

BIOGRAPHY OF MARIO DEMETLICA

“ISTRIA, LAND OF MY CHILDHOOD”

My name is Mario Demetlica. I was born in the region of Istria when it was part of the Kingdom of Italy, but is now mainly in Croatia and Slovenia. I am now 89 years old and live in Adelaide, Australia. This, in brief, is the story of my life, and more particularly, that part of it that was lived in Istria.

My parents

My parents were Giuseppe and Blasina Lucia Demetlica. They were born in Vines, a town of Istria, Giuseppe in 1886 and Blasina Lucia in 1888. Istria at that time was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



My father was born in poverty and his youth was full of tragedy. His father died of illness when my father was 2 years old and his mother died suddenly only two years later, when he was four. Being an only child, and not having older siblings to look after him, he was taken care of by relatives and friends. He made himself useful to his carers as well as he could at his tender age by working in the carers' small plots of land, which demanded hard and unrelenting work from dawn to dusk with little

to show for it. At age 10 he got a job in the timber yard of the coal mine in Carpano, working 12 hours a day. When he reached the age of 15, he was employed as a miner in the Vines and Stermazio mine. Then at the age of 22 in an accident in the mine he lost his left leg, to above the knee. He was fitted with a wooden leg and the mine redeployed him as a storeman, distributing petrol and carbide (for lamps used in coal mines in that era). Later he became the mine's telephonist until retirement at age 65. He died at age 84, in 1970, and that was when he finally separated from his wooden leg.

My mother also had a hard childhood but, on the other hand, a slightly more fortunate one. Her father died when she was 12 and her mother when she was 15. She was the third of four surviving children. She married my father when she was 17 and lived to the age of 89 years, dying in 1977. My parents had 12 children, two of whom died a few days after birth. Of the ten that reached adulthood, I am now the only one still alive.



My birth and childhood years

I was born on 2 June 1929 in Apartment No 38 of the Piazza di Vines d'Albona. I was the 11th of 12 children of my parents.



At age 4, my parents enrolled me in kindergarten, very near our house in Vines. During the Fascist era children in kindergarten were called “sons of the wolf” in reference to Capitoline wolf which, according to legend, had suckled the twin brothers Romulus and Remus who went on to found Rome. Being a “son of the wolf” was considered a great honour by the children. At kindergarten there were 36 children, some of whom were of Italian and some of Slav background. We all played together happily, like brothers, with toys made from wood and paper. I remember that we used to enter the schoolroom holding hands and singing “Rooster, little rooster, cock-a-doodle-do, hurry little rooster, get up, take the basket and come with me, because going to the kindergarten is fun”. Then we would do the ring-around-the-rosey singing “Ring Ring-around-the-rosey.....” which was known by every child in those days. It was good being children then, without any ill-feeling between us, all of us happy.

When I was eight I became a Balilla, an organisation for boys prescribed by the Fascist regime. They gave me a new uniform, grey-green trousers, black shirt, sky blue handkerchief, two metre long black sash, the fez and the headgear of the Arditi (an elite corps of the Italian army).



During my primary school years, there were 30 children in my class, most of whom were native Istrians and the others were children of Italian citizens who had come to Istria after it became part of the Kingdom of Italy following the end of World War I. Our teacher was from Sicily. She was of slight build (petite) but a very good and patient teacher. She taught us the alphabet and told us that we had to memorise it so that we could at a later stage know how to write it in a different way. Similarly for numbers which, she told us, were the keys to mathematics. Sometimes she would scold us because between us Istrians we would often fall into speaking our two dialects, namely the Po naše (mainly Slav based) and the Istroveneto (primarily Italian based). She told us to pay more attention to the school rules pinned to the wall which, in large print, stated: DURING CLASS YOU MUST SPEAK AND WRITE ONLY IN ITALIAN. AWAY FROM CLASS YOU CAN SPEAK AS YOU WISH.



There were lots of games that us boys played outside of school, but not having the money to buy ready-made toys we had to make them ourselves. I'll describe some of these.

When there was enough wind, we used to fly a kite. This was made from two unequal lengths of wood (in the ratio of 1:3/4) nailed together into a cross and then covered by thick paper cut from empty sacks of cement.

The tail, made by attaching bits of the same paper to a piece of string, was attached to the bottom of the cross. The tail was made to be one and a half times the length of the longer piece of wood of the cross. A ball of cotton of around 50-100 metres, one end of which was attached to the long piece of the wooden cross, was used to hold and control the kite in the air. As the wind got stronger it would lift up the kite and we would allow the ball of cotton to unroll slowly.

