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Remembering my grandparents: a hot Australian summer

(English language editor Susan Tosch)

My maternal grandparents on their Latvian farm

I have already voted four times and soon I will have to cast my ballot for a fifth time which, hopefully, will be the last time depending on whether our next president gets at least fifty one members of parliament behind him. It's a long, drawn out process as voting for the president is the only secret ballot left in the Latvian parliament where I am a sitting member. It's taken us almost a day, tedious business but the tension in the former Baltic German aristocratic building is palpable.

For the first time since Latvia's independence was restored in 1991 we now, in 2015, have two equally good candidates but if we don't get it done today we will have to vote again in a forthnight and then who knows who

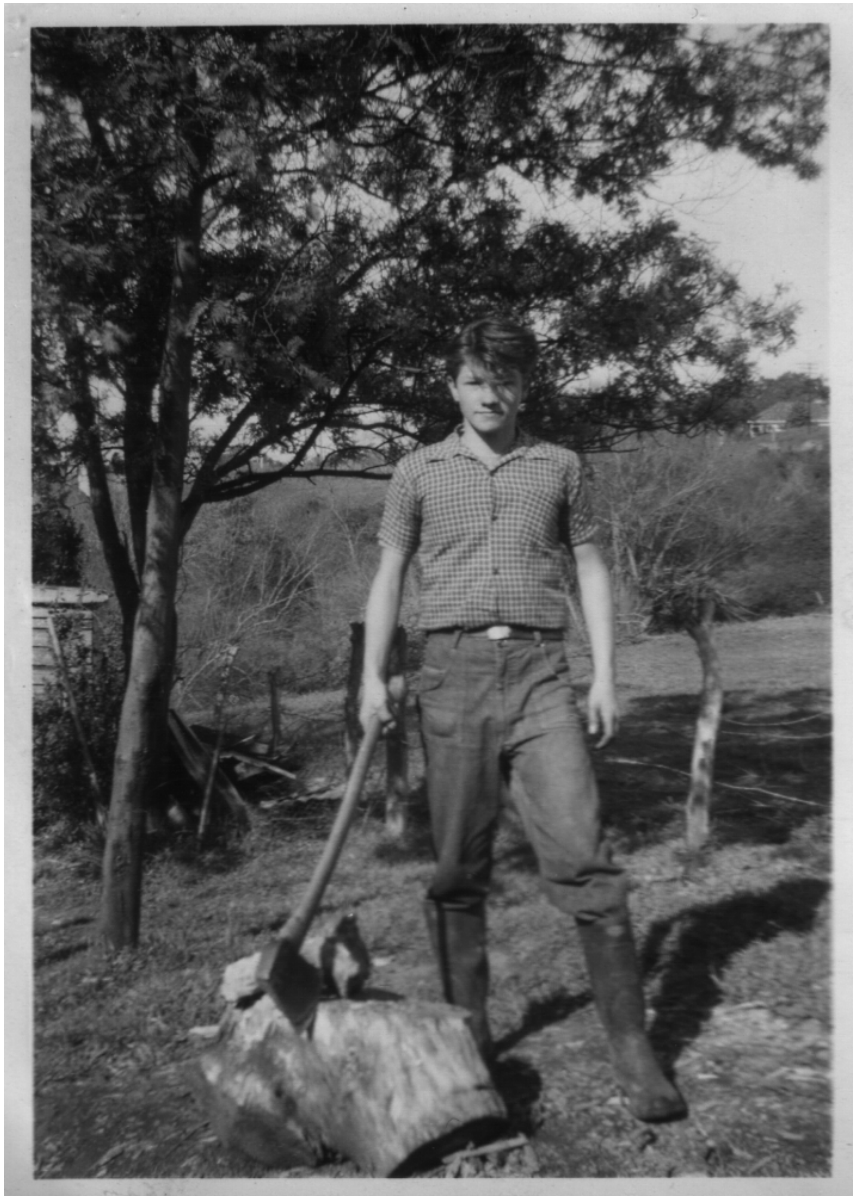
could turn up and what coalitions will coalesce to support a 'dark horse'.

