



Sasha turns 90

An informal interview at Frank's place - with Jerry Krejzar - Sasha Nekvapilova and Frank Prihoda - Frankenstein Thredbo, 14th August 2009



Sasha Nekvapilova in later life

Photo: Michael Nekvapil Family Collection

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Young Sasha turns 90



I am comfortably ensconced sitting on Frank's, Sasha's brothers', lounge, nibbling on her home-made cottage cheese pockets, chatting, occasionally in Czech, when Sasha exclaims; 'today a man on the lift looked at my skis and said', 'how long have you had them?' I said, 'I bought them about 5 years ago and I am very pleased with them!' 'No' he said, 'throw them away'. He had those with the round tips, 'they are so much easier', he said; 'and what technique do you ski?' I said, 'I don't know!' 'You have to start *the new one*, skis apart, arms in front, it is so much easier. Look at my son,' he said, who was with him on the lift, 'we were taking him yesterday, in 24 hours he could turn, and by the end of the day he was on the main run, because of *the new technique!*' I said to him, 'that he would have done me out of my job, as I used to teach,' and that was the end of the whole thing. 'So funny, he had no idea who he was talking with' I said to Sasha as she concluded her story. No idea that he was espousing his views on skiing technique, to a champion skier, who came 4th in the combined slalom at the 1948 St Moritz Winter Olympic Games? Not likely!

Each year Sasha returns to ski during the week of the Thredbo Masters; 'if somebody would take me to the top of the Master's course, by skidoo, I would race. I feel much safer on the course then up at Merritt's, what with all those skiers and snowboarders, most of them skiing much too fast for their ability, and quite often out of control.' Sasha and I have a bit of a thing going, and as her current 'toy-boy' we agree to sit together at the Master's dinner on the Saturday night. But alas, I am stood up! Tradition dictates that Sasha join her 'old team mates'; Bill Bursill, Kurt Lance,

Simone and Bob Arnott, and Beryl and Alan Smith, who religiously get together each year.

Sasha started to ski as a 15 year old in the Krknose (Giant) mountains in her homeland, the former Czechoslovakia. Together with her brother Frank, her cousins, uncles and aunts, the whole family, usually 3 times a year, during the mid-term holidays, at Christmas and Easter. 'I started racing then as a junior, I suppose. I was 16 in my first race and I came 3rd in the juniors. I was very upset because I was sure I was going to win, but I could hardly stand on skis, so no wonder!'

At the start of the 2nd World War Sasha was just 20, 'younger then when I went to University in Prague, but at the start of the war Hitler closed the University,' she says. 'We were not Jewish so we were not unduly persecuted, we had a bad time like everybody else, cold and hungry.' I say to Sasha that she was very lucky as not too many people were aware that many of the city's University students, the elite, were rounded up and shot by Hitler. 'Yes, they were executed, shot,' she replies. It was during the war that Sasha went to ski in St Anton, as it was part of the 'Greater Reich' at the time. 'Yes there were some underhanded machinations to gain travel permits and that was only within the Reich, of course, but only for that specific place, and only by a certain train and back again,' Sasha explains. 'You know that was twice in six years of war, just for training during the war,' she adds.

'After the war they had the 1st international race in Zermatt, Switzerland in 1946. A Czechoslovakian Team was sent and I was with them. I had two 2nd places, I think, so that was quite good. After that I had 1947 and 1948 when I raced again for the Czechoslovakian Team. In those two years I raced in various places in Europe.' Getting back to those Winter Olympic Games, in St Moritz, in 1948, I ask Sasha how the



Sasha race-training in 1946

atmosphere felt at those Games. 'It was wonderful, we got dressed up and went to the dances, and we were invited to meet Moira Shearer, she was a big star, an American, it was great.' 'Putting on the Ritz' I say. 'Yes, there was a Ritz, there were hockey teams, and people got dressed up. In 1948 there was Tony and Brchel and 3 girls, there were always 3 girls in all the big races, and we are still good friends!'

A sudden political change occurred in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the communist putsch, the end of democracy as we know it, life changed for everybody. 'I was racing in Switzerland. This was some months after the putsch, because after the putsch we were trying to get out and couldn't. When I was racing in Grindelwald with the Czechoslovakian Women's Team, before I was to go home to Prague at the end of the Games I had a telephone call, my husband Karel saying, 'we are going skiing



Racing for Czechoslovakia at the 1948
St Moritz Winter Olympic Games

tonight,' so he and Frank were defecting that night. 'I was leaving the next morning, so on the next morning I absconded. When the racers were returning we changed trains in Zurich at Enge, I just didn't get on the train, I defected.' Sasha tried to arrange Swiss entry visas for Karel and Frank, but to no avail. Karel and Frank had made it to St Anton to join Tony Sponar where they managed to survive by ingeniously running the first ski-lift, powered by Frank's World War 2 jeep, in the adjoining hamlet of St Christoph.

