

St Anton am Arlberg and the Thredbo AussieCzech Connection

*Jerry Krejzar
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St Christoph am Arlberg - 2019



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Kaffe and Kuchen

Two old ski mates on skis have come to a halt contemplating what would seem an inconsequential skiing decision, though as far as sustenance is concerned the decision is a bit weightier. Do we take the traverse route to Lech or just continue on skiing down a clip towards Zug? In those days the Madloch on a crisp freezing January day, in the early 80's, you seldom saw another skier. You could meditatively soak up that pristine alpine beauty standing spellbound at the crossroads of those two intersecting trails. Nowadays with the recent introduction of gondolas connecting St Anton, Stuben and Zurs, to stop at those very crossroads is close to perilous; you run the risk of being taken out by a fast moving skier hurtling towards you at breakneck speed, circumnavigating 'Der Weisse Ring' (The White Ring), the legendary twenty two kilometre ski-circuit. On that January day on the Madloch, the immediate choice was whether to head for a morning coffee and 'kuchen' or something a bit more substantial. Marius is for taking the traverse route straight to Lech, where we sometimes take kaffee with a 'topfenstrudel' (cheese-curd strudel). Personally I would have gone for the freshly made version in an out of the way Gasthof, the Alpenhof, in Zug, but Marius won out and we headed for the 'Cafe Gotthard Backstube', the bakery cafe in Lech. Yet on such a crystal bluebird day another option beckoned: the sundeck of the Alte Goldener Berg in Oberlech which dates back to 1430. Oh the choices! An old Basque saying goes, that 'to know how to eat well is to know enough'; and this simple conviction could well mirror the philosophy of 'the skiing life'- 'to know how to ski well is to know enough'. Avid skiers are acutely aware that that in the moment feeling, a well executed series of carving turns, whether on piste, in blissfully light powder, or sun-crusts spring corn can at times border on the meditative.

Thredbo History

Over the years I have often wondered just how my obsessive Arlberg ski-thrall arose, the warp and weft of the personal past, and how that manifests in time.

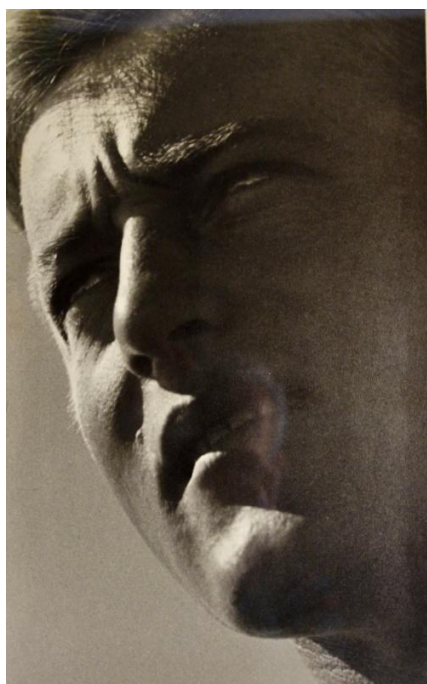
On a bar-stool in Thredbo a lifetime ago, a day over the Christmas holiday summer of 1958/59 sat Tony Sponar a fellow Czech refugee. Only fourteen at the time I sat mute, transfixed as Tony held forth about his intrepid skiing adventures in St Anton. However Tony's soliloquy hardly registered. My main interest that particular summer was spent learning how to catch trout. Leo Pockl who managed Leo's Lodge on behalf of Bill Bursill, an acknowledged trout-fishing expert became my mentor. On reflection the chat with Tony must have ignited a neural mental spark, a hidden subconscious desire, to follow in Tony's well-worn-footsteps. Over time which became an obsession; a love and yearning for St Anton and those shimmering solitary peaks of the Arlberg region. A white snowy pristine panorama comprised of craggy summits: the Trittkopf rising above Zurs, the Kriegerhorn on one side and the Rupikopf directly opposite on the other side of Lech. The well known peaks of St Anton: the Valluga, Schindler Spitze, Kapall, Rendls Spitze and Patteriol surrounding the St Anton ski-circus, our perennial home base over some five decades.

