn't found her.

Then a friend of mine said he knows Slobodan, the girl's brother. We could maybe find him and ask if his sister was still awake. We got Slobodan's address and found his house. Fortunately, the lights were still on, so we knocked on the door. Slobodan's wife Lily opened it and, seeing my friend, gave him a surprised and happy hug. Then she invited us in.

As the others were greeting each other and talking, I noticed a young woman feeding a small child. Lily introduced us to the woman, saying it was her sister-in-law who had just arrived from Croatia one week earlier. Her name was Zora.

We then sat down for a cup of tea before embarking on our journey back to Sydney. During

the entire time at Lily's house, I was noticing the movements and actions of Zora. She wasn't paying attention to any of us, she was just focused on feeding her niece. Watching her, seeing her perform the task so well, with so much care and attention, I knew she was the one.

My friend and I left the house and returned to Sydney, where we spent the night. The following morning, I told him that I wished to see that girl in Wollongong again and asked him to accompany me. He chose to stay behind in Sydney.

I wanted a GOOD woman, and I believed that I had found her. I got in my car and drove back to Wollongong.

I knocked on the door of the house, and Lily again answered. She greeted me warmly, remembering me from the night before. She didn't know why I was there and asked if she could help me with anything. I told her it had been a long time since I'd heard Croatian music, and I was hoping her sister-in-law had brought some that I could listen to.

"Yes," Lily replied. "I'm heading out to meet my friends for coffee, but you go along inside and ask her to play some music for you."

I stepped inside the house and saw the girl from the night before. I introduced myself and asked if I could listen to some of the Croatian records she brought with her. She agreed. I sat down on the couch by the record player, hoping that she would sit next to me. But my heart sank when she chose to sit at the opposite end of the couch. Every time she got up to change the record, I would slide a little closer to her end. She acted very innocent, and when I eventually sat right next to her, she allowed it, not knowing what to do otherwise.

Before I left that afternoon, I asked her if there was any chance I could see her again the following day.

"It's up to you," she replied.

That evening, I headed back to Sydney, knowing I would return the following day. And I did.

I arrived at her brother's house at noon and asked Zora if she would like to go to town with me. She accepted. I took her out and we walked around the little town for a while, then sat in my car and talked. I asked her everything about her life back in our home country.

She explained that she came from a poor family, which caused her to have a tough childhood. She lived with her brother Ante in Banja Luka, one of the largest cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, before moving to Australia to visit her other three brothers.

I then told her about my life—the struggles I'd gone through and everything that led me to this moment. "You do not know me," I said to her, "but try to trust me."

Then I asked her to marry me.

She was shocked. "I cannot do that without the approval of my brothers!" she exclaimed.

I said many things to win her over, including, "Wouldn't you rather feed your own children instead of theirs?" Then I requested that she simply think about my proposition. I asked if she'd allow me to return the following day. She said I could.

The next day, we walked through town together again, talking. Eventually I brought up my proposition from the day before. Somehow, after only talking together for three short days, she

agreed to marry me.

I took her straight away to the jeweler to pick out an engagement ring and a wedding ring. However, realizing I didn't have enough money, I only bought her a wedding band.

After that, I took her back to the house so we could tell Slobodan and his wife Lily the good news. "Since none of us know you," Slobodan said, "we have to contact my other brothers to see if they agree with this engagement."

He called his brothers Ljubo and Grgo and told them the news. Grgo grew quite upset rather quickly. "How do you know that this man is Croatian and Catholic?" he demanded.

"Well, his name is Josip," Slobodan replied.

"Josip can also mean *Juso*, which is a Muslim name. Or *Jozo*, from the Serbian name *Jovo*," Grgo said. He then requested to meet me before any marriage took place. He lived in Canberra, over 150 miles away.

The four of us traveled south to Canberra the next morning—Slobodan, Lily, Zora, and me. The first thing that struck me about Canberra was that it was a lot colder than back in the Sydney region. When we entered Grgo's house, his wife Slava noticed I was shivering, so she put the electric heater right in front of me. While I warmed myself in front of it, Zora's two brothers stepped into the other room to discuss my marriage proposal to their sister. At one point, Grgo said to Slobodan, "Can't you see that man has no blood in him? He is basically sitting on top of the electric heater!"

After I had warmed up and we all had a hot lunch, I tried to win Grgo over by offering to assist with some outside chores, but he wouldn't accept my help.

Later that day, as we all headed back to Wollongong—Slobodan and Lily were in the backseat, Zora and I were in the front—I asked Slobodan what his brother said.

"Grgo said *ma jok*," responded Slobodan. This translated into English as "not at all."

"What do you think I should do?" I asked him.

"I am the oldest brother, so I will give you my blessing regardless if Grgo likes it or not. However, this all depends on if Zora agrees to it."

I looked over at Zora as she sat quietly thinking in the passenger seat. I lightly stepped on her foot, and she responded, "Yes."

Then I explained to Slobodan that I needed to get back to my farm soon. He encouraged me to go back to Dimbulah and then return to Wollongong when I was ready. "Take your time," he said.

But I did not want to take my time. I told him, "I would like to marry Zora this Saturday and bring her back to the farm with me."

"That's okay with me," he responded. "How many people would come to the wedding from your side?"

"I don't know many people from around here," I said, "so I'll probably only have about four or five."

Slobodan said he would plan a small wedding for us. We asked a Croatian priest in Sydney if we would conduct the ceremony, but he refused, saying too many others had tricked him into marrying them for a second or third time or, worse, with bad intentions. He insisted I must first prove to him that I was an honest, single Catholic man. That process would have taken months to

accomplish, and I did not have that kind of time.

"Don't worry," Slobodan said. "We can visit a priest in the next town over and see if he'll marry you two."

We went to see that priest, and he asked to see our birth certificates. We explained that the communists in our homeland had burned many churches, as well as the documents held inside, which included our birth certificates. The priest listened to our story and agreed to marry us anyway.

Our wedding was in a small church. I remember standing there at the altar in my nice clothes, looking at Zora in her white dress as we received the blessing of marriage. The date was July 11, 1966, and it was one of the happiest days of my life.

There were twelve guests in attendance, and four of them were my friends. Zora's brother Grgo calmed down about me when he saw how proudly my friends regarded me and talked about me. That night, he gave us his wedding gift—$20. I was very grateful for it because I was broke at the time. After a light wedding reception, Zora and I retired to the Wollongong Hotel to get some sleep before our long journey back to the farm the following day.

In the morning, we got up early so we could swing by Slobodan's house to say goodbye to her family and friends that had come out for the wedding. I used Slobodan's phone to call my partner Nikola back on the farm and tell him the good news. He was very happy for me.

The journey up to Dimbulah took Zora and me four or five long days. When we finally pulled up to the farm, Nikola and his wife Shirley came out to the yard and greeted us both with big hugs, congratulating us. When Nikola and Shirley had gotten married, I moved out of the master house and into the workers' quarters so that they could enjoy married life in the house. But now, as I started to carry our luggage to the workers' quarters, Nikola stopped me. "No, you two get the house now," he said.

"And where will you guys sleep?" I asked him.

"We moved to the workers' quarters so you two could have the house," he said.

"You didn't need to do that," I told him.

Nikola said, "We still consider this farm yours and we're very grateful for what you've done for us."

The next morning, I skipped over to the larger town of Mareeba to browse and buy used furniture. Zora and I began to live like husband and wife. We stocked up on food, and I began working in the fields every day again.

Ivan Medić, Josip Kovač and
Best Man Marijan Šiško

Zora with brothers
Slobodan and Grgo Grbavac

My Happy Bride

Our Wedding Day
July 11, 1966

Chapter 13

MY FEARSOME WIFE ZORA

Before I married Zora, I had been looking for the right woman in the area around Dimbulah. There was a good-looking blond Australian girl I got along with, but I couldn't marry her for three big reasons—religion, culture, and language. She was not Catholic, she was not familiar with the Croatian culture, and we could barely understand each other when we talked. I knew all those problems would affect the happiness of any family we'd try to have.

During the ride back to Dimbulah from Wollongong with my new bride Zora, I called the blond Australian girl to tell her I was married and that we wouldn't be seeing each other anymore.

She laughed, saying, "I don't believe you! No one would marry you except for me!"

"I'm telling you it's true," I told her. "I'm married now. Just don't call me anymore!"

Dimbulah was a tiny town with no more than 200 farmers. Everyone knew each other. The first time I walked through town with Zora while grocery shopping, I began to worry that we would run into the blond Australian girl. I thought to myself, what if she was around the next corner, and what if when she saw me—would she hug and kiss me? How would Zora react?

I told Zora, "You know, everybody is friendly here because it's small town. If we bump into a young blond girl here, and she is so happy to see me that she hugs and kisses me, what would you do?"

"Depends on the kiss," Zora said. "If I see that it's not appropriate, I will take your rifle and kill both of you."

At that moment, I got scared. *My God*, I thought. *What kind of monster did I marry?* I

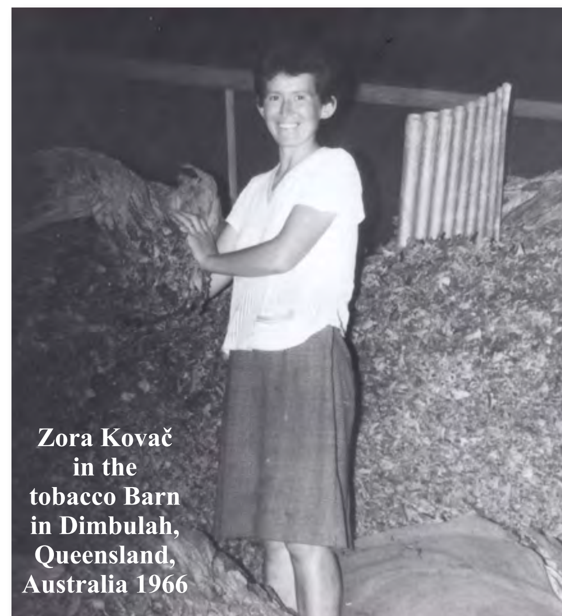
dropped the subject with Zora. Then, the first chance I got, I called the blond girl and told her never to come close to me again. “My wife said that if she ever sees us together, she will shoot both of us, so don’t come see me and don’t call,” I told her. “Just stay the farthest away you can!” After that call, I felt good that she finally took the message seriously.

