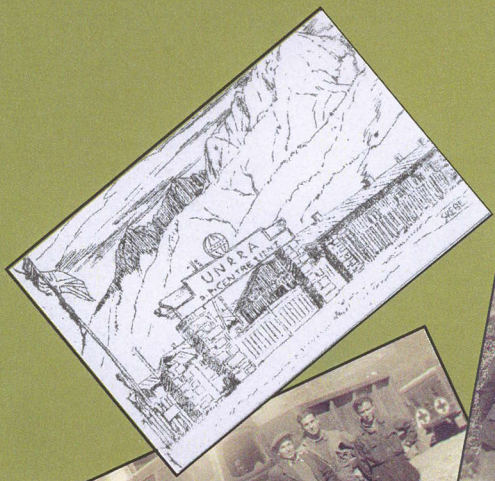
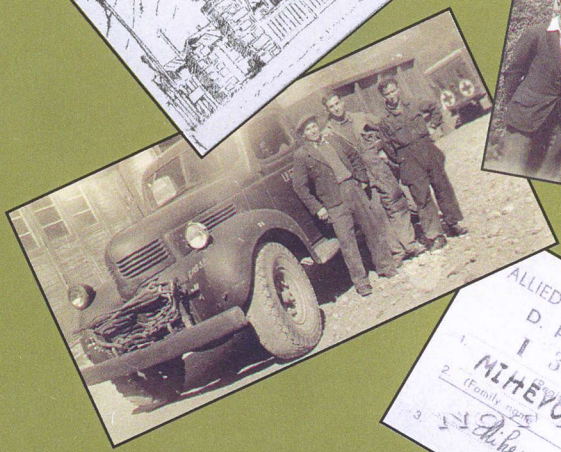
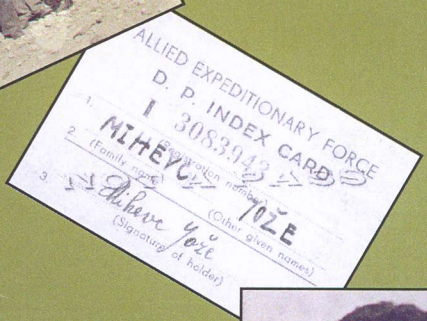
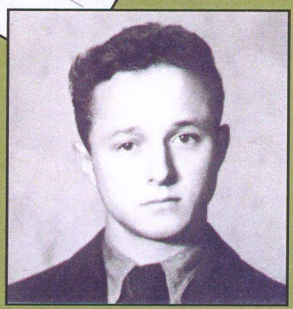
Memories of







Days Gone By

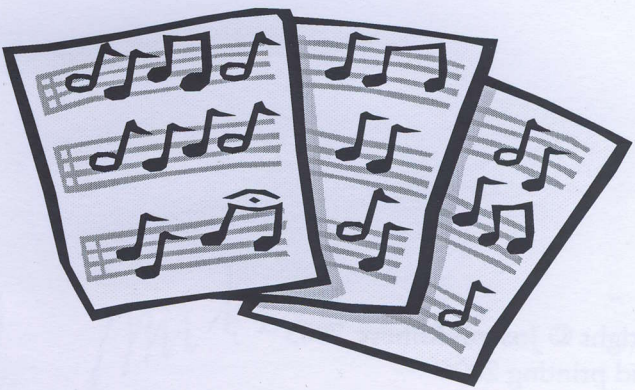


Joseph Mihevc

Memories of Days Gone By

by

Joseph Mihevc



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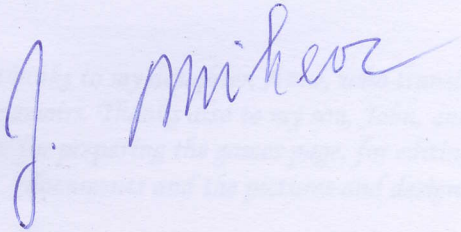


Dedicated

To my wife

Ann

And to our children
Anne, Joseph, Emily, John and Mark
(who encouraged me to write this)

Along with their spouses
Vladimir, Rosalee, John, Rebecca and Delia

And to our grandchildren Rosemary, Dorothy, Julie, Justin, Krista, Catherine, Christopher, Gregory, Stephanie, Stella, Sophie, Julia, David and Jonah

And to our great grandchildren
Megan and Andrew

Special thanks to my daughter, Anne, who translated, keyed and laid out these memoirs. Thanks also to my son, John, and my daughter-in-law, Rebecca, for preparing the games page, for editing the text, scanning the documents and the pictures and designing the cover.

December 2005

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was marked by dramatic change and rapid technological advances. The automobile, the computer and other scientific and hi-tech marvels changed the way in which we live and interact. The hope was for a better and more peaceful world.

It was also marked by much brutality. The two world wars, revolutions, large-scale genocides and other atrocities proved that humankind had not learned from its mistakes.

Slovenia was also affected by these events. I was born in the early 1920s and witnessed the political and economic upheaval that the country suffered. I was forced to flee my country of birth, lived in Austria as a refugee for a few years and later settled in Canada, where I have lived for close to sixty years.

My early life, marked by poverty and difficult circumstances, strengthened my resolve to work hard to overcome any barriers that would prevent me from realizing success. The memories of these experiences have stayed with me forever, and have shaped who I am and what I have achieved.

Here is my story . . .

Some Background

My Grandparents on My Mother's Side

My grandfather, Gregor Premrl, was the head of the family and Josefa, a very hard-working woman, was his wife. He was born in 1856 to a poor family in Ubeljsko under Mt. Nanos. He was probably of French descent dating back to the French revolution. When he was a young boy, he would skip school and "hang out" with his friends, gambling away his buttons, which he would tear off his jacket. Later, he became a shoemaker's apprentice. He married Josefa Sajovic and had a large family.

In the 1890s, the whole Premrl family, which included six daughters – Johana, Frančiška, Rozalija, Marija, Apolonija (my mother), Milka (a son Janez was born later in Slovenia) – went to Brazil in the hopes of escaping the poverty back in Slovenia and achieving a better standard of living. When they arrived, the Brazilian sponsor placed them on his large coffee plantation, which was completely fenced and guarded by a man on a horse. They were forced to live in a barn with no partitions for privacy. The family slept in one corner on very high bunk beds made of wooden posts and sticks, with mattresses stuffed with straw or corn leaves. Food was cooked in a second corner and a pig was kept in the third corner. Mice and rats scampered about and occasionally, a snake would slither across the floor. The pig would be let loose to go after these animals. Chickens were kept outside in a shack. There was also an outdoor hand pump for water.

The entire family was quickly put to work to repay the plantation owner for the trip to Brazil. Even the youngest had jobs to perform, such as planting and picking corn, minding the coffee plants, bringing in wood, and planting, weeding and picking beans between the coffee rows. After a lengthy time period, my grandfather asked the owner how much longer the family would have to work to repay the debt. The response was harsh: "Be quiet and work." It appeared that the family members would never get out of debt, so they began to look for a way out of their predicament. The plan was to lubricate the gates' squeaky hinges and to disarm the alarms. One evening, my aunts Frances and Reza lubricated the hinges and the whole family sneaked through the gates and escaped during the night. The mounted guard eventually caught up with them, but fortunately for the family, they had already arrived on another plantation where the owner was more benevolent, and their previous master could not touch them. They worked on this plantation for pay and eventually were able to earn enough money for the return trip back home to Slovenia. They also were able to save up an extra 400 Austrian gold-dinars (a fair amount of money at that time). It appeared that things were improving.

It was my grandmother's wish that the family settle in Trieste and that my grandfather open a shoe repair shop. Unfortunately, my grandfather had other plans and recklessly spent all of the family's savings on gambling and drinking. At that time, it was the men who made all the major decisions and the women did not have much say,

although my grandmother displayed many skills and was able to cultivate the meagre soil and provide food for the family.

My aunt Johana, who had met a young man on the trip from Brazil, married and moved to Štajersko. She ultimately returned with her two daughters to Ubeljsko after her husband passed away. My grandmother encouraged my other aunts Reza and Frances to find jobs as housemaids so that they could at least wear white aprons (a symbol of refinement), but they were unsuccessful. In time, the family rented a small house in Ubeljsko, where the local farmers helped them out by providing potatoes and other foods from their farms. Not too much is known about how they managed, but they were finally able to buy the house after the turn of the century. My aunt Milka, at the age of 12, eventually went to Postojna and later to Ljubljana and Reka to work as a housemaid. Her earnings were sent back home to her parents.

In the meantime, my grandfather was up to his usual misdeeds. Once, my grandmother sent him to the town's cattle sale to purchase a cow to provide milk for the family. He returned instead with a donkey, and the cow was not purchased until much later. Another time, my aunt Johana gave my grandfather money to pay the taxes. Instead of paying the taxes, he spent the money on drinking. He then made his way to Cleveland in the United States to make some extra money to provide for his family back in Slovenia, but was unable to save anything at all and spent the money on alcohol and other frivolities. He remained there for about five years. While in Cleveland he met

two cousins named Krebelj who were in need of wives. They gave him money to pay for the passage of my aunts Frances and Reza, who would marry the two Krebeljs, but my grandfather drank that away as well. My aunts somehow made their way to Cleveland and it was they and their future husbands who paid for their passage over to the US as well as for my grandfather's return trip to Slovenia.

My own memories of my grandfather are not very positive. I recall a story of how one day, on his way home from Postojna, he stopped in Hruševje at my family home and was so drunk that he tried to sit right on top of my sister Ivanka. Both my mother and sister were frightened and screamed. In about 1927 or 1928, I remember seeing him at our place during hay time, where he was put on the wagon to fork the hay. He was so drunk that he fell off the wagon twice, until he was replaced with someone else. The work in the fields was arduous and a snack in the mid-morning or mid-afternoon always included wine. My grandfather just could not control his intake. My sister Ivanka remembers my grandmother often going to Razdrto to pick up my grandfather where he would be drinking. Once, in late winter or early spring when the ice was thawing, she slipped and fell. A neighbour from Ubeljsko picked her up. As a result of this fall, my grandmother was in bed for a long time. She also caught a cold at the time, and never fully recovered. My aunt Milka came home from Reka where she worked to help out. I can still clearly recall my mother frequently inquiring about my grandmother's health. Despite her poor health, my grandmother would still come around to our

house to bring beans and other foods to help us out. She was ill the last time I saw her in 1932 and she died the following spring in 1933 at her home in Ubeljsko at the age of 83 years.

The last time I saw my grandfather was in 1935. Despite his excessive drinking, poor diet and unhealthy habits, my grandfather lived to the age of 88 and died in April 1944. It is unfortunate that his abilities were wasted and that he was unable to provide a better living for his hard-working wife and his children.

My Parents

My father Anton was born out of wedlock in 1885 in Dolenji Logatec. His father was Frank Demšar and he came from the area around Rovte above Logatec and later moved to Rakek where he had a butcher store. His descendants are still living there.

His mother was Neža Mihevc. The hardships imposed on her forced her to seek work in Reka and she left her son Anton with her sister, who had married someone with the surname Mlinar, in Dolenja Vas, where he spent most of his childhood. He suffered a lot of abuse and discrimination in his younger days because of his illegitimacy and because he was an extra burden on a large family. After he completed his schooling, his mother took him to Reka where he got a job in an oil refinery. That is where he met Apolonija and they were married in 1913.

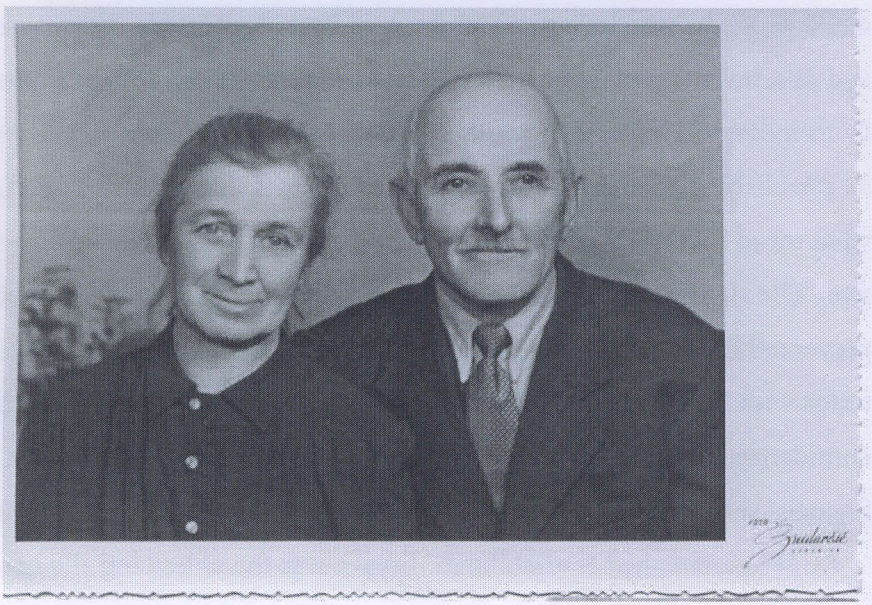
My mother Apolonija was born in Ubeljsko on February 8, 1890. Travelling to and from Brazil with the rest of her family and the difficult and unstable surroundings prevented her from attending

school. Her sister Frančiška taught her to read and write. She also left home at a young age, just as her sisters had done, and went to Reka to work as a domestic. Upon her marriage to Anton, the first world war broke out. When Anton returned from the war to his job, he was told by the Italian occupational forces that he could keep his job if he could prove he was Italian, which he could not do. He was dismissed and two Italians took over his job. The loss of his job forced the family to move to Hruševje in about 1920, where they were unsuccessful in establishing themselves. A second move to Cerknica was somewhat more successful, although the living conditions remained primitive. The depression, and the conditions that prevailed at that time prevented much progress. Also, my father was never able to come to terms with his disadvantaged childhood, and he was timid and lacked confidence. In spite of my parents' good work ethics and honesty, financial security eluded them.

My parents had four children. Ivanka was the eldest and she often took care of me when my mother was out. She left home at a young age to learn a trade in commerce, moving from one job to another, sending home parcels of clothing with her earnings. She was a refugee in Italy and then moved to Cleveland, where she died in 2002. Tone was the oldest son. He was the only one of the four of us who remained in Slovenia after the war. I was the third child. The youngest was Milka who also fled the country after the war and currently resides here in Toronto.

My father died on November 11, 1964. I last saw my mother in 1966, on my first visit back to Slovenia after the war, and she died five years later on March 28, 1971.

My parents Apolonija and Anton Mihevc - 1958

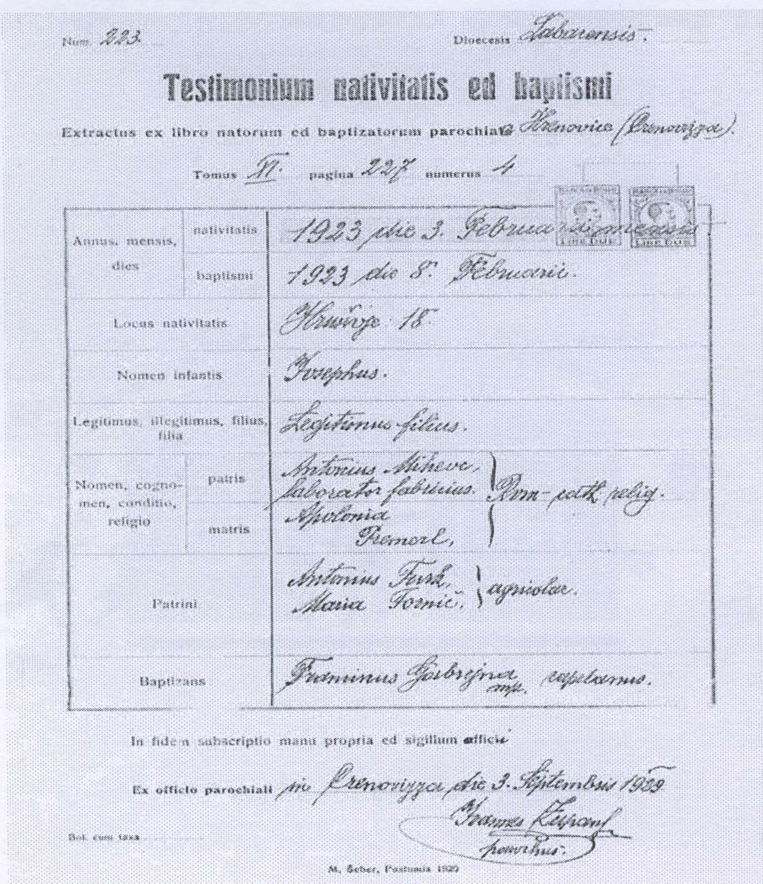


I

Carefree Years

1927 – 1930 (Fall)

I was born in 1923 in Hruševje, a small town about 5 km from Postojna on the main road towards Trst (Trieste). The whole area, with its villages and countryside, was dependent on the hand-cultivated land. Most of the fruits were dried, but to a large extent, were used to make wine or whiskey. A small portion of income came from providing various services to tourists and the sale of hay to Trieste, along with the sale of lumber, milk, cattle, pigs and chickens.


