

## The Kozolec Was the Key

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Those of you who are familiar with the work of the Society for Cultural Preservation in Gradež know that, among the interesting sights in our village is Sterle’s kozolec. Some years ago, this kozolec even attracted students of architecture. Its distinctive feature (in contrast to typical kozolecs) is a sliding platform, similar to a drawer on wheels, which was intended for drying grain. Well, it’s this very kozolec that, a few years ago, enabled the Sterles in Gradež to become acquainted with their relatives in America.



### Meeting as we walked

During the walking tour of Trubar’s birth parish, which our society organized for the September celebration of fruit drying, we overheard a conversation in English early in the morning. Of course, I wanted to know who had joined our tour. I learned that it was Lizette (Liz) Miller from Minnesota and John Stearle from Texas. They are second cousins, and their relatives are in four families (Sterle or Strle, Smrekar, Jakob and Šavli) in Gradež. All of them basically originate from the Sterle family. After the tour, they agreed to an interview, which turned out to be very interesting. Later I obtained additional details via e-mail; I asked Boštjan Sterle to help me with the genealogy research.

I should add that the family’s last name is not always spelled the same way. Some members use Sterle while others spell it Strle. This is a consequence of a change in Slovenian spelling, when the letter “e”

was no longer used to indicate a voiced semi-vowel. There are many examples of paired names like this in Slovenia. Most of them originate from the same last name.

### The Kozolec

So, how was the kozolec the key? Lizette and John were seeking their family roots independently of each other, using different methods, each in their own state. John began his research in 2016, while Liz had already started before him. A significant find for John was the passenger manifest for the ship from Italy to America, which included Angela Sterle – with the comment that her home was in Gradež and that her nearest relative was her grandmother Marija. When he looked up Gradež in Wikipedia, he learned about Strle's kozolec on the farm at Gradež Number 7. (It's interesting that the kozolec is not mentioned in the Slovenian version of Wikipedia, but it is in the English version which John sent to me.) In 2016, John sent an e-mail to the municipality of Velike Lašče, asking whether the Sterle family still lived at Gradež Number 7; he included a photograph of his great-great grandfather Anton Sterle and great-great grandmother Marija Gradišar and Liz's grandmother Angela. In January 2017, he received an e-mail reply from Boštjan Sterle, confirming that he had found his relatives. Boštjan sent him a photo of his grandfather Jože's family, which included Boštjan's great grandmother, the same Marija Gradišar on John's photo.



## **Relatives in Gradež**

Anton Sterle and Marija Gradišar from Gradež had five sons. The second oldest was Jakob, Liz and John's great grandfather, and the youngest son was Jože.

In addition to other children, Jože Sterle had a son Aloysius, who then had Vida, Bernarda (Nada Smrekar after her marriage), and Jože, daughter Gabrijela (Jelka Jakob after her marriage), whose children were Ladislav, Andrej, Benjamin, Tomaž and Elizabeth (Beti Šavli after her marriage), and daughter Aloysia, whose son is Boštjan. Andrej Jakob and his sister Beti Šavli live in Gradež, along with their cousins (brother and sister) Nada Smrekar and Jože Sterle.

## **Departure for America**

Liz and John's great grandfather Jakob left for America in 1896 and worked in Minnesota as a miner, as did the majority of Slovenian emigrants at that time. He married Johanna (Ivanka) Mesojedec, and they had two children: Liz's grandmother Angela (born 1899) and John's grandfather Jacob (born 1901). Soon after Jacob was born, the family returned for a short time to Slovenia, after which father Jakob again emigrated to America, followed by Johanna with their son Jacob in 1902. Angela remained in Slovenia, where she was raised by her great grandparents Sterle. She returned to America in 1920 (passenger manifest). She regularly exchanged letters with Gabrijela Jakob. When Angela died in 1941, the connection was lost. In addition to Jakob, two of his brothers emigrated to America; and one moved to Croatia; only Jože remained in Slovenia.

## **A Family Gathering**

John's grandfather Jacob never told him that he had a sister, Angela, Liz's grandmother. When John posted a message with details about his family to his relatives on the website of the genealogy organization Ancestry.com, it was forwarded to Liz's cousin. Later, after many complications, she made contact with John on Facebook. They coordinated their research for some time via e-mails; they didn't meet in person until John visited her in Minnesota in 2017.