But I was wrong. She continued to call. Zora told me someone kept calling the house and not saying anything. I told her that it must be someone trying to call from Europe but having difficulty getting through. Zora said that the calls were sometimes coming three times a day, while I was out working in the fields. I knew then who it was, but I didn’t want to upset Zora.

Later, when our first son Branimir was born, I took the baby and my wife Zora to the blond girl’s parents’ home sixty miles away. I figured this was the only way to move on, by facing the problem. Her family received us warmly, and so did she. She held Branimir and carried him around the house. When Zora was in another room, the girl said to me, “This pretty baby should be mine and yours, not hers.”

“But now you see I’m married and starting a family,” I said to her. “Please do not call our home anymore.” We visited her family for only a short while, then we left. After that day, the calls finally stopped.

Zora took to farm life like a seasoned farmer. She very quickly proved to me through her good character, constant respect, and strong work ethic that she was the woman of my dreams. Perhaps she realized that I was her only family in this strange part of the country where she had no parents, brothers, or sisters, but she worked on creating such a strong bond between us that I realized she was dedicating her life to being with me.


Zora Kovač in the tobacco Barn in Dimbulah, Queensland, Australia 1966

Anything someone else could do, she would quickly figure out how to do it better. She learned all the farm chores, including driving the tractor. There was passion, drive, and respect in everything she did. As I write this 55 years later, I can say that in all our married years she never once raised her voice at me. She has earned my deepest respect and I would give my life for hers in an instant.

Over the years, whenever she wasn’t happy with a decision I made—be it regarding the children’s education, my business, my drinking, or my opinions—she would wait until she saw I was calm, then she would come sit next to me and quietly explain what she thinks is wrong and how she would prefer that I handle it. “If you really want to do it your way, I’m not going to stop you,” she would tell me. “You are the head of this family. Just please think twice before making important decisions, especially when it comes to the children’s well-being. That must be a priority.” Very quickly I realized that not only do I have a great wife but also a great advisor.

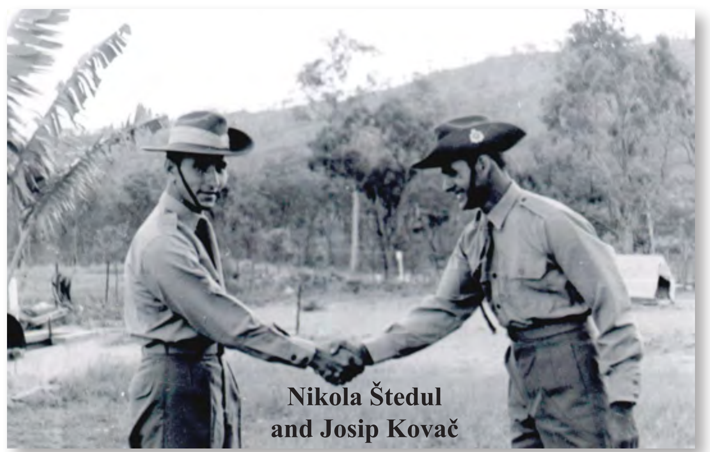
Chapter 14

MARRIED LIFE ON THE FARM

On my 23rd birthday, I got my second automobile—a Ford Zephyr. This one was much more of a luxury car than my blue Falcon. Then later, for my 25th birthday, I purchased my third car—a red Ford Falcon Futura sports car.

During this time, Nikola and I continued training with the Australian military. We continued to ask them to send us to Vietnam so we could fight with the soldiers, but they never did. Finally, after continuing to ask for a while, we got a letter from a General based in Melbourne in which he thanked us for joining the country's military and explained why there was no need to send us to Vietnam to fight—Australia was not fighting in that war, America was. Only when the fighting temporarily stopped would the Australians move in as a peacekeeping mission, bringing medication and food supplies.

We were disappointed but realized there was nothing we could do. We continued training locally, but at the end of 1967, we were honorably discharged. I believe then and still believe now that those in charge did not want Nikola and I to leave two pregnant women running the farm with no help at all.



Nikola Štedul
and Josip Kovač

Our farm was situated on a hillside, and there was a running creek on either side. The cooling moisture of those creeks were havens for snakes. Taipan snakes which are highly poisonous, were common on the farm. One bite could kill a person if they didn't get to the hospital immediately for medicine. Recovery from a taipan bite takes a minimum of three months. When we would plow the tobacco field with the tractor, the taipans would come out of the dirt and follow the tractor down the plow line.

But these snakes never scared me, though they did scare my wife Zora. Before I was married, I would catch them as a hobby. I put one still alive in a large jar and poured rubbing alcohol over it. That killed the snake while also keeping it well-preserved, so it didn't rot or stink. When visitors would come over, I'd take the snake out of the jar and show them what one looks like.

One day when the Osbornes were still living at the farm, Mrs. Osborne went to use the toilet. Now the farm was very rural living—no running water, no hot water, no electricity. The toilet was just an outhouse. As Mrs. Osborne got comfortable on the seat, she looked up just in time to see a big snake descending toward her.

About seven men were working in the tobacco shed that day, and every one of us heard Mrs. Osborne begin to scream madly. She was yelling my name. We all rushed out to see what was going on, and we caught sight of her shuffling quickly toward us, screaming, "There's a snake in the toilet! A snake in the toilet!"

In her terror, she had bolted from the shed with her dress still hoisted above her waist and her underwear still around her ankles. Mr. Osborne came out and grew alarmed immediately—not because of Mrs. Osborne's panic but because of her nudity!

"Put your damn dress down!" he began yelling at her.

She was beside herself with fright and didn't seem to understand, so Mr. Osborne ran over and pulled it down himself.

Farm living meant that instead of buying fresh meat at the store, we raised our own livestock or bought it from other farmers. Zora and I had two pigs, and we decided to kill one for food. At the time, the two of us were alone on the farm, but I told Zora we could do it ourselves and she believed in me. I was a veteran military man, after all. I frequently talked about war strategies and I had a military-grade long knife. Even though this would be my first time killing anything, I felt confident.

We selected one of the pigs and separated it from the other. Then I told Zora, "We'll push him down on the ground, then I'll hold him while you put this wooden handle in its mouth. That way, it won't bite us."

I then pushed the pig down and lay on top of it. It whipped its head rapidly back and forth, making it difficult for Zora to get the handle in its mouth. "Quick! It'll hurt us!" I screamed at her. I think she gained courage from her desire to protect me, and she moved her hands close to the pig's

mouth, somehow managing to get the wooden handle in there. When she did, I grabbed my big knife and plunged it into the pig under its front left leg. The pig screamed, flailed, and went limp.

I proudly got up off the pig's dead body. Zora and I stepped away to clean our tools. I wiped down my knife, and Zora took the wooden handle from the pig's mouth to clean tit. A couple minutes later, Zora turned back to the pig and exclaimed, "The pig is getting away!" I turned my head, and to my surprise I saw the pig was about 200 feet down the road already, lumbering away.

We rushed to catch up with it, and I pushed it down on the ground again. I sunk my big knife in the same hole I'd created before under its leg. The pig moved its head a little, then finally stopped moving. Knowing it was dead for sure this time, we walked back to the house to get some hot water and tools.

A few minutes later, I heard Zora scream, "The pig is gone!" I ran out of the house and saw the pig now about 300 feet further down the road! It was walking away! I ran back into the house and grabbed my rifle. I caught up with the pig and shot it in the head.

Now it was undeniably dead.

We pulled it back to the house and finished butchering it. Ever since then, Zora has used the incident to poke fun at me. "How could you fight in a war if you can't even kill one pig?" she would tease.

What can I say? I had no idea that pig would be so hard to kill.

A man walked up to the farm one day asking for me. When I came out to see him, he demanded I give him the key to my tractor. "Why?" I asked.

"Because you have not made any payments for six months," he told me.

"Look, when I bought this tractor," I explained, "I told the seller that I would pay for it in full at the end of the year when we sell the tobacco, and he agreed."

"No, they sent me to get the tractor key," he said.

"But you can't take the tractor in the middle of the season! We need it for the crops!"

"Okay," the man sighed. "If you don't give me the key, I'll just use my own." He walked over to my tractor, climbed on, and started it up himself. I knew that without this tractor I would lose everything, and this season of crops would be a bust. I quickly ran into house and grabbed my rifle. I stepped back outside and fired at the tractor.

At the sound of gunshots, the man jumped off the machine. He ran so fast that his hat flew off his head, but he didn't stop to pick it up. Without looking back, he ran like crazy down the road away from the farm, and I never saw him again.

Christmas on the farm in Dimbulah 1969

Chapter 15

OUR BRANIMIR AND KREŠIMIR

Just a few months after Nikola and Shirley had their baby girl Kristina, Zora and I had our first son. It was April 29, 1967. For weeks, Zora begged me to let her name the baby.

"What name do you have in mind?" I asked her.

"I'd like to call the baby Damir," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because when I came to Australia, I left my brother Ante's 4-year-old baby Damir, and I miss him so much," she replied.

"No. Impossible," I said. "Our baby will be named Branimir."

"Why?" Zora asked.

"Branimir was the first Croatian governor," I told her, "And this way, our son will not forget his origin. His name will keep him close with Croatian history and tradition."

"Okay, have it your way," she said.

One day I dressed up baby Branimir in an army uniform and put my rifle into his little hands. I talked to him about fighting against all evil, especially the Yugoslav Partisans. Zora said to me, "The baby doesn't understand anything you're telling him."

“He doesn’t now,” I told her, “But when he grows up and finds this photo, he will ask us what it means, and we will explain to him about his roots, and the love and duty we feel to the motherland. No matter where he goes in life, his name will always bind him to Croatia.”