St Anton

When two fresh-faced adventurous corporate warriors set out in 1976 for a six week sojourn to the European Alps to ski, to escape the daily grind, little did they know that they would return for many many more winters yet to come; to this day. That first winter on a freezing January day in 1977 in a howling blizzard, a whiteout to boot, a skier was trying to reorient himself right beside me in Steissbachtal and happened to look down at my skis. ‘*The Ski!*’ he shouted out loudly through the blizzard, a distinctive Aussie accent to boot, ‘*You didn't get those skis here mate, I bet.*’ I said ‘*No!*’ That skier now a lifelong mate was none other than Paul Anicich, one of the original owners of the Athol Ski-Club Lodge in Thredbo. Paul knew they were considered a cult American ski of the day, as Hartigan (Paul’s partner from Athol), had bought a pair the previous season. And so began the first in a sequence of Tony Sponar coincidences; as it turned out that Paul happened to be staying with Rosemary Matt, the daughter of Rudi Matt, Tony Sponar’s ski-racing coach before, during, and after the 2nd World War.

We recently touched base and Paul writes about Haus Matt:-

‘Rosemarie never married; while she once did off-season work for the Austrian Government, involving her in dealings with Japan, she has led her life in the Village. Apart from that she’s a tad older than us. Schneider was 'forced' to immigrate to the United States during the War. Rudi being the Star he was, was given the land, on which The Haus now sits as early as the formation of the Village circa 1932. He is credited with 'founding' the Village, for which he recognised Schneider equally. It was the latter's heritage which had caused his temporary move. You will know some of his successful Sons in the Town, I am sure. One spent a Season in Thredbo, staying at Athol, in the late 70's. He's got the Ski Shop & is a good bloke’.



Rudi Matt

(Hannes Schneider, (born 1890, Stuben am Arlberg, Austria—died April 26, 1955, North Conway, N.H., U.S.), Austrian-born ski instructor who developed what came to be called the Arlberg technique, based on the snowplough, stem, and stem Christiania turns. He helped popularize [skiing](#) in the United States. [The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica](#))

History records Rudolph Matt as an Austrian alpine skier and World Ski Champion who in 1936 had become a world champion in the slalom in Innsbruck. Rudi was known throughout Austria as a legendary ski manager and ski-coach who trained the Austrian Ski Team (and the Czechoslovakian), the teams that competed in the 1948 St Moritz Winter Olympics. In those particular games, the first post-war Winter Olympic Games held, Tony was placed ninth in the Combined (Slalom and Downhill) for his nation, formerly Czechoslovakia.

In February 2018 decades after I first met Paul, I met up in St Anton with Paul's old mate, Hans Wretlind; Paul and Hans were both friends of Tony Sponar going way back. One time in the early 1970's Hans saved Tony's life.

Hans recalls the scene:-

'I came across a ski-pole sticking out of the snow, and buried beneath an avalanche was Tony Sponar!'

Skiing that day was quite wild. As I at the time was looked upon as a dull but safe skier, I took up at the rear of this wild bunch. At Gampen I first had to dig out Charlie Nihlen, which took some time. He was two meters down a crevasse which tired me out, and then we followed the tracks of the Wild Bunch in a chute down 'Grun' (parallel and east of Fang), and the other skiers were mashing up the snow. They waved at me to stop and to look under a small tree as they knew they had lost one of their group, but at the time did not know who. So I saw this little tree rocking and then the tip of a ski-pole. I started digging and after a while I got Tony's face uncovered. He had not a healthy colour in his face. Together we dug out Tony, he spitted, I dug out a mouthful of ice, Tony jiggled some and said with a weak smile - 'thank you Hans I was just about to give in'. We all quit skiing for the day, went down to the Bahnhof and celebrated Tony's second birthday.



Hans Wretlind & the author – beneath the memorial statue of Hannes Schneider – Stuben am Arlberg 2019

As I recall Tony kind of adopted me as their new child, as I'd dug him out of Grun. Ten years later we stayed in Athol Lodge in Thredbo with Anicich, Hartigan and Robinson. Sponar's daughter had a car crash in Jindabyne earlier that year which she did not walk away from. We skied Little Beauty together again, Tony, Paul and myself".

Paul also reminisces about skiing with Tony and Hans in Thredbo:-

'Tony at 72 and after a by-pass & hip operation on a superb Thredbo day I had the pleasure of skiing with Tom, (Tommy Tomasi), Robert Nylander, Hans Wretlind and the Swede Gunnar Munthe (the 2nd owner of the Krazy Kangaruh in St Anton), who with Hans rescued him from that St Anton Avalanche. The only concession Tommy made for his age & condition was that he retired at 2.30. An incredible man our Tom.

All happened to be in Thredbo together to mark the occasion. (Surviving the avalanche). What a great Day!

