

Frank Erpic

FRANK ERPIC

Interviewed by Klaus Hueneke

On 14 November 1986.

Frank worked on the Snowy Mountains Scheme from 1951 to 1967. He came here from Yugoslavia in 1951. He came as an assisted migrant, but did not go to Bonegilla Hostel. He worked for private contractors; he worked at Thiess Village, Jindabyne; and Bogong Creek at Blowering, and Talbingo. His son was also on the Scheme for 2 or 3 years, and he took a lot of photos. Frank worked as a miner, fitter, surveyor's assistant, and then later on as an inspector of works.

KH: I thought I would start, Frank, with your full name first. What is your full name?

FE: Frank Erpic.

KH: Do you have a middle name, too?

FE: No.

KH: Does Frank stand for anything in Sloven? Is it a shorter version?

FE: Franz, it is for.

KH: Oh, right. Like the German Franz?

FE: Yes, yes.

KH: And when were you born?

FE: 5 March, 1914, in Slovenia.

KH: Can you remember the place?

FE: Oh yes. *Shminil Prinoamista* (?)

KH: And what are your parents' names?

FE: Father was Josef or *Yosa*. And mother was Francisca or Fransca.

KH: And where did you go to school?

FE: Where or when?

KH: Where?

FE: In *Neamista* it is very close to my birthplace.

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KH: And what level did you reach at school?  
 FE: Matriculation.  
 KH: That is like - - -  
 FE: High school.  
 KH: Year 9 or year 10, is it?  
 FE: Most likely. I am not quite sure, because I do not know the system in Australia. But anyhow, matriculation. And I enrolled at university. But I was only one year at the university and studied agriculture, and then the war started, and I was obliged to finish my studies.  
 KH: So you could not - you applied to go to university?  
 FE: I enrolled.  
 KH: Oh, you enrolled?  
 FE: Yes. I enrolled for one 1 year, I was enrolled at the university in Belgrade, which is the capital of Yugoslavia.  
 KH: And so you did agriculture instead.  
 FE: Yes, agriculture, I study it, agriculture.  
 KH: At university?  
 FE: At university.  
 KH: Oh, I see.  
 FE: First year.  
 KH: Just the one year?  
 FE: Yes.  
 KH: Then the war came.  
 FE: Yes, that is right.  
 KH: And then what happened during the war?  
 FE: During the war I was at post office, but I already started in Yugoslavia, at the post office, and studied part-time, actually. And wrote and studied part-time.  
 KH: Did you finish anything in your studies?  
 FE: No, no exams, because I was in the post office, the same in Belgrade. And then when the war started - just before war started, I was transferred to Slovenia. And then came the occupation and I was three months without employment, unemployed.

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And then I was again taken by the German administration as a post officer.  
 KH: When the Germans took over.  
 FE: When the Germans took over, I was, after three months - three months was a certain waiting period, one could say - but we were paid from Yugoslav administration ahead three months. When this time elapsed then we were taken back to the post offices, but under German administration.  
 KH: And then what did you do after the war?  
 FE: After the war I was in the refugee camps in Italy. From Italy I fled to France, and from France I migrated to Australia.  
 KH: From France?  
 FE: Yes, from France, yes.  
 KH: Oh, I see. And what year was that?  
 FE: That was 50.  
 KH: 1950.  
 FE: 1950, yes.  
 KH: And did you get married before you came to Australia?  
 FE: Yes, I was married. But my wife remained in Yugoslavia with three children.  
 KH: With three children?  
 FE: Three children, yes.  
 KH: So you separated at that time?  
 FE: Yes, we were separated, yes, that is right. And then later I got - in the beginning - it was in 55, 45, 46, 47, that was impossible to get <sup>the</sup> family. And beside that, we parted with my wife, you see. Because she left the children with my sisters, and then I did not want to know much about my wife, anyhow. And then I got another one.  
 KH: Oh, I see. Did you get another wife here in Australia?  
 FE: Yes, here in Australia.  
 KH: So your wife is Australian?  
 FE: No, no. Actually in France already.  
 KH: Oh, I see, you came together.  
 FE: Yes, together. We came together. We know each other in Italy in the camps. And then in France we started to live together.

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KH: And have you had children with your second wife?  
 FE: Yes, three children.  
 KH: So you came to Australia in 1950?  
 FE: Yes.  
 KH: You came by ship?  
 FE: Yes, the SKAUBRYN.  
 KH: And who paid for your passage? Was it assisted?  
 FE: Assisted, that is true, IRO, International Refugee Organisation.  
 KH: Not the Australian Government?  
 FE: No, no, no.  
 KH: And what was your idea of Australia before you came? What did you know about Australia before you came?  
 FE: Not much. I knew that there are plenty of sheep here and rabbits; that is all.  
 KH: I see. But you knew enough to want to come, did you?  
 FE: No, I did not know much about - but I was only interested to go away from Europe, because there was always a big talk about war - that will start a new war, and so on. And I got enough - one war - I go as far away as possible. And then, actually, and where it will be possible to go, because it was not very easy right away after the war to find a country that will take you. And Australia took us. I applied for Australia.  
 KH: Did you spend any time at the Bonegilla Migrant Camp?  
 FE: No.  
 KH: Or at any other camp?  
 FE: No. I have not been in the camps at all, because I got enough money to - I got to show that I have 50 pounds cash money on the ship, and then I was allowed to disembark in Melbourne, with a friend. My friend gave me accommodation and one kind of guarantee that I will get employment. He helped me anyhow to find employment.  
 KH: Did you learn any English on the ship coming out?  
 FE: I learned English already in France, before I come to Australia. And then on the ship, naturally, I took the course of English.