To play football, we made a ball from old rags scrunched into a ball-like object, of a size suitable for kicking around. In winter, when it snowed, we made sleds using timber boards. We would use them in open fields with a good slope. On the way down we would slide sitting on the sled and then walk back uphill while pulling the sled.

In summer we would go to the beach, which was 6 km from my home. We would always go in groups and walk there and back. We took short cuts through the woods which sloped sharply to the sea and allowed us to get there faster than by road. At the beach we would always hold competitions for who could keep swimming for the longest time, stay underwater the longest and jump into the water from the highest point. Before the competition we put money into a collection that would be the prize for the boy with the most points.

I'd also like to recount a story that casts me in a poor light.

During the fruiting season, when we wanted to eat a piece of fruit we would take it from someone's property without asking (ie steal them). The best and greatest variety of fruit were to be found in the courtyards of the police station and of the house of one of the mine engineers. At midday the police officers would go to lunch and one day my group of five boys decided to attack the huge cherry tree in the courtyard. Four of us climbed the tree and the fifth boy kept watch on the ground. I was the smallest in size and climbed right to the top of the tree to collect the ripest cherries. Suddenly the boy keeping watch alerted us that two police officers were returning. The boys on the lowest branches quickly climbed down from the tree and ran away, with the police officers in pursuit of them but failing to catch them. I was still on the tree and climbed even further up into the denser part of the canopy hoping that I would not be seen by the police officers. However, instead of going into the police station, the two police officers also climbed into the tree but fortunately they stopped at the lower branches and did not see me hiding further up the tree. I was full of fear and hardly breathing because of it and made a promise to myself that I would never steal again in that courtyard. A short time later the two conscientious officers left the tree and I climbed down unharmed and unseen. I never again went to that courtyard.



I remember that when I was 8 years old, in the spring of 1937, my mother took me to the meadows of Pied'Albona to gather some wild radicchio (a leafy plant, of the chickory family, used in salads). Not long after, in 1938, a shaft was drilled on this site to allow the extraction of coal and a new village was built around it to house the coal miners who worked in the mine. The village was named Pozzo Littorio and was officially opened on 28 October 1942, the twentieth anniversary of the Fascist March on Rome.

The World War II years



On 8 September 1943 Italy capitulated and sought an armistice with the Allies. At the time few could have imagined that Istria and its people were about to experience the greatest catastrophe in their history, which would change forever the lives of its native population. I was then 14 years old.

When capitulation occurred, in Vines there were a number of Italian army soldiers stationed in 5 barracks and some police officers in the local police station. They all laid down their arms and abandoned their posts to return home. Seeing the empty barracks and police station, we boys took advantage of the absence of guards to take away foodstuffs, clothing and other goods left behind in the store rooms. In the town square of Vines, only a few metres from my home, there were several meetings of hundreds of people over the next few days and on 13 September they took to the nearby hills with whatever arms they could muster and hid in the pine woods between Vines and Carpano. There they waited in ambush in order to stop an approaching motorized column of German soldiers coming from Pola and headed towards Fiume. That night the earth shook from the explosion of the mines laid to destroy the bridge and from the passing of the German tanks. Machine gun fire and rifle shots were heard throughout the night, but at dawn there was complete silence. Hiding wherever possible near our homes, we boys were wondering what had happened when someone shouted "Good citizens, the German column is about to go through the town and we advise you to put a white bed-sheet on doors and windows". We all did so and the German soldiers passed through the streets of Vines without incident on its way to Fiume. A few days later we found out that in the night battle of 13 September 43 miners/labourers from the district of Albona and other friends had died, in a great show of courage and pride, defending their land unsuccessfully against an occupying force highly skilled in modern warfare and equipped with tanks.

The Germans occupied Istria from 8 September 1943 to May 1945. During that time Istria was ravaged by the fighting between the partisans and the Germans with their fascist allies, and by the behavior of both those groups against the Istrian population. The Germans/fascists were exasperated by the frequent attacks by the partisans, supported by groups of Istrians, who attacked their panzers and disappeared quickly. Accordingly they shot on the spot Istrians who came under suspicion and at the same time there were constant round-ups and retaliations against the civilian population. At the same time the Slav-oriented partisans of Tito took vengeance on the Italian population of Istria, whom they considered an ethnic enemy, and threw people into foibe (sinkholes), including those who were not fascist but were opposed to the partisans.



