

Living a Good Life: Reflections on Joseph (Joze) Mihevc

Good morning. On behalf of the family, I thank you for being with us today as we mourn, remember and celebrate the life of Joseph (Joze) Mihevc and his 102 year life journey. I am saying 102 because today is his 102nd birthday!

I want to suggest to you, as we listen to aspects of my father's life, that there are lessons here for how to lead a good life, a life of deeper meaning and purpose. My father would want this to happen. He often spoke of the need to "teach the younger generation," as he would say, or "experience is the best teacher." Yes, there are many lessons that we can learn from his remarkable life.

Ata/Stari Ata was born on February 3, 1923 in the town of Hrusevje near Postojna Slovenia. At that time, the land was actually a part of Italy. As a result of the region's ever changing border, Ata's/Stari Ata's grew up learning both Slovenian and Italian. He continued to pepper his speech with Italian words throughout his life. In 1931, at the start of the global depression, his family moved to Cerknica, solidly in Slovenia, and that is where he grew up and from where he left after WWII.

Ata/Stari Ata and his family knew hunger and poverty. His early days were extremely difficult. From the stories he told us, it seems that his father, Anton, suffered from some sort of PTSD, having survived WWI and being shot as a soldier twice, once on the Russian front, and once on the Italian front. His mother, Apolonija, became the rock of the house holding the family of six – parents, sisters Ivanka and Milka, and brother Tony, and himself. From his stories, one would quickly figure out that this was a poor family of essentially landless peasants eking out an existence scavenging from the land, the father and children taking odd jobs, and mutual support.

Ata/Stari Ata told stories of him as a 12 year old being sent from Cerknica to Postojna, a journey of 16 kilometers, to sell a sack of beans at the market and return home. He told the story of sharing a single pair of Sunday shoes with his brother going to different church services.

Of course, these experiences of hunger and want molded him. Throughout his life, he always ate everything on his plate, made his family do the same, and kept a prolific garden. He was frugal with his money. He would allow his family to go through what he went through! Well before the environmental movement promoted the “simple lifestyle”, he lived his entire life simply with minimum waste and splurging. People who know hunger and deep poverty have lessons to teach us all on how to live on a tight budget.

Ata/Stari Ata the refugee: And then there was WWII. By this time, Ata/Stari Ata was proving himself to be good with mechanics. He always wanted to know how things worked mechanically. And he could fix anything, absolutely anything. World powers and political movements pushed this way and that – and Stari Ata just wanted to fix engines and be a mechanic. He continued to have dreams and nightmares throughout his life of that period of chaos and war. It haunted him all the days of his life.

Eventually of course he made his way out of Slovenia, starting out from Cerknica in the dark of the night in 1945, to walk to Austria. He spent three years in Austria in a refugee camp, working again as a mechanic in the logging industry in the Austrian alps, being courted by his employer to marry his nice Austrian daughter. And then – an opening to move abroad. He chose Canada because Canada seemed like a land of promise especially for single young men. The lesson here is that the refugee gene has been woven into the Mihevc history and who we are today. We know the story of the refugee, we are the story of being estranged from our native land, of wandering the earth in search of safety, and then finding and building a new life in a new land.

Ata/Stari Ata the immigrant: Canada did become that land of opportunity. And he took it. First, after passing through Pier 21 in Halifax in 1948, he lived and worked on a farm near Owen Sound for a year to pay for his passage to Canada. He ate meals with his host family who asked him not to eat the chicken leg right to the bones, but to leave something for the dog. He eventually made his to Toronto where his sister Milka (now a Koscak) was living. In Toronto there was a growing

number of Slovenians who had made the same decision. My parents were the epitome of immigrants to Canada: hard-working, resilient, entrepreneurial, fiercely determined – just like so many of the new immigrants coming to Canada today. When we defend them and support them, I will submit, we honour Ata's/Stari Ata's story.

Ata/Stari Ata the worker: in 1949 he quickly found jobs in Toronto first at an auto dealer and then at the TTC as a bus mechanic. He became a trusted and sought after mentor for many mechanic apprentices. At the TTC he pioneered many time- and cost-saving inventions. He received many accolades and awards for doing so. Again, he could fix anything; he was a McIvor well before the TV show made its appearance. The TTC and its union ATU local 113 were also good to him providing him with job security and a good pension and providing his children with university scholarships. Over the 36 TTC years, he could count the number of sick days on one hand. And so, what do you think he did with the rest of his time? Well, he fixed cars at home in the evenings. Saturdays? Fixed cars at home. Holidays? Fixed cars at home. He worked 6 days a week, 7am to 9pm for most of his days.

