

Memories of a young emigrant

By Anthony Klein

A bit of family history first. Sometime in the 1920s, a young brother and sister in their late teens left Timisoara to seek their fortune in faraway Australia, presumably to escape harsh economic conditions that followed the Treaty of Trianon - the cataclysmic carve-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that followed their loss of the Great War. They were Louis and Nellie Spitzer, children of my maternal grandmother's sister and thus my mother's first cousins. After a few years of doing odd jobs and cleaning houses, they settled down and prospered. Louis married the daughter of a country draper and, as dowry, inherited a haberdashery in the country town of Benalla. Nellie also got married, to a scholarly and pious Hungarian Jew with whom she had a son and a daughter, born in the 1930s. Louis and his wife also had children - two daughters and a son - born in the 1930s and '40s. They persuaded their parents, my great-aunt Esther and her husband Charles, to come to Australia too, which they did, well before the Second World War. They settled in Shepparton and got into farming, fruit-growing and the fruit and vegetable canning industry. So, these were the Spitzer family pioneers. Why they chose Australia, rather than North America, I have never found out.



Louis and Nellie Spitzer, immigrants to Australia in the 1920s

Back in Timisoara, my mother's eldest sister, Ella, met her childhood sweetheart Geza Spitzer who, after returning from the First World War (in which several of his brothers were captured or killed), went to the University of Vienna to complete his studies in Construction Engineering, thus becoming the only member of the extended family with a tertiary education. He returned to Timisoara, married my aunt and settled down in a good commercial job with a German firm of importers. He carried the decorative title of "Ing." but never, in fact, practised the engineering profession. As fascism gathered strength in Germany and the storm-clouds of war gathered in the late 1930s, his German colleagues, possibly as an act of kindness, gave him advance warning: "Herr Spitzer, this is a German firm - there is no great future here under the circumstances". Fortunately, uncle Geza, whatever he felt about this apparent betrayal by

colleagues of long standing, took heed of the warning and started considering his options. In conjunction with my father, who was a few years younger and who held him in great esteem, they decided to seek the help of the Australian Spitzers (who were actually more distantly related but had the same surname) to apply for Landing Permits and thus escape from Europe and emigrate to Australia.

They duly received the application forms, written in English, of course, and started to fill them in, with the aid of a German - English dictionary. What were their occupations - what were they intending to do in Australia? An easy question for my uncle, the graduate construction engineer, he filled in "Bauingenieur" - translation: Builder. What about my father? They figured out that they would go into the housing business together and my father would become a contractor. (He had completed his secondary education in a "Commercial School" but was only a businessman, after all, with no special technical skills). "OK, then - you'll be a contractor - in German an "Unternehmer": a man who undertakes to complete certain works". English translation, according to the dictionary: Undertaker. Back come the answers from Australia: "Yes, we need builders - Spitzer - you're in - here is your Landing Permit". "No, we don't need undertakers, sorry Klein - no Landing Permit". This tragic error condemned us to being trapped in Europe for the duration of the Second World War and could, indeed, have had lethal consequences! A parenthetic note: In 2002 we went on a tour of Ireland, driving South from Dublin along the coast. On the outskirts of Cork we came across a sign above a shopfront that said: Patrick So-and-so and Sons Builders and Undertakers. So there, the original meaning of the term lives on, and somewhere I even have a photograph to prove it!

The Spitzers sailed from Europe in 1939, in the nick of time: The ship that brought them to Australia (after an enforced sojourn in Colombo) was torpedoed and sunk on its way back! They were met and helped by the Australian Spitzers, settled in Melbourne, my uncle ran a timber mill in Fairfield and they eventually prospered. Their son, my cousin Victor, who was 11 years older than I, worked at various jobs and studied at night, ended up enlisting in the Australia Armed Forces and spent several years in New Guinea as an anti-aircraft gunner. We almost completely lost contact with them during the war. Except for a couple of Red Cross messages (which had to be in English) and which got minute analysis with the aid of the same old dictionary. I remember great puzzlement over the word "both" - in the sentence "we are both well in Melbourne". It was only after the war that the code was broken: They tried to tell us that their son was away from Melbourne, but we would never have guessed that he was fighting in New Guinea!

By some miracle we all survived, except my mother's other older sister Yolán who, married to a Serb national, decided rather late during the war that it would be safer to move some 50 km to the East of Timisoara, to a town in Serbia. Another fatal mistake: Alas, we never heard from them after 1944 - they both perished in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Fortunately, their daughter, my cousin Hedda, was doing an apprenticeship in dressmaking and it was decided to let her complete it in Timisoara. She stayed with my family and became like an older sister. (Our fairly large apartment became quite crowded when my grandparents moved in too, after their house was appropriated by the authorities as part of another anti-Semitic move sometime around 1943 or 44). Soon after VE day, in 1945, when we found out that Hedda's parents had perished in the holocaust, she was invited by the Spitzers to join them, so she travelled to Genoa and caught a ship to Australia, alone as a single girl of 20, with a bogus wedding ring as her only form of protection. She arrived safely, started a new life as a "New

Australian", learned English, got married and lived in Adelaide with her family before being widowed and joining the rest of us in Melbourne again sometime in the 1990s.



