

Mama's Story: Starting Over

An Interview with Cilka and Anton Žakelj

by John Žakelj, for Mama and Ata's 50th Wedding Anniversary, October 1996

After I completed the first draft of "Starting Over"(a translation of my father's diary from our first six months in America), I asked my family to review it. My younger brother Joe commented that it would be valuable to also get our mother's point of view. I explained that to her and she agreed to an interview, which we taped on April 21, 1996. My father also participated. The following is a translation from the Slovenian. I refer to my mother and father as "Mama" and "Ata", which is how our family has always called them. I use my Slovenian name, "Janez", for myself.



Janez and Mama in the refugee camp in 1949.

Janez: Could you tell me about your impressions and memories of our coming to America? Start with the trip over on the ship in 1949 and tell me what it was like.

Mama: When we were on the ship, the men and women were separated.

Ata: The men were in cabins on the lowest level, with the women and children on an upper level. I was sick much of the time. For the first days, I mostly stayed in bed. Whenever I got up, I would start throwing up.

Mama: I was sick, too, but I had to get out of the bed because I was taking care of you (Janez). As soon as the ship started moving, my head started spinning. I was constantly sick more than half the time. But towards the end of the trip I started feeling better.

Ata: Once we passed Gibraltar, the weather got better and we started feeling

better. But while we were in the Mediterranean, the storms were terrible and we were all sick.

Janez: Was I sick, too?

Mama: At the beginning, you weren't sick at all. Later in the trip, you developed a fever and started feeling sick because you had a tooth growing out - it was a molar, and that made you feel very sick. You were sixteen months old at the time.

Ata: I often carried you on walks to try to help you feel better.

Mama: Once your tooth finally came out (I could feel it in your mouth), then you were fine. But even when you were feeling sick, you never lost your appetite. I would be throwing up next to you, and you just kept right on eating (laughs). Sometimes the ship would be tossing violently, with the chairs and tables and everything all being thrown together, but you would just keep right on eating. (laughs again).

Janez: Was it bad food?

Mama: No, it wasn't too bad. For the first part of the trip, I was just too sick to eat any.

Ata: They didn't give us much to drink. I asked a cook if we could have something to drink, I think he was a Norwegian. He brought us some dried grapes, still attached to the stem. After we ate those, we were even more thirsty. I asked again, and then he brought us a big can of grapefruit juice. We had never tasted grapefruit before - it was so bitter we couldn't drink it. We didn't know that we could have added some water

and sugar and it would have been fine. As far as the food goes, they offered decent food when we were sick at the beginning of the trip and weren't able to eat. But when we started feeling better, they didn't give us much - there was no bread, no milk.

Mama: We arrived in New York very hungry. When we got off the ship, we saw a group of women who were handing out free coffee and donuts. There was a long, winding line of us waiting for a donut. When we finally got one, we ate it quickly. Janez, you wanted more, and I said, I don't have any more. So I decided to get back in line, thinking I would get another donut for us, so that at least you would have enough to eat. When I got to the head of line, the woman said, "You've already been through the line", and she refused to give me another donut (laughs).

Ata: I think that was the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Mama: Then Ata found someone who was selling small bags that contained some fruit and bread. The bags were a dollar a piece, which seemed very expensive to us. In the refugee camp, we had worked an entire week to earn a dollar. Ata bought a bag, but there was very little in it.

Janez: When we arrived in New York, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

Mama: Yes, we saw that right away. It was wonderful. But we were tired, hungry and thirsty, and it didn't quite have the same feeling as you would expect. And I was not very happy about coming to America. It seemed so far from home and I knew we

would never be able to go home again. That was very hard for me. (long silence).

At the New York train station, we thought we would get some food there. Ata looked everywhere, but couldn't find any place that sold bread. On the train, Ata learned there was a dining car, so Ata and Mr. Sršen went to get some food for us there. Ata brought us a sandwich. "Yoy", he said, "this was so expensive." It was a soft kind of bread that we had never eaten before, and just one sandwich. I really wished we could have had a loaf of real bread. This sandwich was good, but you could have eaten it yourself. We shared it among the three of us.

Janez: Did the trip from New York to Chicago take a whole day?

Ata: We left New York at 11 p.m. on December 22 and reached Chicago at 5 p.m. the next day.

Janez: And then you waited in Chicago for the next train?

Ata: Yes, we waited many hours in Chicago. While we waited, I looked everywhere for bread, but still couldn't find any for sale. If I could have bought a loaf, we would have had enough for all the kids in our group. There was a man who came by, I don't know who he was. He offered me some money to buy candy for the kids. I didn't think to ask him where I could buy some bread.

Mama: There was a large group of us refugees waiting in the train station in Chicago - the Rihtar's, Sršen's, our family and others. People were looking at us. They

could tell we were refugees. They gave the kids some chocolate and candy. I watched and wished someone would bring us bread.

