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SPECIAL FEATURE: Part 2

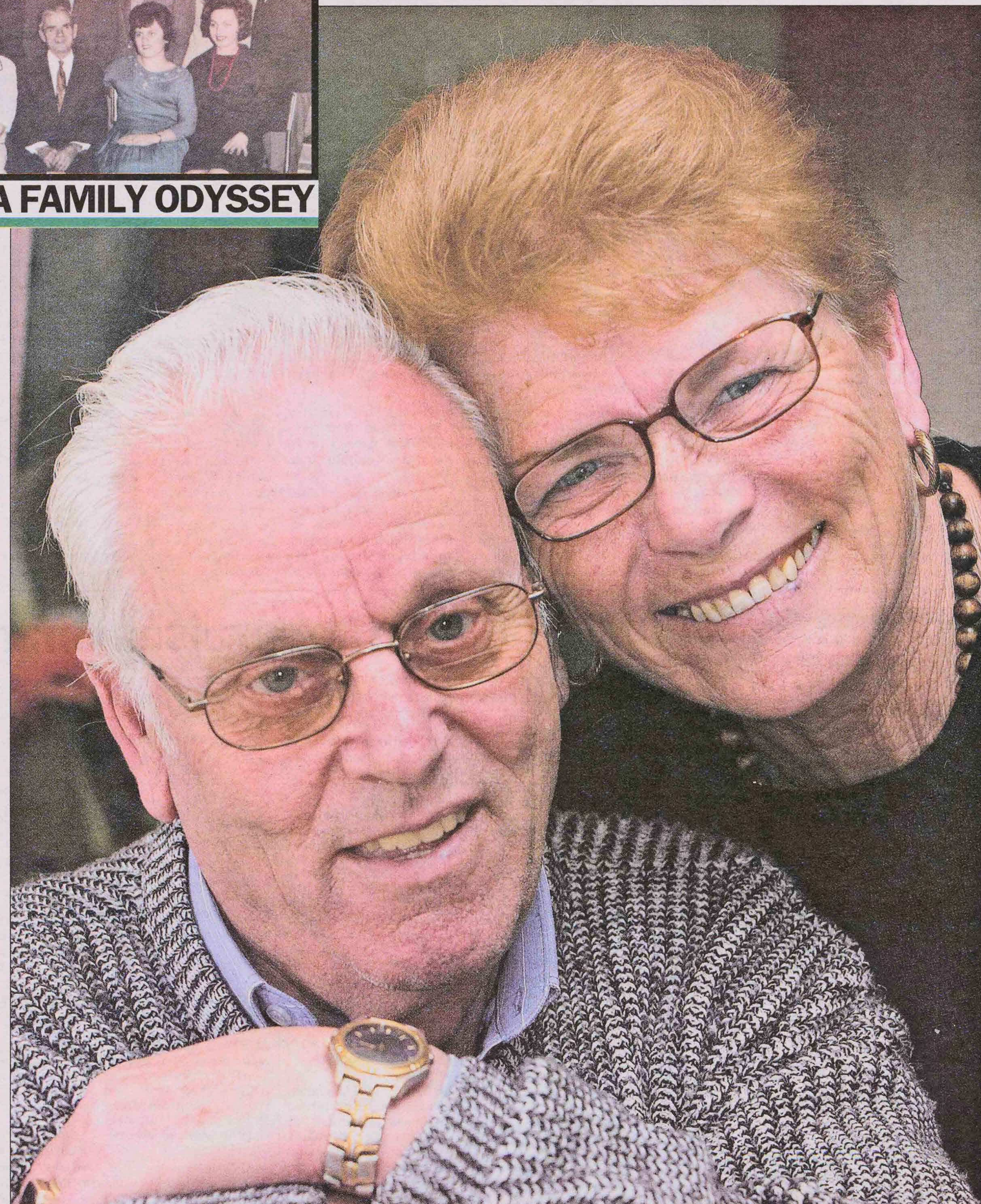
Sanctuary in Australia

ONE-WAY TICKET



THE SIKETA FAMILY ODYSSEY

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 second in a five-part series on their epic journey.