Regina and Joseph Teichner, my maternal grandparents, 1948. Their passport for Australia

Next came my grandparents: Aged in their late 70s and having lost their home and most of their possessions during the war, they came to Australia in 1948, to live with their other daughter, Ella and the Spitzer family who managed to obtain Landing Permits for them. They never learned to speak English, beyond a few mangled words, but came to enjoy life. Grandpa Joseph Teichner, a gregarious old boy, knew that there was no point in speaking to people in Hungarian, but he would often try German and, when not understood, would say it again - only louder. As a former old brewery employee, he came to appreciate Melbourne Bitter Ale (pronounced "Bitter Alee"), found some other old codgers with whom to play cards regularly and was even invited to join the old diggers in the Kew RSL club. Perhaps they didn't realise, or perhaps they didn't care, that he had fought "on the other side" in the Great War! (He had been an artilleryman on the Italian front, before the Austro-Hungarian empire lost Trieste and the other Mediterranean ports). The old boy also enjoyed shopping - and especially, haggling. My aunt Ella had an arrangement with the greengrocer, to let my grandfather beat them down in price, and she would later make up the difference. Ever a bon-vivant, he set fire to his oxygen tent when he insisted on lighting up a cigarette after suffering a heart attack at the age of 81. He died a little while later, but not before the whole family had been reunited, with our arrival in January, 1953.



My grandmother Regina (Rebecca), on the right, reunited with her sisters, Frieda and Esther

That event came about quite indirectly and again as a series of fortuitous events. My cousin Vic travelled to Canberra - on an early DC3 airliner - and, flashing his Returned Serviceman badge, sorted out the "undertaker" debacle and persuaded the authorities to give us Landing Permits too. We could have, nay should have, emigrated together with my grandparents - or even before. However, following the post-war shortages and my father's enterprise in manufacturing substitute materials for industry, it was just too good an opportunity to miss not to build up a little capital before coming to Australia. Another bad mistake, as it turned out, because when the Iron Curtain came down in 1948, all the borders were closed and no emigration was permitted. A few brave souls managed to escape by means of clandestine border crossings, but everyone else, especially Jewish people who wanted to emigrate to Israel, was trapped in the "socialist paradise" in which housing shortages and other economic hardships were steadily getting worse. Then, unexpectedly, came an amazing piece of luck. My father, who came from Budapest originally, was a Hungarian subject and had retained his Hungarian citizenship ever since the 1920s, renewing his passport and Romanian resident's visa at five or ten-yearly intervals. In fact, all of us, including my mother and me were on the one passport - all of us claiming Hungarian citizenship. The logic behind this was that there may be, from time to time, advantages in being a foreign national whereby one could claim exemption from selected restrictive measures - and indeed I believe that there may have been such occasions during the war. However, sometime around 1951, this Hungarian passport was about to expire, as had been the case many times before, and the time came to apply to the Hungarian authorities for a new one. "Dear Sir, Since our current passport is about to expire please issue us with a new one..." Then a neuron must have misfired because in an act of sheer audacity he added the phrase: "...valid for travel to Australia". Preposterous, indeed, under the circumstances! In due course, the answer came from Budapest: "Dear Mr Klein, I am instructed to inform you that your request for a passport has been refused. Your obedient servant..." Armed with this document,

my father went to the Romanian authorities, saying "look: the bloody Hungarians are refusing to renew my passport..." (Without, of course, explaining why they had refused). "Where do we go from here?" Without batting an eyelid, the Romanian bureaucrat informed him that, having lived for so many years in Romania he would be entitled to become a Romanian citizen, and to hell with the Hungarians.

- "But what if I don't wish to become a Romanian citizen?"

- "Well, then you become stateless", came the reply.

- "What does that mean?"

- "Exactly what it says - you are not protected by any country.

- "But can I go abroad on that basis?"

- "You can go to buggery, as far as anyone cares."

I am here translating the very much more vulgar Romanian expression that the functionary employed - and when the import of that sunk in, a few seconds later, they both burst into spontaneous laughter: My father, when realising the unbelievable stroke of luck - and the bureaucrat at the thought of having gotten away with the rudest possible insult addressed to an innocent client. Whereupon from the very back of a dusty filing cabinet he pulled out some very old applications forms, for travel documents for stateless persons, which dated back to the immediate post-war period when they were commonly used for processing refugees.

To be continued