We had to wait for the next train a long time. It was snowing and the train was late. In some ways the Chicago train station seemed like heaven to me. Everything was decorated with lights in many colors, Christmas songs were in the air - it was unusually beautiful.

When we got on the train, I'll never forget what happened. You (Janez) were lying on the seat next to me, I was sitting up and watching so you wouldn't fall off the seat, since it was a very narrow seat. A woman noticed and said to me "You get some sleep, too, and I'll watch your child." So I got some much-needed sleep. Ata slept, too.

Ata: The train arrived in Marshfield, Wisconsin, early the next morning, around 4 a.m. People were waiting for us at the train station. Our sponsor drove us to his home near Willard.

Mama: Our sponsor's wife, Mary, had food ready for us two hours earlier, but we were late, so she had already put everything away. We said we were tired and went to bed. We rested in bed, not sleeping much, until about noon.

Ata: Then we had lunch, and then our sponsor drove me into town for some shopping.

Janez: Mama, did you and I go shopping, too?

Mama: I stayed back at the house with you

that day. The next day, our sponsor's daughter, Helen, came and drove us to church for Christmas. Our sponsor, John, had a pickup truck which had a cab that was too small for all of us to fit inside, and it was too cold for anyone to ride in the back of the truck. Later that year, when it got warmer, Ata and I would sit in the back of the truck, and you would sit in the front with John and Mary.

Janez: I see in Ata's diary that you were able to see your old friends Karl and Mici Erznožnik on Christmas.

Mama: Yes, they brought them to see us on Christmas Eve already. We were so happy to see them. (They were also refugees from our home town and had arrived in Wisconsin earlier.) On Christmas Eve, our sponsors gave us presents. Ata got a shirt, I don't remember what I got, and you got a toy. We were impressed to get any presents so soon after our arrival. And I remember now, you got a winter jacket from Helen's son that was too small for him. You didn't have any winter clothes, so that was very nice to get. We had a nice Christmas.

Janez: Did you get different food from what you were used to?

Mama: No, they had very regular food - potatoes, cooked meat - but more meat than we were used to. The potatoes were usually boiled and then buttered with fat drippings. We usually had potatoes three times a day. Later, we started having more dishes made from wheat flour. I showed Mary how to make štruklje (a Slovenian food like a dumpling). We did all our cooking together. Everybody liked our cooking. Mary taught

me some cooking, and I helped her. I would peel the potatoes. Mary knew how to bake excellent bread.

Ata: Our sponsor, John, wouldn't eat the štruklje.

Janez: Did you use a wood stove?

Mama: Yes, we did all our cooking and heating with wood. We had an oven that used wood. The kitchen was very large - it included a table and enough chairs for everyone, a washing machine and the oven - all in the kitchen.

Janez: What else did you do while Ata worked in the barn?

Mama: We did a lot of sewing. We mended torn clothes and we worked on a large quilt. While we sewed, we talked. Mary told me how it was when they first bought their land around 1910. There were no roads nearby. Mary and John bought 80 acres that had never been farmed - the big pines had been logged off earlier, so when they got the land, it was mostly brush and aspen. They built a one-room log cabin, really more like a shed. Although there were a number of other Slovenian families that also bought land in the general area, there were no other houses nearby. After John and Mary bought their first cow, the cow slept in the one-room cabin with them.

Mary said life was alright in the summers in those early years. But, during the winters, John would go work in Chicago because they needed the income. She was alone all winter in that little cabin. She didn't have horses or a car, so she had no way to travel

anywhere. On rare occasions, the neighbor came to visit; or even less often, John would come visit from Chicago. He would take the train to Marshfield and walk from there to the cabin, which was almost 20 miles away. There were no busses.

Mary said there was a stranger that came to her cabin one winter's day. He was either lost or on a long trip. She was very afraid of him, but she fed him supper and let him stay overnight. The next day he moved on and she never heard from him again.

Well, over the years, they gradually cleared more land for farming. They planted potatoes. Things got better and better. They built a nicer house and a fine barn. But that took many years. Those first settlers went through tremendous hardships, but they persisted and they kept working.

One thing Mary liked to talk about when we were there in the winter was how we would go fishing when spring came. She said we would have a party. I wondered where she was thinking we would go - maybe somewhere far away? On a Sunday that spring, we finally went. There was a little creek at the other end of their farm - it was so small I could jump over it (laughs) - but that's where we went.

Ata: Mary set up a stick with string and a fishhook made from a bent pin. We caught some little fish in that creek. Mary cleaned and cooked them for us, right there next to the creek. She wore a big straw hat.

Mama: It was wonderful, and fascinating, since we had never been to a party like that before.

Ata: There were about 30 squirrels watching us from the trees (laughs).