Once settled in Melbourne I wondered whether Sasha and Karel, with an accent, were treated like many of the 'reppo's', commonly discriminated against in those days. 'Not at all, no, no, we were so lucky because we were good skiers, we started

out on the right foot, they looked up to us they loved us!' Sasha and Karel began their skiing careers in Australia, 'first at Mt Buller, as caretaker's, of a club lodge, 'The Postal Institute' in 1951.' In 1952 once Tony Sponar had invited them both to teach at Charlotte's Pass, Sasha started to teach for the first time at the Ski-School. 'I remember that I had a book, and I learned how to teach from the book! I had no technical skills, we were just ski-racers, we did not have the technique, so with teaching I learned how to ski beautifully, by teaching.'

It was in the winter of 1954 at The Chalet that Sasha first introduced Sydney based architect Eric Nicholls to Tony Sponar, which in effect was the first seed sown towards the future development of Thredbo. By now Sasha had already ignited the passion for skiing, touched, and inspired the hearts of several successive generations of Australians skiers; but it was to be here in Thredbo that she was to finally leave her own mark and heart for good. In 1958 with sixteen hundred pounds and a bank loan Sasha and Karel with the help of Bela Racsko, a Hungarian architect, invested their life-savings to build Sasha's Lodge. A Viennese builder Otto Ernegg started the work in January 1959 and Thredbo's second commercial lodge opened on the June long-weekend of the same year. In 1960 Sasha opened a big wardrobe of ski wear to start-up her ski boutique. In 1963 extensions to the original lodge saw it double in size to become one of Thredbo's most exclusive European style chalets. Once Jan their brother took over the lodge and renamed it 'Black Bear Inn', Sasha and Karel built 'Sasha's Apartments' and from there Sasha's Sportswear was eventually born. Sasha over the years travelled the world to choose fashionable ski-wear for Thredbo's ski cognoscenti and built a loyal retail following. Karel fostered junior racers and became one of the founders of the Thredbo Ski-Racing Club, and in the mid 60's a junior race, Sasha's Cup, was established. As a pioneer, and local identity in the early years I ask Sasha how she feels about the village now. 'It is all sort of foreign to me' 'Foreign, why?' I ask. 'There are so many lodges and they are so beautiful, most of them. People demand only the best; they demand service and they get service. It was a

village and it had an Australian cachet, whilst now it is sort of non-character. They want to give it ‘an Australian identity’ which is not all that strong because many, many years ago there was not much of it’ (an Australian identity). I say ‘there tends to be more of a cross section of society coming nowadays.’ Sasha says ‘that is with the advent of the snow-board, that element has arrived now, yes. Before the snowboarders it was more glamorous.’



That beautiful technique!

Reluctantly our chat comes to a conclusion and my thoughts turn to the chap sitting next to Sasha on The Cruiser at Merritt’s, pontificating about ski-technique, and I inwardly laugh, ‘if he only knew -----’

Happy birthday Sasha! --- from all of your ‘Friends of Thredbo.’

Jerry Krejzar is a TSPA alumni and a member of the Thredbo Historical Society.

**Informal interview with Sasha held at Frank's place, Thredbo
14th August 2009 with Jerry Krejzar**

Aim: To supplement the original interview held on 25/04/06 with Edie Swift, with some additional personal recollections.

JK

Hello Sasha, the Vice-President your brother Frank has asked me to have a few words with you, informally, so we can expand on your original interview.

Sasha

I am glad it's informal.

JK

Yes very informal. Edie covered most of the important aspects, but how did you feel living as a teenager in Prague?

Sasha

I was 20 at the start of the war, younger then that when I went to university, but at the start of the war Hitler closed the university as you know.

JK

Did you have a bad time during the war?

Sasha

No, we were not Jewish we were not persecuted, but we had a bad time like everybody else, cold and hungry.

JK

Not too many people were aware that quite a number of university students were executed.

Sasha

Yes, they were executed, shot.

JK

I was always puzzled, how was it that the Czechoslovakian ski-team was allowed to train in the Beskydy-mountains during the war?