On the day of Branimir’s baptism, we prepared a big feast. We had an entire roasted pig, several roasted chickens, cookies, wine, and beer. A lot of my friends showed up for the celebration––I invited everyone, including our small town’s mayor and our one police officer. We sent guests home with the leftover food and drink. The police officer himself took a few bottles of wine.

As I worked in the fields during that time, Zora would sometimes come out to bring me a drink, holding the baby in her arms. I loved seeing her holding that baby. The more I watched her, the more I fell in love with what a natural, devoted mother she was.

As much as I loved my new family life, I still strongly held onto my other passion—revenge against the Yugoslavia communists for what they did to our people. I continued going away for military training, and Nikola came with me. Sometimes we’d be away for two weeks, training in the tropical jungle of the Daintree Forest, fighting off mosquitoes and leeches.

Before I left, I told Zora, “If anybody knocks on the door at night, you ask who it is, and if they don’t answer you, you shoot them through the door.”

Looking back now, I can see that it wasn’t too smart of us to leave our wives and babies all alone on the farm. Our closest neighbor was over five miles away.

When I returned from one of these trips, Zora told me something had happened one night. She said she was trying to sleep when she suddenly heard a knocking. The sound wasn’t coming from the door, though, it was coming from the wall. She asked who was there, but nobody answered. She turned on a light, and the knocking stopped.

She turned the light off again, and the knocking once more started up.

Again, she turned on the light, and again the knocking stopped. This continued about six times before she realized she’d never be able to sleep. Also, she was afraid the sound would wake up the baby. The only thing to do, she decided, was to go outside and see what was going on.

She grabbed the rifle, courageously opened the door, and stepped out.

To her right, she saw nothing.

To her left, she saw a dog lying next to the house. With the light on, the dog was still. She soon learned that when she turned the light off, the dog would start wagging its tail, tapping against the thin wall of the house.

Zora was able to sleep in peace after that.

In early 1968, Nikola and Shirley had their second baby girl, Monika.

On May 23, 1968, Zora gave birth to our second baby boy. We were both so happy.

Then Zora said, “Please let me give this baby the name Damir.”

“No,” I said, “This baby’s name will be Kresimir.”

"Why Krešimir?" she asked.

"Because in Croatian history we have three kings with the name Krešimir. They were all good kings, and they united our country. They were strong fighters against our enemies, and under their rule our people were happy and prosperous. Wherever he goes, his name will connect him with Croatia and his heritage."

Zora shrugged her shoulders, saying, "Okay, if that makes you happy."

Krešimir

A few weeks later, we prepared another big party at the farm. I was full of pride to have not one but two future defenders of Croatia. We called even more people than were at our first party and made it a much bigger celebration, with the Croatian flag proudly flapping high in the sky. Again, I invited the mayor and our one policeman.

Around midnight, everyone left but the police officer. He and I continued drinking for a short time, then he decided to leave. As a sign of gratitude, I gave him four bottles of wine to take home and walked him out to his car.

At one point he stopped and turned to face me. He said, "Joseph, all evening I was thinking about you, your farm, and your two new sons." I thought he was about to congratulate me, but instead he rudely said, "Now I have to get one more police officer in this town because you have two new boys."

His racist and bigoted remarks revolted me. I turned away and walked back to the house. I felt people hated us just for being immigrants and being successful. It's so unfortunate when people let ignorance and jealousy form their opinions. Also, I was struck by how so many people in positions of power only look down on those who are struggling and need their help.

Ironically, I can proudly say, my son Krešimir, whom that bitter Dimbulah constable complained about, is now a Captain in the County of Los Angeles Sheriff's Department.

One morning in 1969, Nikola informed me he was pulling out and offered to sell me his share of the farm. When I asked him why, he said, “Working on the farm is not for me, and neither is the heat out here. I’ll find something else to do.”

I asked him how much he’s asking for his share, and he replied, “Anything you want to give me. I still haven’t repaid you for my half of the deposit.”

I thought about it for a few days. I would have liked to have paid him out, but I knew that no matter how much I gave him, the ignorant people in the area would spread lies that I pushed Nikola and Shirley off the farm.

I talked to Zora about Nikola’s proposition, and she said, “You know what, love? I’m so scared of the snakes here. In fact, the other day one was on our chain-link fence and Branimir almost grabbed it with his little hands. When I saw that, I almost died.”

She thought this was a good time for us to leave the farm too. “Please listen to me,” she almost begged, “before a snake bites one of our boys.”

I agreed with her that the farm was not a very safe place for small children.

“Okay,” I said. “We’re selling the farm.”

I went to see Nikola and told him we would sell the farm together and split the income 50/50. He was surprised but didn’t say anything. He just shrugged. We put the farm up for sale and before long sold it for a good profit.

Nikola Štedul and his family later moved to Kirkcaldy, Scotland. His wife Shirley was originally from Scotland. Because of Nikola’s love of Croatia and his deep patriotism, the Yugoslav State Security Agency sent an assassin after him named Vinko Sindicic. The hitman caught up with Nikola in Scotland and put four bullets in him.

Miraculously, Nikola survived.

This Yugoslav murderer was one of many hired guns killing Croatians and their families over politics. There was even a Scottish television episode in 1994 called “The Yugoslav Hitman,” which told Nikola’s story. If you do a little research, you will find many articles on how the Yugoslavian government sponsored the murder of Croatians all around the world. As I write this today, Nikola is currently living in Croatia with his wife.

I was targeted as well. Three times the Yugoslav consulate sent local Yugoslav canecutters to kill me, but always without success. These hitmen were amateurs and very clumsy.

One day, one of them came to the farm and shot at Mr. Osborne’s car while he and I were in it. I got out and managed to grab the gun out of the man’s hand. Then I chased him through the tobacco field with it. I even fired at him but missed, which is just as well. If I had killed the bastard, it would certainly have meant jail time for me. So, I just chased him through the field, trying to scare him.

But then, seven years later, they almost destroyed me and my family.

Another Happy Christmas
in Canberra, Australia

Chapter 16

MOVING TO CANBERRA

Zora was happy we had left the farm behind, but I was brokenhearted. I had sold my sporty sedan and bought a small pickup truck to carry all our belongings. As we drove south, Zora asked, “Where are we going?” “I don’t know,” I answered truthfully.

Then I started to get the idea to buy a wheat farm. For the next three weeks, I drove us from farm to farm and we searched for the perfect new home. Unfortunately, all the farms we liked, we could not afford.

We soon got tired of always being in the truck. The four of us had to share a thin seat on which we also had diapers and milk bottles. At night, if we were far from any town, we would sleep on top of each other in the truck. In the mornings, we would make a fire close to a creek so we could wash and dry the children’s clothes.

Little by little, we made our way to the southern part of Australia, the area where Zora’s

three brothers lived—Slobodan, Grgo, and Ljubo, the Grbavac brothers. We decided to stop and see Slobodan and his wife Lily in Wollongong. It would be nice to have a few days' rest before continuing the wheat farm search. We didn't tell them we were coming, and they were happily surprised to see us.

Slobodan and Lily now had three young daughters. I told them we had sold our tobacco farm and were looking to buy a wheat farm. Slobodan said he had a better idea. He thought we should stay in his area because, he said, there was plenty of construction work.

Zora and I thought about it for a few days, then decided we'd do it. We chose to move to the Australian capital city of Canberra, just a short distance from Wollongong. Zora's brother Grgo lived in Canberra. It was a nice, clean city. Small, but quickly growing. I found a new, well-built 3-bedroom house with two garages and a large backyard. It was in a great location, had a school nearby, and was close to shopping areas. It cost $35,000. I paid for it in cash.

When I did that, Zora's brothers were amazed. Now they knew their sister was secure with me. They started respecting me and eventually loving me.

I didn't know any other trades but farming. I had little knowledge of construction except for building the tobacco barns. Zora's brother Grgo was doing concrete work at the time, and he invited me to work with him as an equal partner. I was happy to learn a new kind of trade.

At first, Grgo was a hard boss to please. He got upset quickly when I did something wrong because he wanted every detail to be perfect. But in a few months' time, I got even better at it than he was.

We worked together for five years like that, and it created a bond between us that stayed strong all the way up until his recent passing.

Chapter 17

A BIT OF TRAVEL

In 1972, I took my family to Europe. It was the first time I left Australia since I had arrived 23 years earlier. Our first stop was Germany, where some of my family was living.

In 1973, we visited Canada and the USA. Another three of Zora's brothers were living in the Los Angeles area. Their names were Tomislav, Drago, and Mladen. When we visited them, they pressed us to move to the United States. We considered it and decided to put in an application for a green card and permanent visa.

While we were waiting for the paperwork to go through, we lived for three months in the San Gabriel area. Branimir, my oldest, began attending a local school. Coming home one afternoon, he told us he had been crying the whole day.

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know!" he replied.

This began happening every day, and soon we figured out that the air in that neighborhood had a high smoke factor, which was burning Branimir's eyes. This was smog. That gave us second thoughts about living in Southern California, so we decided to move back to Australia.

In 1973, the Australian government drastically changed its policy against Croatian immigration when a man from the Labor Party named Dr. Jim Cairns was made Minister of Overseas Trade and Minister of Secondary Industry. Stories circulated that he was in the Communist Party's pocket, making himself rich by being their puppet. He would make a spectacle of himself at anti-

immigration demonstrations. He called Italians “dagos” because they worked as the “day goes.” In other words, they were day laborers.

He didn’t like any immigrants, especially from Croatia. He subscribed to the Communist Party’s false accusations that all Croats were Nazis. This widespread rumor was the torment of my existence. We couldn’t escape the prejudice. And to make matters worse, it was far from the truth. I felt as though coming back to Australia from America was a big mistake. I was walking back into the fire.

I continued working hard in construction. I was building homes as well as working side jobs. In 1975, I attended a huge Croatian demonstration in front of the Yugoslavian embassy in Australia. Thousands showed up, including Croatian leaders from the surrounding cities.