Mama: During the winter, I had lots of work. We worked on a large quilt made of small patches of cloth. Mary had saved lots of variously colored patches. At that time, quilts like that were very fashionable. Now, I see quilts like that in museums. Mary helped sometimes with the quilt, but I mostly made it myself. It took lots of time. Sometimes Mary did more of the cooking so I could sew more.

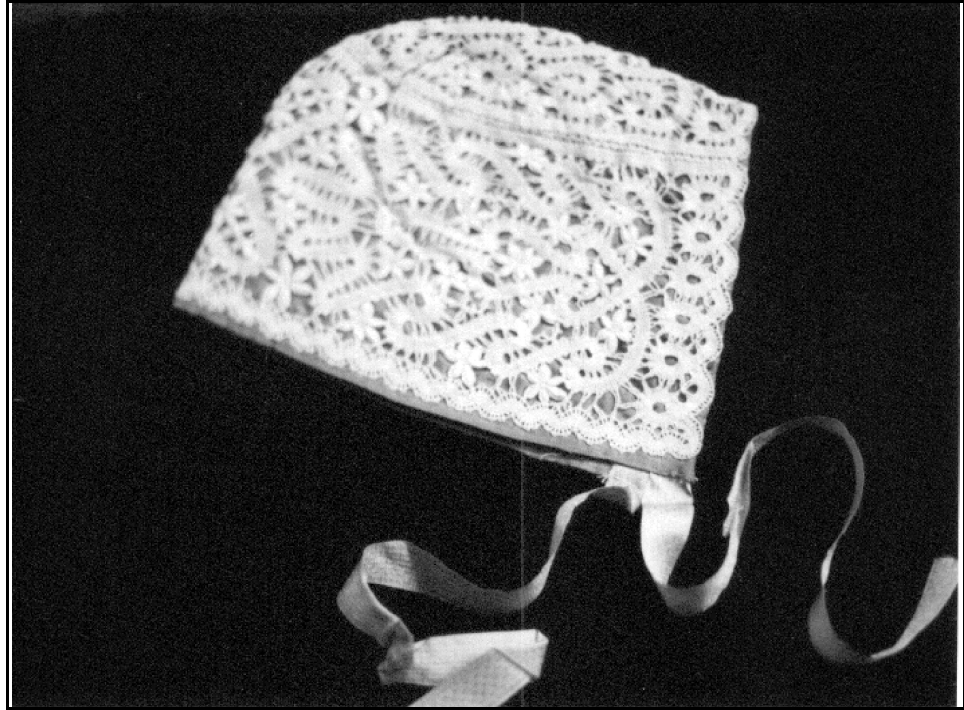
Janez: Was it cold in the house in the winter?

Mama: No, we kept the wood stoves going. We usually sewed in the room next to the kitchen. It was like a living room and it had its own wood stove. We burned lots of wood.

Janez: What about at night?

Mama: At night, the three of us - Ata, yourself and I - slept together in the upstairs bedroom. We had a good heavy blanket, and with the three of us all sleeping together in the same bed, it felt nice and warm.

Ata: Some of the warmth would also come up through a hole in the floor. But that also meant that John and Mary could hear what we were saying. Once, I talked about how I wanted to eat more food made from wheat flour, and less of the potatoes and meat we were getting. I didn't know they could hear me, but after that, Mary changed what she cooked for us.



Mama made this bobbin lace baptismal cap for me when I was a baby.

Mama: One thing John and Mary talked about all winter was how they would plow up a new field for me in the spring so I could grow beans to sell. But we left before any of that happened.

I was mostly quite happy on their farm. But when I became pregnant, I got very worried that John and Mary would get angry with me because I knew we could not feed another person. Soon after, I started bleeding and had to go to the hospital. A month after that, I started bleeding again and had to go to the hospital again.

Ata: They said it was fairly common for refugee women to have a miscarriage soon after arriving in the country - all the change was very stressful.

Mama: I was very afraid when I became pregnant - mostly worried about how John and Mary would react. A year later, after we had moved to Cleveland, we were not much better off, and we didn't have any help, but I was very happy when I became pregnant again. We were independent and I just knew that somehow we would earn enough to feed everyone (laughs). And I knew that no one would be angry with me.

Ata: In Cleveland, our neighbors John and Max often questioned how we could afford more children. I told them that, as long as I was healthy, I would provide for them.

Janez: Mama, back in Wisconsin, did you also take care of the chickens?

Mama: Yes, Mary didn't want to go outside

in the winter. I often carried wood, feed and water to the chicken coop.

Ata: Even though we kept the wood stove going in the chicken coop as much as we could, there were still some chickens that froze. There were a number of times when we found a dead chicken.

Mama: They had almost a hundred chickens, but we didn't get many eggs - it was too cold. Ata also often put wood in that stove, but it wasn't enough to keep the temperature up.