Sasha

No, no, during the war we went to St Anton not Beskydy. Beskydy we went to later because instead of the Krknose, (Giant Mountains), these were part of the Greater Reich at the time. We were not allowed to go to the border country, and the Giant Mountains were on the border, so we used to go to Beskydy which were smaller mountains but which was allowed. There was one chairlift, a single-seater.

JK

I got the impression that Tony Sponar trained with the ski-team in the Beskydy mountains.

Sasha

We did, because we had the Czechoslovakian National Championships there.

JK

The Nazis did not mind?

Sasha

It was in the territory of 'The Protectorate', so it was allowed.

JK

When was the National Ski-Team allowed to go to St Anton?

Sasha

Yes there were some underhand machinations to gain travel permits and that was only within the Reich of course, only for that specific place, and only by a certain train and back again.

JK

Pretty controlled.

Sasha

I think I went there during the war.

JK

With the ski-team training?

Sasha

They were there once when I wasn't, they were making a film, all of them. In 1942 they were making the film.

JK

In 1942 with Tony Sponar and you were unlucky that you were not in it.

Sasha

No, no, you know that was twice in 6 years of war, just for training during the war.

JK

In 1945 just after the war, what happened?

Sasha

I was married in November in Brno. (To - Karel Nekvapil). There was a bit of a revolution after the war, there were houses bombed on Wenceslas Square.

JK

How come you married in Brno?

Sasha

Because Karel came from Brno. Then in the winter of 1946 the Czechoslovakian team went abroad, 1st class, for the first time, to Zermatt.

Frank
Did you not go to the 'Academy Games'?

Sasha
That was in 1947, the year after.

JK
In 1946 the team went to Zermatt?

Sasha
It was great, first-time after the war!

JK
I read in Franz Gabl's book that when the Czechoslovak Ski-Team came to St Anton after the war that they always had plenty of good food, but the Austrians were still, a lot worse off. Franz made nice comments about the Czechs, as they always shared their food when Austria had little because of food rationing. Franz had just returned from the Russian front at the time.

Sasha
We knew Pepi Gabl well, who we met in 1946, 47, 48, who had been to the places where the big International Races were and the Czech Team. We had met Franz but did not know him as well. We went to the World Academic Games in Davos in 1947. I came 2nd.

JK
2nd! That is good. 1948 was St Moritz, how did you go there?

Sasha
I had a 4th place in Combined Slalom, but this did not count because it counted only with The Downhill, together.

JK
That was the Winter Olympic Games where Tony came 17th in The Downhill?

Sasha
He came 6th! (In the Combined Slalom).

JK
How was the atmosphere at those Games?

Sasha
It was wonderful, lovely, we got dressed-up and we went to dances and we were invited to meet Moira Shearer, she was a big star, an American, it was great.

JK
Getting-it-on-at-the-Ritz, as they say, there was a Ritz in St Moritz?

Sasha

Yes, putting-on-the-Ritz. Yes there was a Ritz. There were Hockey Teams and people got dressed up.

JK

How many were there in the Czechoslovakian Team? Was Frank in the Team?

Sasha

In 1948 there was Brchl and three girls. There were always three girls in all those big races, and we are still good friends.

JK

Where do they live now?

Sasha

In Prague, and last year when I was in Prague I took a photo of the two and me, and the contrast with the three of us marching in the Olympic Stadium where we had lots of photos taken of us.

JK

Was it 48 or 49, the last year you competed for Czechoslovakia?

Sasha

Yes 49 was the last time. That was the time I defected after Grindelwald. We only had the one week there in early January, and after that.

JK

You had already decided before that to defect?

Sasha

Yes.

JK

The communist putsch took place in 1948.

Sasha

We were trying to arrange it beforehand, we had friends from England who did not want to be there; Czech airmen who were pilots in the RAF. Twice we had plans; we had arranged a plane with their two little kids and us too.

JK

The families of the RAF airmen?

Sasha

Yes they were their families, a couple with two little kids.

JK

How did they acquire the plane?

Sasha

It was all arranged, in a meadow. And what happened was that there was torrential rain the night before and we couldn't take off! So we had another one; and the same airmen; the night before, was arrested. Then we had to look for other ways, because our friends, the pilot and his wife, they went on foot through the mountains and they were arrested, children and all.

One night in Grindelwald before I was to go home to Prague at the end of the Games I had a telephone call, Karel saying, 'we are going skiing tonight'. So he and Frank were defecting that very night.

Frank

You were in Switzerland when we left.

Sasha

Yes I was, remember the telephone call? But I was leaving the next morning; that is the next morning I absconded. When we were leaving Grindelwald, when we changed trains in Zurich at Enge, I didn't get on.