Afterwards, we felt the demonstration had been a success. A Croatian community leader from Melbourne approached me and asked if he could stay overnight in my home before heading back in the morning. I said yes.

Later that same evening, there was a knock at my door. Fearing it could be a Communist hitman, I grabbed my rifle. I said through the door, “Who’s there? Tell me who you are, or I will shoot through the door!”

Immediately the person on the other side replied that it was the police. I opened the door, and three officers burst into my home. They quickly disarmed me of my rifle and began searching the premises. They split up, looking in every corner of my house for I-don’t-know-what. They ransacked my bedroom, taking all my personal papers. They searched my kids’ room, rolling the boys over in their sleep to check under the mattresses. Then, as one officer approached the room where my guest slept, another officer stopped him, saying it was time for them to go.

As I watched them leave, I thought to myself that the long arm of the Communist Party had indeed followed us to Australia. I had thought the country would let me live in freedom, but I was wrong. I realized I no longer wanted to raise my children here. It was time to leave Australia for good.

But where to?

I decided I wanted to fight the Yugoslav Partisans right on their doorstep, so I would move my family to Germany. I began planning for our departure.

Throughout my time in Australia, I had purchased four beautiful rental homes and was able to pay them all off in full. Now it was time to sell what I had remaining. While I was closing our accounts and getting everything in order, I sent Zora and the boys ahead of me to Germany. A short time later, I joined them.

Unfortunately, the Communist Party found out who I was and that I was moving, and they pressured the German government to forbid us to stay. This resulted in our visas only allowing us to stay four weeks before being forced to leave the country.

So, I came up with a new plan. I would send the family back to the United States. Zora's three brothers still lived there, and now her brother Grgo and his wife Slava had moved to the US as well. Zora and the boys could stay with them while I looked for a more permanent home for us in Europe.

At the Frankfurt airport, we had a very teary goodbye. The boys and my wife were crying

Our last time together, never did I think it would take 5 long years to reunite again.

that they wanted the family to stay together. Branimir was especially upset, holding onto me tightly and screaming that he wanted his Tata (Dad) to stay with him.

It was almost as though his loving heart understood the future and could see what I did not know at the time—that we would not be reunited for another five years.

Zora and the boys made it safely to the US and stayed with Grgo and Slava for the entire five years we were apart. I didn't plan for it to take that long, but passport problems delayed me. My first plan was to look at Switzerland as a possible place to raise my family. But when I tried to get a visa, I learned that somewhere along the way, somebody or some office had put a special stamp in my passport preventing me from being granted any visas. I went to the Australian consulate and requested a new passport but was denied.

I decided to go to Spain. There, I befriended a Croatian community leader named Dinko Šakić. Dinko was very charismatic, and he purported to be against the Communists. He talked to me and some other Croatian ex-patriots about South America, saying there was a place in Paraguay that had the best anti-Communist training for Croats who wanted to fight the Partisans. He convinced the 13 of us to join him in a journey to Paraguay.

Šakić helped me secure a temporary passport to travel to South America. Three months after I had arrived in Spain, I was now headed to Paraguay.

During our first night in Paraguay, Šakić had us check into a motel. He had two sons on their way from Argentina to meet us. But around 3am, our motel was raided by police armed with machine guns. They arrested all of us.

Later that morning, they pulled in Šakić for questioning. When he returned to the rest of us, he told us our arrests had been a mistake. Someone had reported that we were a hoard of Yugoslav Communists, but Šakić set the record straight.

As we got used to Paraguay, Šakić began suggesting we stay in bigger and bigger places. He asked me to cover the costs, promising to pay me back later. He asked all of us to write letters to other Croatian communities and request money for anti-Communist training. This went on for 12 months, and I saw the small fortune I had made selling four homes in Australia quickly drain away.

All too late, the lot of us realized Šakić was a con man. His promises were false, and he was scamming us, living off our money. He had even convinced one of the guys to turn over the keys of his car so Šakić could use it whenever he liked. I learned that Šakić had a friend in Australia who had told him about me. He had learned that I had sold four homes, and he was sponging as much money from me as he could. He had no intention of helping me reunite with my family. (Years later, I found out that Šakić's friend in Australia was a Yugoslavian agent.)

I decided to demand my money back from Šakić. At the same time, my friend who had lent Šakić his car requested his keys back. Šakić readily agreed to our demands—he would gather the money he owed me and bring it and the car to a meeting point. When my friend and I got there, Šakić was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there were police officers there, ready to arrest us.

Which they did.

We were thrown in prison for the next 12 months. There was no trial.

Chapter 18

LIFE IN PRISON

I learned the penal system of a Fascist country like Paraguay, which was then under the dictator Stroessner, was no different than the penal system of a Communist country—prisons were places the government would lock you up and let you rot until they decided to let you out, if ever. I saw people committing so many horrific acts inside those walls, it could make a person cry. Fortunately, my friend and I stuck together and managed to avoid any kind of punishment. They did threaten us if we stepped out of line, however.

One night, an Indian guard barreled into the prison completely drunk. He was holding a knife and screaming, "Who am I going to kill tonight?!"

"This guy is stupid," I whispered to my friend.

The guard looked my way. He charged over to me, grabbed my shoulder, and pulled me to the middle of the room. He pressed the blade of his knife against my neck. I felt its tip pressing against my skin and expected to see blood start running down my chest any second.

Everyone in the room froze, except for one of my friends, Miro Barešić.

Miro had befriended the officer previously. Now he spoke to him in his native tongue, calmly redirecting the drunk man's attention to more alcohol and the allure of white women. He told the officer he would pay for it all if the man would let me go.

It worked. The knife fell from my neck and the hand on my shoulder unclenched. I hurried away, and I never again saw that officer.

Miro, the man who saved my life, later lost his while fighting the Yugoslav People's Army

and the SAO Krajna near Benkovac, Croatia during the Balkan War.

Somehow, a Croatian from Venezuela heard about our situation and came to Paraguay to argue for our release. He spoke to the police and met with the Minister of Interior. After a year in prison, my friend and I were finally let out of our cell and sent to the Minister of Interior, a man named Sabino Montanaro.

Montanaro told us he had been given the wrong information about us, and that we were free to go. He warned us not to listen to anybody that claimed they were responsible for our release, cautioning that some would come around using the situation to ask for a financial reward. With that, we were once again free men.

April 10, 1976 Asunción, Paraguay

My friend and I rejoined the rest of the group. We decided to pool our money and buy a piece of land between 50 and 100 acres in the name of Croatia. We called it Croatian National Agricultural Goods. This name was to make life easier for us by not alarming the government, for we did intend it to be used as an anti-Communist military training ground—not just for us, but for future generations.

With that done, I set my attention on leaving Paraguay and joining my family in the United States. While I continued searching for ways to secure a visa, I looked for work. I found an open position at an auto parts manufacturing plant run by a German. I applied for the job.

"Do you know what the salary is?" the German asked.

"No," I replied.

"Five dollars a day."

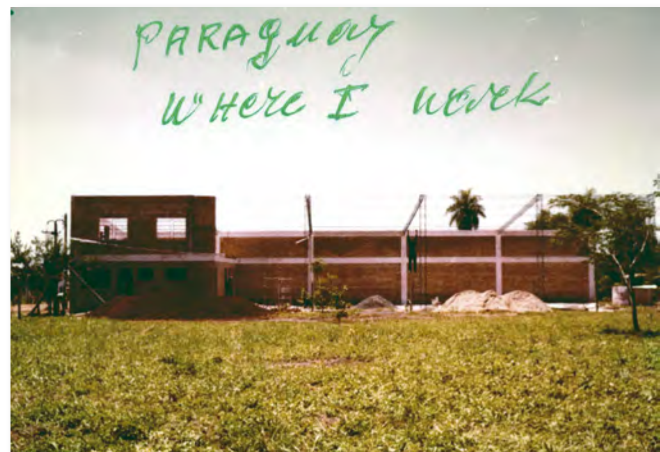
"Will I be able to survive on that?" I asked.

"Look around you," he said, gesturing to the other nine workers in the plant. "Do any of them look dead?"

I took the job.

He gave me the most difficult tasks at first, but I did them without complaining. A few weeks later, he started paying me seven dollars a day. He began to trust me.

Once when he went traveling, he left his house key with me. While he was gone, a man drove up to the house in an RV filled



with his family. He asked me for the key to the house, telling me that he was the owner's brother-in-law. I told him that his brother-in-law never informed me of his arrival, therefore I would not be giving him the key. Disappointed, the man drove off in the RV. When the owner came back and heard this story, he began trusting me even more. He changed my duties so that now I had an easier job, working with his son in the office.

I continued working in Paraguay, but I made efforts every day to find a way to get back to my family in the United States. My heart broke whenever I thought of them. Branimir sent me a letter that brought tears to my eyes. He had gotten in trouble with one of his uncles, and the uncle had called him a bastard:

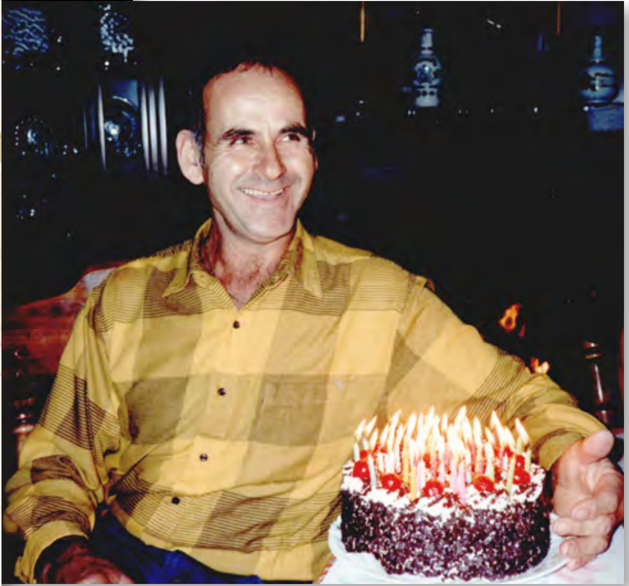
Dear Tata,
Come back quickly.
My uncle called me a bastard, but I know I'm not a bastard
because I have you. You are my Tata.
Please come home as soon as you can.

