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SPECIAL FEATURE

ONE-WAY TICKET



THE SIKETA FAMILY ODYSSEY

Dash into darkness

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 launches a five-part series on their epic journey.

Family patriarch: Aldo Siketa at home in Bell Park. He didn't speak a word of English when he fled Croatia in 1953.



Above, early days for the Siketa family. Standing: Milenko, Kuzma, Bruno, Mario, Tonko, Ivan, Aldo. Sitting: Elena, mother Philomena, father Anton, Ida, Pierina.

Aldo Siketa left his native Croatia by boat, by stealth and by night. In his own terms — and on his own terms — he was running away.

He was running away from an island idyll, a large, loving and vibrant family, a teenage sweetheart and a nationality. But he felt there was no other way to escape the stifling cloud which had descended on his Croatia under communist rule.

Aldo's brothers, Ivan and Mario, accompanied him in the boat that night in 1951 as they struck out for a new life.

It did not matter whether they were brave, misguided or foolish, they felt they were right.

In time their departure would profoundly change the lives within their immediate family.

Within a few years the three brothers would be reunited with their parents and seven siblings in the distant land of Australia, with a new wealth awaiting.

Aldo Siketa is now the family's Australian patriarch and, at 74,

provides a living thread in an imposing story.

He is active and stately in retirement in Bell Park, surrounded by a vast family network and a large and vibrant Croatian community.

Many people know him as a diligent and long-time volunteer for Geelong Ethnic Communities Council, or as a Bell Park greengrocer, as manager of the North Geelong Croatian soccer team or as president of Geelong's acclaimed Lado Croatian cultural folklore dancing group.



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Lastovo Island, washed by the bewitching Adriatic Sea.

Lastovo Island is surrounded by 46 smaller islands in the Dalmatian group, which sprawls from the Croatian coast towards Italy, and its mystique is magnified by celebration in the works of writers such as Homer.

Aldo's father, Anton, was a small, generous and good-humoured man.

He forged a successful career in business, working between several European countries before becoming a successful fisherman on Lastovo in charge of a fleet of three boats and scores of men.

The Adriatic provided rich bounty as the seasons swung between sardines and crayfish.

Anton and his teams would set out at 4pm and return the following morning with fish to set the village packing factory in motion.

The fishermen would cook and enjoy part of their catch by the water and villagers would join them and enjoy their fill.

Anton and his family nurtured and grew their own food: fruit, vegetables, grains and nuts, grapes for wine and olives for oil, pigs, lambs, chickens. Villagers collected their own salt.

Anton married Philomena Glumc on Lastovo; Aldo was their first-born.

While Anton plied the seas, Philomena spent her time at home nurturing a growing brood of children.

Ivan followed Aldo, then came Tonko, Mario, Bruno, Kuzma, Milenko, Elena,



Adriatic spoils: Fishermen share a meal after returning to Lastovo with a catch from the Adriatic Sea. They drink wine from five-litre bottles encased in wicker.

Ida and Pierina. Two other children died during childhood.

The Siketa children shared the family workload as they grew and shared time between their home and a holiday house within reach of the azure Adriatic.

Every Sunday the family spurned work for worship at the Lastovo village Catholic church.

Aldo remembers the feeling of community on the island. "When I was young the village was all like one family," he recalled. "Everyone helped each other."

Croatia was annexed to Italy during Aldo's childhood. He attended an Italian school and became fluent in Italian.

Times were good, but times were changing.

Croatia came under Yugoslav rule during Aldo's teenage years. When he emerged from school in 1948 he was conscripted into the Yugoslav army.

"No voluntary," he recalled with a grimaced smile. "It was shocking."

"All my life we are on an island with fishing and they send you inland. I did the army in Belgrade. The climate was not good for us."

He remembers army life as strict, and dangerous for those who failed to obey orders.

Aldo and others weren't accustomed to the depth of the Belgrade winters, and unforgiving work digging trenches wore him down.

"After one year training in Belgrade they sent me home because I had been sick for a while," he said.

"The work we did, I couldn't do it."

He was rescued by good fortune

when officials sent him to an army doctor for assessment.

"I didn't feel that good when I saw him because I didn't know the person," he said. "But we just sat down and we had a talk. He said, 'The best way is for you to go home'."

"Then he said which family he was from. He was from our village, and his relatives and me used to go fishing."

Aldo's family greeted his return with delight.

"And I was happy to be going home, because I had always on my mind to run away from there," he said.

His return to Lastovo allowed him to fan a spark of romance with his village sweetheart, Anica Grgurevic, but he remained conscripted to the Yugoslav army and was deeply discontented.

"It was a rotten life at that time," he said.

So he resolved to find a better way.



Island home: The Siketa family home sits nestled near the heart of Lastovo village.

TOMORROW: FLIGHT AND FORTUNE