Num. 223 Dioecesis Labacensis.

Testimonium nativitatis ed baptismi

Extractus ex libro natorum ed baptizatorum parochiae Hrenovice (Crenovizza).

Tomus XI. pagina 227 numerus 4

Annus, mensis, dies	nativitatis	1923 die 3. Februarii
	baptismi	1923 die 8. Februarii.
Locus nativitatis		Hruševje 18.
Nomen infantis		Josephus.
Legitimus, illegitimus, filius, filia		Legitimus filius.
Nomen, cognomen, conditio, religio	patris	Antonius Mihevc, laborator fabricius. Rom.-cath. relig.
	matris	Apolonia Premrl,
Patrini		Antonius Furk, Maria Fornič, agricolae.
Baptizans		Franciscus Gabrijna mp. cooperator.

In fidem subscriptio manu propria ed sigillum officii

Ex officio parochiali in Crenovizza, die 3. Septembris 1929

Joannes Kupranf parochus.

Bol. cum taxa

M. Šeber, Postumia 1929

Houses were constructed of stone and contained large hallways with open fires at the end for cooking. One large room served as the living room and all family events took place here. In the corner, there was a bed or a dresser with deep drawers where the young children slept. The children also played in this room. They enjoyed teasing the house cats out of their hideouts by running around the table with bits of paper tied to the end of a cord.

Even for the children, the fall and winter days were filled with work, like the selection of beans either for cooking or for next year's seedlings. The children worked quickly, racing to see who would accumulate the largest pile of beans. The winner received a bigger slice of bread.

Occasionally, a rat would find its way into the potato storage room. It was quickly caught alive in a wire mesh trap, as an exciting fight ensued between it and the small house cat. The cat grabbed the rat from the rear and slowly grasped its neck and head. Finally, the cat overpowered the rat and triumphantly stood in front of the onlookers, with the large rat in its mouth and the rat's tail and legs hanging down. As a four-year old child, I watched these battles with fascination and the memories of them have left a lifetime impression.

The younger children would often relieve themselves in front of the house in a small patch of grass. One day, some prominent dignitaries happened to be passing by in a lovely horse-driven car-

riage. They were much amused by the performance of the children and smiled at them and at the house.

I learned how to use a hammer and nails at a very young age, and I was taught to straighten short nails to be reused by the shoemaker. I would sometimes hit my finger and get a black fingernail and I still have scars on my fingers.

There was no electricity or gas for cooking and wood-burning stoves were used. It was a lot of fun to bring the chopped wood into the house and to pile it under or around the sheet metal stove.

The construction of a new brick dairy processing plant was a sign of advancing times. Many people, including children, toured the building when it opened and viewed some of the cheeses on display. To my mother's dismay, I poked my finger into the cheese and left a hole in the sample.

A game called sheep and wolves was a favourite pastime around the table, especially during the winter. It was drawn on a piece of paper, and black and white beans were used for keeping score. We also played a game (drawn on a piece of paper as well) where you had to try to put three beans in a straight line, while your opponent tried to prevent this move. The last page shows you what the game looked like.

After the First World War, the entire province was classed as an occupied territory. The occupying Italian army carefully watched all the peasants. One day, it was announced that Mussolini was going to

pass by on his way to Postojna. All of the windows and doors were ordered closed and no light was to be seen from any cracks. No one was allowed outside except for the guards. As the villagers stayed behind closed doors and shuttered windows, Mussolini passed by without incident.

As a result of the Italian occupation, the incumbent Slovenian mayors were replaced with Italian mayors. Of course, this did not go over too well with the villagers and it so happened that very close to our home, the newly-installed mayor was shot dead through a glass window on the very first night of his arrival. The hole in the glass was patched and remained that way for many years. I remember hearing a shot and the sound of footsteps running by the side of our house. It was many years later that I learned what had happened and where the gun was hidden.

Looking for and catching crabs in the shallow streams was a favourite pastime on hot summer afternoons. Freshly-picked dandelion with potatoes or beans and the delicious sweet meat of the crab were considered a special supper.

Spring was also an enjoyable time of the year, as we played in the front and the rear of the house. Small chicks were let outside and children were ordered to watch them closely so that the crows would not take them. Unfortunately, the crows were very clever as they hid in the hedges, waiting for a chick to come close. They would then grab them, while only a few metres away, the children watched helplessly. Often, someone would watch to see where the crow flew to

feed its young. Then, an older family member would go to the nest for the crows and we would have a good crow meat supper.

The chickens were also allowed to go across the street to peck for food in the yards. Occasionally, a car would run one over as it crossed. The chicken meat, delicious though it was, could not replace the sorrow of having lost the chicken, which could have been sold or used to produce eggs.

Spring, summer and fall days were busy. We enjoyed planting, picking and sorting potatoes. Another important job was to gather the lost hay from the sides of the road. Young boys, emulating the grown-ups with horses, would be responsible for loading it onto a small hand-driven wagon. Sunday was set aside for recreation and sports and very often we played bocce with specially-selected round stones.

The first horse ride was a proud moment. A ride on wagon planks when manure was taken to the field was also memorable. Once, despite my mother's disapproval, a relative took me for a ride down the hill on a big wagon. We arrived safely at the bottom of the hill.

It was normal for everybody to have a small pocket-knife for peeling potatoes, fruit and other items. If we cut our fingers, we would get more instructions on how to use it properly. However, in order to use an axe for chopping wood, strict instructions were provided.

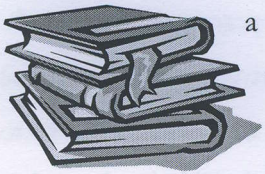
A special fall event was a visit to a neighbour's fruit drying oven, where we were allowed to taste some of the dried fruit. I was very interested in learning about how the fruit dryer was constructed. It was constructed of stone (for the fire) and heat was directed to the bottom of a wooden screen. Above the screen with the fruit was a space that was tightly-covered with a wooden plank. This is where the heat would be most intense. A small fire heated the stone framing and retained the heat for a long time, because it was below ground level and not exposed to the wind.

A tour of the cow stables resulted in a swift kick from the cow when the cleaning fork touched the cow's leg. We used a petroleum lantern while we worked in the stables, especially during the evening as we milked the cows.

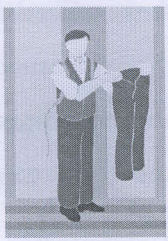
I learned how to use various tools, such as rakes, forks, shovels, and brooms, at a very young age. In the summer, I would use rakes and forks to gather the hay or to turn it over so that it could dry more quickly. Snakes lurked about and we had to step about very carefully. Also, we would not want to disturb the wasps' nests and get bitten.

As a young boy, I was keenly interested in how things were made. How the doors were made and hung, how the toilet in the back yard by the manure pile was constructed, how to store the hay outside and how to make charcoal – these are the kinds of things I would observe in detail.

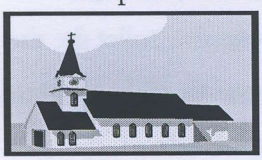
Soon it was time to start grade one. We learned numbers and letters, and soon after multiplication and division up to twenty. I was



a quick learner, and I also learned to read and write with no difficulty. In grade two, however, as a result of the Italian occupation, the language taught in school was Italian and it took several months for the students to adapt and understand the new approaches. The teachers also taught us to pray "Padre Nostro" and how to express ourselves politely. One day, my teacher sent me to call another teacher. I ran over to him and told him "la maestra te ciama." The teacher from southern Italy did not correct my inappropriate approach. On another occasion, as that same southern Italian teacher was writing on the blackboard, the whole class laughed at him, saying that he was taking pictures of them. Finally, someone told him that his pants were torn. He went across the street during school hours to my relative, who was a shoemaker, and waited, in his underwear, while my relative stitched up the teacher's pants. Apparently, he only owned that one pair of pants.



Preparation for Holy Communion and confirmation took place



during the fall, winter and early spring days outside of school hours. It was a real treat to get out of the house and meet at somebody else's home during the winter. During the warm springtime and fall, we walked unaccompanied by adults for about forty-five minutes

through the fields and meadows to get to the building near the church, where instruction by the local priest was given. During our trek, it was fun to pull and eat some of the fresh yellow carrots and white turnips growing in our path. We would also test the strength of the cabbage heads, much to the disapproval of the field owner, since it was damaging his meagre crop. At the next town's pasture, we would notice a fruit dryer with the operator who slept in the 45-gallon drum that was open at the end. He was also a watchman who guarded against thieves.

We also babysat on a regular basis. Three things were accomplished with this task: our parents and relatives knew of our whereabouts, the baby enjoyed the company and we received a slice of bread as a reward.

From early spring until the late fall, the days of the week were tracked by counting how many days were left until Sunday. I walked barefoot with other children my age using shortcuts through the fields, pastures and over small streams to the church. Walking barefoot, we were not concerned about injuring our toes, or walking on rough gravel or the sharp remains of wheat and barley, or the hidden poisonous snakes. Instead, we marvelled at the newly-constructed water reservoir, which was a technical advancement for that time. We also picked up some over-ripe cherries that lay on the ground near the church.

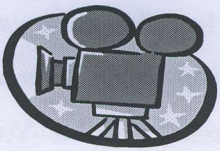
For us, the First World War was followed by generally poor economic circumstances and new procedures and products were not

a priority for improving our standard of living. The main concern was preparing for another war, with yearly army exercises conducted on a very large scale. During the summers, exercises with live ammunition and big guns occurred regularly. Army personnel slept in schools, stables or in tents – wherever there was room. They were equipped with horses, wagons and cannons driven by six or eight horses or mules. They also had some cars, trucks and bicycles. Certain areas were closed off when they practiced with the big guns. Horses were left outside and exposed to the elements day and night. When they were not in use, they formed a circle, especially in the night with one man watching them in the centre. At the end of the day, the army band had a concert for about an hour before bedtime at nine o'clock. The last melody was always the same and it still stays in my memory. They also built large underground caverns in the area along what was then the border of Yugoslavia. It was a good thing that all that preparation was never used.

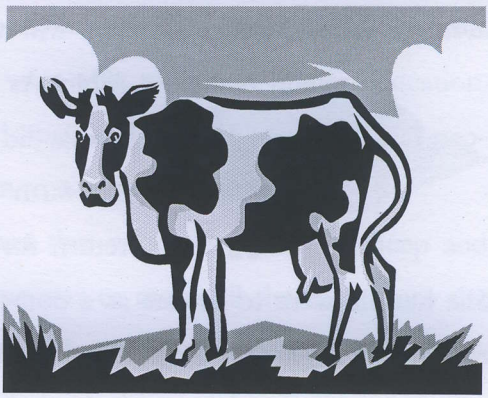
Houseflies were a major nuisance from early spring to late fall. A bunch of fern was hung from the ceiling to deal with them. The flies loved the fern and gathered on it overnight. Then wide bags were used to envelop the fern with the flies and then the bags were smashed hard against the wall or the floor. The fern was then reused the next day. The room, especially the ceilings, had to be repainted with lime whitewash before the winter in order to cover up or wash off the fly droppings.

The food was very simple, especially breakfast. Occasionally, we would have bread with home-brewed coffee made from roasted barley. Whenever that happened, we would ask, "When are we going to have breakfast?" The standard breakfast was polenta and the crust from the dish where the polenta had been cooked was a treat, like having cookies.

There was major excitement when it was announced to all the surrounding villages that a film was going to be shown in the evening on the big stable wall outside our neighbour's place. The film demonstrated the proper procedures for planting an apple tree, preparing the soil, transplanting and pruning. That was the first time I ever watched a film.



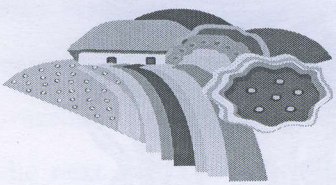
In the fall of 1930, the neighbour required someone to take care of his seven cows and I was chosen to take on this task. Even though I was only seven years old, I was considered trustworthy and responsible. The agreement was that he would accompany me in leading the cattle to the field, where I would be left for the day. At the end of the day, the neighbour would return to assist in guiding the cattle home. One day, he did not show up



at the agreed-upon time. I waited until darkness set in, when I decided to lead them home myself. As I was returning, I met him close to his home, as he was recovering from his day of drinking. I continued with this job into the fall despite the cold. Keeping warm in the cold fall days was often a challenge and stepping into fresh and warm cow droppings was one way to warm up my bare feet. My reward for these labours was 45 lire for the season – my first pay – which went towards the payment for a family house – our home.

My early carefree years ended, at the age of seven, when my whole family moved across the border to Cerknica, which was at that time, part of Yugoslavia. Many of my experiences from my first seven years served as a foundation for later life. I particularly remember my parents' lessons in honesty in work and being adaptive to changing circumstances. Later, when I was older, co-workers and others often exploited this honesty and flexibility. Another lesson learned from my parents was patience.

Our family lived during those years on a farm belonging to my mother's sister Marija, who was widowed with two boys, Karl and Albin. As a widow with two small boys, Marija did not stay on the farm but gave the farm to my mother to operate in return for taking care of her two boys. She herself went to Trieste as a domestic while my family operated the farm. I am not sure what kind of financial arrangement they had, except that I know that my mother raised Marija's two sons, Karl and



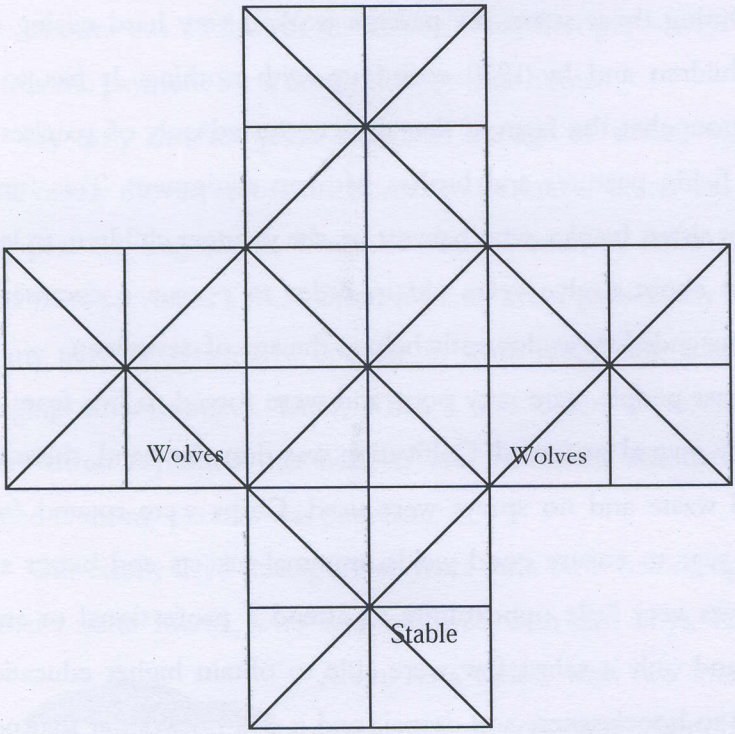
Albin, along with her own young family. When Karl grew up and got married, he took over the farm and somehow forced my family to look for an alternative home. There was another small farm that my mother would inherit, but it was too small for raising a family of four. Moreover, it was located on the outskirts of the village and too far from school.

During those years, my parents worked very hard raising two extra children and by 1930 ended up with nothing. It has to be pointed out that the farm at that time consisted only of patches of certain fields, pastures and bushes with no equipment. This forced my older sister, Ivanka, who babysat us, the younger children, to leave home at about twelve years old in order to pursue a commercial trade. She ended up as domestic help at the age of seventeen.