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KH: And when was your first - when did you get to hear about the Snowy Mountains Scheme?  
 FE: About Snowy Mountains Scheme, I hear in 55. And I read in a newspaper, News Weekly - in newspaper I read article how much they earn and what are conditions for living and so on. And then I got a friend who was already in a camp by Cabramurra, and I wrote to him and he sent me a letter back that it is possible to get employment, but I have to come up there, otherwise it is impossible to do anything. And then I packed everything, what I got, and I go myself. My wife and kids, they stayed still in Victoria, that was South Dudley.  
 KH: Is that in Melbourne, is it?  
 FE: By Melbourne, that is about 70 miles from Melbourne.  
 KH: So you got a job on the Scheme through a friend?  
 FE: Yes, through a friend, yes, that is right.  
 KH: And what was your first job?  
 FE: It was labourer, first it was labourer, and then miner in the tunnel. And from that I was in workshop as assistant fitter. And then I shifted to the survey department - actually it was not the survey department, it was the surveyor's - chainman, for about one and a half years, as chainman. And then I start to study surveying by correspondence. The company, that was <sup>Kaiser-Walsh</sup> ~~was a~~ <sup>Raymond</sup> they paid fees for everyone who want to study something, you see. And then, like that, you see, I start to do surveying. That was one reason. The second reason it was for the company got - it was very hard at this time to get qualified surveyors on the job, especially in the tunnels because the job is pretty dirty. Besides that, American foremen, they were fairly rough, and surveyors, they were treated like other men.  
 You see there was no difference between <sup>a</sup> ~~a~~ <sup>miner</sup> or a surveyor. Actually a ~~miner~~ was somehow better - better looked after than surveyor, you see. And the job has to be done quick, you see.  
 KH: Surveying in the tunnels?  
 FE: Yes, surveying in the tunnels, to give a line, you see, actually to bank the face. It was firstly necessary to put a centre line, and

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then from the centre line measure the face and mark the face of the tunnel. And that was required to be done very quick and accurate. And surveyors usually - 25 surveyors - they were more or less slow on the job, and they want to do the way they wanted, but foremen, *was not satisfied* usually, with the way. They were doing and then they just sacked them, or surveyors left themselves. You see, the money was not very high for surveyors. It was good money but not too attractive for a qualified surveyor. And as they could not get qualified surveyors they start to train people who was interested and paid for them, even these fees for the international correspondence schools. And when I sent my examination papers, I got to send the papers to Sydney, to the school, the school always notified the company and myself, you see, how I pass. And I got pretty good, very good marks, actually, more or less. Nearly all, they were very good and excellent marks.

KH: So you became a qualified surveyor?

FE: I have not been qualified, but I was surveyor, but never bothered to get qualifications because I got the same job, the same money as surveyor, you see. Because to get qualification it would be necessary to go to Melbourne or Sydney or to any technical school, you see, to pass the examination. But I have not had time. I did not want to spend the time, you see. It would be necessary to maybe a week, maybe two, you see, to go for qualification. But I have not been interested because I got a job, the same job, you see, and the same money as qualified surveyor. And then I was, for the time being, when I started, I was instrument man, you see, and then I was surveyor. Assistant surveyor and then surveyor.

KH: And did you live - where was the first place you lived when you were on the Scheme? What was the first camp?

FE: The first camp below Cabramurra - I cannot remember the name. They changed - it was different name in the beginning than later.

KH: Was it some place called Kenny's Nob?

FE: Not Kenny's Nob, no.

KH: Not *Sue* City?

FE: That was later.

KH: Later, yes.

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FE: That was in the first place, T 2, was built up there, you see. ....T2, from Tumut Pond, to T2, you see. A contract got - a French company, CITRA.

KH: That was your first job.

FE: The first job there, it was with CITRA. But I did not last long up there. I was *in the tunnel*, I think it was - not miner - labourer. But I was not fast enough for them and they sack me.

From CITRA I got sack and then I gone over - it was just over the mountain - on the other side, on to Tumut Pond. In Tumut Pond they were Kaiser, *Walsh - Perini*, - Raymond, company, and I was waiting for a while in the camp with a friend. It was very hard to get job, actually. You could get job if you came at the right time, you see, when there was vacancy. If there was not vacancy, you got to wait. And I was waiting maybe a week, I do not know exactly. And then I got a job with Kaiser in Tumut Pond, Kaiser, *Walsh - Perini*, - Raymond, in Tumut Pond. And I *stayed* up there, until the tunnel was finished, or well after that, until the contract was nearly finished.

KH: And what was the camp like? Did you live in tents there, or

- - -

FE: There were barracks.

KH: Oh, little barracks.

FE: Little barracks, yes. Little barracks, that was in Tumut *Pond*. That now, I think, everything is covered. Is nothing more to see. In these barracks we lived, yes. That was, I think, in 55, when there was that much snow that we could not get any supply from Cooma. We worked for nearly - more than <sup>one</sup> week - cut off from the rest of the world. And the supply run off, even we had no bread. Well, actually, they bake it themselves in the kitchen.

KH: Oh, you had a kitchen?

FE: Yes, a kitchen, but they did not have much food, you see. And then after about one week, or something like that, you see, then they clear the roads and supplies started and we start to work. There was that much snow that on one side of the barracks, you see, was the snow rolled from the roof, touch the ground, and formed tunnels. We got to walk under the snow into the barracks, on one side, because the barracks, they were on the hill.