The early post war years and my first job

After the war most of Istria was occupied by Yugoslavia and one small part remained in Italy. The Yugoslav part was divided between two of the Yugoslav republics, Slovenia and Croatia. Everything changed: the flags, the language, what people talked about, the political cheering that went on. One form of tyranny had been replaced by another.



I started work as an apprentice on 1 September 1945 in the mechanical workshops of the mine at Pozzo Littorio (now called Pied'Albona). They made me a member of the Union of Young Communists of Yugoslavia (SKOJ) but I received nothing as a result of it, except, as was being pointed out to me, the honour of belonging to the Union. So this honour system was simply replacing that under the fascists. I did not feel especially thrilled by the "honour" and there were those who kept reminding me that I should demonstrate that I appreciated the honour being bestowed on me.

In 1948 there was tragic accident in the mine of Pied d'Albona (previously Pozzo Littorio) with 85 deaths. Coal was mined in the Albona district for around 200 years and during that time there have been some bad accidents with many deaths from the explosion of methane gas in the mine. In the twentieth century, there were four explosions of this type: in 1936 (with 16 deaths); 1937 (31 deaths); 28 February 1940 (187 deaths, 304 wounded) and 1948 (85 deaths, as reported by official authorities, but disputed by some as being too low).



I was present at the site when the 1948 accident happened and I helped to load the injured workers into ambulances and the dead into rooms prepared for them. I can still remember the smell of burnt human skin and the cries in pain of those who were mutilated. It would take many pages to describe it all.

In the mechanical workshop we worked 24 hours a day to make galvanised coffins for those who had to be transported for burial to their towns, some as far as Germany because there were a number of German prisoners of war who died in the accident. The mine was closed down in 1988-89 as the coal had run out and there is now nothing left except the memory of a bygone era, an era that was ignored and not spoken of during the Yugoslavia period and continues to be ignored by the new overlords in Istria, namely Croatia and Slovenia.

Reaching adulthood and initial attempts to leave Istria



In 1947, at the age of 18 I officially became an adult with the right to make my own decisions on my future life. I accordingly decided to choose to leave Yugoslavia and go to Italy (called an "opzione"), which was a choice open to adult Istrians that the Yugoslav authorities had to consider seriously under an agreement reached with Italy. Unfortunately my decision then and my subsequent actions delayed my departure for Italy by ten years, for reasons that I describe below.

My difficulties with the new Yugoslav regime began when I first went to the city hall of my native Vines to announce my decision to seek an opzione. There were two clerks in the office at the time and, on hearing my reason for being there, they jumped up and tried to assault me.

I ran away at great speed but more sure than ever that I was making the right decision to leave for Italy. I also began straightaway to make plans for escaping from Istria and the passing of time did not make me change my mind.



I found out that to escape I needed to go to Lasko in Slovenia, known for its thermal baths (Rimske Toplice) dating from Roman times, where lived a person who for a fee could organise an escape across the border into Italy. I started my plan by holding potato pieces on my knees for a number of days until the knees started to creak. When I went to the doctor he agreed that I needed treatment at a thermal baths facility and I was able to convince him to send me to the ones at Rimske Toplice, as I pretended to have relatives there who could assist me with the treatment. I spent 28 days there, made contact with my escape organiser and paid the fee (5000 dinari).

The arrangement was for me to board the train that left Jesenice (on the border with Austria) for Nova Gorica in the evening and disembark at the fifth station after boarding. I did this but when I got off the train instead of meeting the escape organiser I was met by the police. Only much later did I realise that I had got off the train at the sixth station and not the fifth.

I was immediately put in prison where I was interrogated by the army, the police, the border guards and the ubiquitous secret police (UDBA). I did not give in and continued to tell the same story, namely that I had a return ticket to Pola, as they could see for themselves. I also told them that I had the badge of a "lavoratore d'assalto" (highly proficient or master worker) and how could I have attained that status if I had not been loyal to Yugoslavia. This was a risky statement by me as I had never been declared a "lavoratore d'assalto", even though I had been highly praised for my work.

In the morning, at an early hour, the police let me go after taking all my money and gave me a ticket to Jesenice. They told me that I had to find my own way back to Pola and not to annoy public officials again. When I left the prison, I was very tired and very hungry. I saw a plum tree nearby and the house owner, who was looking at me, let me have as many plums as I wanted. I never forgot the sweet taste of those ripe plums in the autumn of 1949 although the next day I suffered the consequences of my excessive eating - something that I never told anyone.