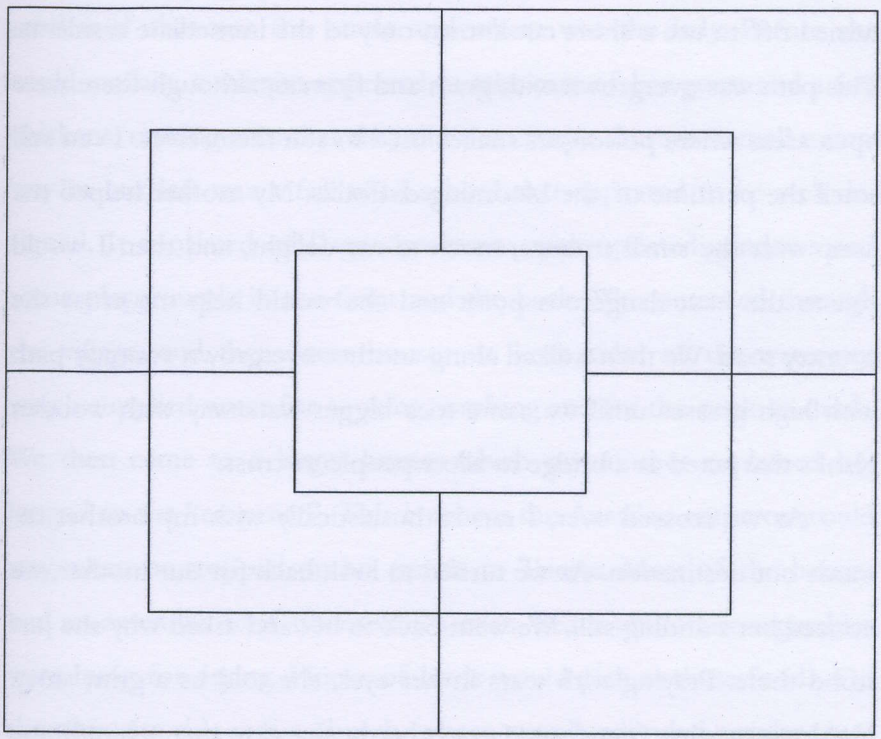
Most people were very poor and were forced to live from the land they owned or rented. Cultivation was done by hand, there was minimal waste and no sprays were used. Crops were rotated from year to year to ensure good yields, minimal insects and better soil. There was very little opportunity to attend a professional or trade school and only a select few were able to obtain higher education. This led to hopelessness and despair and it was no wonder that people chose to emigrate or to turn to alcohol.

Here is one of the games that we used to play – sheep and wolves. The object of the game was to move all the sheep into the stable without losing one to the wolves, who watched for any unprotected sheep. There are twenty-four sheep trying to get past the

wolves. All the points above the wolves represent 24 sheep that have to be moved into the stable. A wolf can jump over the sheep to the next empty spot and that sheep is then lost to the wolf.



Here is another one played by two persons. Each player has a set of nine beans of the same colour. The goal is to put three of your beans in a straight line while your opponent tries to prevent this. When one player is successful in getting three beans in a row, he can take one of his opponent's beans. The game continues until one player (the loser) is left with only two beans.



A Visit to My Grandparents

I was very young and had not yet started school. My mother worked very hard in the fields during the week and Sunday was the only time for visiting and socializing. We had no car, or other form of transportation, so my mother, my brother Tone and I walked for three quarters of an hour from Hruševje to Ubeljsko, where my grandparents lived.

We walked along the main road for a short while and then turned off to use a short cut known only to the immediate residents. This path was overgrown with grass and flowers, although there were open areas where poisonous snakes used to sun themselves. I can still smell the perfume of the blooming daffodils. My mother helped me jump over the small streams, much to my delight, and then I would run to the next dangerous point and she would help me cross the country road. We then walked along another overgrown swampy path with high grasses until we came to a bigger waterway with wooden planks that acted as a bridge to allow people to cross.

As we crossed over, I ran enthusiastically with my brother towards our destination. As we turned to look back for our mother, we noticed her standing still. We went back to her and asked why she just stood there. Praying with tears in her eyes, she told us a grim story. Not long ago, her friend went to get her husband to escort him home – he had been drinking. The couple argued on their way back and the husband hit his wife at the very spot where my mother was standing. The wife had collapsed – dead. The husband's response was, "But

Neža, I hit you only once." After hearing that story, we continued on our way with much less enthusiasm. This memory has stayed with me to this day.

A short walk over the hill and some cultivated area brought us to the first house in Ubeljsko. The living conditions were very poor – the house was a very small stone structure and a few goats peeked out through the small opening in the door of the nearby shack. The house itself contained only one room and a hallway. I asked my mother if that was the house and where was the lady. Before she could explain, a woman appeared to take care of her goats and a few chickens, making sure that they did not escape. Across a small waterway to our left was a fair-sized school that appeared to be well designed. It consisted of large classrooms with updated windows and some playgrounds in the front and the back. We continued through the village, and there were houses on both sides of the waterway, which supplied water for cooking, washing and for the cattle to drink. We then came to a larger house, which my mother explained belonged to the "emperor". This is where the Austrian emperor would stay when he stopped on his travels to Trieste. Most of the houses had an extended roof under which corn, beans and other vegetables were hung for drying. Flocks of birds would pick at these foods. On the opposite side was a church, where people attended regular mass and also the Sunday afternoon prayers. Surprisingly, many males attended church, which wasn't typical.

Right next to the church was a gostilna (a pub), where people went to drink (and overdrink.) Further along on our right side was another gostilna that was very crowded, especially on Sundays. It was here that townspeople with blistered hands and feet from the daily labours and not much of a social life found some relief from the constant daily pressures of survival. My grandparents' house then came into view. The two small windows facing the road were full of carnations and other flowers. Flowers covered the stone wall as they grew on both sides of the small door leading to the basement storage room. The only entry to the house was elevated around the corner of the house. The door, which was made of planks browned by smoke, was heavy and hung on two large hinges. It was usually kept open, especially in the summer. A 3' high gate attached to the stone wall kept the chickens in. Any chicken that flew over the gate got part of its wing cut off as a penalty.

Above the door was a special opening about 10" x 10" that was used to let the smoke out of the house. The path to the door was finished with carefully selected flat stones, while the floor inside the house was mostly packed clay and some flat stones. A homemade broom made with birch branches was used to sweep the floor.

The interior measured about 12' by 22' and there was a small window at the end. Cooking was done in a 3' x 4' x 4' fireplace located in the far corner. The cookware was suspended from the ceiling. A spoon was always handy to pick out any ashes that flew into the food cooking in the fireplace. Potatoes were baked in the hot

ashes of the fire. A special iron stand over the fire was used to cook coffee, tea and other small things. On one side of the fireplace was a small cooking stove made of sheet metal, with its interior finished with mortar, a cast iron top with two holes and a small compartment for baking. Water was brought in daily from the town's well and was kept in a covered bucket. The ceiling was black from the soot of the open fire. Petroleum was used for light. Many people suffered from watery eyes and a cough brought on by the smoke.

On the right side were two bedrooms. One of the rooms contained two small beds and two dressers. One dresser had deep drawers where children slept when they were small. In one corner was a small wooden box full of sawdust, into which my grandfather, who had asthma, would cough his spittle, especially in the early morning. He covered up his spit with a wooden stick. I was not allowed to see the inside of the second bedroom.

Through the floor penetrated the odour from the small room below, where potatoes and other crops were stored for the winter. All the walls were constructed of stone and there was no insulation, which considerably increased the dampness and contributed to the various health ailments that living in these kinds of conditions caused. A cat was a must to control the mice and rats that found their way into the house from the nearby barn or storage room below. There was an outdoor washroom with no paper.

A small table and a few chairs were by the fireplace. My grandfather made a brief appearance. He stepped on to the top of

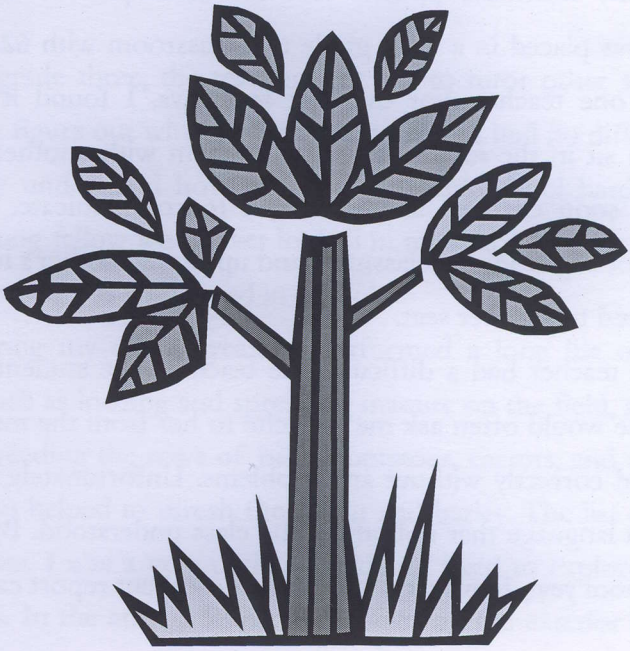
the fireplace, extended his hand into a hole in the wall and brought out some hazelnuts, which he gave to me saying, "They are from Nanos" (the mountain). My grandmother was there but she did not say much to me. Later, my mother showed me some religious pictures that my grandmother had signed – Josefa Sajovič – and which she gave to me. My mother talked a lot with both my grandmother and her sister Johana while my brother and I played outside.

On our way home, my mother pointed out the gostilne (pubs) where my grandfather was a frequent visitor. From these pubs came loud noises and talking that interrupted the peace of the Sunday afternoon. My mother's sister Johana accompanied us to the main road. My mother sent my brother and me ahead and told us to wait there while she continued to talk to her sister. My mother eventually caught up with us, and the tears on her face expressed the hardships that she and her family were forced to endure.

II

School and After

Fall 1930 – 1940



Our family moved to Cerknica, a town known for its intermittent lake, when I was seven. The local people were mostly small farmers dependant on the hand-cultivated land and on the sale of timber.

I would often be awakened in the early morning hours by the noise of a passing horse or by oxen-driven wagons loaded with timber. Timber, destined for export, was being transported to the railway station in the next town, Rakek.

The school was larger now and the student population consisted primarily of small farmers' children, a number of whom suffered visibly from the poverty and the consequences of alcohol abuse. I was placed in a large grade two classroom with 62 students and only one teacher. For the first few days, I found it kind of strange to sit in the middle of the classroom with another boy my age. That soon changed and we began to communicate. Unfortunately, I got lice from my classmate and upon my mother's insistence, I was moved to another seat.

The teacher had a difficult time teaching the students mathematics. She would often ask me to recite to her from the math book. I answered correctly without any problems. Unfortunately, it was in the Italian language that nobody in the class understood. By the end of the school year, however, I received an excellent report card.

Upon our arrival in Cerknica, my mother took the whole family after school to harvest potatoes. Other chores included bringing the wood home from the nearby pastures and also carrying broken bushy fences on our backs to provide fuel for cooking. During the second year, this chore became a daily routine after school and during the summer.

In the winter, the kitchen was the only warm place where the whole family gathered. During the coldest winter days, the bedroom was so cold that my slightly wet shoes froze to the floor. It became a morning ritual for me to break them free and put them on my feet. At bedtime, I wrapped myself totally in my blanket except for a small hole for breathing. By morning, a small frost would form around the hole.

In grade three, the teacher sent me to tutor other students. I could not figure out why this was necessary as I had no difficulty and could not understand how others could find school hard. I was a bright young fellow who never looked in my schoolbooks at home as my homework was completed in school.

During my school years, I performed a long list of various chores, such as loading and spreading manure on the field, and planting and weeding the rows of beans, potatoes, carrots, and white turnips. I also helped to thresh the wheat and barley. The list of chores was endless. I was a very curious child and liked to explore my surroundings. In the attic, I found open holes on the exterior walls that exposed the house to the elements in both winter and summer.

I. Ime in podatki.

a) Rodovinsko in krstno ime		Mihevc Jožef
Rojstva	b) dan, mesec in leto	3. februarja 1923
	c) kraj	Hruševje
	občina	Ilirska Bistrica
	župnija	Ilirska Bistrica
	srez	Postojna
	banovina	
č) Narodnost		slovenska
d) Veroizpovedanje		rim. kat
e) Domovinska občina (pristojnost) in srez		Jerkmica 260
f) Koze so se cepile		1924

II. Bivališče.*

a) Bivališče otrokovo		Jerkmica 260.
Ime, stan in bivališče	b) staršev	Anton ~~Mihevc~~ Zupan
	c) odgovornega rednika	
	č) zakonitega varuha	
d) Naslov varstvene oblasti		

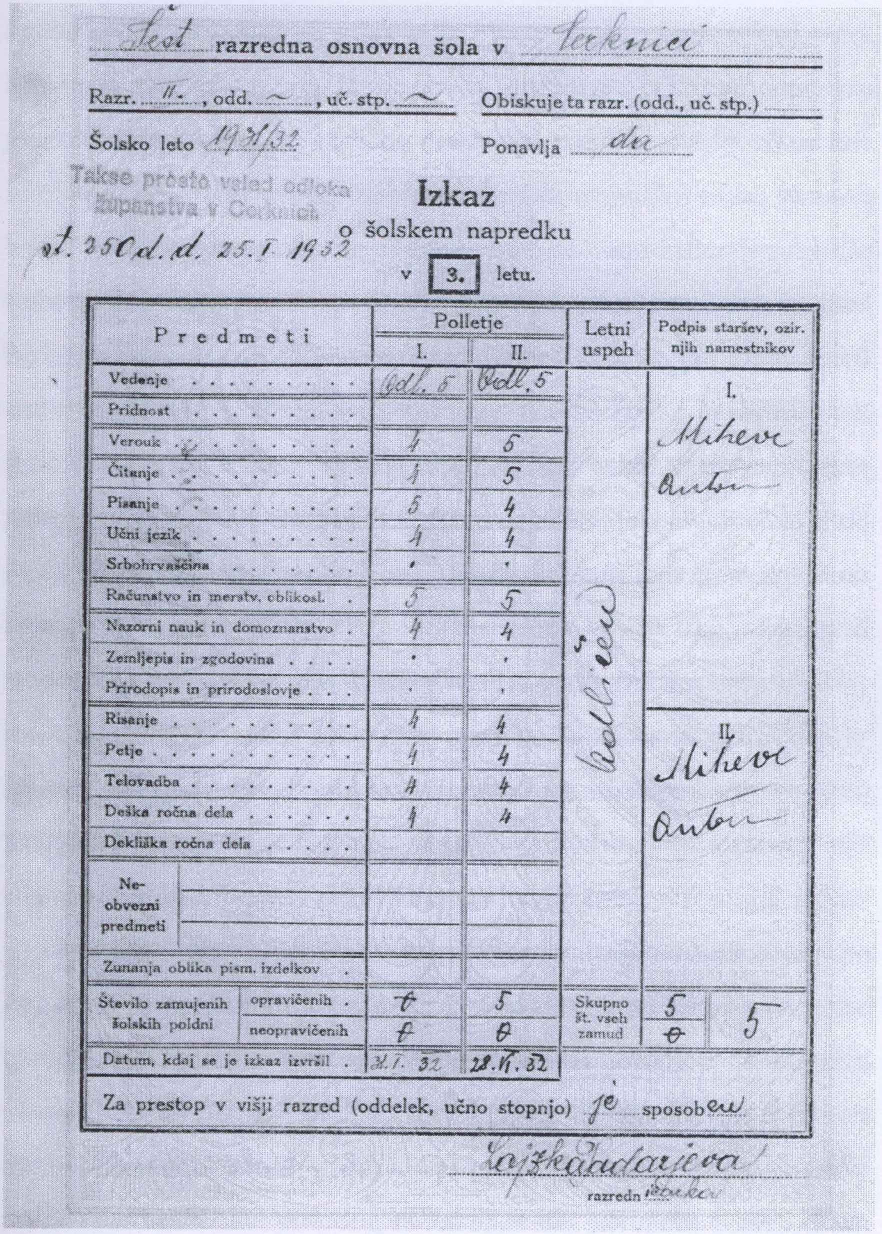
III. Prvi vstop v šolo.

a) Dan, mesec in leto	16. 9. 1929
b) Kraj	Hruševje šu 7. 10. 1931

Šolsko upravitelj stvo Jerkmica, dne 30. 1. 1932.

Šolsk... upravitelj...

* Izpremembe gl. 4., oziroma 5. strani



Šest razredna osnovna šola v Cerknici

Razr. II., odd. ~, uč. stp. ~ Obiskuje ta razr. (odd., uč. stp.)

Šolsko leto 1931/32 Ponavlja da

Takse prosto vsled odloka Županstva v Cerknici
št. 250 d. d. 25. I. 1932

Izkaz
o šolskem napredku
v 3. letu.

Predmeti	Polletje I.	Polletje II.	Letni uspeh	Podpis staršev, ozir. njih namestnikov
Vedenje	odl. 5	odl. 5		I. Mihevc Anton
Pridnost				
Verouk	4	5		
Čitanje	4	5		
Pisanje	5	4		
Učni jezik	4	4		
Srbohrvaščina	·	·		
Računstvo in merstv. oblikosl.	5	5		
Nazorni nauk in domoznanstvo	4	4		
Zemljepis in zgodovina	·	·	prav dober (?)	
Prirodopis in prirodoslovje	·	·		
Risanje	4	4		II. Mihevc Anton
Petje	4	4		
Telovadba	4	4		
Deška ročna dela	4	4		
Dekliška ročna dela				
Neobvezni predmeti				
Zunanja oblika pism. izdelkov				
Število zamujenih šolskih poldni – opravičenih	0	5	Skupno št. vseh zamud	5 / 0 — 5
Število zamujenih šolskih poldni – neopravičenih	0	0		
Datum, kdaj se je izkaz izvršil	31. I. 32	28. VI. 32		

Za prestop v višji razred (oddelek, učno stopnjo) je sposoben

Lajzka Gadarjeva
razrednik

In the winter, snow would blow right through just above where we slept. I carefully searched about the house to find some planks and nails, which I cleaned up and used to plug the open holes. I proudly put a folding wooden metre stick in my pocket, cleaned the planks and nailed them together so they would cover the holes. I later learned that those holes used to be windows. There were old wooden frames with hinges and I carefully measured out doors that would be hung in place of those windows. When I left home in 1943, seven years later, those holes were still plugged. My father and mother were both encouraging of and quite satisfied with my efforts. During this time, I also served as an altar boy for over four years, using the Latin language.