JK

From there you made your way to St Anton?

Sasha

Yes after two months.

Yes, I stayed with Frank, an architect, and his wife, he had a big villa, and he was very kind. They were nice to me but I had to go to the police and some sort of immigration place asking for visas for Frank and Karel. I went every day to ask them but I could not get them.

JK

Did you get to St Anton just after Frank and Karel?

Sasha

No, they were there for sometime, after I finally gave up the quest for visas to Switzerland, I went there, and that is where Frank, Karel and Tony had the lift.

JK

They were already set up with the ski-lift when you got there, and they had plenty of food because they were making money.

Sasha

No, they had to buy a lift ticket on the Galzigbahn, that cost money, and what we ate at night was garlic soup, sometimes potatoes with some gravy and we had meat once a week.

JK

That was not that long after the war, and I got the impression from reading Franz Gabl's book, that it was still quite a hard time in Austria.

Sasha

Yes that was 1949; the people who owned the house had cows, in the house. It was awful for me because I was a pregnant.

JK

You actually had your child in Austria?

Sasha

No, when we left in May for Belgium, that's when Michael was born. We went to Belgium because Karel had his brother living there, and Frank had good friends, we had good friends, they were settled there from Prague.

JK

That was in 1949?

Sasha

Yes that was in 1949, and we left Belgium in 1950, Michael was one year old, so that was November 1950 when we went. I had a holiday in Paris first and we had another week in Genoa from where the ship was leaving, which we boarded after Christmas.

JK

Were you sent to a refugee resettlement camp like Bonegilla?

Sasha

No because Frank was here already, settled in Melbourne and he guaranteed us so we did not have to go; because he was sponsored by -----.

Frank

No, I was not sponsored I had, as a single person who paid for his passage, a landing permit from London, it was easy.

Sasha

He had a job, some business clients in the flower business; they gave him a job and a car.

JK

How did you feel about the difference, coming from a European life-style in Prague, to Melbourne?

Sasha

Well you know it was quite a difference.

JK

You may remember in those times we were seen as 'reffo's', especially with an accent, Australians were not as accommodating of refugees as they are now. Did you have any experiences in that regard?

Sasha

That's right, but no, no not at all, we were so lucky because we started on the right foot and they looked up to us, they loved us!

JK

Isn't that interesting, that is because you were at the 'top of the heap'?

Sasha

The Wagner's, our friends, were already settled in Melbourne, they were there as we came into a 'prepared society' they were completely wonderful to us. In those days the people who skied were the people who had money.

JK

You first started skiing in Charlotte Pass?

Sasha

We first started skiing in Mt Buller we had a Ski-School there.

JK

What year was that Sasha?

Sasha

That was 51 and we were caretaker's, of a club lodge, 'The Postal Institute'. The winter was terrible it rained all the time. I was cold and frozen all the time. In that winter Tony Sponar said, 'do you want to come and teach with me at Charlotte Pass'? I said 'yes', and luckily Karel said yes, because they had this little baby -----.

JK

That was 52?

Sasha

Yes that was 52 and from then on.

JK

How did you find the Ski-School?

Sasha

Well I remember I had a book, and I learned how to teach from the book!

JK

Is that right, was the book based on the 'Arlberg technique'?

Sasha

Yes, yes, I had no technical skills, we were just ski-racers we did not have the technique, so with teaching I learnt how to ski beautifully, by teaching.

JK

So by following 'the instruction book', it sort of came?

Sasha

(Laughs) --- Yes, yes!

Today a man on the lift looked at my skis and said 'how long have you had them'? I said, 'I bought them about 5 years ago and I am very pleased with them'! 'No', he

said, 'throw them away'. He had those with the round tips, 'they are so much easier', he said; 'and what technique do you ski'? I said, 'I don't know'! 'You have to start 'the new one'; skis apart, arms in front, it is so much easier'.

JK

That is so funny, (hearty laugh), as he did not know who he was talking to.

Sasha

He said, 'look at my son', who was with him on the lift, 'we were taking him yesterday, in 2 hours he could turn, and by the end of the day he was on the main run, because of the new technique'. I said to him that he would have done me out of my job, as I used to teach, and that was the end of the whole thing.

JK

When you built the 2nd commercial lodge in Thredbo, which is all pretty well documented, it was 58 or 59. How do you see those years when Thredbo was in its gestation? Now that you have come back, to compare what it is like now, how do you feel about that having been such a pioneer here?

Sasha

In 1959; it is sort of foreign to me.