In the spring of 1950 I again tried to escape, but that time with a friend of mine, Tony F, who was slightly younger than me. One late afternoon we caught the train from Pola to Pinguento. During the trip no one checked our documents. As the train was slowing down before stopping at the station in Pinguento, we jumped off the train. We could see that before long there would be a heavy shower and we sought shelter in the nearby woods. In a short time we were completely drenched. Toni panicked and started to shout but I was able to calm him down somewhat. To both of us it felt as if the night would never end.

At dawn we decided that we were not in good shape and that there was no point in pursuing our plan further. We walked towards the nearby village of Murusi, where an acquaintance lived. On reaching the river Mirna we saw that we could not any longer wade through it. We thought of going over the bridge but there were two soldiers stationed there, so we went back and collected some firewood and then returned to the bridge carrying it. The soldiers were smoking while leaning on the bridge railing and, not suspecting anything, acknowledged our greeting casually as we went through. When we arrived at the house of my acquaintance we were received with pleasure and took the opportunity to dry ourselves, eat and have a good night's sleep. In the morning my acquaintance told us that soldiers were looking for two young men who had jumped off the train the night before. She of course had not seen anyone. In the afternoon we went to the Pinguente bus station where we waited for the bus home. Shortly two policemen arrived and Toni started to be gripped with fear. I quickly picked out a cigarette and approached the policemen to ask for a light. One of the policemen lit my cigarette and the two of them left. Toni calmed down and was astounded that I could have acted with such sang froid. This fact too I never told anyone.

Marriage to Paolina

Shortly afterwards I was called up for national service and was stationed at the Butimir airport, near the Sarajevo airport. There I trained for 6 months as a military driver and obtained my licence. I was then sent to the army post in Pale, near Sarajevo, and in other areas. During a routine trip to the barracks of Sarajevo, a man in civilian clothes came on board the truck. He was carrying an automatic pistol. I asked him why he was carrying arms as we were not in a state of war! The stranger told me to mind my own business as otherwise I might be swallowed by black shadows. He added that he and his group were Ustashi and told me many things that he knew about me and my family. He concluded by saying that it would be better for me to forget what I saw and heard. From that day on, individuals from that group frequently took my truck for their use without asking. I have never spoken to anyone about this knowing the danger it posed to me and my family. I was in danger from both sides: from the Ustashi if I spoke up, and from the Communists if I remained silent and did not expose the affair.



On returning from national service I married Paolina, whom I had known for several years, in October 1953. The practice in those days was to have a civil marriage first and then a religious one,

in the church of Santa Maria d'Albona. As we were going to the church one of my witnesses announced that he could not enter the church as he was a member of the communist party and by going to church risked losing his job. So I had to find someone else quickly. Fortunately there was someone in the street who offered to be a witness and enter the church with us, so that in effect we ended up with "three" witnesses at the wedding.

Having married, I avoided being called up in the army. Young people were being called up in large numbers in October 1953 because of the diplomatic crisis surrounding the future of Trieste. It was government policy at the time to send the least loyal citizens to the front line to defend the country. This was a strange way to operate but this same approach was used 40 years later, in 1990, when inmates of prisons were sent to defend the Croatian homeland.



went to work and was supplementing the already good wage with earnings from playing in a jazz group. In 1953 I formed a group that comprised 4 musicians, and we called ourselves Jazz di Vines. We played every Saturday at dances in the local towns and on Sunday at the Hotel di Albona. In 1954 I put together another group of 6 musicians that we called Kawboy Gimmi. We played at the Albona theatre, in the hotels in Rabaz and in the villages around Albona. Then in 1955 I put together a group of 9 musicians to play at large parties and fetes. We had many engagements that provided relaxation to those varied communities. However this annoyed someone so that we started to be harassed by the authorities. I was called before the Komitet where I was denounced for having chosen the name of Kawboy Gimmi for the group, an Americanism that offended the Komitet who argued that "they had not fought a bitter war to become Americans and to perhaps form an alliance with rotten capitalists". Having failed to change my mind, I was then referred to the UDBA where I was interrogated on possible links with foreigners. They told me that they knew I had contacts in other countries, from whom I received songs that my group played. I explained that in fact I copied the songs from the radio late at night, but they rebuked me for making fun of them as they did not believe that what I was saying was possible.