They also exchanged e-mails for some time with their Slovenian relatives. Andrej Jakob shared the family tree with them. Then their main contact became Boštjan, who told Lizette and John that two brothers of the great-grandfather Jakob also emigrated to America. After some months, they located their families, too. In July 2018, they had a virtual family gathering which included members of all four Sterle families (on their great grandfathers' side), three in America and one in Slovenia. In 2019, Boštjan Sterle, with the help of Benjamin Jakob, organized an in-person meeting with them in Slovenia. It was particularly memorable for Liz to meet Gabrijela Jakob and to see the Sterle home where her grandmother Angela lived. She never met her in person, since she died too early, but she was happy that someone remembered her letters. John and Liz said that visit was strenuous for them, since their Slovenian relatives showed them so many of the most beautiful sights of their ancestors (Bled, Lipica, Piran, Postojna cave ...).

This year's meeting began with sadness, as John and Liz attended Gabrijela's funeral. In order to be there, Liz shortened her vacation in Salzburg, to which she had traveled from Munich. They hope to

have a happier time in the coming days in the relaxing company of their relatives. They both admire Slovenia and plan to spend a week here. They feel especially happy in Gradež; they complimented Boštjan Sterle and Benjamin Jakob, who are their “taxi drivers.” They were excited about the Gradež walking tour and main program, and they were impressed by the cooperation among the villagers, as well as their dedication and diligence in organizing events of the Society for Cultural Preservation. They have a good understanding of the mission of the society.



Liz said that she also visited descendants, i.e. relatives, in the family Škulj in Kaplanovo. She received helpful data from them for her family tree. Her grandfather John Skull (Janez Škulj; the family tree includes the surnames Skulj, Skull and Škulj) came from that family. Like her grandmother Angela (his wife), he emigrated to America. She was very cordially received in Kaplanovo, too. She found the Zadnik family on Facebook. (Anton Zadnik married into this family.) As another point of interest, Liz mentioned that the genealogist Peter Hawlina, who was researching his family tree, told her that he is related to his (Anton Zadnik's ?) wife. One more sign that we live in a small world!



From Slovenia, Liz returned home while John travelled on to Hungary. His mother is half-Hungarian. In Hungary, they arranged a celebration for his birthday. He showed them a video about the history of his Hungarian family. He's planning to do something similar about his Slovenian family history. He also visited his Hungarian cousins in Slovakia. When this article was published, they had both already returned to America.

### **More about Lizette and John**

Lizette is a retired cytotechnologist; she worked in a lab for detection of cancer. She has a son, who came with her to Slovenia in 2019.

She has been connected to the Slovenian community in Minnesota since childhood. Since her grandfather was born in Slovenia, she is eligible for Slovenian citizenship, and has submitted documentation for that. She sang Slovenian songs with her father in a group which was founded by her cousin (singing You and I and a silk umbrella, We go to Štajersko, and similar). She's learning the Slovenian language, which is quite difficult for Americans. A Slovenian dentist worked in Minnesota and began teaching Slovenian; since she returned to Slovenia, the course has continued via Zoom.

Liz said she obtained most of her genealogical data in parishes. Government records did not list either the death of her grandmother Angela or the birth of Angela's brother Jacob. In our conversations and e-mail exchanges, she often emphasized how grateful she was to be able to visit the houses where her ancestors lived.

John retired as a computer systems analyst; he was a specialist in software development and testing. He did not establish his own family. He had more difficulty than Liz in researching and figuring out his family tree. His father worked in the military and the family had to move often. Many official statistics were lost; he and Liz benefitted from DNA tests. He said that there is no Slovenian group in Texas.

My son-in-law helped me with the interviews and, at the end, jokingly asked who is currently the most famous Slovenian. With one voice they both responded, of course, that's Luka Dončić.

Lizette and John were very pleasant to talk with; I am extraordinarily pleased that I became acquainted with them. It's priceless how they researched their roots in such detail, and that they established and still maintain connections with their Slovenian relatives. The analysis of all their family connections was quite challenging for me and I hope that I untangled everything correctly.

Allow me to finish my submission as I began it. Strle's kozolec helped distant relatives to find each other. How can anyone say that preserving our heritage is not important!