Meanwhile, over in California, Zora was also making efforts to get me back, and she was having more luck than I was. She convinced a congressman to speak with President Carter about offering me a visa.

Then one day in 1979, I received a call from the United States consulate in Paraguay. They asked me to come into the office to discuss my situation. I did so, and after we talked, they granted me a visa to travel to the US. After five long years of tears and struggle, I was going to see my beloved family again. I was overflowing with happiness for the first time in years.

I flew to Miami, where I was going to switch planes and head to California. But I learned the FBI had changed my itinerary, and I was directed to fly to New York. There, FBI agents questioned me for three days straight, asking all about my past. When they were convinced that I was not the terrorist that the Yugoslavian Communists made me out to be, they allowed me to travel to California.

As I reunited with my family, two strong emotions surged through my heart. One was the endless love and happiness I felt being back with my wife and children. The other was the passionate hatred towards the Communists for their dirty lies and chronic injustice, the way they could hurt people's families, like they did mine. I was even angrier at those people in positions of power who believed the Communists' lies without bothering to seek out the truth. So many innocent people were hurt by them. I cried both tears of joy and tears of sorrow that day, but my family was whole again.



Chapter 19

LIFE IN CALIFORNIA

Zora and my children had been living with Grgo and Slava in San Gabriel for the last 5 years, so that's where I started my American dream. The first thing I bought in California was a pair of nice bikes for the boys. They were so happy to ride around on them, and I swelled with joy watching them. It was now 1980.

My first order of business was to get a California driver's license so I could be mobile and find work. I was nervous because in Australia we drove on the left side of the road, and there were very few cars. Here in the US, there were many, many more cars on the road, and they all drove on the opposite side. I started studying the DMV driving rules.

My sister-in-law Slava said it would take me at least a month to learn everything, but she was wrong. In far less time than that, I made and appointment with the DMV and got my license on my first try. Slava was surprised.

Now I could drive, but the concrete walls and dividers on the freeways still made me nervous, so I kept to side streets as much as possible until I got used to driving on the right side of the road.

The next thing I wanted to buy was a house. I asked Zora how much money she had left over from the amount I gave her in Germany five years earlier.

"All of it," she said. She hadn't spent a penny.

We began looking for a house. Both Zora and I were picky—she didn't like some of the things that I liked, and I didn't like some of the things that she liked. We couldn't agree, so we kept

looking at more and more. On one Saturday, we were supposed to go see a house in Huntington Beach, but Zora wanted to stay home in San Gabriel so she could do some laundry. She asked if she could take the day off from house-hunting, and she'd join me again the next day.

I said it was okay, and I went to see the house in Huntington Beach alone. I was not happy about going without Zora, but I did it anyway. The real estate agent took me to a street that had four houses for sale. When we walked into the first one, rabbits were everywhere. At our arrival, they scattered, hopping away into the backyard. I looked at the real estate agent. He explained the house had belonged to a couple of professors who kept rabbits, as they didn't have any children.

I looked around the house and fell in love with it. I could tell that my family would be happy here. This was where I wanted to live.

"Relax!" insisted real estate agent when I told him this. "Let me show you the other houses first!"

I let him walk me through the other homes, but nothing appealed to me as strongly as that first one. I was convinced that was the one for us. At my request, we went back to the real estate office to write up the contract. The agent asked if my wife needed to see the house first. I told him there was no need.

Immediately upon my return to San Gabriel, Zora asked if I'd found a house. I told her not only had I found good one, but I purchased it. She was astounded. But what if she didn't like it? She asked if she could see it the following day, but I said no. I told her she could see the house only after escrow, and if she didn't like it then, well, she could buy herself another. Zora knew she didn't have enough money to buy another house, and she didn't make any further comments.

One month later, it was time to bring the money for the house to the real estate office. We went to the bank and requested a $30,000 check. The teller told me that

Huntington Beach,
May 26, 2019

the check would cost five dollars. "Well in that case," I said, "I'll take the thirty thousand in cash."

We took the cash to the real estate office, paid for the house, and very quickly it became our home. We have known only happy times within its walls.

Zora became pregnant with our third child, and I found my first job in California—working for a manufacturing company called Western Gear in the City of Industry. The commute was 75 miles round trip and I made $7.00 an hour. After food and car costs, there wasn't enough to cover my monthly mortgage, let alone other bills. Because I worked the second shift, which started later in the day and went till midnight, I began sleeping in my car, a little AMC Gremlin, there in the City of Industry parking lot. In the mornings, I looked for other work around Los Angeles and Orange County, finding various labor jobs I could accomplish before my shift started at Western Gear in the afternoon.

While I was away for the work week, some Yugoslav Communists took pleasure in threatening Zora. Somehow, they had found out where I lived and what my work schedule was. Zora tried to brush off the threats, choosing not to tell me about them. But after dealing with them for some time, it got to be too much for her. Shaking and scared—and still pregnant—she told me everything.

She said that every night she would get menacing calls. On one night, the caller threatened to blow up our house, killing everyone inside. The caller suggested she sleep outside if she wanted to stay safe. On another night, the caller made her cry with very rough and crass language, saying, "I killed your bastard husband and cut him into pieces! Come outside and I'll throw one of his legs to you! You can stick it between your own legs!"

The morning after one of these types of calls, we saw that someone had trespassed through our backyard the night before. The visitor had left a paper on the doorstep that had one word written on it: LIFE

I went to the Huntington Beach Police station to report the trespasser and these threats. "Do you know who might be doing this to you?" an officer at the station asked me.

"A Yugoslav Communist," I replied.

The officer shrugged his shoulders and said, "Unless you know the name of the person who did this to you, there's nothing we can do about it."

The next day, I went to see an attorney in Pasadena. I related my story, telling him, "If this menace doesn't stop, I will lose my pregnant wife and unborn child!"

The attorney advised me to go to the gun store and buy a good gun to defend myself. In the meantime, he said he would write a letter to the FBI explaining the situation. He said, "I will tell them that if anyone unknown to you tries to get into your home at night, past 9pm, you will shoot through the door at them."

I took his advice and bought a gun. He sent his letter to the FBI, and ever since then, my family and I were left in peace.

I continued working labor jobs in the day and the factory shift at night. After about six months of this, Zora and I talked about our financial situation. I was complaining that it was difficult to

make the mortgage payment every month and that we still didn't have medical insurance. As she thought more about it, Zora grew alarmed. "I'm carrying a baby inside me!" she said. "God forbid if something should go wrong, we have no medical insurance! I will go look for a job myself that gives health coverage."

She began looking for work, and two weeks later she got a call from the Huntington Beach Hospital. They wanted her to come in for an interview. I was home on this day, and Zora set me up on the sofa, fluffing a pillow for my head and telling me to have a nice rest before I went to work. She said she was running out but would be back soon, after her job interview.

At that, I perked up. "Wait," I said. "I'll go with you."

"No, no, you just have to rest," she replied. "I'll be back soon."

"No," I insisted. "I'll go with you to see what kind of job they're offering you."

She said, "Whatever job they offer, I'll take it. We need the medical insurance."

"I'm coming with you," I said, getting up. I was not taking no for an answer.

When we got to the hospital, we found the human resources department and Zora introduced herself to the woman at the desk.

"Congratulations!" the woman exclaimed. "Out of 120 applicants, we chose you!"

"Excuse me," I interrupted. "What kind of job is she going to do?"

"Who are you and why do you need to know?" the woman asked.

Zora jumped in, explaining, "This is my husband."

The human resources woman said, "Oh. Well, you know, she will be cleaning the bathroom on the first and second floors of the hospital."

"No, thank you," I said seriously. "My wife will not be cleaning other people's bathrooms as long as I live."

The woman turned to Zora, saying, "Oh my God, I've never heard such a thing in my life! My husband doesn't care if I clean bathrooms, as long as I bring money home. You're very lucky to have a husband like this."

When we left the hospital, Zora was a bit panicked. "What'll we do now?" she asked. "Since I'm not taking the job, we still don't have health coverage."

"Don't worry," I told her. "I'll work harder, as hard as I can, even if I have to work on my bare knees. But you are not going to be cleaning anyone's toilets! You take good care of the children, and I will provide for the family."

Chapter 20

THE PALM TREE

Zora's youngest brother Mladen called me one day to ask if I was interested in performing some concrete work for him. He had a contract with the city and was looking for a subcontractor to excavate an area, which basically meant breaking up a lot of concrete. Mladen said he would pay for the equipment I would need, the materials, the tools, and the insurance. When the city paid him for the job, he said, he would deduct those expenses plus a percentage for himself and give me the rest.

At first, I was nervous about leaving my secure job at Western Gear and going into an unknown field of work. But at the same time, the $7 hourly wage was not enough to live on. I agreed to Mladen's offer.

I gave Western Gear a one-week notice, and they wished me luck with my new endeavor. That night, I thought about the new job. I knew how to do the work, but I wasn't sure I could do it by myself. I needed help. I also needed to learn about the tools I'd be using and where I would be dumping the concrete after I had excavated it. I called my brother-in-law Grgo and asked if he wanted to be my partner. I told him we could split the profits 50/50. He accepted.

We used Mladen's six-wheeler dump truck, which was very old. We used sledgehammers, pickaxes, and shovels to break the concrete, then we used our hands to load the broken concrete pieces into the truck. When the truck's bed was full, I drove it to the dump, unloaded it as quickly as possible, then raced back to the job site to do it all again.

We finished the job successfully and expected that we'd make pretty good money from it.

Unfortunately, after Mladen took out the expenses and his percentage, there was not much left over for us. He did, however, line us up with a second job.