Third attempt to escape from Istria and its aftermath



In 1955 I told my father and no one else of my intention to try again to escape from Yugoslavia. My father told me: "My son, you are no longer on your own. You have a wife and child, a house, a good job and are making money with your music group. What more do you want? Why do you want to go away from here, and without even knowing where to?" I replied to my father along the following lines "Dear dad, you are right to chastise me, but believe me when I say that I am no longer able to put up with life here because these wretched communists all the time insult me and stop me from doing harmless things that I enjoy. Life for me has become boring and insufferable. Dad, I know that you are hurt by what I said, but I ask you to tell me whether you would rather I stay here unhappy for the rest of my life or that I go to where

destiny leads me, from where I can send you a photo of me, smiling and happy, together with my family?"

At this my father, with tears in his eyes, said "My son, if this is the way you are thinking, then it is better that you go even though I feel sorrow in my heart in saying this. Be re-assured that when you go your mother and I will look after your dear wife and son, but I advise you not to tell even your wife about your plans in case she, by her behaviour, involuntarily raises the suspicions of the authorities".



For my third escape attempt there would be three of us: me, Toni F, and Sandro H, who was a little older than me. We made sure we had good clothing, so that we could withstand changes in the weather, which had been a problem in my second escape attempt. At that time the American troops were pulling out of Austria and of Europe generally, and we thought that we could try to sneak into those contingents in the guise of non-combatant auxiliary workers. With a little bit of luck we might be able to do it.

We left Pola with a ticket to Jesenice, as in my previous attempt. When asked why we were there we intended to say that we had heard that the Jesenice ironworks were looking for workers and that the pay was very good. Towards evening, as we were approaching the appointed meeting place, the three of us jumped off the train. Others joined us so that we ended up being 8 in all. We greeted one another and exchanged names (which were fictitious). We all wanted to leave Yugoslavia and had a similar reason for wanting to do so. The contact for our planned escape took us through a wood into a clearing. It was night time but not dark because of the full moon. The plan was that two would cross the clearing first, followed by three others and then the last three. The group reaching the other side of the clearing would give the signal for the next one to go. On the other side was our next contact who would take us over the border from Yugoslavia to Austria.

In the middle of the clearing was a bush which we had to go past. The first group reached the other side and gave the signal for the next group to come. This group comprised the three of us, the 'Albonesi', namely Toni, Santo and me. We walked silently and, while visibility was less than perfect, we could see nearby objects and shadows of moving men. We had just passed the bush, when a soldier appeared from behind it. He was holding his pants in one hand and a pistol pointed at us in the other. When he shouted 'Stop' we stopped in surprise and fright. Then a young woman appeared next to the soldier and she was re-arranging her clothing in haste. The three of us were taken to prison and on the way there the soldier finished putting his trousers on.

We were interrogated singly throughout the night. I was not prepared to concede and kept saying that I was not trying to escape from Yugoslavia, but came to look for work and got lost in the countryside. However, when they showed me the statements from the other two, I had to give up. There was no trial and we were given prison sentences according to our ages: 6 months for Toni in Lubiana, 7 months for me in Maribor and 8 months for Santo also in Maribor. They took away my money and left me only with enough to send a letter to my wife. I wrote to her in Italian because at home we spoke in that language as well as the local Albonese. They tore up that letter and threw it away telling me "What do you expect. You should know in which country you live!" After that I was not allowed any more letters until the following month, provided I could find money for one.



My wife had been informed of my attempted escape by my father, but she received no official news about me. There were however lots of rumours, all purporting to be from reliable sources. Some said that I had been sighted in Rabaz, or even Pola, and then Pisino and in other parts of Istria. Through a contact in the police force every rumour was checked but the finding each time was that I was not in Istria. The following month Santo was able to send a letter home so that our relatives in Albona got to know where we were. My wife then

set out for Maribor immediately in the company of my sister Giuseppina. She was allowed 15 minutes to speak to me, but not in Italian and always with a police officer next to her.

In prison I worked in my trade, fitting and turning, and they also put me in with the prison musicians. There were 45 of us and every night we practised different songs, but mainly the (Austrian) music of Strauss. On Sundays we held a concert for the prison inmates, around 400 in total.

However, we did not stay in prison for the full imposed term. As a goodwill gesture for the upcoming New Year an amnesty was pronounced for the whole group, so that we were freed after spending 5 months in prison.