During my last three school years, I was an occasional summer worker, called to work when extra help was needed, on a bigger farm that contained a saw and a flourmill. Looking back, it was like slavery. The owner was wealthy but illiterate, and his land included valuable timber and open fields. It so happened that when he found out that my father had bought a small part of the field next to his waterway, he cruelly cut down the valuable tree on my father's land. A few years later, I saw that tree rotting away by his house. I was very disillusioned and disheartened when I received my reward for my summer work – a small paper bag containing a few apples and an orange. My mother cried when she saw that.

My family was hit very hard by the depression of the 1930s. My father lost his job and no other jobs were available. He worked a day here or a day there, but was certainly unable to earn enough for a growing family's needs, and the hardships were borne by all of us. The depression forced all family members to do their best to survive. I was barely twelve and was also required to contribute. My regular summer job was to walk to the bush, which took one hour, to pick herbs such as linden flowers, mistletoe and belladonna to be dried and sold. Most often, we would bring home the linden branches with their flowers. The flowers were then picked while the dried leaves were fed to the goats and rabbits in the winter.

The mistletoe was the heaviest to carry home. It took about an hour to walk to the bush. I would then climb the fir tree, which was ten to fifteen metres tall or even taller, throw down the mistletoe, bag it and then carry the large, heavy bag home. It was an especially tiring job and I would take several rests during the walk home. Sometimes, the fir trees grew so densely together that I just swung from one tree to the other, like Tarzan, as I held on tightly to the branches.

I learned to be careful when picking the belladonna. Often, the ripe seeds under the leaves sprayed its liquid into my eye, blurring my vision. One summer, after an afternoon rain, I went to pick belladonna and was confronted by a very dangerous situation. As I picked the belladonna leaves, I heard a slight noise in the distance. I turned my head to see a man pointing an "axe" at me, although it was not an

axe, but a gun. He was illegally hunting for deer. He was confused when I started telling him about the very tasty raspberries.

Once, I was picking raspberries with my sister and some friends in a forested mountain about an hour and half from home. All of a sudden, a heavy storm with hail and lightning and thunder appeared. The lightning hit the trees all around us and we were all very frightened. We were all under 15 years of age. We quickly packed up and ran from that area, stopping halfway down the mountain, soaked to the skin. After the storm, the nice warm sun dried us out completely as we walked home. Later, we learned that that particular locale was known for such severe weather conditions. At the base of the forested mountain was a lake. The slope of the mountainside was like a huge circular trough that forced the air into a whirl. This whirl, along with the moist air from the lake and from the Adriatic Sea, mixed with the air of the nearby snow-covered mountain (named Snow Mountain) created the sudden and heavy lightning and thunderstorms in that area, severely damaging the trees in the area.

As I looked out for raspberries in the wilderness, I had to step carefully through the rotting and broken branches. Once I noticed something that looked like a nicely-curled black women's belt, which I could not resist and decided to take home with me. I still recall the shock and surprise when this belt turned to be a three-quarter metre long poisonous snake, with its head curled downward. The snake did not move as I felt its cool skin. I picked up a heavy stick and hit it in the middle of its torso. A milky liquid appeared over the snake's skin

and it moved slowly into the broken branches. The scare and shock remained with me for many days after.

The conclusion of the day was quite satisfying when we sold the raspberries by the kilo to the doctor's family or to somebody else. The money earned was our family's income. Small pieces of polenta or bread comprised the daily meal. I was often so overtired from these labours that I suffered from tremors at night while I slept.

My earnings from my various jobs were tabulated and, although small, they were positive and encouraging. As I grew older, more jobs came my way. The neighbours would notice my good work ethic and I was often asked to help out, especially during the potato and hay seasons. Later, I also worked in the bush cutting down timber and used the neighbours' oxen and horses; I also helped plough the fields or harvest the hay on a regular basis.

It was very early during my school years that I noticed a division among the students. Certain topics were not discussed or were discussed only with trusted people. Also, one had to be careful about expressing opinions on certain issues. One would often not speak to certain individuals. The reasons for this seemed to be a division based on political ideologies, wealth and influence, and poverty. School grades were often based not on merit, but on social status. I noticed that the teacher had her favourites and these received good report cards and favourable attention. This became very apparent in grade four when decisions were made about who was going to continue to high school. Nonetheless, I finished all my grades with good marks.

Drž. šest in 4razredna narodna šola v (na) Cerknici

Kraljevina Jugoslavija.
Dravska banovina.
Šolski srez: Logatec

Številka 67/1929-30
Šolsko leto: 19 36/37.

Izpričevalo

o dovršeni višji narodni šoli

Mihevc Jožef

rojen dne 3./tretjega/febr. 1923, z besedo: dvajset tretjega.
v Hruševju pri Postojni. rimsko-katol. veroizpovedanja,
je hodil v ~~vijo~~ narodno šolo od 16. septembra 1929 do 31.marca 1937,
nazadnje je dovršil učno snov ~~četrtega~~ šolskega leta v II.b. razredu, na tukajšnji višji narodni šoli. Ob svojem izstopu iz šole je bil ocenjen iz predmetov po § 42. v zmislu § 63. zak. o nar. šolah takole:

Vedenje		odlično /5/
Veronauk z moralnim poukom		odlično /5/
Narodni jezik; manjšinski po § 45. zak. o nar. šolah	slovenski	prav dobro /4/
	srbohrvatski	prav dobro /4/
	nemški	
	madjarski	
Zgodovina		prav dobro /4/
Zemljepis		prav dobro /4/
Računstvo in merstveno oblikoslovje		prav dobro /4/
Poznavanje prirode		prav dobro /4/
Praktična gospodarska znanja in sedmosti glede na krajevne potrebe		odlično /5/
Higiena		prav dobro /4/
Gospodarstvo-gospodinjstvo*		
Ročno delo		prav dobro /4/
Risanje		dobro /3/
Lepopisje		
Petje		odlično /5/
Telovadba po sokolskem sestavu		prav dobro /4/

Ta učen se je zadostil osemletnemu obveznemu šolanju in se zato odpušča iz šole v zmislu § 65. zak. o nar. šolah z dne 5. decembra 1929.

Upraviteljstvo državne višje narodne šole

v Cerknici, dne 31.marca 193 7

Štev.284/1937.

Šolski upravitelj

Uradni pečat

razr. učitelj

* Nepriključno je črtati.

In the fall of 1937, at the end of my regular schooling, I went to the next town Martinjak to a prosperous farm to take care of the cattle in the pasture. I also help to thresh the wheat and the barley by hand – a job for a rainy day. In late October, we prepared the firewood for the coming winter. The family I stayed with consisted of one son over twenty and four sisters, who did not get along very well. There were restrictions placed on girls between 16 and 25 and despite the unsettled conditions at home, there was nowhere for them to go. In addition, the war and the revolution were rapidly approaching, further limiting one's options.

Two months later, I came home to attend trade school classes. The classes, held three times a week in the evening, did not keep me busy enough, and I very much wanted to find some work, but none was available. So, I kept myself occupied with various projects and activities, such as making mouse traps and rabbit cages. In early spring, using an axe, I harvested "krhlika" (rhamnus frangule), which grows to over one inch in diameter. With a pocket knife, I would remove the bark which was then sold for its medicinal properties. I would also go to the bush and use a small axe to cut down sticks for climber beans. I also picked plantain. In the fall, I would harvest juniper which was then sold to various merchants to cook whiskey. I also picked wild rosehip, which we now know is very high in vitamin C. Before the ground was frozen, I also had to dig barberry from the ground by using a pick. The yellow bark was peeled from the

stem and the roots, and the bark was dried and sold. I also did field work, such as cutting, drying and storing the grass for hay, cutting wood, and breaking stones for maintaining and repairing roads using a special hammer. All of this work was done by hand and my hands

House and Stable

were often swollen and my muscles sore. This kind of work was very hard and provided little reward.

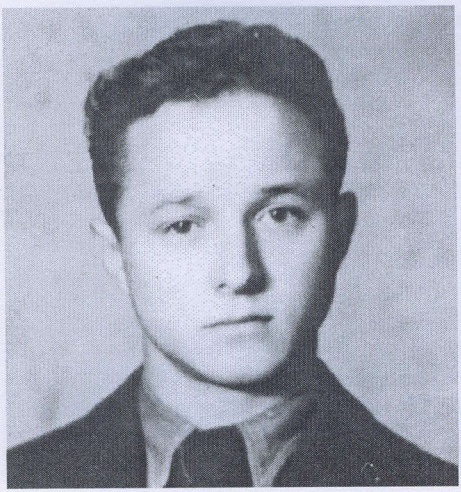
In order to improve our standard of living, we needed a stable to shelter a cow and to store manure. I put a lot of effort into con-

structing this stable by mixing the mortar, preparing the stone and whatever else was necessary to build this structure. This pleased the whole family and in 1939, it appeared that things were going to improve, as the crops in the field began to yield a better result. My family's years of hard work began to pay off. The neighbours noticed the results of our work ethic and frequently asked for help. That winter, a neighbour asked me to cut the big fir trees in the community bush. By hand, three of us cut and cleared the trees for timber or cut boards of various sizes and lengths. My earnings enabled me to buy my first suit for Easter.

I also found time to get involved with the town band, where I played the trumpet. We played at Easter and at various religious celebrations, at concerts, dances, funerals and other events. These melodies continue to play in my mind – waltzes, marches, polkas, tangos, funeral and religious songs – especially when similar melodies are played on TV or on the radio.

My education suffered because I was forced to spend so much time working. Moreover, there were some language difficulties, particularly because of the different dialects. Because of the poor economic conditions and also because of the political atmosphere, education was not encouraged nor was it something everyone could afford to continue past grade six. As a result, many people lacked adequate reading and writing skills. I was fortunate, however, that on the first of July 1940, I began my apprenticeship as a mechanic.

The owner of the shop where I trained as a mechanic, as well as his family, had noted my work ethic, my honesty and my successes and offered me this opportunity. I clearly recall my father coming home with a smile on his face and announcing that next day, I could start as an apprentice. I was so excited and full of enthusiasm and arrived at the shop before 7 am. Unfortunately, it was still closed and I met the owner's sister in the kitchen. She smiled at me and handed me the key to the shop and told me to go and open it. I unlocked the door and stood inside not knowing where to turn. I do not remember who was the next person to come in. Whoever it was explained a few things to me and I did what he directed. I worked hard from then on. Many of my former school friends, along with the neighbours, were quite envious of my position. I later found out that some of the parents of my schoolmates and many others had tried to get their sons to apprentice in the same place, but without success. Apparently, their sons had not displayed the qualities that the owner was looking for, a detail that was explained by the shop owner to my father.

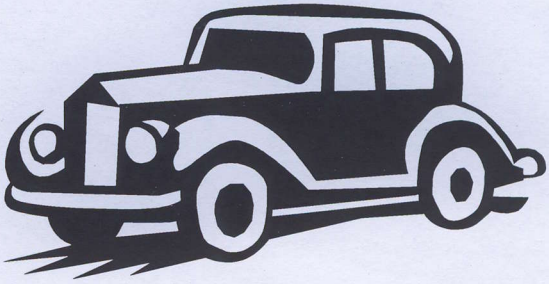


About 17 years old around 1940

III

My Apprenticeship and After

1940 – 1945



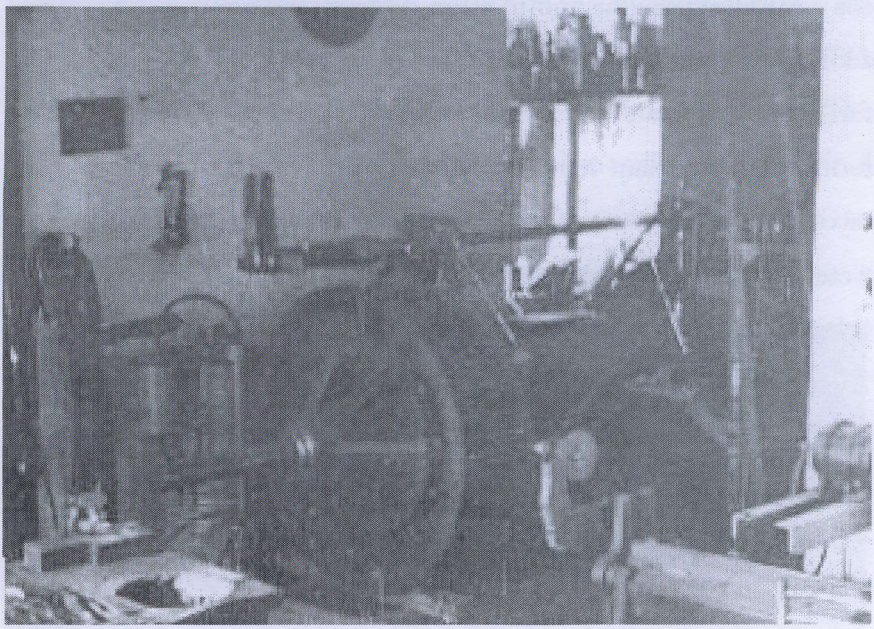
On the first of July 1940, I took my first step as a mechanical apprentice. It was a big change from working in the fields or in the bush, or breaking stone by hand. The shop was small with the owner, two helpers, two apprentices and me, the novice. Two major projects were underway when I started. One was to construct a water turbine and sawmill for the owner's brother, while the other was to build a bus body for the local bus line that was operated by the owner. My brother Tone was also a helper, but his time was mostly spent driving on the bus route and acting as a chauffeur for special occasions. There was also another helper who worked

The timber saw was still in operation in 1985

steadily as a bus driver. He also performed various jobs, even chopping wood, in his spare time during the afternoon hours. The shop offered all kinds of services for the locals and also for the Yugoslav-

ian army's defence department. The possibility of attack from Italy or Germany was high.

As an apprentice, the kind of work that I performed was not what one might expect, especially by today's standards. There was

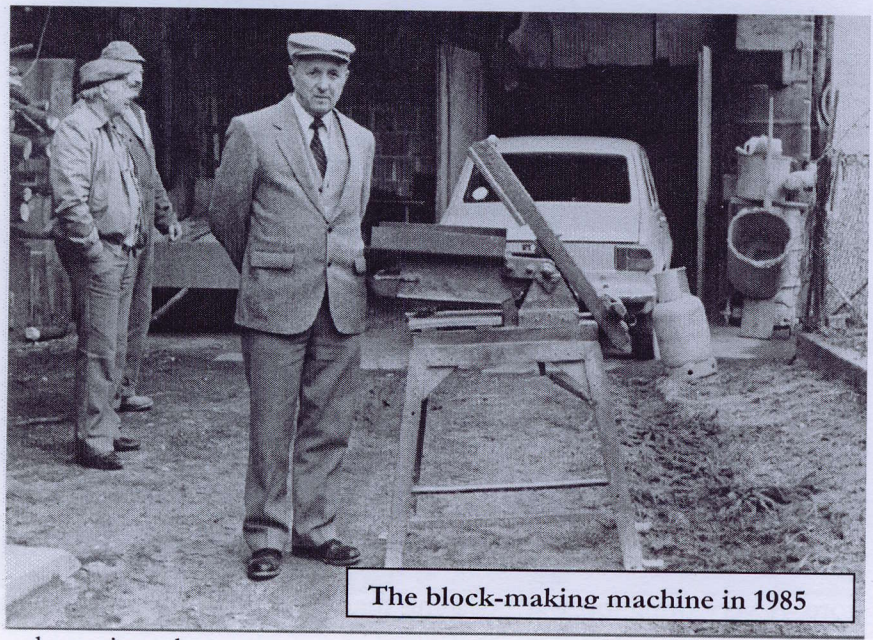


The turbine was still in operation in 1985

little communication and there was no planned instruction. For a start, I was routinely asked to give a hand to someone or to hold something or bring this or that. I was also sent on errands to the store. A very tiring job was pedalling the wheel that drove the fan to keep the charcoal at a very high temperature of 1500°C or higher. This was necessary to heat the steel or iron to red or white, in order to hammer it into different forms. The same kind of heat was re-

quired to hammer the round stock to make the bolt heads used in construction. We also made different clamps and steel reinforcements.