CHILDHOOD SWEETHEARTS: Aldo and Anica Siketa at home in Bell Park. They were friends on Lastovo Island, Croatia, and corresponded after Aldo migrated to Australia in 1953. They married in Geelong and welcomed seven children.
Photo: GLENN FERGUSON

Seven young men fled Croatia. They took an 11-metre fishing boat, battling four-metre waves as they left their Lastovo Island home to strike out on a 150-kilometre voyage for Italy under cover of darkness.

It was 1951, the men were escaping a communist regime they felt had stifled their old Croatia and they were convinced they could find new liberty in Italy or lands beyond.

Brothers Aldo, Mario and Ivan Siketa were among the men in that boat. They left behind their parents and seven siblings.

Their journey would take them to Australia, Geelong and a new beginning.

Aldo, the eldest, was escaping the Yugoslav army. "I knew there was a better way, even if I stayed in Italy," Aldo recalled at his Bell Park home: "But I didn't want to stay in Italy. It was too close, too dangerous."

That night flight from Lastovo was perilous. The men had to pass guards on patrol boats with a licence to shoot, but the familiarity of a fishing boat striking out to sea in the evening provided them with a veil of security until they reached the sanctuary of Italian water.

Back at home, their younger brothers and sisters wondered where the adventure would end.

Their mother, Philomena, had heard a whisper of the escape plan and had quietly braced for dealing with separation. Their father, Anton, knew nothing, so was left to contemplate the loss of three sons and a valuable fishing vessel. The parents had to deal with interrogation by secret police.

The Siketa brothers were afforded refugee status in Italy. They worked in camps with tens of thousands of other displaced people.

Burgeoning countries of the time like America, Argentina and Australia had offices at the camps, using them as portals for recruiting people power.



danny iannan

The Siketa brothers settled on Australia, so shifted to a camp at Bremerhaven, Germany, for four months before setting sail aboard an old ship which bore the name of Nelly but had formerly been christened Seven Seas.

"You had to sign a contract with the Australian Government to work for two years, and after that you are free," Aldo said.

"We were given free passage on the ship.

"It was more like a transport boat than a passenger ship, and there were not many people to work, so we worked helping in the kitchens and I served on the tables."

Nelly docked in Melbourne in October, 1953, and the Siketas joined thousands of other migrants with their few possessions in a camp at Bonegilla

awaiting work. They spoke no English and hoped to stick together.

"I had a friend in Geelong who I wrote to, and he got me a job at Ford because I had mechanical experience," Aldo said.

"But they had nothing for Mario. I decided to stay with him, and so Mario and I were sent to Queensland to clear the bush."

Ivan found work on the railways at Wagga Wagga. Aldo and Mario found their Queensland experience miserable. The work was brutal, they lived in a tent kilometres from the property owner's house.

"And we don't have any pay," Aldo said. "We worked for two months and then he kicked us out because we didn't work how he liked."

The boss paid them out with enough money to take them back to Victoria. The promise of work at Ford lured Aldo to Geelong; Mario followed.

They lived with other migrant men sleeping in bunks in a bungalow behind shops in Walscott Street and later bought a block of land in Kildare Street, North Geelong.

They built their own one-room bungalow from wood saved from Ford boxes and worked hard to buy assets, including a motorcycle and a grey FJ Holden sedan.

Ivan later joined them. Aldo worked on engine reconditioning at Ford, but later shifted to driving a crane.

"I liked this job and worked hard at it," he said. "The pay was about 12 pounds a week and there was some overtime, but at the weekends most of us would go pea-picking around Colac, Werribee, Birregurra and all over.

"It was very hard work starting at 5am, but lots of families did it to get started. Most of the people I worked with were Italians and Croatians."

The brothers maintained contact with their family back in Lastovo and Aldo corresponded with his sweetheart, Anica 'Ana' Grgurevic.

He urged her to join him, and in 1956 they wed in Geelong.

By the close of 1957, the first of their seven children, Antonia, had arrived and they had been joined by Aldo's family.

Anton, Philomena and their seven remaining children had farewelled Lastovo and moved to the extended Kildare Street home.

Aldo left Ford, shifted with Ana to Yarraville and worked in Brooklyn. They would shift many more times before settling back in Geelong.



PASSPORT SHOT: Philomena Siketa with children, from left, Kuzma, Pierina, Milenko and Bruno, just before their departure for Australia.

TOMORROW: BRUNO THE BUTCHER