Grgo and I signed the contract for the second job, agreeing to the same conditions as the first. This job was bigger, and we made a little more money from it. But it still didn't feel like our pay equaled the amount of work we put into it.

Then Mladen offered us a third job. This one was in the City of Hawthorne. When I worked out the details and pricing with him, for some reason I overlooked a key detail—the city had marked a huge palm tree for removal.

We signed the contract and agreed to the terms. A few weeks later, Grgo and I started the work. The city inspector showed up to walk us through everything before we got deep into it. When he pointed at the palm tree to be removed, I protested, telling him it wasn't in our bid.

"It's on the plan," he replied.

"Well, I didn't see it," I said.

"Not my fault," he countered.

The inspector watched as I approached the tree for a closer look. I saw that it was over four feet in diameter.

I turned to Grgo and asked, "Now what? We don't have a chainsaw to cut it down and we don't have a backhoe to dig it out."

Grgo said, "You have a machete and an axe. I have an axe too. Why don't you climb up and hack off all the branches with the machete, then we'll chop it down with the axes."

The plan made sense to me, so I climbed the tree and cut off all the branches. When I came back down, Grgo and I began chopping at the tree with our axes. The inspector shook his head at us like we were crazy, got into his car, and drove away.

He returned to the job site just before 5pm. Much to his surprise, not only was the palm tree down, but we had already chopped it up into small pieces and loaded those onto our dump truck and two pickup trucks. Shaking his head again, this time with astonishment, he approached us and shook our hands. "I have seen plenty of contractors do unbelievable things," he said, "but never something like this. You guys are amazing. Now don't take this the wrong way, but when I left you

this morning and went back to the office, one of the engineers asked me how the new contractors were doing. I said, 'What contractors? They are just two crazy guys chopping at a palm tree with axes. It's going to take them weeks to get that tree down.' The engineer told me we should give you a chance. Just wait until I tell them this."

The next day, the city inspector told his team about what we had done. He said some people didn't believe him, but others asked him what country we were from. He told us that he didn't know so he wasn't sure how to answer that question.

Grgo and I proudly told him we were Croatian.

After that, the inspector never bothered us again. Every other day he would cruise through the job site and give us a friendly salute.

Later during that same job, I was hauling a load of broken concrete in Mladen's old dump

San Clemente, CA 1987

truck to the dump. The route took me over a railroad crossing, and just as I was rolling over the train tracks, the truck stalled.

I tried to restart it, but the engine wouldn't turn over.

Then I heard a train horn.

I jumped out of the truck and ran as fast as I could toward the train waving my hands, signaling the engineer to stop. He saw me and started pulling on the brakes. My heart was in my

throat. I was afraid the truck would get ruined, but more than that, I worried about people on the train getting hurt. And how would I ever pay for the damages? With the brakes screaming, the train slowed down and came to a stop just before the dump truck.

That third job for Mladen had some exciting moments, but we completed the project successfully. After Mladen deducted the expenses and his percentage, Grgo and I split the leftover money. It still didn't feel equal to the hard work we put in, all that excavating and truck-loading by hand. I decided it was time to get my own contractor's license.

When I told Grgo, his wife Slava said, "Brother-in-law, don't even try. Many go for it, very few ever get it. What makes you think you'll pass the test?" She did her best to discourage me, but it didn't work. I paid for classes at a contractor school to teach me everything I needed to know. For three weeks, I took classes at night and studied by day. Then the California Contractors State Licensing Board called me to present myself in Pasadena for the test.

I felt good. I felt ready for the tests, despite my sister-in-law's warnings that the language barrier would cause me to fail. I knew she had a point, but nothing was going to stop me from taking the chance.

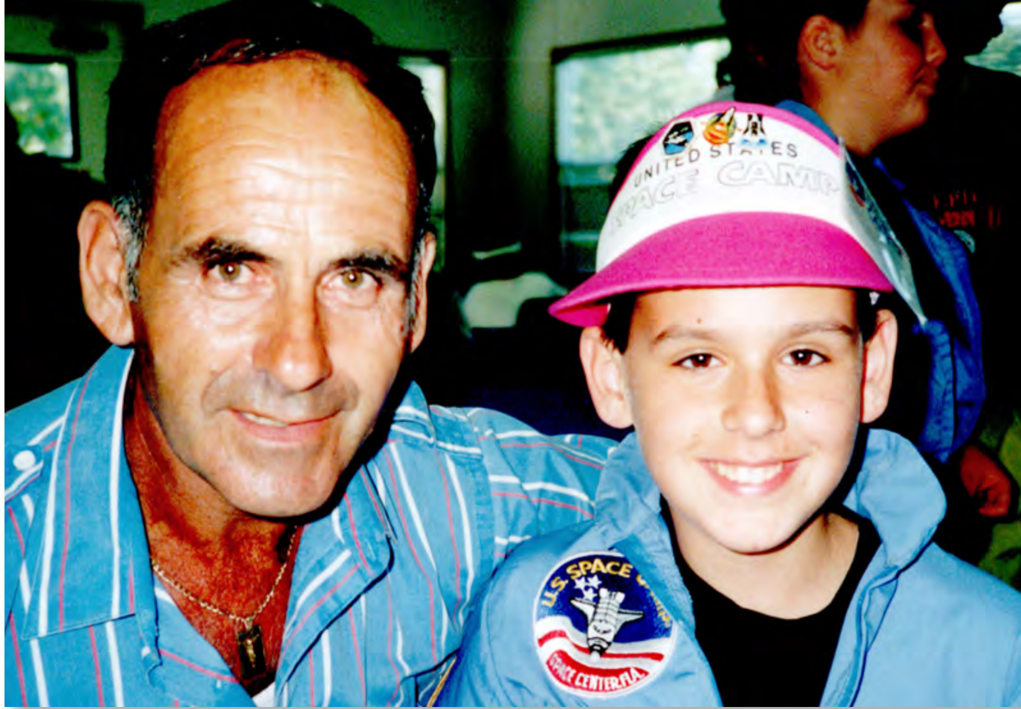
There were about 300 others taking various license exams on the day I showed up for mine. We were divided into smaller groups and sent to our assigned rooms. First up for me was the exam on construction laws, covering everything from laborer payments to tax requirements—pensions, vacations, workers comp, and all other legalities. We were given three hours to finish the exam and not a minute more.

I finished in time and waited with the others to see if we passed. When some of the other guys learned they passed, they hooted and hollered, laughing with relief. Then I saw my grade—I passed too. I was so thankful to God for helping me through it.

We were given one hour for lunch and then it was time for the trade exam. We were warned not to look at each other's papers and were given three hours to complete it. Again, I finished mine in time and waited with the others.

An hour later, the exams were handed back to us, graded. Again, people were hooting with happiness when they saw they had passed. With shaky hands, I flipped through my own exam until I got to the last page. And there was my grade—100%.

I felt like the happiest guy in the world. Embarking on a construction career is rough and doing it without the right tools and equipment is even rougher, but to this day I am so grateful to Mladen for giving me the opportunity to leave my low-paying manufacturing job, where I very possibly could still have been today. Mladen showed me that the American Dream is real, that in America, with hard work and determination, you really can be anything you want to be.



Chapter 21

OUR ZVONIMIR IS BORN

Due to complications, our third son was born seven weeks premature. It was June 7, 1980. He seemed to be in good health, though, and we took him home. But in the first couple of days of being home, the baby got very sick. It seemed he stopped breathing on one night, so we jumped in the car to rush him to the local hospital.

It was late at night in the wintertime and the roads were foggy. In my panic, I ran a red light at the intersection of Magnolia and Adams in Huntington Beach. I didn't see the car that hit me until the last second when it came out of the fog and crashed into our right side. The collision was loud and terrible.

Zora was hurt, but the injuries weren't critical. We decided I'd take the baby to the hospital and send an ambulance back for Zora and the other driver. I picked up Zvonimir and held him close as I sprinted to a car that took us to the hospital. There, the doctors helped return his normal breathing and placed him in a ventilation chamber. In the meantime, police arrived at the accident, and they sent ambulances to the scene.

The car accident was my fault entirely, but the district attorney didn't press charges. He understood the nature of my emergency that night and chose to take pity on the situation, though he did reprimand me on leaving the scene of the accident before calling ambulances. I could have gotten Zora and the other party medical assistance quicker. I felt bad about that, and worse when Zora would experience recurring headaches for a long time afterwards, but I was grateful that we were still alive.

Zvonimir's breathing problems kept him in a respirator machine for two weeks. Zora visited

him twice a day, and I checked in on him every evening coming home from work. Finally, the hospital called to tell us we could bring him home.

The family was excited, but I found Zora weeping.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Look," she said, handing me a hospital bill for $24,500. "We only have thirty days to pay the whole thing. It's got me so anxious I stopped producing milk for the baby."

"Did you pay any of this yet?" I asked.

"Yes, a $2,000 deposit. I told them you would go in and talk to them." She started to cry again. "But what do I do about milk for the baby?"

"It's okay. Feed him with formula milk."

Our finances were mostly tied up with the house. I felt the real estate agent had tricked us. He led us to believe that a VA loan would give us the lowest interest rate. He didn't bother to further explain that it was a variable loan where the low interest expired after twelve months, jumping then to 16%. When that happened, we thought we'd lose our new home and be out on the street.

The next day we visited the hospital and explained our economic situation. They gave us two years to pay off the bill, and they let us bring our baby home. Everyone in the family was so happy, especially Krešimir. He loved the baby and played with him all the time. He carried him everywhere and took care of him. This was a great relief for Zora, giving her time to do other things.

Regarding the baby's name, Zora waited until she saw me in a good mood, and then she approached me. "I hope you will now fulfill a wish of mine," she said.

"By all means!" I replied. "Just tell me what you need."

"Okay," she said. "I want to name the baby Damir."

"No way!" I exclaimed. "This baby will have the name Zvonimir."

"Why?" she asked.

