

# Olympian's great ski escape



## Julie Power

**A**ustralia's oldest living Olympian, Frank Prihoda, 96, owes his freedom and sporting career to skiing.

After a communist coup in February 1948, the Czech-born Mr Prihoda was among 50,000 of his countrymen – around 50 a day until 1951 – who fled the regime. Unlike most, he left on skis.

A friend drove Mr Prihoda and his brother-in-law Karel Nekvapil to near the border with Austria – an act that, at the time, could have cost them their lives.

"On the particular day of our escape there was snow on the ground," he said. "So we skied to a lake, which was frozen, and then skied across the frozen lake to Austria. From there we walked through the woods," he said.

Around the same time, his sister Sasha, who competed in the Winter Olympics in skiing (who died at 94 years in 2014) was planning to defect after her Czech women's skiing team competed in Grindelwald in Switzerland.

When the team went to catch the train home, Sasha's luggage

boarded the train but not her. A bit later, friends threw her luggage off the train, being careful to keep out of sight of the team's coach, reported *The Canberra Times*.

"She refused to come home with her team. Meanwhile, her husband and I were escaping," said Mr Prihoda.

For most refugees in postwar Europe, there were few places to go. Only Canada and Australia would take them, and the trio chose Australia because of an advertisement in the *London Times*.

"It stated that it snowed in Australia," he recalled. "We chose Melbourne; it had four seasons, which was closer to Czechoslovakia."

Compared to European slopes, the skiing in Australia was limited, but Mr Prihoda said it was nice and they were very happy to have a home. His sister, who competed in the 1948 Winter Olympics in St Moritz, Switzerland, went on to found Thredbo.

Like his sister, Mr Prihoda didn't learn to ski until relatively late, around age 13 on a family outing.

"At the beginning it was more traumatic than pleasurable," he said. But the siblings both raced competitively.

Mr Prihoda was naturalised in 1955, four years after arriving in Australia, and was chosen to represent Australia at the Winter Olympics in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, in 1956.

He was 35 then, the oldest member of the team and the oldest participant in the alpine games, a fact that was announced to everyone, he recalled.

He attributes his longevity to his life in Thredbo, where he moved in 1974 and ran a shop for many years.

"It's due to Australia, and living in Thredbo. It is a healthy life, healthy food, healthy grog, and over the years ... a lot of exercise."

When he turned 90, he had to give up skiing as he was losing his sense of balance. And until recently, he volunteered at the local museum. Now he is slowing down. "My heart specialist says I am living off my athletic past."



Frank Prihoda (above) represented Australia at the Winter Olympics in Italy in 1956. Main photo: Andrew Meares