On my return home to Vines d'Albona I started to look for a new job, but was faced with an impenetrable wall of hostility from my communist work mates. A director of the mine in Albona, who was also my neighbour, told me that one could not go against the Communist Party's decisions and rules and that transgressors had to be punished so that others would understand that the Party would not tolerate being trifled with. As was pointed out to me, what would happen if everyone did his own thing?. No, the party could not accept anarchy, and for the disobedient there was no job.

I had a riposte to that point of view held by the director and his ilk, and I spoke to the director in this manner: "During the war, when I was only 15 I would keep watch on the slopes of Monte Maggiore to warn you when patrols of German soldiers and fascists were around, while you played at being partisans and in effect went to hide from the enemy. I now realise that I should have left you all to be killed". The director was so enraged that he threw me out of his office.



The local committee of the Party had the authority to impose a further penalty on the offending individual and in my case, in addition to denying me a job, they also refused to give me my work certificate (similar to an employment and qualifications CV) which would have allowed me to look for work in another town, like Pola or Fiume. I was also denied permission to submit an opzione. So clearly my good fellow citizens held that opponents of the one and only party should be punished severely for trying to escape illegally from the new homeland of Yugoslavia.

I was devastated, as I had to look after my small family and had no other resources. I had been out of work for 8 months when I went to see another director, who managed the firm Naprijed. He told me the same thing as the previous director, namely that one must not disobey the rules of the party and that offenders would not be given a job. However, seeing that I had accepted my mistake, had frequently sought his help and was in financial distress, he caved in and gave me a job.

At the firm, from the materials cast aside in a corner I pulled out an old iron cutter and in two months brought it back to working order. Using that cutter I was able to exceed the "norma", that is the output to be fulfilled by a worker in a day. When the commission from Pola came to evaluate my work, they concluded that I was exceeding the norma and that I should be compensated for it. I ended up earning more than the director (Viktori Goglja). I also started to play music again, so further improving the financial position of the family.

Leaving Istria by legal means and emigrating to Australia

However, I was not happy and was upset at seeing the discontent of the honest and hard working Istrian people that I saw everywhere. I could not condone the prevailing crudeness of the society around me, the unpleasantness in the interactions between individuals, the limitations to freedom of speech and thought. I was tired and humiliated and decided to free myself definitively from that miserable and retrograde society. Since I first opted to go to Italy in 1948 I had made other requests like that but each time I was refused. Therefore I talked with my wife about seeking a svincolo (namely, giving up the Yugoslav citizenship, a new scheme introduced in around 1955/56) so that we

could leave for Italy. My wife agreed but said that she wanted to come with me and not wait for me to establish myself outside of Yugoslavia first and then sponsor her and our son.

While we were waiting for the permit, because of the long administrative delays we had time to get our documents in order by reference to original registers. On coming to power, the Yugoslav communist government had slavified family and personal names, without seeking approval from individuals. We wanted our surname to be re-instated to Demetlica from that imposed on us, namely Demetlika, and this cost us 24,000 dinars, which was the equal of two months' average wages. Then, after 10 years of forced penance under the Communist regime, on 15 March 1957 we obtained the *svincolo* and the permission to leave Yugoslavia. We hastened our departure as much as possible and I, my wife Paolina and our three and a half year old son Gianni abandoned our homeland only two weeks later, on 1 April 1957. We left behind our parents, relatives, friends and the house in which I had intended to spend the rest of my life. We also left behind the graves of our ancestors and went forward into the unknown. Even though it was a heart-breaking decision, we did not change our mind. It was in any case easier to leave than to continue to live in an uncivilised environment.



Before departing we had to sign a document stating that we were leaving all our real estate to the State, or according to the language of those times, to the people. We had known about this requirement beforehand, so that we had already transferred our



Marioa, Gaeta
Campo Frofoghi.

entitlements to real estate to the members of the family who were staying behind. We did not go straightaway to a reception camp on arrival in Italy, as was the usual practice. For several days we stayed with Paolina's aunt in Trieste and then later went to Gaeta, a town between Rome and Naples. There we lived in the Vittorio Emanuele II displaced persons' camp. We remained there for three years together with several hundred other disconsolate exiles from Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia, but



we were always hoping that one day we would achieve our desired objective, our destiny.



For over two years I worked in the small Cantiere Navale (Shipyard) of Gaeta. The working hours were long (about

10 to 12 hours a day) but I had a good wage. I bought a Lambretta which I used for going to work and for travelling with my wife and son in the countryside around Gaeta. My son Gianni was 5 years old when he went to kindergarten run by the nuns of the convent, who also looked after orphan children. In return for not paying fees, my wife worked 8 hours a day without pay as a cook's assistant in the convent's kitchen.