The Old St Anton Bahnhof - The Bahnhof Gang'

Throughout the 70's, 80's and 90's each and every winter the 'St Anton 'Ski-Bum-Crowd' would gather from all corners of the globe to ski powder. In those days to tour would be to go 'off-piste' - terminology such as 'Free-riding' or 'Back-Country' were rarely used until more recently. Oftentimes some of us would take a ski guide in a group class, just as Tony had done. Tony returned over numerous winter seasons back to his beloved St Anton, by then as an elderly ski-bum, just to ski powder. The two legendary guides in those days were Robert Gluck and Andre Draxl. Hans and Tony skied with Gluck together with Hartigan, Anicich, Rupert Rosenblum, Dr Hugh Barry, Lucinda Nicholson and others. Marius, Darcy, 'Lobster Mary' an American lobster fisherwoman from Maine, a Brit or two, a few Germans, Austrians and I skied with Andre. Sitting at the top of Kapall in the cafe on a below -15 freezing morning, visibility nil, a 60km blustery blizzard howling outside, waiting for Andre and the troops before that first run; and you would ask yourself 'what am I doing here?' Always an existential riddle; though once Andre braved a course through the cloud and mist, expertly guiding the group towards the narrow chutes of Shongraben forest and began to weave his magic tightly through waist deep powder through the trees, you had your answer. Competition between the top groups and guides was fierce. Heaven help the poor unfortunate who would stuff up the perfect set of synchronized tracks or 'teppich' set by your guide when skiing one after another down Rauz Walls: a momentary artwork for lesser skiers to admire. And should one reflect upon technique, with straight cut traditional skis angulation and up unweighting was much more pronounced compared to today. These days the powder armoury consists of a multitude of wider shaped skis with rockers, etc, which readily transforms every second adventurous intermediate skier into an expert powder hound. Skiing back then took a bit more discipline and technique and was a bit more work compared to today.

These were the glory years of the 'Bahnhof Gang' - a disparate bunch of 'ski bums' came from all corners of the globe. American, Canadian, Australian, Scandinavian the odd Czech, Greek and German who would gather on most evenings in the old Bahnhof to make merry and swap tall tales of skiing bravado. The Bahnhof gang was headed up by Canadian 'Kelly' and South African 'Zulu Eddie', who were the acknowledged 'ring-masters'; with the support of key members with monikers such as 'Russian Pete', 'German Pete', 'Pom-Pom Pete', 'big Al' the three Nicks, the 'Greek' the 'Macedonian' and just 'Nick Nick' and many more. There were around thirty to fifty of us depending on the time of the season. Discussion to do with topics of world affairs or culture were usually short lived and pointless in the Bar of the Old Bahnhof. Yes a diversity of viewpoints prevailed and matched the diversity of cultures and characters that made up the crowd, but without fail the thrust of the schnapps fuelled conversation would most times, eventually, focus on snow. Snow in all of its ethereal crystalline manifestations, powder snow and the quality and textural complexity of snow. And following an epic powder day the talk always focused on the various off-piste tours favoured by the groups. Two of these groups were known as the A team, as the term suggests, a bit faster and more adventurous, compared to the slightly more sedate B Team.

Tours that were discussed frequently, in fact with religious fervour, were such as the backwoods through the Langen forest to Langen Bahnhof, Hinterrendl, Rossfall, Schongraben, Schindlekar, Mattun and many more.

Since our first St Anton winter we regularly enjoyed the gracious Austrian hospitality served up in the well known bed & breakfast or Pension establishments in town, on a biennial basis. Such as Haus Draxl, Richard Juan, Haus Elizabeth, Haus Schollberg and others, in some cases staying on more than one occasion. However in 1994 when we commenced to ski in St Anton each and every winter, fate or coincidence intervened as to our choice of accommodation. We had decided upon an apartment and it was Haus Herbert Rofner where we chose to stay. Situated in Gastigweg high above the town and overlooking the Gampberg, away from the noise and bustle and action in the village. And behold Tony's phantom ghost arose from the depths of history yet again. It turned out that Herbert was the nephew of Pepi and Franz Gabl.



Gertrud Gabl holding the 1969 FIS Ski World Cup Championship Crystal Ball

Franz had won silver in the 1948 St Moritz Winter Olympics Downhill and the Gabl's were a particularly well known local family. Pepi's daughter Gertrud was known throughout Austria as a world famous international ski-racer, but sadly was killed in an avalanche on January 18, 1976 at just 27 years of age. In 1969 Gertrud won the coveted Crystal Ball, the Overall World Cup title, the FIS Ski World Cup, as the Alpine Women's Ski-Champion for that year. In December 2019 the Town Hall erected a bronze statue to commemorate her fame.

Pepi had been a long time ski-friend of Frank's (Prihoda) and Tony's well before the war at the time our Czechs used to train in St Anton with Rudi Matt.

'Sponar's Lakeside Inn' near Smiggins Holes in Australia.