Ata: By Easter, they had about 80 chickens and none of them were laying eggs. Mary ordered new baby chicks in the mail. The mailman brought them - they were in a large box that had holes in it. All the chicks were alive. They came from a plant that hatched 200,000 chicks a day.

Janez: Did you need to clean the chicken coop?

Mama: No, not much, at least not during the winter. When it got warmer, we let them run around outside. Then they started laying eggs again. I was surprised when Mary told me she got only 22 cents for a dozen eggs. When we came to Cleveland, I noticed that eggs cost 60 cents in the grocery store. Then I started thinking about all the people that must have handled those eggs from the farm to the store and realized that each person probably didn't make much, but the farmer made the least.

Janez: Mama, did you have winter clothes?

Mama: I had an overcoat they gave me in

the refugee camp, but I didn't have boots. Since Ata worked outside more, they bought him overalls and boots. I didn't need them that much.

Ata: As far as bathrooms, there was an outhouse by the chicken coop, but that was too far to go at night in the cold. So we used a chamber pot in the basement. We would take that out twice a day.

Mama: All in all, we somehow managed. I'm grateful they agreed to sponsor us.

Ata: They certainly didn't profit any by having us.

Mama: We worked a lot, but it didn't bring them any income.

Janez: Ata's diary mentions that you also played cards. It says Ata played with me when the rest of you played cards.

Mama: Yes, at first, they tried to get Ata to play cards, but he had never played before. So when I agreed to play, they said, "Ata, you need to take care of Johnny." (laughs) I had often played cards back in Slovenia, especially when we were children. I didn't know the game they played in Willard - pinochle - but I learned quickly.

Ata: When I would visit Mama's family (the Gantars) in Slovenia, I played a little. They played Koenigruf (call the king), and other fairly easy games.

Mama: We played lustig the most.

Ata: That's right. But at my home, cardplaying and other things like that were

just not allowed - it was considered sinful.

Janez: Anything else you remember from our first year in America?

Mama: (pause) I remember when we were on the train from Wisconsin to Cleveland on Ata's birthday, June 13, 1950. We hugged each other and I said "Today is your birthday. Now we're completely on our own. We can't be dependent on anyone else now."

In Cleveland, Mr. Rihtar let us move into his attic. It was empty and dirty. Mr. Zupan brought an old mattress (laughs), and I don't remember who brought the other parts so we had a bed.

Ata: For the first few months, we paid Mr. Rihtar \$12 a month for rent, then later we increased that to \$16. We shared a bathroom and kitchen downstairs.

Mama: There were three families living in that house. We all cooked on the same stove and never had an argument about not having enough room. I usually cooked in the afternoon, since Ata usually came from work around 4. He liked to eat right away when he came home.

The first time Ata went to the grocery store, he bought only one of each item - a quarter stick of margarine, a quarter stick of butter, and he wanted to only buy a little bit of sugar, but the smallest bag was five pounds. We just couldn't afford to buy much



Ata, Janez and Mama, at Rihtar's house, Cleveland, Ohio, 1951.

(laughs).

Ata: When I went to the grocery store that first time, I took a suitcase with me - I didn't know they provided bags at the store.

Mama: (laughs) We thought stores were like they were back in Slovenia. They just gave you the food, and then it was your problem to figure out what to put it into.

After a while, we were able to afford more and better food. And Ata learned about the farmers' market downtown - he would buy

lots of vegetables and fruit there.

Ata: I wonder what we did with all the wine I bought - I would buy 4 gallons at a time.

Mama: We had lots of visitors, and we would always serve them wine. Rudy Drmota would come visit us, and Mr. Župančič and others, although they didn't like having to climb the stairs to the attic where we were. The Rihtar's were always wondering why we had so many visitors.

There were also a number of older women, like Mary Oblak, who had settled in Cleveland years earlier, who came to visit us. They would take a long bus ride to come see us. There was a woman who would come from Collinwood - I forget her name. And there was Albina, who came to sign me up for the women's society - she didn't mind that we couldn't afford that - she just wanted to talk with us.

Ata: The women's society put on an exhibition of women's crafts. They asked Mama to make some bobbin lace, which she did, but then they kept the money from what they sold.

Mama: That's the custom in an organization like that. They just didn't know how poor we were (laughs).

Mama: (pause) I liked living with the Rihtar's. In the evenings that first summer, we would sit outside and sing all our songs over and over again.

Janez: Did you sing in Willard, too?

Mama: No, they didn't sing there. Mary

wasn't interested in singing. She preferred talking about politics. Mary and Ata had good discussions about that.

Janez: I think we're running out of time now.

Mama: There's lots more interesting things to tell from our first years in Cleveland - you haven't written about that yet.

Janez: We'll have to talk about that next time.