



in the know

SPECIAL FEATURE: Part 3

Bruno the butcher

Geelong's Siketas are one of Australia's largest Croatian families. They left an island paradise in the 1950s to find new lives in Australia. Today's story is the third in a five-part series on their epic journey



Bruno Siketa was out rabbiting in paddocks near Dartmoor. It was back in the late 1950s and Bruno was in his late teens, growing a feel for Australia after having migrated from Croatia a couple of years before.

He spent spare time on weekends catching underground mutton with his ferrets. Rabbiting was a hobby which came with the fringe benefit of a meal, but fate intervened decisively during one of his expeditions.

Bruno came across a truck which had overturned with a load of pigs and calves. He went to help and struck a rapport with the driver, Anton Vergus.

Mr Vergus was a migrant who ran a butcher shop in Bell Park, Geelong. He quickly perceived qualities in young Bruno and offered him an apprenticeship. Bruno set to work and was gradually schooled as a continental butcher.

Decades later he bought the business, and now Siketa Meats is a Geelong icon. Daily streams of customers crowd its narrow floorspace and testify to its status, yet Bruno estimates 60 per cent of his business is from Melbourne and Ballarat.



danny iannan

Bruno settles down on a plastic chair in the staff tea room at the back of his business. He links his hands on the apron in his lap and inclines his head in a fatherly way, ready to talk.

The air has the stiff edge of a chiller, but is delectably infused with the aromas of countless continental smallgoods.

Bruno remembers his Croatian island home of Lastovo as a place of both simplicity and freedom. "Life there was primitive," he recalled.

"Like the Aborigines here, you go around, get fish and food and you eat.

"And when you live in places like that you have freedom to run all around.

"We would go in the morning and 10 hours later come home. Mum had 10 kids; there was not too much time to worry."

Bruno credits his parents, Anton and Philomena, with having nurtured a tight family unit and he paints

their picture from his heart.

"Mum was tough but very good," he said. "She was a very, very lovable person, to have 10 kids and a tough life... she was a very good mum. "And dad was a little bloke but had a big heart. "He always believed in helping people; that was his life and his nature. He always used to say it is better to give than to receive."

and urged their parents to follow them.

So it was that Bruno found himself at the Italian port of Trieste in 1957 aboard the ship Toscana.

Anton and Philomena had packed their seven remaining children to leave Lastovo for a land they barely knew.

The voyage took more than 60 days because the Suez Canal was closed. Bruno remembers they took little more than memories and aspirations.

"What did we bring? Nothing," he said. "A suitcase, an empty suitcase. "What can you bring? You leave what you leave.

"Whether you live in one place for 15 years or 100 years, when you leave you want adventure, so you don't think about it."

But while his keen young eye scanned the horizon for possibilities, he felt sorry for his parents having to leave so much behind.

"It was tough for them," he said. "My mum suffered a lot."

Bruno remembers Aldo, Ivan and Mario missed meeting the Toscana at Station Pier, but a friendly taxi driver bade the family welcome on a hot

Melbourne day.

"He shouted us drinks," Bruno said. "Coca-Cola, and that was the bloody first time I drank the stuff.

"He was a good old Aussie; he could see we were newcomers. You find good people in every race."

The Siketas taxied to Geelong for an emotional reunion with their sons and brothers, and then they set to hard work for the family gain.

Bruno picked grapes at Mildura and cut timber in the Otways. He worked making boxes in a mill at Dartmoor and was living there with most of his family when he met Anton Vergus.

After having shifted back to Geelong, Bruno attacked his new career and later met an Italian girl on Eastern Beach.

ONE-WAY TICKET



THE SIKETA FAMILY ODYSSEY

Bruno was a child when his brothers Aldo, Ivan and Mario ran away from Lastovo overnight to escape the stifling rule which had descended on Croatia after it switched from Italian to Yugoslav rule.

About 3000 Yugoslav soldiers occupied the island.

Bruno was old enough to sense his parents' anguish after his brothers' departure, but thinks he was young enough to avoid trauma himself.

"What can you say when you lose your three brothers?" he said.

"You might be sad or whatever, but you don't think too much when you are young.

"Until you were 20 you were still a kid. That was one thing good about those days."

Perhaps his perception of the act of leaving home under cover of darkness had been tempered by the fact that many young men of the time were doing the same, at risk of lengthy imprisonment.

Aldo, Ivan and Mario made their way to Australia



Above: Croatian migrant Bruno Siketa, pictured at work in his acclaimed Bell Park shop. He became a butcher after a chance meeting on a road near Dartmoor.

Right: Milenko Siketa brandishes Siketa Meats products. He joined brother Bruno in the shop about 35 years ago.

Left: Anton and Philomena Siketa, pictured in Geelong. They forged new lives in Australia with their 10 children.

Main photos: PHILLIP STUBBS

She was Laura German. She lived next door to his family and they married when he was almost 21.

They have welcomed five children and have watched with delight as new generations have left their footprints in Australia.

The Siketa Meats success story grew on the strength of quality produce and hard work.

Bruno's brother, Milenko, joined Bruno in the shop 35 years ago and their father, Anton, became a familiar face at the business in his retirement years, exchanging repartee with customers.

Bruno is now 63 and has seen much of the world: Europe, Argentina, the USA.

He strokes his chin in thought when he is asked what he loves about Australia.

"It is the best country in the world by far," he nods thoughtfully. "It has freedom, open space, it is peaceful."

In his heart he is an Australian.

He knows that Lastovo could never have provided his family with the opportunity it has enjoyed in Australia and that the island exists now for him as a lovely repository for memories and reflection.

"Every two years we go back, just to relax," Bruno said. "It's nice to go for a holiday, but you can't eat scenery, you know."