Russia is on the move again and fighting a war against Ukraine even though it says it isn't fighting a war. We can't afford to dilly-dally and take risks. I will therefore vote for the defence minister and not my friend, the best judge our country has produced. He cannot garner sufficient votes, but the minister has a chance.

It's cold in the building. We have had a chilly spring and I have developed a sore throat which I can't get rid of. Everybody is staring at their laptops or smart phones to escape the suspense but my mind wonders off to the country where I grew up and where there was no real winter – Australia.

My birthday party in Greensborough, mid-fifties. I'm sitting bottom right with plastic pistol in my hand

I remember nothing about my early childhood in Latvia but quite a bit about life in the Latvian refugee camps in Germany and almost everything about the long journey by sea to Australia. But that is not the age when you start questioning your place in the world.



Me in Greensborough, late fifties

I began asking philosophical questions in Australia when I became a teenager. The biggest question of them all was, "If my family and I were Latvian then why weren't we living in Latvia?"

Now that I have lived in Latvia for a quarter of a century I reflect at times how I managed to returned to the country of my birth after so many twists and turns, including almost being sent to the Vietnam war as a US Marine after my parents decided to emigrate to America in 1960 for fear of a Red Chinese invasion of Australia. I did see war in Afghanistan in the mid-eighties while searching for Baltic prisoners of war captured by the mujahedin while they were being forced to serve in the Soviet army. By then I had ended up in Sweden where the Latvian exile

community had contacts with the underground in occupied Latvia, just across the Baltic sea.

Could it have been otherwise? Or were there episodes in my family history that compelled me by some hidden urge to repeat what had been done before? Is it in my genes? I open a page in my laptop and start writing – this is a good time to explore my past, while waiting for the next step in Latvian history to take place.

I am sure the answers lie in Australia. After all, I grew up there, from the age of seven to seventeen, in the innocent fifties, when Bill Haley and the Comets exploded onto the music scene with their hit song 'Rock Around the Clock', and us kids all stood in long lines at the movie theatre to see Elvis Presley in 'Jail House Rock'. I promptly bought a pair of blue suede shoes. I can remember everything as if it all happened only yesterday. This is my story...

Our house, built in 1853 by Robert Poulter, an immigrant from England. The Poulter family called their house "Bonnie Vale". Many years later in the 20th century it became known as "The White House". After Lejins' family left it in 1960, the house was soon destroyed by fire, but the little hill on which it stood began to be called Lejin Hill. The typical Latvian ending "s" of surnames was dropped according to English language practice.

It was a very fine, hot, Australian summer's day seven years after the end of the Second World War. The hot

North wind had turned the green leaves of the lilac bushes black in the garden of our home in the Melbourne suburb of Greensborough and the dust lifted behind the cows as they walked languidly across the paddocks in the bend of the Plenty River. What just a few weeks earlier had been lush green pastures thriving on the sediment deposited each year by the flooding river had now turned into a dust bowl, covered with patches of dried brown and yellow grass still holding out in the hope the rain would soon come.

I was thirteen and my little sister, Aija was two years younger when we burst into the kitchen of the old house built by Greensborough's first settler, Mr. William Poulter, and froze in our tracks when we saw our mother crying. My brother Aivars was older than us and was out most of the time with his friends. My sister and I were always running in and out regardless of the heat; every day was exciting as there was plenty to do by the river and on the steep hill, covered with trees and blackberry bushes on the other side. Our great joy was the canoe built by my brother from tin, tar and wood. The canoe leaked but we had an old, tin cup to bail the water out and so could paddle a long way in the murky waters, navigating past fallen trees and scooting over shallow shoals playing cowboys and Indians.

I had a real bow and several arrows, made by my father, which had been handed down to me from my brother. I always took the side of the Indians who,

against all odds, defended their land from the encroaching white settlers and their soldiers, who spoke in forked tongues. Only much later did I realize why I adopted this attitude.

