

Frank Prihoda has carved out an extraordinary 100-year life with grit, determination and a pair of skis

WORDS Alegria Alano PHOTOGRAPHY Thredbo Resort

Mountain man



Frank Prihoda was born 100 years ago in what was then Czechoslovakia, worlds away from his current life and home in Thredbo, New South Wales. “I was supposed to settle into a certain life in Prague, which in the end did not eventuate,” Frank says.

At 16, he lost both his parents and took over the family’s artificial flower business. But being a businessman put him at odds with the Communist Party that took over in 1948.

“I had no future in communist Czechoslovakia, so I decided to escape,” Frank says. He describes the decision to leave with his older sister Sasha and her husband Karel as “soul-destroying but necessary”. In the winter of 1949, Frank and Karel defected and crossed the border into Austria on their cross-country skis. Sasha, in the meantime, managed to stay in Switzerland, following international ski races. She joined Frank and Karel later in Austria.

From Austria, they moved on to Belgium where they learned of a country called Australia. “In the *London Times* was a big article about Australia: how they liked to take in migrants, the possibilities and conditions,” Frank says.

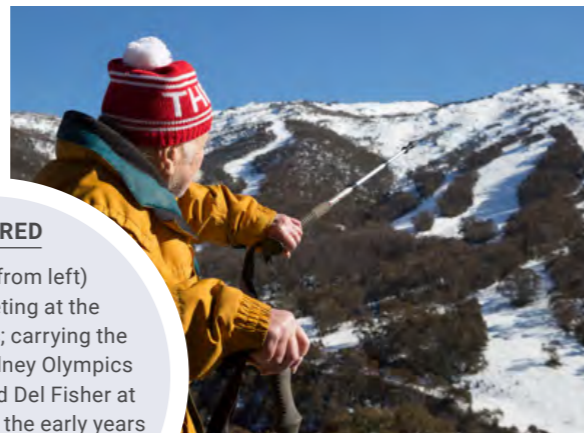
With the promise of a new life, Frank boarded a ship to Melbourne in March 1950. Karel, Sasha and baby Michael (Frank’s nephew) arrived at the end of December.

“It was influenced by the fact that Melbourne had more or less four yearly seasons,” Frank says.

Frank had started skiing when he was eight, influenced by Sasha who later skied for Czechoslovakia at the 1948 Winter Olympics. »

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FRANK PRIHODA,
AUSTRALIAN UNITY
HOME CARE CUSTOMER



PICTURED

(clockwise from left)
 Frank competing at the Masters Games; carrying the torch for the Sydney Olympics (2000); Frank and Del Fisher at Merritts Gondola; the early years on European slopes; pointing to the ski run called Frank's Face.

He also showed promise, joining the Czechoslovakian Ski Federation squad at 18. Melbourne's proximity to the Australian Alps allowed Frank to ski again. "I was quite active in the Victorian skiing community and was one of the foremost racers in Australia."

Weekend trips to Mount Buller led to competing in the Victorian, NSW and National Ski Championships. Within six years of migrating, Frank was chosen to represent his new country at the 1956 Winter Olympics.

"For sportsmen, it is always an honour and a pleasure to participate in the Olympic Games and I was doubly pleased by the nomination on account of the fact that I, as a migrant, was probably one of the very first who could participate," Frank says.

It was Australia's third appearance at the Winter Olympics and though he did not win a medal, Frank had cemented his place in Australian sports history.

He returned to work at his wholesale business in Melbourne but stayed involved with racing. In 1958 he became Race Committee Chairman of the

Victorian Ski Association until he was drawn to make a life in the mountains.

In 1959, Sasha and Karel opened a lodge in Thredbo and, in 1974, Frank decided to join them. He opened 'Frank's Shop', which sold souvenirs.

"When I arrived in Thredbo, I felt elated. In Melbourne I was highly stressed," Frank says. "It's so easy to make one's living in this environment. The community of people played a big role. People of like minds who were also in Thredbo for the environment, for the sport, not only to make money."

Community is important to Frank, a founding member of the Thredbo Historical Society and former Alpine Museum volunteer. "It's special to belong to the group who live, manage and operate Thredbo. And they do it with love and devotion," Frank says.

When asked about longevity, Frank says, "People should work as long as they can. It was a great blessing to run the shop until I was 80. Sometimes it's very hard in light of illness, which always comes with old age, but one has to keep trying to consciously lead a healthy and happy life."



Images: Randy Wieman, Thredbo Resort

Frank has been an Australian Unity health insurance customer for 15 years and in November 2020 started receiving weekly social support funded by the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP), through Australian Unity's Southern Highlands Cooma branch.

Each Wednesday Frank spends a few hours with an Australian Unity Home Care Worker. Sometimes this includes a short walk, a drive into town to do some shopping or doing some cooking together at home. This allows Frank to continue visiting his local community and provides wellbeing support.

Frank's mantra is to "find positive happenings in every turn of life". For Frank, skiing has been a great source of positivity, even in his later years.

"When I turned 90, I did two ski races – the second was called 'Thredbo Masters' that was for senior people. Senior over 35! I was very qualified to participate in being senior," Frank says.

In July, Thredbo came together for Frank's 100th birthday. There was a lot to celebrate. Frank is Australia's oldest living Olympian – he also ran the 2000 Olympic torch through town – and his most treasured honour was to have a ski run, 'Frank's Face', named after him. It is meaningful not only as a personal achievement, but because it is beside 'Sasha's Schuss' and 'Karel's T-bar'.

"We are sort of bunched up on that one hill – the whole family," Frank says, describing the runs. "That undoubtedly is without equal and one can't help but be pleased and honoured." ●



If you would like to learn more about our Home Care Services and how they can assist you, contact your local branch or call our friendly team **1300 160 170**.

Frank's 100-year commemoration video can be seen here: thredbo.com.au/blog/2021/australias-oldest-living-olympian-turns-100