As a novice apprentice, I was also expected to wash the different parts with gasoline and to clean cars and buses. In addition, I did a lot of cleaning and sweeping. I also stored 45-gallon drums of fuel, fuelled and lubricated buses and cars, and repaired flat tires. A broken tooth is a permanent reminder of these tires. The bad roads and the rayon cord tires resulted in many flat tires, and in those days, tires were difficult to purchase. Hand pumping tires was a difficult job. In



The block-making machine in 1985

a short time, however, my muscles got stronger and I could pump two, three or more bus tires a day, while a much stronger man could only pump one tire. I was also able to compete successfully with

stronger men in using my hand muscles to loosen or secure wheel nuts on buses. Gradually, my responsibilities increased to include not just work with bicycles, but also the maintenance of cars and buses and various other repairs. In 1942 and 1943, I assisted in the construction of a water turbine and sawmill. When I visited in 1985, both were still in operation. The various demanding tasks that I undertook provided me with an opportunity to view things from a practical perspective. It is also possible that necessity from a very young age was "the mother of invention" which led me to observe and produce. After twelve hours of daily work in the shop as an unpaid apprentice, I helped at home and constructed two concrete block-making machines, before I completed my three years of apprenticeship in July 1943. I started to build a band saw but the revolution prevented me from getting it operational.

19 years of age in 1942

The start of my apprenticeship meant that I was no longer at home as much and I was unable to help out as much as I used to. I could only help out in the morning, evening and sometimes at lunchtime.

Even at an early age, I recognized the hardships that my parents suffered, especially my father who, as an illegitimate child, was severely discouraged and disparaged by his relatives and others. Although he was a very good worker, he possessed very little self-confidence and self-esteem. I can clearly recall him slowly making his way home one day from the parish office. He had been speaking to the parish priest on behalf of Tone, my brother, and had asked that he be accepted as an altar boy. The rejection clearly demoralized him and he walked with his head down. His instructions to me indicated his lack of confidence and I did not always follow them. His confidence grew, however, a few years before I began my apprenticeship. I had a big argument with him when we planned and completed the modification of the stable to accommodate one cow and two pigs. Nevertheless, he was very confident in my abilities and, in later years, he would ask me many questions. My help at home had always been appreciated. On May 4, 1945 in the early morning hours I left home for good.

The politics of the day had a major impact on our lives. The collapse of the Austrian empire after the First World War resulted in the creation of Yugoslavia, which included most of Slovenia. Part of Slovenia, however, was ceded to the Italians and that is where I was born. Under Italian fascist rule, one was always careful about what one said or did in fear of possible reprisals. There were some killings and many were jailed or threatened.

Certificato d'operaio
Pomočniško izpričevalo

L'Associazione degli industriali ed artigiani della Provincia di Lubiana
Združenje industrijcev in obrtnikov Ljubljanske pokrajine

l'esame d'operaio — pomočniški izpit

Certificato d'apprendistato
Potrdilo o trajanju učenja

In 1930, my family moved across the border into Yugoslavia, where there was somewhat more freedom, even though there were some underground movements developing. The effects of the Russian revolution of 1917 had spread its influence also to Yugoslavia and there existed serious disagreements between the governing bodies and communist party members. It was rumoured that some of these disagreements had even led to the "elimination" of certain individuals. The communist party, having been outlawed at the end of the First World War, went underground where it organized itself and planned strategies that could be employed when opportunities pre-

sented themselves. The party did not succeed on a large scale during peacetime. It did, nevertheless, conduct important meetings right on Catholic church property and called trusted members to participate in army exercises, an activity that was considered normal at that time. In reality, these participants attended communist training sessions that took place in the "prison" in the south part of the state. Personally, I felt some discomfort about the situation and was never certain who could be trusted and what could be said, especially when it came to politics. I played in the local band where a few of the older men were communists but there were never any discussions about these matters.

Some underground bulletins were circulated before the Italian occupation in April 1941 but I never bothered to read them. These bulletins were smuggled to various locations through ingenious methods and unnoticed by the authorities. While I was an apprentice, I can recall delivering, in broad daylight and in full view, 20-litre square metal oil cans with false bottoms filled with underground material. I was also instructed to deliver, in a small wagon, small wooden drums or bottles of wine to the guesthouse located at the end of town for loading onto the bus. The post office was avoided so as not to arouse any suspicions. The wine was for the "liberation army." In both cases, I was unaware of what I was transporting and only found out after the war. Communist party members also devised various methods to recognize each other. Younger males would wear a carna-

tion or something else in their lapels or hats, or the tie would be worn in a certain manner, or a specific hand gesture would be used.

There were also attempts at sabotage. For example, when I built my second block-making machine, the person for whom I had built the first machine threatened to take me to court for copying his machine. All kinds of attempts were made to restrict and hold back those who were not party members.

Communist party members were very clever at hiding their identities. It was rumoured that party members went to church "twice on Sundays." Nobody really knew what other contacts these people had. While ordinary people, like myself, did not pay much attention to these kinds of activities and focused on personal concerns, there were others who were very suspicious and aware of what was going on. However, I do recall some over-the-shoulder laughs. For example, once when I was sawing wood with my father, before I started my apprenticeship, two party members (not known to us as such) passed by, laughed at us and made some unpleasant remarks that I did not quite understand. These same two individuals acted in a similar manner on an outing. They held very high party positions and after the war, one was hired as a judge and the other became a local official. I had met this judge a few years earlier in trade school, where his talk had always been secretive. It seemed that party members were focused more on advancing themselves than on improving the country, and I don't ever recall any of them having to work for a living.

In 1941, soon after Yugoslavia was invaded by Italian fascists and the Nazis, the communist party, calling itself the "liberation army" used this opportunity to eliminate those people who were opposed to, or suspected of being opposed to, a communist takeover of the government. The order came from the highest communist authority to eliminate all small farmers' sons and intellectuals who opposed the regime. Unfortunately, those who carried out these commands went above and beyond, asked no questions, and whole families, including children, "disappeared." In addition, people, including women, were subjected to unbelievable torture. The young girl who helped out at the house where I worked was one of the many who disappeared. They stripped her naked, tied her hands and legs together, and then put her onto an ant's nest. Apparently, she knew too much. Also, many villages and houses were burned. Young men, many of whom had been members of this "liberation army", armed themselves against this terror. Having witnessed these atrocities, they escaped and formed another army (domobranci) of over 12,000 men to fight the communists.

During this time, my apprenticeship proceeded and was not interrupted. My daily routine was to go to work and then go back home. Activities were restricted to the town, as the exits were closed and controlled by the Italian army. This changed when Italy capitulated on September 8, 1943. The Italian army left, leaving the town unprotected from the communists, who arrived shortly after. When the German army arrived from the next town's railroad station,

Rakek, the communists opened fire on them. Although the Germans turned back, they returned shortly after with heavy guns. I watched from a nearby town as a number of houses in my neighbourhood were burned. Later in the afternoon, the Germans left.

A few days after this incident, the communist "liberation army" mobilized all the men they could find and also brought into town hundreds of newly-mobilized men. I worked in the shop that was mobilized to work for them. On Sunday, September 18, 1943, the German army attacked the town and these mobilized men. They burned houses and fired on everybody who ran for cover. By the middle of the day, over 50 people had been killed while many died from wounds in the surrounding villages. I knew many of the victims and they were not communists. They had been used as the front line in case of attack. Many of the mobilized men used this attack as an opportunity to escape from the communist-controlled "liberation army." A few witnesses of that tragic day live here in Toronto.

On the day of the attack, my family hid. My father and I hid with the neighbours in their stable until late afternoon. I'm not sure where my mother was; my sister Milka was in the next village, while my brother Tone walked in the river while the Germans fired at him. He was lucky enough to make it unhurt to the next town. In the evening, the Germans left the town, taking a number of prisoners.

At that time, the communists strictly controlled everything in my hometown, Cerknica. At the shop where I worked, I was told to report to the mechanical shop located 2 ½ hours walking distance in

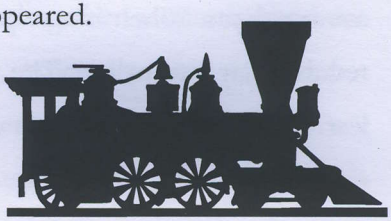
a town called Bloke, where my former band partner had recommended me to the brigade. In reality, I had been recommended to be shot. A couple of days after I arrived, I was sent back to my home town to the shop where I apprenticed to make a part. When I returned to Bloke with the completed part, I was surprised to find almost everyone gone. A major German offensive against the communists was underway and everybody had disappeared. This saved me from the "brigada". Not knowing where to turn, I returned home under cover of darkness, where twice I confronted, without realizing it, very dangerous situations and heavily armed and guarded outposts.

After a day or two at home, the anti-communist (domobranci) army mobilized me as a volunteer. About a week later, during the night, the next town of Grahovo was attacked by communists, where they killed any opposition they could find and burned the church and a well-known guesthouse. They also grabbed people out of their homes and burned them alive. About fifty people were killed. I stayed home the next day and hid in the neighbour's barn overnight. There was a special corner where I could hide. It was after midnight, when through a crack in the door, I saw a member of the communist "liberation army" set fire to the school.

My refugee status started the next day, when I left my hometown and went to the railroad station in Rakek. The German army was stationed there, protecting the town from communist attack. I picked up the daily newspaper and noticed an advertisement for mechanics at the railroad locomotive shop in Ljubljana. I responded

with an application and went to Postojna, where I got a job in a small shop, to wait for a reply. In this shop, a communist man anxious to hear my thoughts on various issues interrogated me. I was unaware at the time of possible consequences. Fortunately, the railroad shop in Ljubljana accepted me.

In order to move about, one had to have a permit issued by the occupying German army. On my second visit, I received this travelling permit along with a receipt authorizing me to work in the railroad shop upon payment of a small fee. I left on February 3, 1944. I had barely any clothes and had no idea where I was going to sleep or what I would eat. I had to secretly bypass my home, because the partisans (communists), who were in control of Cerknica, my hometown, were ever watchful for conscripts to their army or for anything that looked suspicious. One never knew whom to trust and one could be arrested under any pretence, including false accusations. Many people, under these circumstances, disappeared.



Before boarding the train, each passenger was checked. There was another inspection during the ride and then another when one disembarked. The stations were all guarded. When I arrived in Ljubljana, I stored my meagre possessions in a locker in the railroad station and went to seek out room and board. I had an address and some unclear directions, but I was fortunate to locate the apprentice's residence. There were over one hundred apprentices from different professions, some

students and some refugees like me boarding there. A priest and some nuns were in charge.

After settling in at the residence, I went to the railroad shop office with my permits and authorization and I started to work immediately with a group responsible for various repairs and maintenance jobs. My co-workers were a secretive group and did not say much. Once, our job was to disconnect the locomotive from the coal and water wagon. It was close to quitting time and my co-workers disappeared and left me on my own. The next day, each member of the group was told to report to the office to explain why the job had not been completed. The others presented all kinds of excuses. My turn was last and I explained how I was left alone to do the job. Unable to find anyone to assist me and unable to complete the job on my own, I had no choice but to leave the job undone. They asked me if I would have stayed if I could have completed the job on my own. I answered yes. When it was payday, everyone in the group received a reduced pay except me. The group members were not too happy to learn that I was the only one who had received my full pay.

Fortunately, soon after that incident, I was transferred to another group. Two others and I were in charge of the steam-operated air compressors on the locomotive and the associated equipment for air supply for the whole train. The compressors had been built by Westinghouse and were quite complex. Late one afternoon, we received an order to repair the leak in the steam locomotive and I was offered two hours overtime to stay after hours to complete this job. I

quickly and efficiently repaired the leak before the group leader left. When he learned that I had completed it so quickly, he said nothing, but the promised two hours overtime pay was cut by about a half.

Whenever there were air attack alarms, everyone in the shop boarded the special train that stood on the spare track for that purpose, and the train took us to the outskirts of the city. Once, when we were moving to the outskirts of the city on that train, there was an ammunition train on the spare track. This train could not move ahead because of track damage, and the German army guarded it. Anyone caught looking at that train was slapped in the face with a tree branch by the guard. I was one of the unlucky ones to get a slap.

One day, when I reported for work at my regular time, I was told to go to work in the locomotive overhaul section, which was about a kilometre away. Some other workers were given the same order and we walked together to the other shop. When we arrived, I was put to work with the group overhauling the locomotive and doing some other repairs. This was hard, especially since we did not know the man in charge and the procedures, nor did we have any tools. I was given a hammer, chisels, punches and a few other tools and told to help out with various tasks, which included rolling the locomotive wheels by hand to various locations.

One situation was particularly disturbing. One of my communist co-workers successfully set a bomb that killed the train engineer, who was not a communist supporter, as the train travelled to Kamnik. All that was left of him was some hair and dried human flesh.

One of the most difficult tasks was to install a high-pressure steam pipe inside the steam chamber of the locomotive. In order to do this, I had to go inside a small crawlspace above the steam pipes and find the appropriate hole that was dimly lit with a carbide light. I was chosen for this task because I was small enough to fit inside the chamber. I still have nightmares about that job. What made it even more frightening was the possibility of an air attack alarm while I was in the chamber; it would be impossible for me to get out quickly and go to the shelter. Also, the chamber had no ventilation and there was always someone assigned to ensure that the person inside was responding appropriately and was not overcome by the lack of air. Fortunately, my job soon changed and I was assigned to fit white metal bearings to the wheel axles. I also worked rotating shifts – day, afternoon, and night.

When the air attack sirens sounded, we would run to the nearby shelter under the hill. In the fall of 1944, at about 12 noon, while I was sleeping after having finished my night shift, a few bombs were dropped on the outskirts of the city while one bomb hit the section where I had worked a few weeks earlier. Hundreds of bombers of the allied forces flew often both by day and night over the city on their way to bomb Germany.

One day, they bombed the large railway bridge, called "Borovniški most" over a swampy area between two bushy high hills. Luckily, little damage was done and the bridge could still be used. A few days later, on the weekend, I attempted a trip by train to Rakek, near

my hometown, Cerknica, over this slightly damaged bridge. I saw the damaged part, which was at the edge of the bridge. The rail track was not affected. I also saw the large craters at the side of the bridge left by the bombs that had missed the bridge.

Unfortunately, I was not able to reach my destination. After the train crossed the bridge, an air attack alarm sounded. The train stopped and its passengers jumped through the windows and doors to safety. The smaller planes gunned the locomotive while we passengers watched from the distance. A thick cloud of steam came from the locomotive. After the excitement was over, most of the passengers returned to the train and after a long wait, they either returned to Ljubljana or continued their travel. The damaged train was pulled to the nearest station. I returned to Ljubljana and tried to travel to Rakek the next weekend.

Several days later, in the late evening hours, the alarm sounded again. I was in Ljubljana in the boarding house when planes appeared and shone lights, like a large umbrella, above the large bridge, which was then bombed. From then on, passengers had to get off the train at the bombed bridge, walk through the swampy area, and then board another train on the other side to continue their travel. One had to be very careful when crossing the swamp, as there were huge holes created by the bombs that had missed the bridge. I travelled this way a few times, both during the day and also at night. This bridge was never repaired or rebuilt, although new tracks were installed at lower levels after the war.

Another large bridge, named "Štampetov most", had also been hit and was badly damaged but still in operation. A major repair program was underway and many workers had been conscripted to work on it, when it was bombed again. One day, (I think it was a Friday), surveillance planes with machine guns appeared and open fire on the workers, killing many of them as they ran for safety. On Sunday, as I was taking the train to Rakek, an alarm was sounded just as the train approached the "Štampetov most". Everyone jumped from the train and ran for cover. The locomotive was again machine-gunned. This time, I did not return to the train but instead, walked with a friend to Vrhnika. On the way, we stopped at a nearby cemetery house where, through the window, we saw five-foot-high groups of plain coffins stacked against the walls. From the coffins onto the concrete floor ran streams of water and blood from the decomposing bodies. They were the victims of the air strike. When we arrived in Vrhnika, we took another train back to Ljubljana.

In the spring of 1945, I stopped taking the train and instead, travelled by bike, sometimes with friends. Once I picked up a young boy at the hospital and gave him a lift on my bike for about 50 km. He had no other way of getting home.

In the locomotive overhaul shop where I worked, there was also a small foundry for pouring white metal bearings. The same foundry was also used to pour the iron plates used in the manufacture of electric irons, which had just been invented. These irons, however, were built for the "black market." I was able to make two

electric irons for my family, which were still in use several years after the war. Various other products, such as formed steel, bolts, cut steel and so on were also produced for the "black market."

Having come to Ljubljana, the door to return home was virtually closed. Any kind of travel required a very good reason, special permission and photo identification. I told the authorities where I lived and my need to go home. After several months, I finally received the necessary documentation and I was then able to travel free of charge on the trains.

The German army controlled any travel and I had to provide the appropriate documentation on demand. I eventually bought myself a railway cap that I would pull over my eyes as I pretended to sleep. They would leave me alone.