Lejin hill. My sister Aija and our dog Shepsreps (our house in the background)

We had never seen our mother cry before and were terrified as we clutched at her side, crying ourselves. What had happened? Between the tears she pointed to a letter lying on the kitchen table and sobbed that her mother had died in Germany.

We had left the Latvian refugee camp in Germany three years earlier and had been taken by the American troop carrier, General Black from Naples, Italy to Melbourne, Australia by the International Refugee Organization.

I still have vivid memories of the long train trip from Falingbostel in the British zone of occupation down the whole length of Germany and then going through the great tunnel that connected Switzerland to Italy. It was a bit scary entering and then chugging

through the mountain but nothing could have been more exciting for a seven year old boy. At the start of the trip my father had tied the ends of our blankets to the baggage racks on both sides of our compartment and lifted all three of us kids up into the make-shift hammocks at night. There we swayed and quickly fell asleep to the steady clickerty clack of the train wheels running over the joints in the tracks. The funniest part of the trip was when the train stopped briefly after entering the Italian side of the tunnel. We watched out the window as an Italian border guard slipped on the snow-covered steel rails and fell on his backside, smack onto the ground. Everyone on the train, as well as the other border guards standing outside in the snow, laughed good naturedly at the embarrassed but sheepishly smiling young man.

But I am not sure if I can truly remember my maternal grandparents. We lived in a different camp from them. Before we were moved by British army trucks to Falingbostel, which was the first leg of our journey to Australia, we lived for five years in Omstedt, a suburb of Oldenburg. We were housed in barracks which had been evacuated only shortly before by the Russian prisoners of war. The flimsy barracks had been doused with tons of DDT to get rid of the lice. The Red Army had stopped advancing, and us kids soon started to attend the Latvian kindergarten that had been set up in the camp.

As we criss-crossed Germany during the fighting between the Americans and the Germans and the Germans and the Russians, we had somehow become separated from my maternal grandparents. We had walked all the way from the blackened ruins of Dresden to Oldenburg, but my grandparents ended up in Vorel at the end of the war, near the North Sea, which was also in the British zone of occupation. We found them later through the Red Cross but we lost all contact with my paternal grandmother who remained in Latvia with her youngest son. Her husband had died of old age during the war. We could not even write to her, the Iron Curtain had come down.

I have tried very hard to remember what my mother's parents looked like. It is possible that I do remember them, because we visited them once in Vorel.

My parents with our first cow, my brother and guests

It must have been just before I turned five because after that age you start remembering things fairly well, at least the most interesting things. I remember clearly the toboggan ride down the hill

with my cousin Jānis and my sister. This was a big event for me, it was my first ride on a sled, and it could not have been in Omstedt, as there were no hills there and my cousin didn't live there. He lived with his mother, my mother's sister, who lived with my grandparents. My Aunty had lost her husband fighting on the Eastern front. Later she married a former Latvian soldier she met in Vorel, who though wounded was lucky enough to have survived the war.

It was a bitterly cold day as the three of us raced down the snowy slope shouting and yelling with unbridled joy until we saw the only tree at the bottom suddenly looming before us. We fell silent just before the inevitable collision, instinctively realising it was going to end badly. The blow was terrific, we were thrown up in the air and scattered in all directions. I recall to this day how I lay on my back staring up in complete bewilderment at the sky spinning above me.

I remember much less clearly coming into a room with a stove somewhere on the right. Somebody may have stoked it with extra lumps of coal because there seemed to be some talk about the cold but all I could see of my grandmother was a blurry pale face in the distance. It must have been my grandfather who fed the iron stove. I used to sit in his lap, in the garden of his farm in Latvia, gazing at him reading the newspaper, but this was told to me by my mother. I have no recollection of that at all, as I was only two years old when we barely squeezed through a temporary opening

between the fighting armies and caught the last train from Riga to Berlin several months before the guns fell silent.

I wonder how differently I would have grown up if I had my mother's parents in my life? Everybody else seemed to have grandparents. My parents said that we could have supported them. They would not have been a burden on the state. But the Australian government thought otherwise – they were well beyond their productive years, so they were not allowed to join us.

