

We Arrived with Nothing

My parents were post-war refugees from Europe arriving in Australia in 1950 with nothing but a couple of bags and two infants.

My Ancestry

My ancestors back to at least the 18th Century lived in the region where Belarus is today. Prior to that I may have had Swedish ancestors because in the 18th, 14th and 9th Centuries the Swedes invaded that region. In Slavic languages, my surname “Szwed” means “the Swedish man”. Watch out for the Viking in me.



Belarus land-locked in Eastern Europe



Swedes also invade in 14th and 18th Centuries

Nick Szwed

Several invasions by Swedes

Our Journey

My parents were born in different villages in Belarus in the 1920s. The German Nazis invaded Belarus on the way to Russia in 1941. My mother told me this story of their arrival on a sunny summer's day when the priest had come to the village to hold an outdoor service, as there was no church in the village. The congregation was kneeling when they saw the Germans approaching and they stayed kneeling, praying to God. The Germans took a good look at them and continued quietly. The reason I remember this story so strongly is that the Germans destroyed about 80% of the towns and villages in Belarus, wherever they met resistance. Mum's village survived.

Pretty soon the Germans came back and conscripted all the able-bodied people to work on German farms and in factories to assist with their war efforts. They were taken in rail wagons like this.



My parents ended up on the same farm in Germany. They married and had their first baby, my older sister, as prisoners of war in Germany.

After Germany was defeated, all prisoners were released. My mother told me about another important moment that could have changed our whole future. All my parents' Belarusian friends were heading for the Russian compound to be taken home. My parents followed reluctantly because they did not like the Soviets. But when they entered the compound and barb-wire gates were slammed shut behind them and armed guards stood in front of them, they became extremely concerned.

Fortunately, one of mum's girlfriends had partnered with a Polish man and he had come along with them. He was also a quick thinker. He told mum and dad and a few others to absolutely say not a word. He had a Polish passport and when they got to the reception desk, he held out his passport and asked if this was the Polish compound. The Russian official took one look at his passport and told them to get out of there, the Polish Compound was down the road.

My dad was keen to leave Europe as soon as possible because he heard that the Russians were sending everyone who had worked for the Germans, to the Gulag in Siberia. He was afraid that if the Russians found out what he had done, they might come after him.

My dad had relatives in Uruguay and wanted to go there immediately. But during the medicals when it was discovered that mum was pregnant, they were told she could not go on an ocean voyage until the child was born. My dad's stress levels went up significantly while he waited for me to arrive.

By the time of my arrival Australia was considered the superior place to head for. We set off by train for Naples, Italy and boarded the Hellenic Prince (named after the birth of Prince Charles). I contracted some kind of disease on the journey to Australia and was seriously ill. My mother prayed to God that I wouldn't be buried at sea. I pulled through and we arrived at Station Pier on 25 April 1950 and headed north to Bonegilla by train.



After a stint in Bonegilla, we went to Mildura where my parents worked on the farms/orchards. When mum and dad discovered that there were better paid jobs to be had in Melbourne, they decided he should go there with the aim of finding a job and buying some land to build a house. Mum would continue working in Mildura. I reckon I must have developed my love for 40-degree days during my second year of life in Mildura.

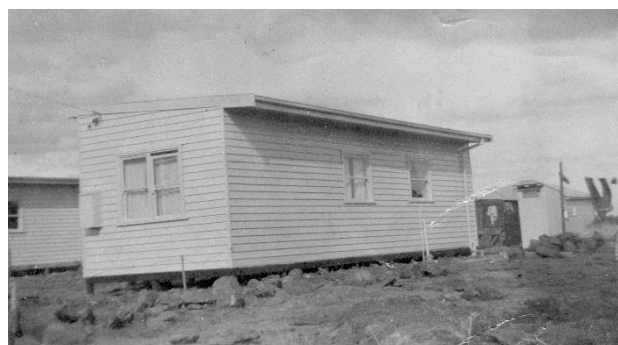
Dad got a job in Footscray and learnt to use a metal lathe. He eventually gained a Fitter and Turner Trade Certificate. He heard that there was cheap land available in St Albans, which was on the same train line as Footscray, so he went down there and bought a block of land. St Albans was a small village about 5 km NW of Sunshine which was the western edge of the metropolitan area.

He then started to build a house with the help of his neighbours, that's what they all did for each other. He lived first in a wooden crate that had been used to import either a car or tractor. Keilor and Sunshine Councils had allowed migrants to do this and then to occupy partly completed houses while they built the remainder. So, we arrived from Mildura to what was known at the time as a "Bungalow". My mother nearly died, the 6 of us were moving into a two room "Bungalow".



Nuffield Tractor Crate ends up a shed

I remember several months after we moved in, a woman mum knew turned up crying because her husband had lost his job and they were being evicted from their rented home. Mum told her as there was no other choice, her family would have to move in with us for a while. After all we had two rooms, they could have one and we, the other.



Two room Bungalow

This photo of the four Szwed children was taken circa 1954. It shows some of our worldly possession a magnificent valve radio that brought the world to our home and a few trinkets. Dad also owned a three geared bicycle which he used to travel to work on. He also carried all sorts of goods on it including hardware which he cleverly tied to the bike.



My parents were brought up on farms and so they grew their own vegetables – on every square inch of available dirt on their quarter acre block. We also had fruit trees and always chickens but sometimes geese, ducks or even rabbits.



St Albans had a population of less than 900 before the migrants started to arrive. Many post war refugees, like my parents, headed there and by the end of the 1950's the population had jumped to over 7,000. New primary schools and a high school had to be built by 1956. Afterwards St Albans continued to provide sanction to refugees, from Vietnam in the 1970s and more recently from Sudan.

During my childhood, St Albans was like a small country town, surrounded by endless paddocks which we explored. The Maribyrnong River was nearby and a great place to play in on hot days. We didn't really feel like we were part of urban Melbourne and we all seemed to know each other. Most of us had no extended family and so the neighbours and friends of our parents became our aunts and uncles. Our "relatives" came from many different countries, so we grew up with diversity and inclusion as a natural part of life. Seventy years later we still hold annual reunions with the kids who went to school in St Albans in the 1950s and 60s.



Maribyrnong River on a hot day in the 1950s

In 1956 a new primary and a high school were built to accommodate the growing population and several others added over the years.

Even though my parents had little schooling opportunity in their childhood, they encouraged all four children to go on to tertiary education. They made it clear that while Belarus was their homeland, we were Australians and had to make the most of the opportunities this country offered. All four took advantage of the free education available in Australia and went on to professional careers.

Nick Szwed
Updated Jan 2024