JK

Foreign! Why?

Sasha

There are so many lodges, and they are so beautiful, most of them. People demand only the best; they demand service and they get service. It was a village and it had an Austrian cachet, whilst now it is sort of non-character.

JK

You mean it is more uniform and 'Australianised'?

Sasha

They want to give it 'an Australian identity' which is not all that strong because many, many years ago there was not all that much of it. (An Australian identity).

JK

I have the impression that the past is lost and that Thredbo is trying to create a 'Thredbo identity'.

Sasha

Yes absolutely. It was more glamorous in those days and it is not now.

JK

It was more glamorous but not anymore?

Sasha

No, no it just had the name of the place where only the best people go, so that a lot of people who did not have the means were afraid to come.

JK

There tends to be more of a cross-section of society nowadays.

Sasha

That is with the advent of the snow board, that element has arrived now, yes. Before the snow boarders it was more glamorous.

JK

More glamorous and more eclectic I guess.

Sasha

Yes that was the right word.

JK

Isn't that, interesting.

Sasha

They were some of the people that were coming, and 40 years later, still coming, some of them.

JK

You had a local cinema at Sasha's?

Sasha

We used to bring the big, big reels of film and we put it on, Karel had the projector.

JK

How many people turned up?

Sasha

Lots! 20 or 30.

JK

You say outside, on the terrace?

Sasha

Yes, outside on the terrace, 'Black Bear' does not have the terrace anymore.

JK

How many years did that last?

Sasha

Oh about two summers.

JK

Do you remember those early days, in 'The Lodge' when all the Czechs, there was a waiter with a missing-thumb there was Gus and his dog, and 'The Professor'?

Sasha
Yes, yes professor Stanislavski.

JK
Was he the professor who used to paint, I remember him, and Gus and the big dog.

Sasha
That was later, Stanislavski was 59 or 60, he may have gone by 61.

JK
My parents used to socialise with them, I was less interested as a teenager, instead I preferred to go fishing with Leo and Behounek.

Sasha
Behounek, he was a very good friend, he was good friends with Stanislavski.

JK
That was 'the Czech mob'.

Sasha
We had at Christmas, the Czech mob, we had the Ritter's.

JK
Tonda (Tony) and Anna, they were good friends of my parents who always used to visit when in Sydney. Anna left for Switzerland and Tony raised pigs on the Barry Way.

Sasha
He died last year, he did not have pigs, he had a house on the Barry Way, had big grounds, he had like a nursery but he would not sell anything, lovely trees.

JK
We used to come up for trout and schnitzel at Easter and Christmas.

Sasha
Yes Easter was always very busy. They were the Ritter's and the Korner's, and you know what happened then, Anna Ritterova divorced Tony and married Korner, who divorced as well. That was with him she went to live in Switzerland and they both died more than 10 years ago. I had been to their place.

JK
It was a different life in those days.

Sasha
Tony used to go out in the car and listen to the cricket, because there was no reception.

JK
There were some card games going on in 'The Lodge', and that is how one of the Czech waiters lost his thumb, with a bullet hole lodged in the wall.

Sasha

I know a man who had his gun with him in 'The Old Lodge', I forgot his name but he had an engineering place outside of Cooma, it is still there the house, but he is not there anymore.

JK

Do you remember the card games?

Sasha

No.

JK

Must have just been 'the boys'. Well Sasha thanks very much for your tale.

Sasha

Not at all.

Frank

What about the illustrious days of Sasha and Karel founding the junior races and school?

JK

We have not talked about that.

Sasha

He was very keen on fostering the juniors so we had a race, called 'Sasha's Cup' which was run every year.

JK

When did that start Sasha?

Sasha

Early or mid 60's, I had photos of that, and of course Karel became one of the founders of The Thredbo Racing Club. It was so much work running the races and the lodge, 100 kids. I never taught in Thredbo there was too much work with the lodge.

In summer Frank got himself famous because we drove up to the lodge, about Christmas, above the old lodge, 'Black Bear Inn', he was on the edge of the road and the road gave in, and -----.

Frank

The left wheel dislodged as I was letting a car pass and it was too far. Then I felt movement and I started braking, nothing to do with the brakes, and I started to roll.

JK

What a way to introduce your arrival from Melbourne!

Frank

It was New Years Day and what I did I was thrown in the back of the van and I formed myself into a ball, and I was sort of tumbling around and had I had a safety

belt, the roof was caved in right to the driver's seat, it would have made me an even smaller guy!

JK

Thank you Sasha and Frank for the lovely chat.