In May 1959 an international organisation for emigration came to Gaeta to select suitable candidates for migration. I went through an assessment of my trade skills and professional competence. As a result I was offered the option of going to Switzerland, a job in the factory Magneti Marelli of Milan or emigration to Australia as a stateless person within a month. I was very happy with the opportunities offered. I went to Rome to see the Australian Consulate but on thinking it through I realised that unless I went to visit my parents and relatives in Istria then I might not see them ever again if I went to faraway Australia. I therefore



Vines 30-7-1959- ultima riunione di Famigliari e Amici prima di partire per l'Australia. 1-10-1959 Mario - Paolina - e Gianni - Demetfice:

I therefore decided to go to the Yugoslav Consulate to get a visa to enable me, my wife and son to go to Istria for 3 months, but the Consulate only gave me a visa for 30 days. After our visit that we chose the Australia emigration option, even though we had to pay for the travel costs for myself, my wife and son.

We arrived in Australia in November 1959 and settled in Maryborough, Queensland, where our sons George and Walter were born. In 1965 we went to live in Adelaide, in South Australia, and have been there since then.

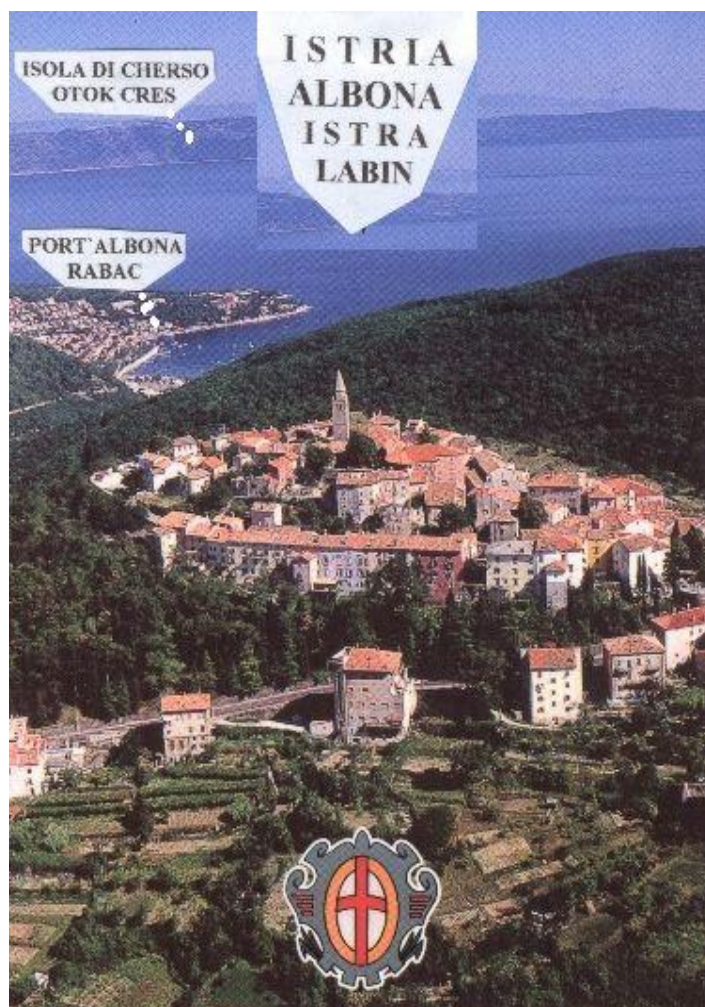


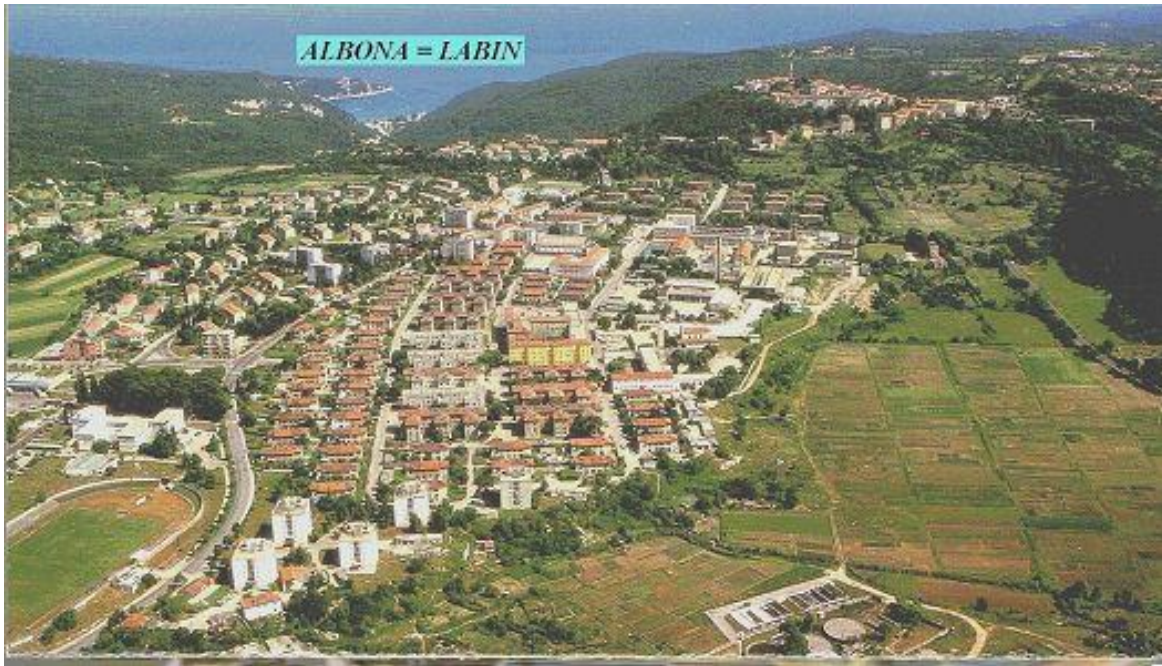
Returning to Istria to visit family and friends

Since coming to Australia we have visited Istria and our native Albona regularly (9 times in all). Even though we enjoyed visiting relatives and friends, the social situation has saddened us. I thought that after the bad times under the Communist regime things would get better and that social conditions would improve and the country take off, but unfortunately progress has been slow.



During one of our visits, when we went to the beach in Rabaz, I approached an acquaintance who





used to be a diehard communist, the same one that prevented me from getting a job. My friends know how much bitterness and sourness I hold against this former mate, but I am by nature a peaceful man and I, considered by the past regime as an enemy of the state, extended my hand to him and forgave him - him, the man who had benefited greatly from the regime and was one of its most important supporters, who through his actions had affected the destiny of many people and who had forced me to leave my homeland.