I worked 40 hours a week in the shop. On the weekend, I always took the train in an attempt to visit my home. Unfortunately, I could not make it home for most of 1944, so my parents would meet me in Rakek, where we would exchange news, various personal items and food. It was dangerous to travel home. The communists controlled my hometown and they were always on the lookout for "unusual" activity and the comings and goings of the townspeople. They would even send children to take care of the goats along the road and, at the same time, to watch for who was entering and leaving the town. One could be "arrested" on the slightest pretence and serious consequences would follow if you were caught. Thus, I did not feel

that it would be safe to return home, as there were people who did not want to see me alive.

On one such visit to Rakek, a former friend who had worked with me as an apprentice, arrived by bike to try to convince me to go with him for a social visit to a house just on the outskirts of the railroad town. He was a communist party member and if I had gone with him, I would never have returned alive. By Christmas of 1944, however, the anti-communists gained control of my hometown and I was able to visit home regularly each weekend until I finally left for good as a refugee on May 4, 1945.

While I lived in Ljubljana at the residence, the food was rationed. The residence did its best, but there never was enough. When I visited home on the weekends, I was able to get some extra food, which I really enjoyed and I felt full for three days. On my visits home, I helped my parents out with various jobs that needed to be done. Occasionally, they were able to give me some flour to take back to Ljubljana. I gave this flour to the nuns at the residence and they would bake a loaf of bread for me. This bread was a welcome addition to the meagre diet.

In 1945 before leaving home

IV

My Journey as a Refugee

May 1945 – June 1948

(translated from Slovenian)

I left my home in Cerknica on the fourth of May 1945 at about three or four in the morning; my sisters Milka and Ivanka had not yet finished packing when I was ready and they left about a half hour after I did. I worked in Ljubljana in the locomotive shop at Šiška as a machinist and I had been home for the weekend. I could see the gunfire, which was about three kilometers away near Podskrajnik, moving towards Cerknica. With a knapsack on my back, I climbed through the back window of the house, crossed the neighbour's yard, went past the church through Begunje and Otave to Notranje Gorice and then onto Ljubljana to the apprentices' residence at Kersnikova 4, where I had been living for the past year. In Otave, I caught up with several others from my town who were taking the same route. When we looked back, we saw the burning army barracks at Slivnica, which had been torched by the domobranci when they retreated. I was extremely fatigued and don't remember the dates very well. I was quite shaken by news that people had been hanged to die on the linden tree by the roadside between Rakek and Unec. I also heard that my neighbour had threatened me by saying, "We'll get that damned Mihevc, the altar boy; we'll show him the devil." One of my father's friends said that there would be tears in the house if my brother and I do not report to the partisans. At any rate, the plan was to kill me.

I think that it was on the first day after I arrived in Ljubljana that it became clear that the partisans were winning. Store windows had posters that showed a woman fleeing, with a knapsack over her

shoulder, along with her children, and holding a sign that read "On orders from Moscow." She was forced to take refuge. These had been placed by anti-communists as a warning that the Slovenian communists, on orders from communist Russia, were using various tactics to force people to flee. I joined the thousands of other refugees from all over Slovenia and moved with them towards the Gorenjska area. The German border patrols north of Ljubljana abandoned their stations when we arrived. With a group of others from Cerknica, we reached the village of Suha (if I recall correctly) where we spent the night sleeping in the hay barns. Mr. Tone Ponikvar, the mayor of Cerknica, bought a calf, some of which we cooked for our meal. The remaining raw pieces of meat we carried with us as we continued on our journey. This was the last food eaten in Slovenia. From then on, we ate whatever food we carried in our knapsacks.

We continued onwards towards Tržič where we slept (if we could) on the bare ground. Early the next morning, after a cup of tea – I'm not sure where it came from – we joined the refugees, which included domobranci and stragglers from the German army, and went through the long tunnel through the Karavanke. Just before the tunnel were burning army barracks, which I think were abandoned by the prisoners who had been working on constructing the tunnel. Exhausted and oftentimes hanging onto the horse-driven wagons, we walked in the mud through the dark tunnel, at the end of which we finally saw Koroško. We rested a bit and ate whatever we had in our knapsacks. The walk downhill was easier but it ended soon. We

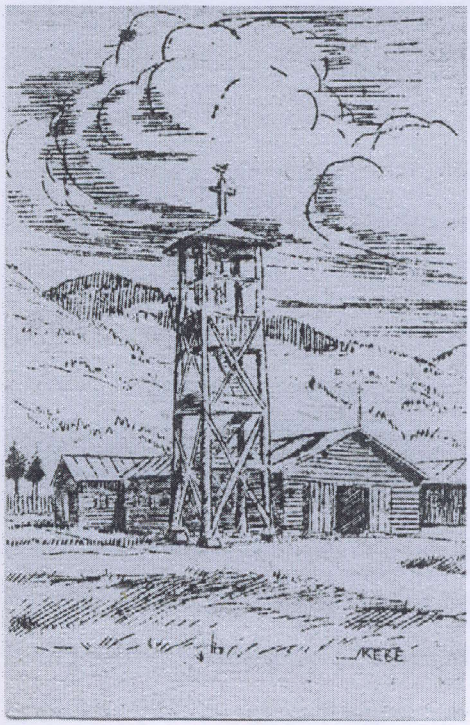
learned that the bridge over the Drava river was overtaken by the partisans and our way was blocked. Seventeen of us, mostly from Notranjska, decided to go through the woods towards Beljak. It soon became dark, and we spent the night in the woods. Two women from our party were sent to the nearby village to determine the situation at the bridge. They shortly returned to inform us that the bridge was open. We rejoined the rest of the group and continued onwards with the rest of the refugees towards Vetrinje. I think it was the ninth of May.

In Vetrinje

When we arrived in Vetrinje, we were led to an open field that was totally exposed to the weather. There were between 20,000 and 30,000 people, including domobranci and Slovenian families. About a week later, there were fewer of us. The German prisoners were moved first, while the Slovenian domobranci and civilians were last. Many Slovenians were transported back to Slovenia, under the direction of the English army, which loaded them onto trains and told them that they were going to Italy. Instead,

they were sent directly into communist hands where over 12,000 were killed after suffering gross atrocities. (Recent investigation suggests that this mass murder eliminated over 200,000 people.) At the end of May 1945, this forced return was ultimately stopped through the intervention of the Red Cross, under the direction of Mr. Barre, who was a Canadian, and also Dr. Valentin Mersol (a Slovenian).

After these orders came, we were left in that open field for the next three weeks, until we were resettled to various camps in Austria.



There was a severe shortage of food, especially among those who had left home several days earlier. Franc Arhar and Mr. Bauman were extraordinary in their attempts to obtain food. They went north from Celovec into a village and bought two calves that they led through Celovec into the camp later in the evening. Early the next morning, a young butcher, Tone Bavdek, went about the task of carving up the meat and thus we were able to add to our meager rations.

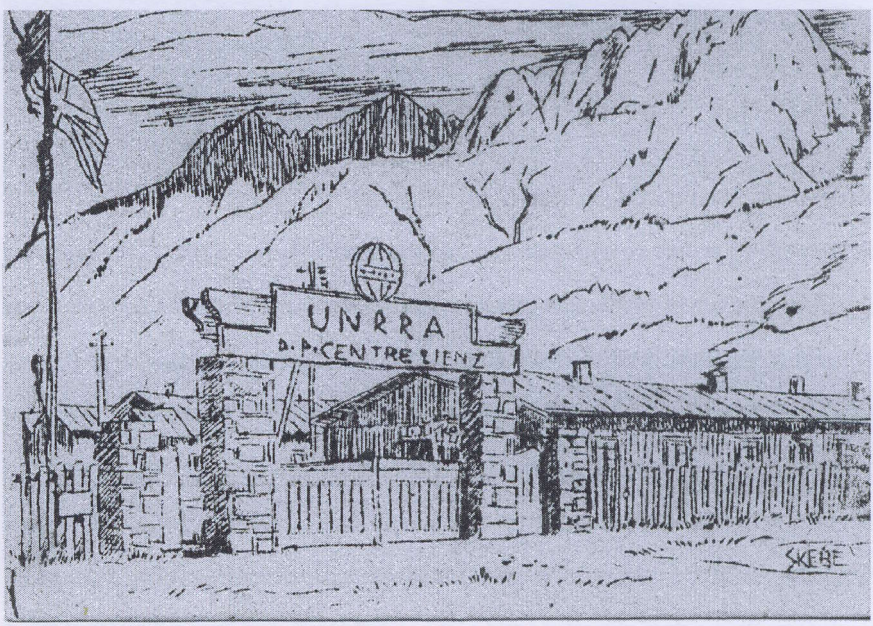
I don't remember who provided the flour nor did we know how to bake bread without an oven. Again, Franc Arhar and Bauman demonstrated their resourcefulness and Franc somehow acquired a stone plate from the nearby castle. It was carried to our tent and he, a stonemason, built an oven. We all helped in whatever way we could and we finally baked our bread. Very soon, the rest of the camp learned that we were baking bread and others came by with their flour to bake their bread. The privilege of using the oven was paid for with some of the bread that was baked. One day, a young woman (Bara Remec, renowned as an artist in both Argentina and Slovenia) came by and drew our oven, the only one of this type in the camp. A few years ago, I saw that same picture in a magazine or a book.

Mr. Babnik, currently in New York, kept us up-to-date on what was occurring in Slovenia. He had come from Slovenia after the Slovenian domobranci were sent back. Standing on a horse-driven wagon, he provided us with information about the situation.

In Peggez (June 1945)

We stayed in Vetrinje for about six or seven weeks and I don't recall the exact date in June 1945 when the refugees were moved out. The largest group went to Spittal and Peggez near Lienz, while two smaller groups went to Judenburg and to Kelenberg by the Drava river. Our group was taken by the English to the railway station in Celovec, which had been heavily bombed. We traveled in ordinary railcars, from which we saw many smaller civilian and army camps that were awaiting further orders. We also saw railcars that had been

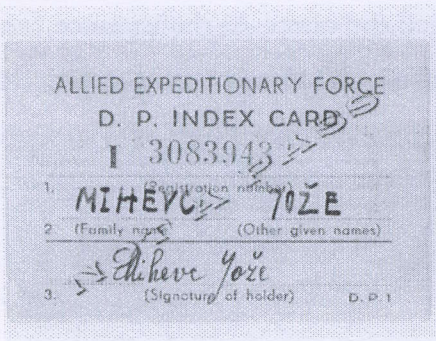
bombed by plane. The train stopped at Peggez, from which we walked about a kilometer to the camp's entrance. Russians who were forced to return to Russia had previously occupied this camp. (There is a Russian graveyard at the site and Tolstoy's book, ***The Minister and the Massacres***, documents this event). A few Russians were allowed to remain and they managed the camp. At the entrance, we were told how many people were allowed into each army barrack. It

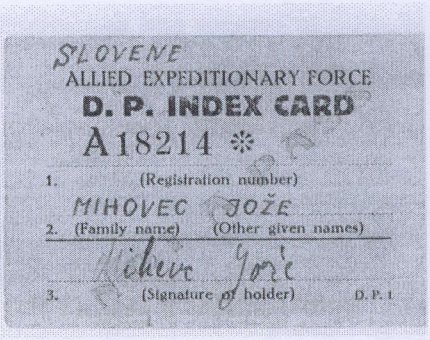


wasn't until the evening hours that we were given barrack number 27. As I mentioned earlier, some Russians remained and we shared the rooms with them. Since it was so late, we did not organize ourselves that evening and tried to get whatever sleep was possible under the conditions. The next day, we got ourselves organized, decided who

slept where, and begged for some straw for the beds from the farmers in the neighbouring village, Tristach.

Soon after, we were registered and given a DP (Displaced Person) identification card. The camp kitchens were staffed by the Russians and, at the beginning, they cooked for us. There was little food


ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE
D. P. INDEX CARD
I 3083943
1. (Registration number)
MIHEVC JOŽE
2. (Family name) (Other given names)
Mihevc Jože
3. (Signature of holder) D. P. 1


SLOVENE
ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE
D. P. INDEX CARD
A18214
1. (Registration number)
MIHOVEC JOŽE
2. (Family name) (Other given names)
Mihevc Jože
3. (Signature of holder) D. P. 1

and we had to be resourceful in taking care of ourselves. Because we had left home in such a hurry, we had overlooked packing some essential items, such as cutlery and bowls. I had two spoons and I gave one to someone who did not have one. Soon after, though, I broke my own. So I found a small, copper pipe and attached it to the spoon; this spoon served me well for a long time. A bigger problem was the bowls from which we could eat. At the beginning, we used ordinary "tin soup cans". However, soon after our arrival in Peggez, I created for our group from Notranjska bowls out of the large tin cans that the English had tossed when they were done eating the well-wrapped dried food.

Camp food generally consisted of the following:

1 kilogram loaf of bread for 10 people daily
1 liter canned meat for 10 people daily
1 small spoon lard and sugar daily

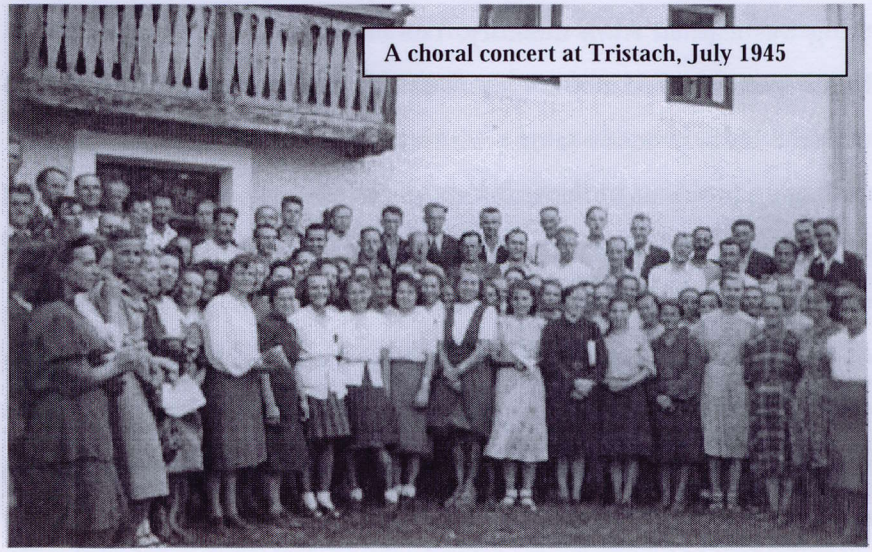
In addition, in the morning and evening, we received a cup of tea, and at lunch, some kind of vegetable soup with a few pieces of potato, with occasionally a few pieces of pasta. Our daily meal totaled about 700 to 900 calories daily. The daily rations, delivered in a bucket, were picked up from the camp kitchen based on the number of people listed in each barrack. The commandant of the barrack generally distributed the dried food at around 10 am in the morning.

Because of these low rations, we often wandered to the neighbouring villages "to beg" and were thus able to acquire some potatoes. These we cooked ourselves out in the open in tin cans, making a fire using small twigs that we picked up in the woods nearby. There was lots of damage caused by a major storm and we were put to work loading gravel to rebuild the roads and bridges around Lienz. Because we were malnourished, we did not accomplish much and the chauffeurs of the army trucks were sympathetic to our plight. Thus, a truck only half full of gravel would drive back at four o'clock.

We learned that there was more food available in the camps in Italy and many people decided to go there. Four or five of us decided to go. Because the roads by the river were closed the trip was arduous as we had to go over the mountains by the Drava River. The narrow

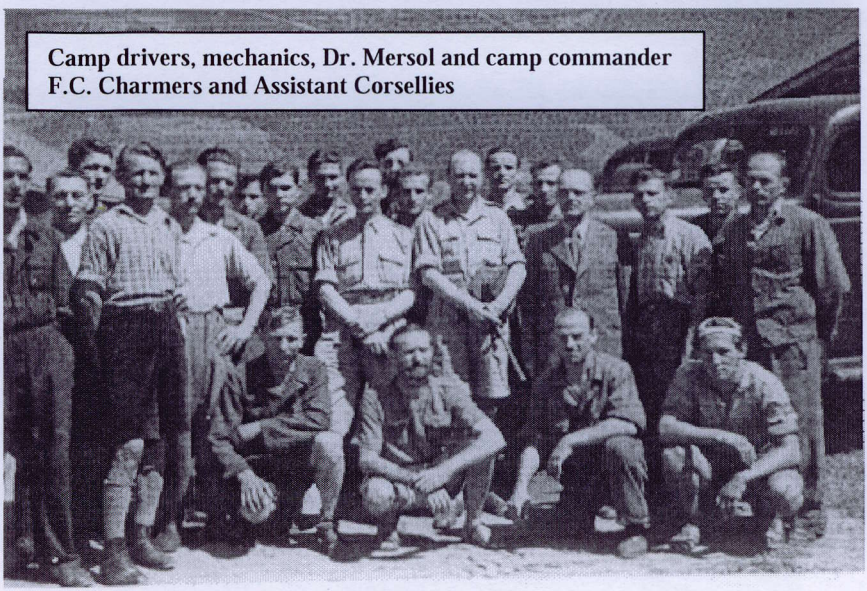
valley of the Drava River opened up at its source by Toblack, where the view was beautiful with the mountains in the background. Here is where the water forked and either went into the Drava through Slovenia or went into Italy. A narrow railroad wound through the Tyrols in Italy to Cortina di Ampezzo. From there, an occasional civilian truck would make its way along the serpentine route toward lower ground further south. Some of these truck drivers would be kind enough to pick up travelers. Nonetheless, it was still a long trek to the refugee and army camp in the suburbs of Treviso. It took us four days and three nights and we reached Treviso at the end of June or the beginning of July 1945. In order to obtain food, one had to register and obtain a DP identification card. The food was really better than in Austria, but the intense Italian heat was unbearable for many. In order to improve the food situation, people helped themselves by participating in the black market and by selling tobacco in order to obtain Italian lire and other needed supplies. After a few days, our group of four or five decided to return by the same route to Austria (I don't recall why we decided to return) where we remained until we were settled overseas in 1948.

