

John Tolewski – A Child Refugee from Neret

By Nick Tolewski

John Tolewski was born in the village of Neret on 4 May 1944. As a child, due to the Greek Civil War, he was forced to flee with his mother, Para, and his older brother, Paul, to Poland. He left behind his father, Risto Tolev, who had been captured by authorities for working with partisans.

John and his brother Paul were part of the 28,000 *detsa begaltsi* – Macedonian child refugees – from the Greek Civil War.

In Poland, John and his brother grew up in a Polish orphanage and then went to boarding school. John spent most of his youth there.



Paul, his mother Para and his brother John in Poland.



The Polish Orphanage. John and Paul are in the photo.



John and his brother Paul in Poland.

In 1960 as a 17 year old, John was sponsored to come to Australia by his uncle and auntie, Tanas and Dosta Ristouchis, who owned an orchard in Kyabram in Victoria. When dad first came to Australia he got picked up by his uncle Tanas at Essendon Airport in a ripping black Buick and driven straight to Kyabram where he met his cousins for the first time. John, along with his mother and brother, worked there for a while before moving to Melbourne.



From right, Tanas Ristouchis and his wife Dosta with daughter Para and her husband Chris Christo, and the black Buick.

As a teenager, John lived in and around Fitzroy, and had various jobs before getting a job in the Snowy Mountains. His two favourite jobs were working in the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme where he worked for a couple of years before buying his forever home in

Thomastown; and at Coles where he worked for over 30 years, mostly at Greensborough.

John was introduced to his future wife, Sofia, at a wedding at Fitzroy Town Hall in 1967. Sofia Alexandridis was from the village Peshoshnitsa and they had three kids: Nick, Liz and Chris, and seven grand kids: John, Natasha, Anita, Edilio, Cassius, Leni and Oliver.



John Tolewski



Sofia Tolewski

John never went back overseas, and after fleeing Neret as a toddler he never saw his father again.

Both of dad's parents remarried due to unfortunate circumstances.

My grandmother Para was the younger sister of Dosta Ristouichis. Para's maiden name was Chapkoun. She had two brothers, Risto and Kurste, and two sisters, Sofia and Dosta. All lived in Reservoir except Dosta who lived in Kyabram. Para remarried Paul Petrou, who was from the village Turje. Paul came to Australia in 1944, and worked on the sugar canes in Queensland. He was a successful tailor and made many suits for John and his brother. My baba [grandmother] Para and my dedo [grandfather] Paul lived in leafy Brunswick St, Fitzroy. They had a daughter named Helen. I haven't seen my auntie Helen in a long time. Paul was an avid punter and they say he never missed a meeting at Caulfield Races. He made suits for jockeys, bookies, cops. He was very well known and liked. My dad treated him like a real dad.

Risto Tolev remarried in Neret and had two boys, Vasil (Bill) and Mitre Tolis. Dad never ended up meeting them. A few years ago one of dad's half brothers, Vasil, who lives in Germany, rang out of the blue to let him know brother Mitre had passed away in Neret. That was the first time dad had ever spoken to his brother, and from then on they kept in regular contact.

Dad and his brother Paul would always catch up for a VB beer or two. John lost his dear brother Paul on 17 September, 1996. Paul was 56. His death affected John deeply and he was never really the same again.

Paul's surname was Tolefsky. Dad's previous surnames as a kid were Tolev, Tolis, Toli and finally Tolewski on his arrival to Australia from Poland.

John Tolewski – 4 May 1944 to 23 July 2021, Beloved husband, father, grandfather and friend to many – RIP.



Risto Tolev, John's father.



Para Petrou, John's mother.



Paul Tolefsky, John's brother.



Mitre Tolis, John's half brother.



Vasil Tolev, John's half brother.



Nick Tolewski with his father John and his son John.



Tanas Ristouchis and Dosta Ristouchis (nee Germancheva) with their six children. Para is with her husband Chris Christo. The other children are Mara, Sofia, Kata, Jim and Ristana.



John Tolewski second from left and Paul Tolefsky far right at the Snowy Mountains in the mid 1960s.



John Tolewski (right) receiving a watch for his services at Coles.



John Tolewski and brother Paul Tolefsky in Poland.

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