The former mate, now a grandee, blames it all on the strange circumstances prevailing at the time.. He said that he had not really been a communist but simply an anti-fascist! This is an interesting lie, from a person who, like many others, has changed his spots. There was a time when the communists did not allow someone to call himself anti-fascist if he was a member of the communist party. Now everyone seems to say that he was anti-fascist and was forced to become a member of the communist party, but that deep inside he was just anti-fascist. It's interesting that these people all lean on the usual crutch, namely that they went along with the times, forgetting that they were the ones who created those times.

Epilogue

Dear Istrian relatives, friends and supporters

I have written this short tale of the part of my life spent in Istria, which spanned the administration of our homeland by Italy (1918 to 1943), the occupation by Germany with support from Italian fascists (1943 to 1945) and the take-over by the Yugoslav partisans led by the Communist dictator Josip Broz Tito, who also seized Fiume (Rijeka) and Dalmatia. As I pointed out above, I and my family (wife Paolina and son Gianni) were able to free ourselves from the barbarous Yugoslav Communist regime on 1 April 1957 when we departed for Trieste (which by then was part of Italy).

I have been sick for the past 8 years and am currently very ill. My lungs are functioning at a low level and I am frequently hospitalised as I have difficulty in breathing, getting up and walking. I think that I have little time left to live, but it's not up to me but to mother nature to decide on the timing of my departure from this world.

I have much to be thankful for in my life. I have lived to be 89 years old, and my new homeland of Australia, through hard work, has enabled me and my family (including 7 grandchildren and 4 great-grandchildren) to enjoy a good standard of living and much happiness.

I now sign off by wishing everyone who reads my short biography a Good and Happy Life, and, paraphrasing a popular Italian song, "finche' la vita va, lasciala andare" or simply "let life take its course".



**Mario Demetlica
Adelaide (Australia)
September 2018**

The whole Demetlica family together 1-8-1998