Shortly after we returned to Austria from Italy, the authorities closed the border to Italy. It so happened that someone named Telic from the Loška valley in Notranjska attempted the trek to Italy. He did not obey the border guards and he was shot. His body was returned to Lienz where he was buried in August 1945, I think.



A choral concert at Tristach, July 1945

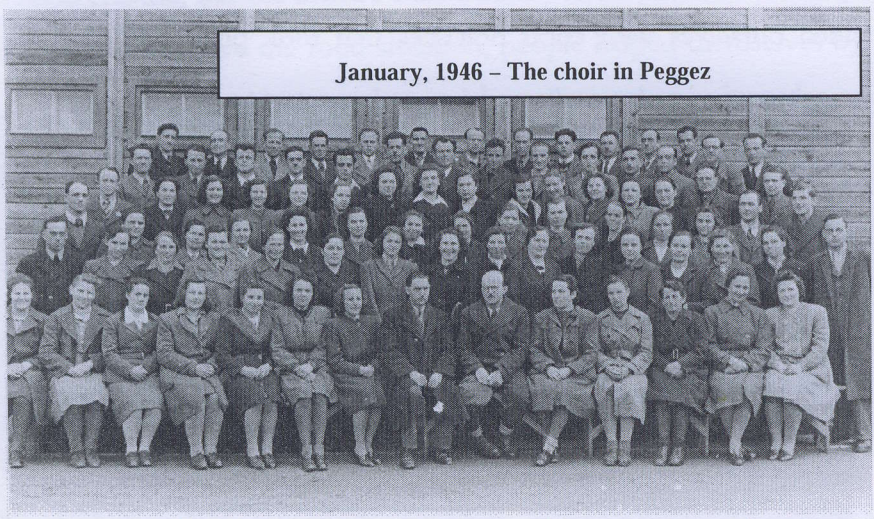
Thereafter, we settled into the routine of camp life and entertained ourselves with choir practices that took place two or three



Camp drivers, mechanics, Dr. Mersol and camp commander F.C. Charmers and Assistant Corsellies

times a day in the nearby forest. We had no sheet music and everything was learned from memory. The choir leader was professor Mihelic. We organized a concert at Tristach in July 1945. We continued with the choir practices along with the concerts, which took place in the large church in Lienz and also at the camp itself. Late in the fall of 1945, the United Nations Relief Agency came to our aid and provided us with clothes for the coming winter, and in the picture taken of the choir in January 1946, we are all wearing the same suits, many of which had been made over, although this was not obvious.

At the same time, the leaders of the camp, along with the cooperation of the Slovenian members, organized various tasks, such as: preparing firewood, peeling potatoes, making cloth toys for the



January, 1946 – The choir in Peggez

children, working in the sewing room, making tin plates, bowls and various wood products, working in the store room, and various other tasks. Any larger tasks could not be undertaken as there were no

tools or implements available. I initially assisted with the potatoes, in the garden and then later, helped to maintain the camp trucks. Because of my employment at the railroad station in Ljubljana outside of my field, I was behind in my knowledge and training in the automotive trade. So I tried to catch up and teach myself by performing jobs even if it was not required just so that I could learn. Late in the fall of 1945, all German money had to be traded in for Austrian shillings (at a loss), although camp work continued to be paid. The youth attended camp school, which provided education from kindergarten to high school, while any university students went to Gradez. Several courses were offered, including in the trades, and one could obtain a diploma. The work and sacrifices made by the teachers in offering this opportunity was much appreciated.

Many plays were presented in barrack 14 – the auditorium, and I participated in two of them. Choir practices, which continued after hours, were moved from the woods into a room in the barracks and the concerts continued until we were moved to Spittal in November

August 31, 1946 - Receiving our diplomas

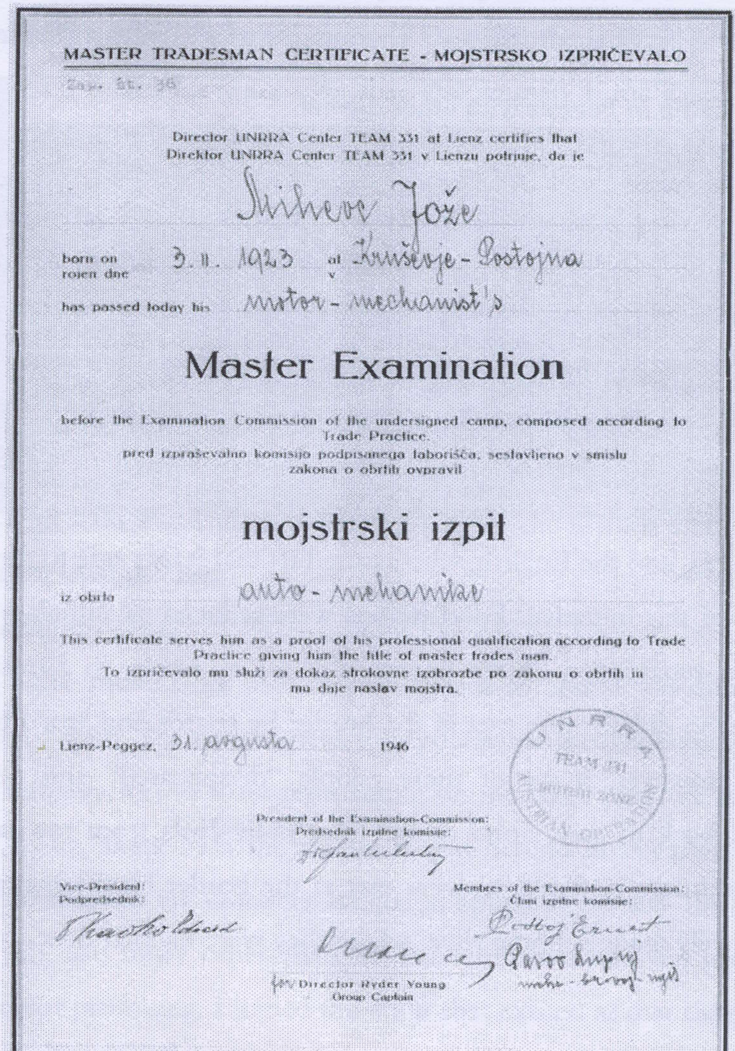
1946. The choir also went on an outing to Grosslockner in September 1945 and performed at the camp in Kelenberg, where we had to go across the Drava River by boat. There was also an outing to Gosposvetsko fields. We were able to accomplish all of this despite the meagre food rations we received.

When we received our trade diplomas, we arranged a display of our achievements; however, we slept beside our displays because we feared that the communists would come in and destroy our display and sabotage our efforts. One morning, the Austrian police arrived in the camp and nobody was allowed to leave the cabins. We were suspected of harbouring Nazis. All the men were searched on their upper thighs for the Nazi tattoo, but the accusations of the Slovenian party proved to be false. Our camp at Peggez was one of the main targets of the secret police and we were often the subjects of various searches. Mr. Lozar composed a special song to commemorate this situation. He sang it over the camp microphones when the Americans announced that the secret of the atomic bomb had been stolen. It went something like this:

> The secret of the atomic bomb was stolen.
> Most likely it was us who stole it.
> The investigation will come soon
> They'll look for the culprits
> In Lienz and in Spittal.

There were many speeches and classes among the various refugee groups, which caused considerable competition. I was very

surprised one day when a friend approached me with the directive to attend a special speech in order to stop it. To me it was unthinkable to do such a thing to others who were in the same situation as we were and I firmly refused to participate. Religious life was also very active and the weekday and Sunday masses were very well attended.



MASTER TRADESMAN CERTIFICATE - MOJSTRSKO IZPRIČEVALO

Zap. št. 36

Director UNRRA Center TEAM 331 at Lienz certifies that
Direktor UNRRA Center TEAM 331 v Lienzu potrjuje, da je

Šuhev Jože

born on / rojen dne 3. II. 1923 at / v Kruševje - Postojna

has passed today his motor - mechanist's

Master Examination

before the Examination Commission of the undersigned camp, composed according to Trade Practice.
pred izpraševalno komisijo podpisanega taborišča, sestavljeno v smislu zakona o obrtih ovpravil

mojstrski izpit

iz obrta avto - mehanikar

This certificate serves him as a proof of his professional qualification according to Trade Practice giving him the title of master trades man.
To izpričevalo mu služi za dokaz strokovne izobrazbe po zakonu o obrtih in mu daje naslov mojstra.

Lienz-Peggez, 31. avgusta 1946

UNRRA TEAM 331

President of the Examination-Commission:
Predsednik izpitne komisije:

Vice-President:
Podpredsednik:

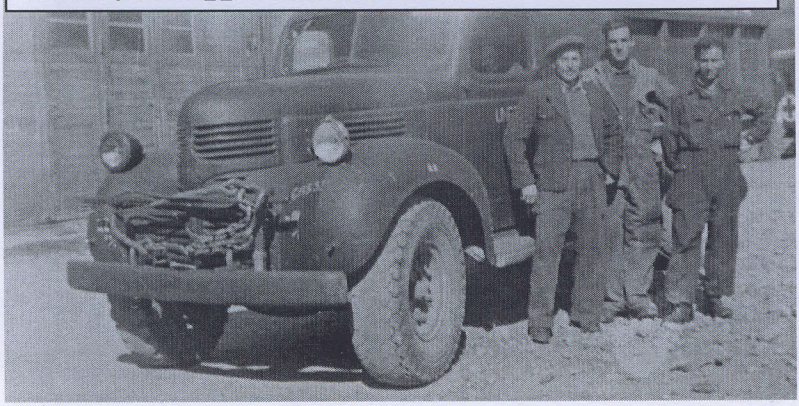
Membres of the Examination-Commission:
Člani izpitne komisije:

for Director Ryder Young
Group Captain

The singing of the choir contributed to the enjoyment of the mass. The priest was Father Gregor Mali. There were some in the camp, however, who were not interested in participating in plays, festivals, outings, choirs or church activities, but their lack of interest did not dampen the enthusiasm of those who did become involved.

The Slovenian secret police opened a repatriation office in the camp in 1946. Their propaganda encouraged us to return voluntarily

At camp in Peggez with other drivers.



to Slovenia, and the English, who assured us that it was safe to do so, supported this initiative. Food rations were reduced to stimulate interest in repatriation. Some people did opt to return to Slovenia. Those who did so were met at the border by guards and "escorted" home. However, many of these people "disappeared" and never made it back to their home town. Four individuals from my cabin returned home to Slovenia, were met at the border by these guards and actually made it home alive, where they were handed over to the

police department for interrogation. One of these lucky ones was Mile in Rakek, whom I visited on my trip back to Slovenia in1992.

Despite the uncertain future and the various hardships of camp life, there were some interesting experiences. Once, I went to visit one of the girls in the next room. Then, some of my friends played a trick on me. What they did was they locked me in the room, climbed overhead under the roof, opened one of the ceiling panels and poured a bucket of water over me. The women in the cabin did not appreciate these kinds of pranks.

We took turns in the barracks helping the cooks peel potatoes. In our barrack, the women in the next were assigned this task. Once they decided that it was "payback" time. They waited by the door with a blanket. When they saw the figure of the commandant of the barrack approaching, they covered him with the blanket and beat him up. They did not realize until it was too late that they were beating the high school teacher by mistake. Some of the women were beating up their own teacher.

In Fragant (1947)

The move from the camp at Peggez to Spittal was done all at once by train. The camp trucks transported the meager belongings of the refugees to the spare train sitting on the track near the camp. A few of us, along with the trucks, stayed behind in Peggez an extra month to clean up. Once we arrived in Spittal in January 1947, I lost my job, like many others had. It was midwinter and the prospects were not promising. I joined the choir that existed at that camp. This

choir had decreased in number because many of the members worked outside the camp. Fr. Janez Kalan (died in Argentina), who, during the war, had been a priest in Cerknica and was now experiencing camp life with us, had an old friend who needed help in his woodworking business. The French captives who had been employed by him until then had been released and had returned to France. Thus, several of us were able to obtain employment. Two housekeepers started at the beginning of February. I started at the end of February. My job as chief mechanic was to repair the badly worn equipment. Several other men got jobs working in the woods (lumberjacks) about a month later.

It was difficult to get used to the new surroundings, especially since the work was different and more demanding than what I was accustomed to at the previous camp. I was involved in various tasks such as fixing a water turbine, a saw for cutting timber, a stone crusher, and the building and maintenance of cable car equipment and other related tasks. I had a very interesting experience once when I was working on the cable car station along the mountain path. I heard a rustling in the forest and when I turned, I saw an amazing sight. There was a column of five or six deer. The first and last deer in the column had huge antlers. The deer and I stared at each other and when I made a step forward, they began slowly to retreat. Near the crest of the mountain awaited another surprise. I had never before seen such a huge anthill – this one was almost a story high.

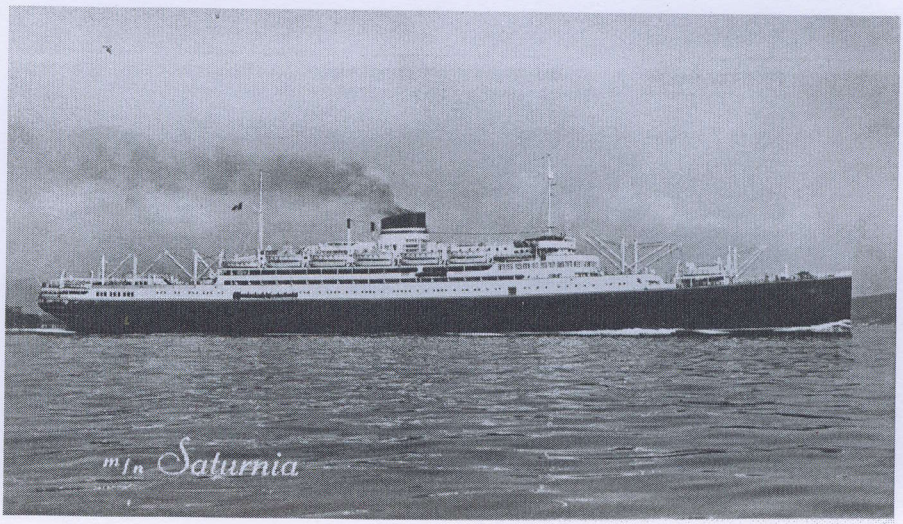
The owners of the business were Slovenians and they also spoke Slovenian. The father had died before we arrived, but before the war I believe that he was the manager of the mine Zagorje on the Sava river, where the family still had relatives. The children were Franc, Kristal and Erika. The business employed about twenty Slovenian refugees, mostly lumberjacks, those who worked on the saws, bricklayers, housekeepers and me, the chief mechanic. The lumberjacks would send the timber down the icy path into the valley, and in the spring along the river to the saws. Much of the timber was also transported by cable from the hills across the river to the road.

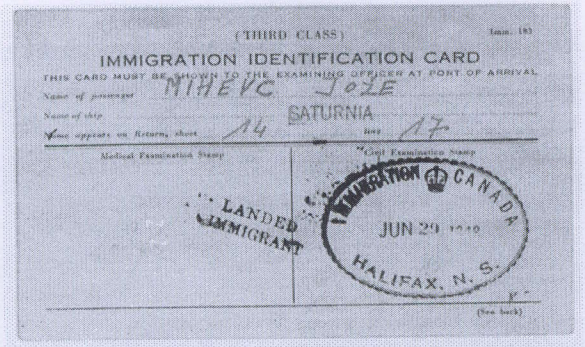
Franc had offered to assist me in obtaining Austrian citizenship, but at that point, I had already made the decision to emigrate to Canada. When I left their employ, he provided me with a reference letter. Considering the times, the food was adequate. In the summer of 1947, the workers along with their friends from the camp went on an outing to Grosslockner.