Our house, which we rented, cost us hardly anything. I think it was a few shillings a month. It was so cheap because there was no electricity.

Our father shows the former water tank to Aija and Mila, the mother of Sue Tosch, who edited my story

Mr. Pope, the landlord, who lived across the meadow and tilled his land with a great big horse and plow, was just glad to have somebody living in it. It consisted of two parts. The original part had two rooms made from massive stones, mud and straw built by Mr. Poulter sometime in the 19th century.

Our house in the distant past, owner's wife Mary Poulter with her sons in front of it. The building on the right was later converted to a room with slanted roof.

The thick, brown stones kept both rooms cool in the summer but much wood was needed for the primitive fire place in the main room to keep it warm in the winter. The road where we lived was named in his honour and was proudly called Poulter Avenue, although it was just a gravelly dirt track with potholes where two cars would have had difficulty passing each other. It didn't matter, it was a dead-end road and precious few cars found their way to it. The one-armed postman rode a bike.

I don't know when the two additional rooms made of wooden boards were added to the two original rooms. Then there was the partly enclosed veranda, and the kitchen. The sink had one tap with cold running water, and it tasted delicious. I guess there were no chemicals mixed in the water.

Our family practically lived in the kitchen where a tall kerosene lamp with a wick and glass cylinder hidden under a huge lampshade stood in the middle of a big table and lit up the whole kitchen with a warm, bright light. An iron stove stood a few feet away by the outside wall where my mother cooked

our food. I chopped the wood for the stove and the fireplace. This cost us nothing, as we gathered broken branches and sometimes whole logs from the river after the yearly floods had subsided.

We also grew much of our own food. The potatoes lasted until the next spring. In summer I lugged our cucumbers and sometimes tomatoes up the hill, opposite the hill where we played, to the local fruit and vegetable shop on the main road and was given a handful of coins in return from the owner's pocket. Our cucumbers were much better than those delivered by truck from the vegetable market. My father had been a farmer in Latvia before he became a teacher. Us three kids spent a lot of time weeding the garden, which must have helped the vegetables grow fat and juicy. Old man Pope built a fence around our house and garden and soon the apple trees and gooseberry bushes recovered from the predations of the cows. We had two cows, sometimes three, so we had free milk, cheese, cream and butter. I had the job of turning the handle of the Alfa Laval milk separator. Later, I helped my brother milk the cows. Nothing was more delicious than a cup of frothy, warm, rich, milk straight from the bucket! We also had free eggs and chicken meat. I fed the forty or so hens and when visitors came it was my job to catch a couple, chop off their heads on the block of wood under the big weeping willow tree, and pluck them clean before I presented them to my mother. My father selected the best

eggs and sold them at Eltham High School where he taught mathematics.

But having visitors, old friends from the refugee camps who were now also living in Melbourne, placed another obligation on me. I had to trek up the hill to Green's Hotel with a huge, empty canvas bag which the bartender stacked full with brown bottles of beer for the money my father gave me. It was harder going downhill as I had to be careful not to break any of the bottles.

We washed our clothes in a small shed which had a huge tin drum inside where we heated the water and then used a new shiny bucket to pour it into an old tub. It was almost like a sauna in there or what Latvians call a 'pirts'.

My maternal grandmother died relatively early, at 73, and would have only been with us for a couple of years in the old settler's abode. But she would have been part of our family, taking part in discussions around the kitchen table, helping my mother with the food, and may have even looked after us so my mother could go out and get a job. My mother only started working after we had finished our primary education at the little red brick school in Greensborough and I had started to take the train to Heidelberg Junior Technical School in 1955. That was four years before my grandfather died and that meant he could have lived with us for almost a decade.

My brother Aivars paints the house while our mother gives instructions

The idea that he could have been around for so long with me must mean that he would have had some influence over me in my formative years. Just the few summers I spent working on my uncle's fruit block in Parenga by the Murray River had a determining effect on me.