"The last Croatian king was named Zvonimir, and he was a very good king. People lived well under his rule. He was a strong man and defended Croatia from the Turks and Muslims. He even sent a huge army to defend the Holy Land. After his reign, Croatia fell to Austrian and Hungarian rule. I'd like to honor that great king by giving our son his name."

"Okay," Zora shrugged, then asked, "When will it be my turn to choose one of our babies' names?"

"Well, I just need one more name," I told

her. “If God grants us more children and we have a girl, her name will be Drina.”

“Why Drina?” Zora asked.

“Well, I’ve never been there, but Drina is the river God created to divide Serbia and Croatia, dividing the east from the west. After Drina, you can choose any name you like.”

We had a big party for Zvonimir’s baptism, but our financial hardship had me anxious all the time. I had to go on medication for migraine headaches that wouldn’t go away. Grgo and I got two good contracts during this period, and we worked long and hard at those jobs. I managed to pay off the hospital bill within eighteen months, but the 16% interest on our mortgage kept our other expenses in check. We could hardly buy enough food to feed the family.

Finally, the interest rate started to go down. It got to 7% and we were able to refinance the mortgage. After that, things got easier. There was enough money for good food, new cars, education for the children, and new equipment for my work.

One thing we loved to do as a family was travel down to Mexico. The last time we took that trip was in 1984, when Zvonimir was 4 years old, and the older boys were 16 and 17. I gave Branimir and Kresimir some money to buy whatever they wanted. We walked around, went into different shops, and had a nice time.

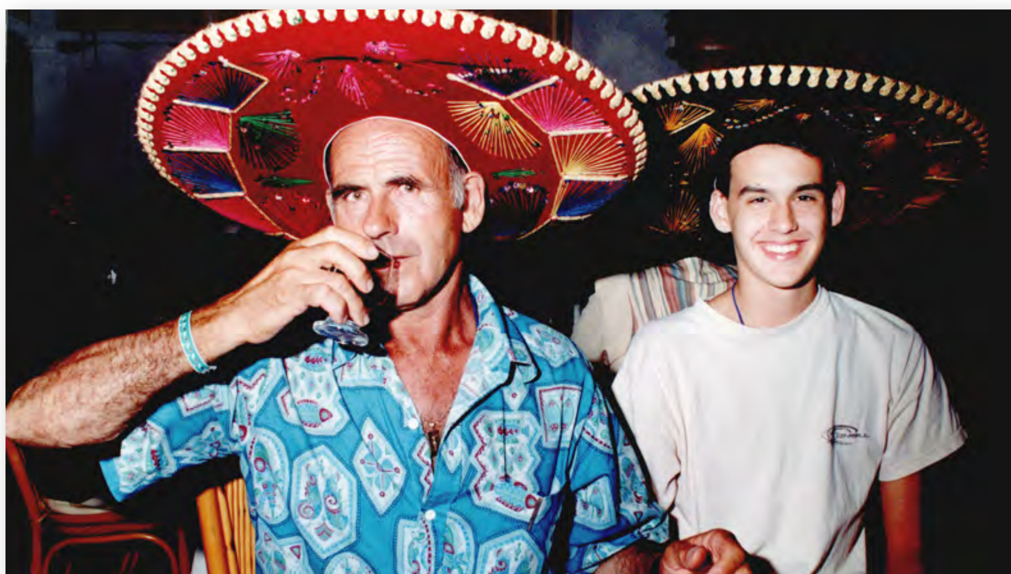
On the way back up to the border, the older boys told me they had bought fireworks, which were illegal to take into the country.

“How are we going to cross the border with those fireworks?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” they replied. “We can hide them well.”

We sat in traffic for two hours, inching our way to the border. When we finally got there, border patrol stopped our car. An officer stuck his head in our windows, checking that nobody was hiding down by our feet. Satisfied that there was no one else, he asked us, “Do you have anything illegal in here? Guns? Fireworks? Drugs?”

“No, nothing,” we all said.



Vacation in Cancun, Mexico 1994

“Mi nemamo puno vatromet,” Zvonimir said suddenly. He was speaking in Croatian. We hadn’t taught him English yet, and I was immediately relieved that we hadn’t, for he said, “We are carrying lots of illegal fireworks.”

The officer just looked at him, not understanding Croatian. He turned to the adults in the car and asked with utter seriousness, “What did he just say?”

Without missing a beat, I told the officer, “He said that he loves you.” To this day, I still don’t know how that idea popped into my head, but it did.

The officer looked back at Zvonimir. After a moment, he said, “I love you too.”

Then he turned to me and said, “You folks can go.”

Zvonimir Graduation

Gordon Grbavac, Krešimir, Raul, Charlie, Luis and Grgo Grbavac

Chapter 22

LIFE ON THE JOB

Our construction jobs took us everywhere from Ventura County to San Diego. One job we got was in Chula Vista, an area on the southern side of San Diego, just above the border. I needed more laborer hands for this job, so I hired a man named Branko Lasic who had just arrived from Croatia for a vacation. He was looking to make some extra money for his trip. I asked Branko if he could drive.

"Yes, I can," he responded.

"Okay, Branko," I said. "We will be driving down to San Diego. You'll pull the compressor with my pickup, and I'll drive the dump truck. I'll go first so you can follow. Just drive steady behind me. I'll watch you in my truck mirrors and if I get too far ahead, I'll slow down and wait, okay?"

"Okay," he said.

We headed out. When we got on the I-5 heading south to San Diego, Branko began tailing me too closely. It looked like he was going to hit the back of the dump truck at any second. I couldn't slow down for fear that he would hit me, and I couldn't figure out a way to tell him to back off.

Maybe this guy doesn't know how to drive after all, I thought. But what can I do about it? I need that truck and compressor in Chula Vista.

I decided to drive faster to put a sensible distance between our vehicles, but the faster I drove, the faster he drove. I grew more and more nervous as we proceeded like that down to San

Diego. When we finally arrived, I jumped out of the truck and angrily shouted at him. “Do you even know the meaning of the word ‘slow?’ I thought you were going to crash into me for that whole drive!”

“This is the second time in my life I’ve ever driven anything besides a bicycle,” he said.

I almost fainted at that one.

Sometimes when we’d work that far away, the workers and I would temporarily live in the area in a rental house, doing our own cooking and laundry. Other times, we’d go home at night, often not getting back until after 10pm. On those nights, Zora would not eat until I returned. I insisted to her, “You have to eat, whether I’m here or not!”

But her response was always, “I can’t eat before you come home! No matter what time it is, I will always wait until you’re back!” That was my wife then, and it’s still her today. I’m a very lucky man for having such love in my marriage.

While we had the job in Chula Vista, we also got a big contract in Huntington Beach. We needed to bring in more workers. Even my wife Zora, my sister-in-law Slava, and all our kids helped out with the concrete work. We billed the city every month and began to make good money. It was the best contract we had to date.

Meanwhile, Grgo’s son Gordan started his own construction firm. He focused on underground work, which relies more on heavy equipment than human workers. I believe Grgo invested a lot of money into that heavy equipment, and because he couldn’t be in both places at the same time, he pulled out of the Huntington Beach job. We still had 30-40 days to go.

“I’m pulling out, I can’t do any more. I have to help Gordon,” he told me.

I was shocked that he was leaving me alone, but our partnership had only been a verbal agreement anyway. Besides, we’re family and I understood that he needed to help his son. I looked on the bright side—because the job was so close to my home, I was able to get my own two older boys to work alongside me and Zora as we finished out the contract.

When we got the final payment on that job, Zora asked

me what I was going to do about Grgo, since he only worked part of the job. I began thinking about Grgo, remembering the first day I met him, when he didn't want his sister to marry me. I remembered the day he asked me to be his partner in Australia, building homes. He was always a hard worker, very honest, and a man of high character. These and more good things went through my head about Grgo.

After subtracting the expenses on the Huntington Beach job, I split the net income with him 50/50. Even though my family and I put in extra work, it felt only right to split the profits evenly. I cut him a check and brought it to his house, showing him the income and expenses paperwork on the job.

Both Grgo and Slava were very thankful that I decided to do that. But our successful business partnership was now ending, and Grgo was going to only work with Gordon. It was time for a new chapter in business. As I was leaving that night, Grgo stopped me, saying, "Brother-in-law, what should we do about all the equipment we bought together?"

"Well, you know everything we have. Let's divide it into two equal portions. Make two lists and I'll choose which list I want to keep. Or I can divide the equipment into two lists, and you can choose which one to keep."

"You make the lists, and I'll choose," Grgo said.

Later, I did just that. I wrote down all the equipment and tools we had and priced each piece individually so I could make two even lists. Then I brought them to Grgo. After looking over both of them for a few moments, he said to me, "You know, this small equipment is no good for what I'm doing. We're working on underground construction, and I need much heavier equipment than these pieces. How about you buy them off me?

"How much are you asking?" I asked.

He told me a price and I said, "Sold!"

I cut him a check so I could keep all the equipment, and that's how our business partnership ended. Happily, it was a friendly and peaceful conclusion to 32 years of successful partnership in Australia and the United States. To this day, I have nothing but the highest respect for Grgo, whom I love as a brother.

Our last Christmas, December 25, 2020

Chapter 23

MY LEGACY

Zora and I always tried to make our three boys realize we loved them equally. We gave them each the same amount of love, support, and encouragement, and they all had spectacular parties on their 21st birthdays.

I taught my two oldest boys about my work when they were very young. Because I was working all the time, they didn't see me at home too often, so I would take them to the job sites with me. Over time, they began to associate hard work with me. I feel this drove them to be successful in their own respective working fields and helped make them into the responsible family men they became.

I pushed them into higher education. Branimir got his civil engineering degree and later took a job as Vice President for Thompson Pipe Group.

Krešimir got a master's degree at USC and is today a Captain in the LA County Sheriff's Department.

Our youngest, Zvonimir, also got a master's degree at USC in Accounting, and then got his CPA license. He is now the Chief Financial Officer for Thompson Pipe Group.

Even after the boys grew into these wonderful men, we as a family stayed very close and attached to one another. As you see your mother and I worked so hard to build a family with love honor and respect. Please do everything you can to continue our family legacy of love and understanding.

