

ERNEST'S STORY

My grandfather, Ernest Istvan Gerzabek, (who I am very proud to tell the story of) was a refugee from Hungary. Ernest was 18 years old when he became a refugee.

It all started in 1956 when the Soviet army severely crushed Hungary and the Hungarian people. As an outcome thousands of freedom fighters and civilians were killed.

Like 200,000 Hungarians, Ernest decided to leave his beloved country in search of freedom, along with his parents and his younger brother. Secretly they left, leaving their small flat and all of their belongings behind. Crossing the border was challenging, constantly alert for danger on the way. There were armed border guards who either shot or arrested and imprisoned anyone who was caught. Ernest recalls, "Our hearts were pounding, it seemed like eternity." He and his family walked for tiring kilometres in the dark.

After walking the long, tiring distances he was relieved to hear the voices of Austrian border guards welcoming the Hungarians. The guards helpfully escorted them all to a school hall. Ernest says, "In hindsight I often wondered how we dared to undertake such a journey into the great unknown without any money, property or support from relatives. I could not speak any other language besides Hungarian," he told me. It makes you realize how desperate a refugee must be before he or she leaves their whole life behind in their beloved country of birth.

"It was so easy for FAT CAT politicians in their cozy offices to accuse refugees of being illegals and lock them up behind razor wires and treating them like they

were undesirable sub-humans!" Ernest said. All Hungarian refugees were accepted by the Austrian Government. "We were treated with sympathy, given food, clothes and the basic necessities for survival, we were even given accommodation!" he says.

They were housed in dormitories with bunk beds, each dorm accommodating at least 40 other strangers. There was not a lot of privacy living with so many people, so later on families received a room in an old army barrack with communal bathrooms. Ernest explains, "We were free, poor, but free to roam the streets and meet and become friends with the locals."

They were helped to apply for immigration to countries that willingly accepted refugees. "My family wanted to move away from the frequent war and the conflicts of Europe, so we applied to distant countries like U.S.A, Canada and Australia." He explained.

English and German languages were provided at the camp, so eagerly Ernest started to study both languages.

Waiting for the acceptance became very drawn out and painful, with hope fading away every single day. They waited two long years before receiving a final answer. "As I remember, the uncertainty was practically unbearable, I was depressed and hated being stuck in a seemingly endless limbo!" he explained. Finally being accepted by Australia gave him the hope to start a new life. "I was so grateful and still am after 47 years," Ernest says thankfully.

He packed his belongings and left for Australia in an old Italian converted ship. It was no luxury cruiser! It took six

INTERVIEW CATEGORY WINNERS



April Seymour grandparents (Ernest and Ruth Gerzabek).

weeks to get to Melbourne. There were dormitories again, separated by male and female. It was very hot and crowded. Plenty of food was given, "We were even given wine with our dinner," says Ernest.

From Melbourne they were taken to Bonegilla Migrant Camp. At the camp there were all sorts of nationalities, and oven hot barracks for families in need of a job. Ernest, his parents and his 14 year old brother managed to get a job so that they could save money. "We put all of our savings together and within a few years bought a modest home unit, furnished it and joined the human race."

Slowly he overcame his difficulties with the English language, improving enough to communicate.

He then felt confident enough to enroll in university to study architecture part-time. "I found the going very hard, having to use a Hungarian/English dictionary at all times, other than mathematics, design and drawing subjects," Ernest explains. Some of the lectures were spoken too fast for him to comprehend so he would study during any free time he had to catch up on the work.

He finished his seven year course and became an architect in 1965. He then became a proud Australian citizen and during his 25 year career he constructed at least ten public schools, five high schools plus whole building blocks in major projects like Westmead Hospital.

Ernest then retired and became an artist. To date he has had 16 solo exhibitions in Sydney and Melbourne, and he also participated in countless group shows in Australia, the US and Canada.

"I always felt proud of being a refugee, of being brave enough to do it and finally having succeeded against countless odds and disadvantages. However, I felt hurt when in the early days, in Australia we were called and treated like "bloody new Australians" by some locals. Luckily only the most ignorant and uneducated people did so, people who never learnt any languages, had never seen the world and envied the successes of hard working migrants" he expressed.

My grandfather, whom I am very proud of, is a happily married man with loving grandchildren, children and other relatives to support him and his successful career. What an inspiration! Ernst states, "Based on my personal experience I believe illegal refugees can become useful members of society, given the CHANCE."