He had been a soldier and always sang Latvian love songs mingled with melancholy war songs while picking apricots with me and my two cousins, Jānis and his half-brother Vidvuds, despite the terrible heat. When I complained about the long, hot working hours he laughed and said I should read a book called 'Dvēseles putenis', (Blizzard of Souls) if I wanted to know what hard life was all about.

It was a story about a teenage Latvian boy who fought in the First World War and then in Latvia's war of liberation. I did read it when I returned home to Greensborough even though it took me an hour to finish the first page. Back then I could hardly read Latvian, but I couldn't stop reading this book! I identified with the protagonist who, like myself, had also just fallen in love and his heroic actions fighting for

Latvian independence was something I would have gladly emulated.

There comes a time in your life when looking back becomes quite interesting, almost as exciting as when you were young and looked forward to each day to see what wonders and new events it would bring.

The Latvian poet, Imants Ziedonis, said that the reason why a person looks back at the "bottom of the hill" when they get "over the hill" is to understand themselves better and wonder if there was anything that they could have done to make the journey uphill somewhat different.

Could my grandfather have made that difference? He was born in 1874 and had lived through the last half of one century and the first half of another. He had seen revolution, the big war, been a prisoner of war, been shot and had shrapnel in his leg, but still saved his family by bringing them back to a newly born Latvia from Russia. Was it fate, luck, or something in his character?

Us kids grew up in Australia though, in our own little world, which was always full of excitement. Our mental horizons didn't stretch very far. It was cricket or football at the little school over the hill and if my team lost it was a total disaster.

But us kids were somewhat different from the rest. The three of us were the only so called 'new Australians' attending the little red brick country school. In the beginning, when I ate my sandwiches all the other kids stood

around in a semi-circle watching me, wide-eyed. I was eating black, rye bread that had a crust on it. The bread they ate was pure white, soft like cotton, and to my surprise they threw away the crust because it was a mite harder.

My sister and I were the only children to perform at adult gatherings. Our mother had taught us simple Latvian folkdances and we became a huge success with all the other mothers. There were hardly any fathers because these events took place during the day. There was only one other performer, my friend David, who was dressed in a kilt and played the bagpipes. His father owned the Chemist shop, Vickers, but their name didn't sound very Scottish to me. There was no "Mac" in front of it.

His parents were the ones who rescued us from the one room where the five of us lived in Mentone for the first year after we arrived in Australia. Mr Vickers picked us up in his old brown Model T Ford and drove us to the old house by the Plenty River. The ride seemed to take forever, it was very hot, and I became car sick. I had never travelled in a car before.

We were one of only a few families who spoke a language other than English at home. My parents spoke perfect English, as my mother had been an English teacher in Latvia and my father had worked in the Latvian embassy in London for a while. But speaking Latvian was as natural to us as breathing the clean air all around us. And it was through listening to our parents speak

in their native tongue that we kids, by and by, learned about our past.

The back of the house, kitchen chimney and window; my father and mother, and Aivars having a fight with Aija

Our family discussions were obviously quite different from those taking place in the average Australian home. Little by little, snippets about our life before arriving in Australia lodged in our brains, about how sweet and juicy the strawberries in Latvia were and about the first summer apples, so pale green-yellow, that when you held them up to the sun you could almost see through them. That was their name, "Dzidrie", meaning clear apples.

They also told us about our own ancient forefathers, who battled bravely with sword and shield for 100 years against the Teutonic crusaders when they landed on our shores and about the horrible famine in Russia during the revolution. We couldn't understand that people had nothing to eat.

The story that stuck with me most was when my mother recounted how my grandfather jumped out of the window just in the nick of time, as the Russian Cossacks broke down the front door of his home to arrest him during the Latvian revolution of 1905. My mum

was only one year old and was held tightly in her mother's arms. My grandmother's fear was so intense that it was transferred to her little baby daughter and remained deeply etched in her memory for the rest of her life.

My grandfather was an organ player in the church of the local parish and during the revolution played Latvian revolutionary songs for the congregation who sang them with great gusto. That meant a death sentence when the Tsar struck back.