It was likely in Peggez that the solution to the refugee problem became apparent and it was to settle them overseas in the Americas. In Spittal, brochures were distributed that explained the various opportunities available. My aunt in Cleveland agreed to sponsor me to the United States, but it was too late as I had already been accepted into Canada to work on a farm. Having passed a medical examination, I along with over one hundred other happy Slovenians, left for Canada on June 12, 1948 on the Italian ship, Saturnia.

With co-workers from the logging and gravel firm – June 12, 1948

One hour before leaving the Austrian camp – June 14, 1948





(THIRD CLASS) Imm. 183

IMMIGRATION IDENTIFICATION CARD

THIS CARD MUST BE SHOWN TO THE EXAMINING OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL

Name of passenger MIHEVC Joze

Name of ship SATURNIA

Line appears on Returns, sheet 14 line 17

Medical Examination Stamp

Civil Examination Stamp

LANDED IMMIGRANT

IMMIGRATION CANADA

JUN 29 1948

HALIFAX, N. S.

(See back)

UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND REHABILITATION ADMINISTRATION

AUSTRIAN MISSION

TEAM 331. LIENZ

C.M.F.

Tel. 12/3779 Team 331.

To : whom it may concern.

This is to certify that M i h e v c Joze

DP Number A 18214 was employed in this camp

from 25th Dec.45. to ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ 31st December 1946.

as worker. (unskilled labour)

mechanic-driver

His work was found satisfactory.

P.C. Chalmers,
Director, Team 331.

Lienz,
~~31st October 1946.~~
31st December 1946.

Amtsstempiglie (Anmeldung)

Meldezettel für Hauptmieter

Deutliche Schrift mit Tinte!

1 Ortsgemeinde: Flattach/M. pol. Bezirk: Spittal/Dr. Land: Kärnten
Ortschaft (Stadtbezirk): Fragant Straße Gasse Haus-Nr. 84 Tür-Nr. —

2	Vor- und Zuname:	J e z e M i h e v c
	auch der Eltern:	Anton u. Appolonia Mihevc geb. Premrl
3	Beruf:	Schlosser & Werkmeister
4	Geburtsort, -bezirk, -land:	Hrusevc, Jugoslavien
5	Staatsbürgerschaft:	Jugoslavische
6	Geburtstag, -monat, -jahr; Religion; ledig, verheiratet, verwitwet, geschieden:	3./II.1923, röm.kath. ledig
7	Name und Geburtsdatum der Ehegattin: Gattin, auch Mädchenname und Vor- und Zunamen der Eltern:	—
8	Kinder unter 14 Jahren:	—
9	Tag der Eheschließung:	—
10	Frühere Wohnung:	Lager Peggetz
11	Ordentlicher Wohnsitz:	Fragant No.84
12	Name und Geburtsdatum der Kinder: der Reisedokumente:	Wohnsitzbesch.No.599300
13	des österr. Paßvisums:	Beschäftigungsnachweis No. 068606 DP Index A.18214

Fragant, am 13. Juni 1948

Laut Amtsstempiglie abgemeldet am: 11. Juni

Ist ausgezogen am: 12.6.1948

nach (Ort, Bezirk, Gasse, Nr.): Kanada

Conclusion

I often wonder how and why I was one among the many thousand refugees. I often feel that the experiences of my youth are echoed in the following song:

A poor child I wander about
Like a pitiful lost soul
In my loneliness, I shed quiet tears
God is the only one who watches me...
Nobody would give me a hand
Yet everyone would mock me.

Writing about this period of my life has also made me reflect on my life before and after these terrible years, and I feel connected to the truths in the following poem:

I am sentenced to wander in foreign lands
It is difficult to tell you how wretched that is.

The trauma of those days transplanted me into new surroundings, where I was able to start anew. My roots here in Canada are deep and I would not be able to go back. I will remain outside my homeland, and I often recall the song that is sung when one leaves the homeland.

Oh, farewell, my homeland
I will never forget you - never - never.

Humankind continually strives to improve and to learn from past mistakes. The solution lies in working together, understanding each other, common sense and the successes of a full life. Above all, the aim should be for peace.

The beginning of a new chapter was about to unfold on May 12, 1951 when I married Anna Zorc

Celebrating our growing family – Anne, John, Emily, Joe and baby Mark

A reunion with my siblings Ivanka, Milka and Tone around 1970

V

Visit To Slovenia

1985

Memories of my youth prompted me to visit the country of my birth, where I had hoped for a better future. It seems that "every bird likes to go back to its nest" and I visited again in May 1985. Time had erased some of the bad memories and I remembered how I had successfully prepared myself mentally for them when I had visited nineteen years earlier in 1966.

My wife Ann did not go this time, because she had been to Rome, Lourdes and Slovenija just three years earlier. So, my son Joe and my grandson Justin accompanied me on this trip and the planning started at Christmas. We flew to Munich, rented a car and then drove through the snow-covered Alps into Slovenija. At the border of Austria and Germany I asked the guard in German how far it was to Malnitz. He understood my German and answered accordingly.

After about an hour's drive through the picturesque Salzburg province, we arrived in snow-covered Malnitz. The train through the tunnel on the Tyrolean side had just departed which meant we would have to wait an hour. As we exited the tunnel, the Molska valley opened up before our eyes and we were able to see the Drava river, which originated in Toblach on the Italian border. I had hoped to spend some time in Malnitz, where I had worked after the war, but because it was late and we did not want to arrive in Slovenia after dark, we proceeded onward. We quickly arrived in Podkoren, the border of Austria and Slovenija, where I recalled reading about this place in my father's journals from the First World War.

We left the snow behind and entered the Gorenjska area, where we saw the river Sava and, proceeded towards Ljubljana. I felt like singing the following song:

Vrba, the p lace of my dear and happy home
Where the house of my father stands.

It grew dark very quickly. After asking several times for directions to Kleče, and the home of Kanci and Nevenka, we finally arrived and being quite exhausted, we rested for the night.

The rooster's crow awakened us in the morning, and, when I looked out the window, I was shocked to see about a quarter of a metre of snow on the ground. It was interesting to see the apple blossoms poking through the snow. Someone had rescued the blossoms by shaking off the snow with a long stick.

After some conversation and planning, we departed for Cerknica, my hometown. The new highway from Ljubljana to Razdrto led us through many places that I recognized, having traveled through the area by bike during the war years. We went through Unec and then onto the road to Cerknica. Although a lot of things were still the same, there were also many changes, including new buildings and rearranged roads that altered the appearance of the landscape somewhat. The linden trees by the road between Rakek and Cerknica were gone. A factory had replaced the field where frogs used to lull me to sleep when I was younger. The statue of Ludvik Lovko reminded me of the band practices, plays and performances of my youth. The last performance took place in 1941 when the Italians

occupied Logatec and the territory. There were also many renovated and newly-built homes which changed the appearance of the town immensely. I recognized the church steeple, however, which still showed the damage done by a German grenade in 1943. The trees in the forests in Slivnica and towards Begunje had grown taller. I was reminded of the song:

Where are those paths that used to exist but are no longer there.

The ride across "our field" reminded me of the first time that I dug for potatoes in 1930.

We finally arrived at my brother Tone's house, where we were warmly welcomed. We settled in for a good long talk that lasted until late into the night, and we planned the details of the visit. Since it was May, one my wishes was to go to church for "šmarnice." So, we went to church, where people participated the same as they had in the past, although I would have liked to have heard more of the songs dedicated to Mary and the month of May. I looked around the church and did not recognize anyone. There was some construction going on and new lights were being installed on the inside walls. Outside the church, younger people waited for the end of the ceremony so that they could continue with their work in the church. A friend, Kunčev from Sv. Roka, broke away from the group of young people and introduced himself to me. I got the feeling that he wanted to continue chatting with me, but unfortunately, I was at a loss for words and couldn't think of anything to say to encourage further discussion. I felt totally unprepared for such impromptu get-togethers.

I then went into the church office to arrange for a mass. The friendly, middle-aged priest was quite happy to show me around the church office and the renovated classroom, where stables used to be. I noticed that the priest was very understanding of older people and their experiences; he was quite knowledgeable about current affairs and how the younger people were being taught the truth about the past.

One of the highlights of my visit was having tea with Mrs. Primšar, a former neighbour, and reminiscing about the difficult times we had endured in the past. My mind was filled with many memories, such as her husband Jože and his parents, two weddings and those who had died, harvesting the crops, and on and on. The fire from 1943 was certainly a very sad memory for both of us, yet Mrs. Primšar was able to keep her head high and even during the most difficult times had been able to pick herself up and start all over again.

I also visited with the Jernik family in Dolenja vas, where I met the younger family members and noticed how quick they were to perform any tasks that needed to be done. I was somewhat embarrassed when I did not recognize them a few days later at the church. This would not have happened when I was younger. I was also very surprised to meet up with the very happy Semič fellow. During the war, I had taken him from the hospital in Ljubljana to his home on my bicycle, no other form of transportation being available. Today, I would not attempt such a trek.

When I was visiting the Zgonc guesthouse, I was very surprised to hear that one drinks wine both before and after one starts working. I was not impressed and felt that alcoholism had done enough damage. More work needs to be done to educate people about the dangers of consuming too much alcohol.

Very often I would look upon Kamna hill and remember the dream I had one night when I was young. I dreamed that I had planted walnut trees on the hill and then, the squirrels came to gather the walnuts. I had a very pleasant discussion with my school friend Jože Štajer about our memories of the year 1930. The visit to Matevž Žlabrov was also very enjoyable. We laughed at his very interesting and amusing stories about when we had lived together in the boarding house in Ljubljana.

Visiting my brother Tone's family in 1985

I visited the graves of my parents and I got a lump in my throat as I thought about how hard they had worked and prayed for the well-being of their family. I would like to tell them that God had to a great extent answered their prayers. At the cemetery, a large grave commemorated the death of forty-eight people who had died as a result of the violence of the war. Some of them had been my friends and now I saw their gravestones in the cemetery. Why was this all necessary, I asked myself.

Soon it was time to leave and we bid farewell to all who had welcomed us and spent time with us. We drove through the Gorenjska area and I was reminded of the song:

The sunny valleys are my paradise,
I am leaving you now.

The view over Ljubelj reminded of the rest of the song:

O, farewell my homeland
O, farew ell to the mountain flower
May the heavens watch over you
I will never forget you . . . never . . . never.

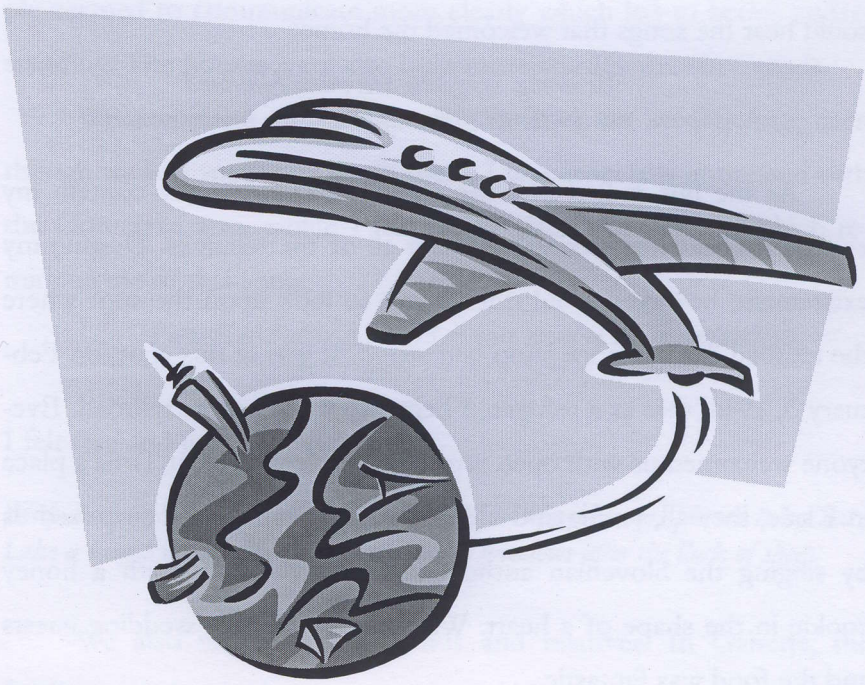
We drove through Vetrinje and Celovec and continued onto Spittal, through the alps and the tunnels. We then arrived in Munich, Germany. Throughout the drive, we enjoyed the beautiful alpine scenery and the wooded terrain. We spent the night in Munich, where we looked on the place where Hitler gave his speeches.

After a nine-hour flight, we arrived back in Toronto.

VI

Visit to Slovenia

1992



As the quiet moon shines brightly,
My soul's thoughts are of my home
And my heart beats quickly.
God only knows when I will see my home again.

After lengthy preparations, my wife Ann and I are finally on our way home to Slovenia. The year is 1992. We were not tired after the pleasant plane trip over Ireland, then Amsterdam and then finally Munich. The five-hour bus trip through the Austrian Alps went by quickly. Although memories of past, difficult times were reawakened, they quickly passed once I looked on my homeland and in my soul, I could hear the songs that welcomed me home:

Be strong, my gentle Slovenian homeland
To me, you are the most beautiful and like heaven on earth.

As the bus pulled into the station, I could barely contain my excitement and was anxious to meet all of the relatives. Despite my excitement, however, I did not neglect to look upon the spot where the railroad maintenance shop had stood. It was at this spot, on February 3, 1944, that as a refugee, I began to work on the railroad. Everyone welcomed us with open arms. When we arrived at Tone's place in Kleče, they all, young and old, greeted us warmly and surprised us by singing the Slovenian anthem and presenting us with a honey cookie in the shape of a heart. We were treated like wedding guests and the food was fantastic.

We were given various tours of the farms and were very impressed at the modernization that had taken place. I was impressed

by how crops are planted on the hills. It was vastly different from what I remembered from my youth, and farming methods had improved significantly, resulting in greater yields and productivity. There was a greater emphasis on commercial farming. Unfortunately, this type of innovation had not been encouraged back when I was growing up. Also, the growing season in Slovenia is longer than in Canada.

I also noticed that many of the Slovenian dialects that were spoken when I was growing up had somewhat disappeared and people seemed to communicate more clearly which led to better understanding. The houses were also built more sturdily than in Canada.

We saw parts of Slovenia that we had not seen before, even though we had spent our youth there. I was especially impressed with the Gorenjska area, which I had never visited before and which reminded me of this song:

I would be happy if I could go once more to the mountaintops,
So that I could see the beauty of our land.

I felt free and just wanted to sing:

With a crooked cane in one hand and a bouquet of wildflowers pinned to my hat
Like a king I wander in the mountains and meadows after the flock of sheep.

We also visited many friends and relatives. In Gaberje, the families and the children are growing and looking forward to a bright future, which reminds me of the following song:

Go forth and sing, Slovenian youth
And move your homeland forward.

These are just some of the people whom we visited and whom we wish to thank for their hospitality and warm welcome:

- Francka Kos and her family - The entrance to their home reminded me of a large farm in Canada.

- Mici - a very lively and a brisk talker. We enjoyed eating the wonderful meal that she had prepared. It's too bad that I fell asleep during the visit.

- Anica and Janez - We enjoyed the fresh air at their cottage and a tasty meal.

- Jerca – Unfortunately, we could not sneak some of the excellent food and fresh, home-grown vegetables into our pocket.

- Martina, Jernej, Marinka, Lojze, Mirjam and Tone – The visit in Kleče was memorable. I remember Filip wondering what I meant when I told him, "I am known as Doctor Rooster." We also saw the play "Veriga", went to a procession, picked blueberries, sat around a fire, traveled to Brezje and watched as the younger family members sang and played games.

- Nevenka and Kanci, and their sons Rok and Matija – We stayed with them and are grateful for their attention, hospitality and all the many favours.

We also traveled through Babno hills, Polhov Gradec, Sv. Katarina Tehovc to see Francka Česnovar and Helka Božič, which pleased Ann very much. We really enjoyed this visit and hope to return their hospitality when they visit with us.

Surrounded by love and family during our 1992 trip to Slovenia …

… and during our May 2005 visit.

The twentieth century was marked by dramatic change and rapid technological advances. The automobile, the computer and other scientific and hi-tech marvels changed the way in which we live and interact. The hope was for a better and more peaceful world.

It was also marked by much brutality. The two world wars, revolutions, large-scale genocides and other atrocities proved that humankind had not learned from its mistakes.

Slovenia was also affected by these events. I was born in the early 1920s and witnessed the political and economic upheaval that the country suffered. I was forced to flee my country of birth, lived in Austria as a refugee for a few years and later settled in Canada, where I have lived for close to sixty years.

My early life, marked by poverty and difficult circumstances, strengthened my resolve to work hard to overcome any barriers that would prevent me from realizing success. The memories of these experiences have stayed with me forever, and have shaped who I am and what I have achieved.

Here is my story . . .