Sitting in Herbert's kitchen in February 2020 Herbert recounted his experience at

I used to instruct with Pepi in Stowe, Vermont, USA and one season he offered to let me accompany him to Australia. Because of his pre-war connection and friendship with Tony, Pepi had set up an arrangement to help out with instructing at the Sponar Lakeside Inn. So as his 21 year old nephew in 1961 I ended up teaching beginners, and a few regular low intermediates how to ski. Besides teaching I was also responsible for certain work around the Lakeside Inn, which in the poor snow season of 1961 included clearing bushes from the track of the Poma lift, mainly because of a lack of snow; and at times we took the guests to Smiggins. I recall that Pepi remained the boss, but he was not always there. Tony's wife Elizabeth mostly managed the staff at the Inn and she was a pretty tough 'task-master'. As the Inn was quite isolated all of the activities and entertainment remained 'in-house' and yet most of the guests

came not just to ski, but also to experience the complete 'winter package' that the Snowy Mountains had to offer.

All now a long time ago, yet hardly surprising as Herbert was a young up and coming ski instructor at the time. Since those days Herbert and Marcella have become well established within the village community in St Anton. Gracious hosts, bestowing their typical Tyrolese hospitality upon countless guests over many decades, including these two Aussies over the last 25 winters. As firm friends we convivially socialize and ski together gabbing on about the social and cultural affairs of the village when we two are in residence.

Back to the Beginning

Four Czechs escaped the imminent totalitarian grasp of communism enveloping their homeland - formerly known as Czechoslovakia. They made their way separately to Sankt Anton am Arlberg.



Herbert Rofner shovelling snow at Haus Rofner 2018



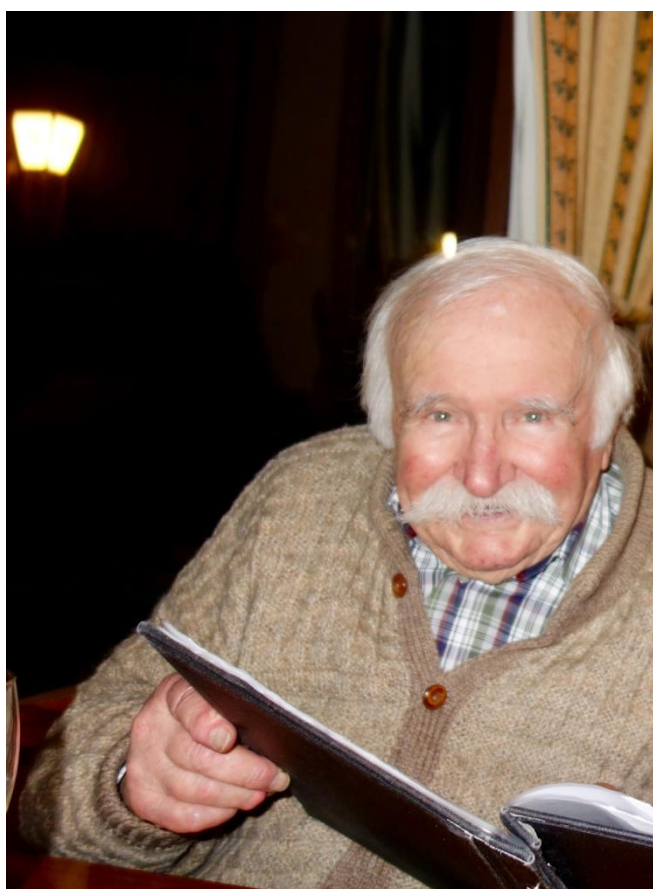
Tony Sponar, Frank Prihoda and Karel Nekvapil utilizing the World War 2 jeep for the mechanised lift up to Brunnenkopf - 1949

The Czech National ski champion Tony Sponar was the first to flee Prague just after Christmas in December 1948 in Frank Prihoda's World War Two jeep. Soon thereafter on 15th January 1949 Karel Nekvapil and Frank Prihoda left Prague at night to also make their escape over the Czech Austrian border by gliding silently across a frozen lake on cross-country skis. And later in that same winter of 1949 Sasha Nekvapil simply slipped off a train at the Swiss station of Zurich-Enge in transit after a race-meeting in Grindelwald; unbeknown to her fellow team members of the communist Czechoslovakian Ski Federation on their journey home to Prague. This audacious plan was surreptitiously hatched the year prior, to join her brother Frank, husband Karel, and Tony in St Anton in the Arlberg.