This information came to us in bits and pieces, sometimes forgotten, but later remembered, and together, imperceptibly must have influenced our young minds. Mum told us about her father's life but how would it have been if he had related his story directly to me? We might have had long conversations.

I remember one time when we had visitors from the city enjoying our hospitality. I had run into the room only to stop dead in my tracks to stare at the gathering looking at me in total silence. I instinctively felt that something solemn had happened. There was a long silence. Then I was told. Fifty Latvian soldiers in the French legion had been killed in Dien Bien Phu when it fell to Ho Chi Min. The year was 1954, I was eleven, and I can see this scene as clearly today as I did then. I felt the unspoken words lying heavily in the subdued air – "When will Latvian men stop dying while fighting for foreign armies?"

There wasn't a man in the room who had not fought in the Second World War. My father was the exception. He had served in three different Russian armies after the Russian revolution of 1917 before he found his way to a Latvian national army battalion in Siberia, and returned to Latvia via Japan.

My grandfather was missing from this gathering. But he was the only one who had fought in the Tsarist army at the very beginning of the First World War when he marched into East Prussia singing Latvian war songs. He could have told me that in his division the majority of soldiers were Latvian, not Russian. I only found that out by reading history books. Six years later he signed up with a lame leg to fight for Latvian independence with his oldest son who had just turned eighteen. They didn't have to fire a shot. The Latvian war for independence was over before they reached the front.

Robert Redford's film, "The Horse Whisperer" left a strong impression on me. Could my grandfather also "talk" to horses like that? He rode the horses on his father's farm bareback and without bridles from the time he was a young boy, just as his children, my mother, aunty, and uncles did when they were growing up in the Latvian summers, some of which could be quite hot. He may have given me some advice on this subject while reading his Latvian newspaper printed by the Latvian community in Melbourne, sitting under the willow tree in our backyard while I

played Tarzan in the branches above. Then I would not have done the following...

There was a grey horse in the paddock by the river put there for the summer. I was drawn to him like a magnet. Indians rode horses so I was desperate to do the same. I devised a plan. I climbed up on the fence and waited patiently until the horse walked by, leisurely munching on what was left of the grass. Then I leaped onto his back! I woke up looking in amazement at the blue sky spinning around me and when I finally gathered my senses I saw him on the other side of the river, watching me with a jaundiced eye. I survived. No broken neck or even a broken bone.

That was another close shave I had with fate. More were to follow on my long journey back to a reborn Latvia. If my parents had decided to go to Dresden a day earlier we all would have perished. Was it fate, my upbringing in Australia, the many books I read, or my unknown grandfather who set the example that determined my return to Latvia. Or was it simply in my genes after all. Somebody in the family had to be an idealist.

My mother's cousin, Anna Irbe, who shared the same name as my mother, became a missionary in India in the 1930's. Nobody else answered the call issued by her father, Bishop Irbe. She remained there after the war as she could not return to Soviet occupied Latvia. There are still people who remember her to this day and lay

flowers on her grave in gratitude for the work she did with the tribal Indians.

It was in the willow tree in our backyard in Greensborough sitting on an almost horizontal branch while watching the big red sun go down, that I vowed that I had to do my bit to free my country.

I have to admit that it still feels a bit strange living in my homeland and now being a grandfather to boot. There is nothing to stop me from telling my grandchildren my stories. We are all together. I think that this coming summer I should make a bow for my oldest grandson who has turned seven, as I did for my son when he was that age.

It's time to put an end to my thoughts and close my computer. The young, gentle lady speaker of the Latvian parliament dressed in white is getting ready to announce the results of the vote. Suddenly everyone in the building is quiet.

We did it! From today we have a new president, Mr Raimonds Vējonis! We all stand up and applaud!

But I do wish a nice hot Australian summer would come to Latvia for at least a week or two. I need to get rid of my sore throat.

THE END

This story was published on Greensborough Historical Society's internet page at the end of 2016:
www.greensboroughhistorical.org.au

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