Even though I leave this world in body, my spirit will always be with you all. I leave this

world HAPPY and without regrets.

I look forward to watching my children continue to grow and develop as parents, I look forward to seeing each of my grandchildren finish college, and let's not forget those master's degrees. I will be there for your future weddings and the birth of my great grandchildren.

I was truly blessed with my wife Zora. Thank you for a wonderful life. Without you, it would not be worth living.

Okay, kids, your parents will tell you the rest of my story, and all the other adventures that happened along the way. Please remember to pray, work hard, don't quit, do the right things, and God will take care of you just like he did me.

Please visit your family roots in Croatia, they will ground you and help you appreciate all that you have.

Your mother and I worked so hard to build a family with love, honor, and respect. Please do your part in continuing our family legacy.

Love and respect everyone, there should be no room for hate in this world.

God Bless America

Thank you to my nephew, Father Charbel, for reading me my last rights.

I love you all so much that words cannot describe it.

GOD BLESS.

See you in Vinica.

Love,

Your Tata and Dida,
Josip Kovač
August 26, 2021

Digital copies of "The Journey" and photos can be found at www.JosipKovacfromVinica.com

There are many more stories I have to tell, who wants to write them? You Ivana, Petar, Isabella, Michael, Joseph, or do you all want work on it together?

**Eulogy read by Branimir Kovač on September 24, 2021
with the support of his brothers Krešimir and Zvonimir**

In Loving Memory of OUR HERO

We gather for another chapter in our lives, my brothers Krešimir, Zvonimir, and I stand before you today as the proud sons of Josip Kovač, with his proud daughters-in-law Lucy & Tanya, his proud grandkids Ivana, Petar, Isabella, Micheal, & Joseph, and his lifelong partner our mother Zora.

We all have our heroes; I would like to talk today about ours, Josip Kovač.

Our Tata was born during World War 2 in the village of Vinica near Tomislavgrad in Croatia, it was January 2, 1940. His homeland would shortly become the Communist puppet state of Yugoslavia. He was the 8th of 12 children, 6 of which died during infancy. He had a hard childhood with memories of hunger, cold, and an uncertain future, but his faith kept him strong. Even with these memories he felt the love of a mother and father that he never forgot. He loved his village, and always cherished the memories of playing with his siblings. Those heart felt memories ignited his Croatian patriotism and have always pulled him back to his home in Vinica.

With Gods help he leapt off a moving train into the darkness and escaped alone over the border into Italy as an 18 year old refugee. He would emigrate to Australia with nothing but the clothes on his back. His pure character and work ethic was recognized by others. They saw a humble human being. His kindred soul opened opportunities that lead him to own his own tobacco farm at the young age of 24. Two years later he heard about a recent female Croatian immigrant and drove for 5 days and over 1,600 miles to meet her in Woolongong, Australia. Her name was Zora Grbavac. These two innocent souls took a chance with one another and were married within 4 days, that was July 11th, 1966; and they have celebrated 55 wedding anniversaries. They worked together on their farm, and from there they moved to the Australian capitol city of Canberra. There he became a partner with our late Uncle Grgo Grbavac in the construction trade.

Our father was established with 4 paid off rental homes at the age of 35, but he saw no opportunity for us kids in Australia. He sold everything, left a comfortable lifestyle behind, and started all over in America. It took 5 long years before we were all reunited. There is a lot more to this story and it's explained in his Autobiography that will be available to you all at the reception. Please take it home with you.

As parents you have so much influence over your children, simple words or gestures can help set your child on certain roads for their future success. I remember vividly after college my father once said to me "I don't worry about you, you can do anything". WHAT POWERFUL

WORDS, “I don't worry about you, you can do anything”. Going forward I no longer feared losing, I knew I WILL make it happen, my success can be pointed simply to that one comment. My brothers have similar stories.

Like many immigrants arriving in a new world, with a new language, new customs, our father learned that the only person he could rely on; was himself, the person in the mirror. Our father was successful in family and work because of his never quit attitude, make it happen direction, he WILLED it to happen, he put in the time and effort without quitting regardless of the hardship or the situation. He always had a positive attitude and never blamed anyone or anything. We are proud to carry on his work ethic that is now in our families DNA. There is an expression in America which goes "he moves mountains", this expression could have been written about Josip Kovač. If he was given a wheelbarrow, a pick, and a shovel with the direction to move a mountain for the next 20 years, he would have worked with the same vigor and determination throughout the 20-year span as he did on day 1, not once asking why, just staying focused on the task at hand and pushing until the job was done.

In the United States our father became a public works contractor with our late Uncle Grgo which meant all three of us and our mother worked in the family business. After college I went to work full-time with him as a partner. He was tough, he would tell me at work, "I am not your father, I am your boss". It was hard at the time, but as I now reflect, it was the best time of my life, I cherish those memories. While in hospice he asked me what my favorite job was. I replied, WITH YOU, he responded ME TOO.

He taught us to how to treat and respect others around us. He led by example with his work crew, they were his boys. He showed empathy towards them, gave them advice, and helped them through personal difficulties. They have told me he was their second father. For those that know our father, he could be intimidating on the construction site, but it was only a game face. I would call him TIGER and then his stern face would turn to a smile.

But when the grandkids came everything changed. Our Ivana was his first, and she was his number 1 helper. Growing up, they did everything together including working on their rental properties; she was more excited to go to Home Depot than to Toys R Us. We have a Croatian expression "Koje te rodio", which translates to whose your mother?. When asked she would always respond with MY DIDA / MY GRANDFATHER is my mother, and this was up to 6 years old. To me it was one of the most beautiful things to hear and see the love and attention he gave to her. This same love and attention was shared with all of his grandchildren, Petar, Isabella, Micheal, and Joseph. Their happiness was priority one with him. As a parent I am still amazed at the love and patience he showed the 5 of them. I had trouble with only 2.

Like most children of immigrants, a higher education is a requirement. He never finished the equivalent of middle school, yet he knew the significance of an education and its relation to a

person’s future. Growing up we all knew that we MUST graduate from college, there was no plan B, I was the first college graduate and Krešimir and Zvonimir are the first master’s degree recipients on our fathers’ side of the family. He was so proud of our educational accomplishments. I now recall some of the tricks he played to steer us towards a college education. I vividly remember when Krešimir and I were working on a construction project in Huntington Beach. He parked the tractor across the street, took the keys, and had Krešimir and I labor through the hot summer sun with a 20 pound sledge hammer removing concrete. That whole week we had to look at the tractor parked across the street. He would make sure my brother and I were hot, sweaty, and tired. He would come up to us and ask to see our hands, he would rub our blisters, remove a pen from his pocket and say, "you won’t get blisters when you use a pen in an air-conditioned office with a college education." He would play these tricks over and over again through our youth. It worked.

Our father was proud of his daughters in law Tanya and Lucy. He cultivated their relationships with love, laughter, and respect. They became his daughters. He loved spending the summers with his grandchildren in Croatia and took pride in sharing his roots, teaching them history, but most importantly playing with them as if he was a kid himself. He recognized that by understanding your roots it helps you appreciate what you have and where you live. He was so appreciative of having the opportunity to become a United States citizen and to live in this beautiful country.

Our father took on all challenges, whether learning to speak and write in English, in Spanish, getting his driver’s license and contractor license on the first try, using a computer, I even learned how to text and make emojis from him. Whatever he set his mind to, he accomplished. Even in the end making sure everything was ready and complete for our mother so that she can have closure and security once he was gone. There was nothing he could not master, I take that back except for singing ganga and playing the gusle. He wasn’t perfect.

Our father was not a selfish man. Even when he did not want to go to hospice, we asked him to do it for us, he got up gingerly on his weak legs and left with us knowing he would not see his home with so many loving memories again. During his last week in hospice, he told our mother that he was happy and proud of us, of his life, and that his dreams had come true. I saw these same unselfish actions by my two brothers Krešimir and Zvonimir as they took care of him and our family through his 4th battle with cancer, hospice, and finally helping him on his journey to heaven. I want to publicly thank them. We must thank his care givers; they were beautiful and compassionate people.

On behalf of our Tata, we thank his extended family, the Grbavac's for sharing all of their love and memories.

Thank You Dida Josip for being who you are. You taught us how to entrust our fates in God’s hands, to love, how to forgive, how to work hard, and as adults how to be better spouses and parents. You will be missed; but your spirit will never be forgotten because we still feel it here in

our hearts. Our father is now in heaven playing boce ball with our Ujac Grgo, playing in the fields of Vinica with his mother, father, brothers, and sisters, God Bless their souls.

The Josip Kovač family wants to thank the Clergy and all of you in attendance. Thank you for helping to lay our father's body to rest today and sending him up into God's hands. We would be honored for all of you to join us at the burial site next door followed by our father's celebration of life reception in the hall, which is provided by our beautiful mother and her grandchildren. Dear heavenly father we thank you for blessing us with a truly amazing; amazing man; our Tata and Dida Josip Kovač. We miss you.

Our family also wants to recognize all those that have passed, especially during this time of covid. They did not get an opportunity for a public celebration of life, let's celebrate them as well today. Thank you all for coming.

Our Legacy
Father's Day, June 16, 2019
Home In Huntington Beach, CA

KOVAC
RANCH

Zora
The Love Of My Life

Fatima, France
Sept 12, 2012

Good Times With The Grandchildren

Being picked up by Dida Josip at the Zagreb, Croatia Airport

Missing Family, alone for Christmas 2005, Vinica Croatia

Costa Rica, Easter 2012

My Grbavac Family
Grab, Croatia, 2014

Thanksgiving 2018
So much to be thankful for

Josip with brothers Nikola , Ivan, and sister Marija in Vinica, Croatia on August 14, 2017

The beautiful, loving and powerful hands of Josip Kovač

Another Sunday walking to Church, Peter Kovač with Dida Josip

JOSIP KOVAČ

January 2, 1940 – August 26, 2021