Once our crew settled in St Anton, to make ends meet the jeep that Tony drove during his escape was cleverly utilized as the engine-power for the first ski-lift in the adjoining village to St Anton, the village of St Christoph. (Later to become the home of the Bundersportheim, the ski training centre for the Austrian Ski Federation). Our yet to become Australian Czechs carried Austrian ex-soldiers, the amputees, up the ski-lift. At that time the Arlberg was situated in the post-war French Occupied Zone.

On a November day in 2019 in Thredbo Frank raised the topic of the 70th anniversary of our Czechs leaving St Anton. Frank was searching for the permit granted by the St Anton Burgermeister, granting the Czechs the right to establish and run a mechanized over-snow ski-lift in St Christoph. But alas the permit has been misplaced and Frank could not find it. A trivial point nevertheless, as this article is largely written and dedicated to my dear friend Frank, his legacy, permit or no permit. Frank who will turn 99 on the 8th July 2020 is not only Thredbo's oldest resident but the nation's oldest living Olympian; having represented Australia in the 1956 Winter Olympic Games in Cortina, Italy in the Combined and Slalom ski championship events.

Once Frank served tea he exclaimed: - *'At long last I have found some dates!'*



Frank Prihoda reviewing the dates of the Czechs departure from St Anton at home in Thredbo Village

'After Easter 1949 that is - Tuesday 19th April - we packed up the lift and were just about to leave St Christoph when four Canadian filmmakers appeared and engaged us for a week to pull their camera, they were doing a film from the early days of Canada but not far from Lech am Arlberg. Technically it did not work - but it was the best week we had all of the winter for finance. Then we came down to St Anton where we stayed probably until 12th May, and then left for Innsbruck which we left on 17th May 1949. The Nekvapils and I drove to Belgium and Tony with his by then wife Lizzi stayed on in Innsbruck. Only today I found the exit date on some travel document.'

The cover photo taken in 2019 by the author shows the Poma lift-line in St Christoph which very closely follows the original lift-line engineered by Tony, Frank and Karel way back in 1948.



Skiers on the T-Bar lift heading to Brunnenkopf - 1949

(Recently acquired photos obtained from the Sponar family collection depict skiers being towed up the current T-Bar track to Brunnenkopf in St Christoph).

Going back full circle to those beginnings allows us to reflect upon the

remarkable yet significant historical connection with Thredbo.



Frank Prihoda leading his charges to Brunnenkopf - 1949



The St Christoph T-Bar track to Brunnenkopf - 1955

Yes legends one and all, and who just happened to have set up and run the first mechanized over-snow uphill transport in St Christoph, possibly one of the first in the region. Yet dear reader, the significance to which I refer relates to -*'the wellspring of Tony's obsession and dream'* - to reimagine and recreate an international ski-resort as a mirror image of his beloved St Anton, in his adopted country. Out of the four acknowledged founders of Thredbo, without Tony's presence drive and determination many claim that 'the vision' of the Thredbo of today may not have eventuated at all. Thredbo nowadays is acclaimed as the nation's premier resort.

Perhaps smaller in scale compared to his beloved St Anton, yet with the construction of a Doppelmayr gondola scheduled for the opening of the 2020 winter season the resort continues to grow, prosper and excel and live up to that dream. Looking back to our first visit in 1977 I marvel just how St Anton has been transformed over the years. St Anton - always known and revered as *‘the cradle of alpine skiing’* - is gifted with superb skiing topography, with some of the most accessible free-riding and touring terrain on the planet. Since the recent construction of a gondola to Albona, and a gondola linking St Anton to Zurs this terrain has become even more readily accessible. And this winter season, in 2020 we saw an additional gondola in operation - built over summer to replace the ancient lift to Schindlekar. It takes considerable foresight to systematically improve and update the facilities in the town and on the mountain, and to readily reinvest in up to date infrastructure - so as to remain at the pinnacle of innovation and modernity.



Schindlekar Gondola on the 2020 opening season St Anton am Arlberg

This insightful policy framework sets a very high bar indeed for like-minded European resorts to match. What an incredible privilege these two aging mortals have enjoyed! Not just a lifetime of skiing and gambolling amongst these many splendid peaks, but also bearing witness to the transformation of this unique iconic Tyrolean village into a premier, leading, world-class resort.

Tony Sponar was born on 8th April 1920. Tony would be immensely proud to see this apparent transformation take hold as we celebrate his centenary; a fitting tribute to his legacy.



*Contribution:- Marius Rauch, Paul Anicich, Hans Wretlind,
Rosemary Matt, Herbert Rofner, Rudolf Mraz and Frank Prihoda*

Photos:- Sponar Family Collection, Rosemary Matt, Jerry Krejzar

*Jerry Krejzar is an alpine historian and a regular writer for the
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