In the 1960s and 1970s he also built two family homes on Branstone Rd and a cottage in Muskoka, doing most of the work – framing, electrical, digging, roofing, landscaping himself, or with his children. The only day he would take off was Sundays, as that was family day and the day for Church. He especially complained when his children developed an interest in sports. At the cottage he put up a sign that says, “Alternative to sports kept me vigorous.” So, if you, his children, grandchildren and great grand children are ever seeing traces of workaholism in any of us, you can lay that gene at Stari Ata's feet.

Ata/Stari Ata the student and the writer: From his earliest days, he was interested in learning and studying. During our upbringing as children, he pushed schooling and education regularly insisting that his children should strive for top marks. When he retired from the TTC in the late 1980s, he immediately went back to school to learn creative writing. His writing skills improved enough for him to write a book about his life; and then he contributed to a second book as well. Curiosity, a scientific

approach to problem-solving, being smart, learning from the school of life, were deep values that he instilled in his children, grandchildren, and anyone who would listen. He kept his mind active, whether it was doing Sudoku, Playing Sheep and Wolves (and he was hard to beat). So when his grandchildren pursue teaching careers or aim for a masters or a PhD, know that this is the education gene from Stari Ati that is alive and well.

Ata/Stari Ata the family man: The centrality of family was core to how he lived his life. It was evident in his never missing a parent teacher interview for any of his children, attending to Emily when she needed to be driven to Tennessee for medical treatments, helping with the renovations and repairs of his children's homes, fixing things that no one could repair, maintaining our cars, helping each child achieve their first home - Ata/Stari Ata was one with his family, both doing the work and passing on skills.

In 1950 he married Anica Zorc, our mother and Stari Mama. Together they had 5 children, 14 grandchildren, and 13 great grandchildren and counting. They were a team that placed their family at the centre. Ati/Stari Ati always enjoyed visits with family and was eager to hear about the lives of his grandchildren and great grandchildren often asking, "So what's the good news?"

Ata/Stari Ata the foodie: When he was about 70 years old, he suffered a mild heart attack. True to form, he did his research, read extensively on healthy living, and came to the conclusion that he needed a radical change in diet. He developed a breakfast cereal of oats and garlic and flax and so on – 31 ingredients – each one well studied for its health efficacy. He would drive us crazy and scold us at family meals for eating too much processed meats, sugars, and salt. A healthy diet meant a good quality life. It was a key secret to his longevity. I think it fair to say that he was a foodie before it was a thing in our society. So when our family members show an interest in work that centres on food, this too has a genetic root in Stari Ata's life and teaching.

Ata/Stari Ata the community guy: He had several communities where he contributed his energy and support. The Slovenian community and

Church were centres for him and our family – church, choir, scouts and guides, dancing clubs, Sunday at the Slovenian Farm, Slovenian school – Our Lady Help of Christians was his community base, nurturing his religious faith, helping to raise his family, a place to socialize, a place to be born, to wed, and to say goodbye as people passed away.

Ata/Stari Ata sang in the Church choir. He sang with the choir on his 100th birthday. Even this last year, if you visited around bedtime, he would sing to you: “Good night, Arlene, good night Arlene, I’ll see you in my dreams.” As well, he was an instrumental part of Krek’s Credit Union helping it to get set up in the 1950s and contributing 41 plus years to the credit committee. He was especially proud of the first time mortgages he approved for so many Slovenian newcomer families. In his local neighbourhood, he volunteered for 10 years until he was 85 as a driver for the Red Cross for shut-ins attending medical appointments. Ata was a classic “community guy.”

So back to my very first question: what is a good and meaningful life? I think it is fair to say that Ata/Stari Ata showed us what a good and meaningful life looks like. His life made him happy, and it provided him with deeper meaning and purpose. The arc of his life bent not towards himself but to others in his family and community. He was resilient in facing the things that life threw in his direction. He believed in the power of his intellect and his ability to figure things out, build something and move forward. He did not turn into a grumpy old man in recent years, but a gentle spirit regularly laughing, joking and singing. We celebrate that. We honour him and the life he led. We see patterns in our own lives that seem to follow patterns in his life. That is a good life, and we are privileged to call him Ata, Stari Ata, friend, and community builder. Our memories of him and the experiences he shared with us will be a blessing in our lives.

Rest in Peace Husband, Father, Grand and great grand father, uncle and friend. Thanks for blessing us with your love and your life.