

A scenic view of a wooden boardwalk crossing a stream in a forest with vibrant autumn foliage. The boardwalk is made of light-colored wooden planks and spans across a small, flowing stream. The surrounding trees are covered in bright yellow and orange leaves, indicating autumn. The water in the stream is clear and flows over small rocks, creating a gentle rapids effect. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

**The Boxer
Becomes a Prince
From Plitvice to Paradise**

**The Story of
Branko Gravara**

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***Psalm 91:15-16** He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.*

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“Run son, run!”

“Run son, run!” were the final words he ever heard from his dear mother.

Just eleven years old, and with a mind recently spoiled by the carnage he had personally witnessed, Branko did what he had always done (well, almost always) – he followed his mother’s orders and ran. World War 2 was a terrible experience for people all over the world: tragedy was on every hand with separation from loved ones, poverty, hunger, emotional and physical pain, fear and death. How could a child expect to grow up with any sense of sanity?

Run son, run! Waist high in snow and nowhere particular to go, he ran and ran and ran; never again to see the face of the one that had been his comfort and joy every moment of his few short years on this crazy old planet.

Born in Kordunski Ljeskovac in what is now Croatia, but was formerly Yugoslavia, childhood was near perfect for the son of a carpenter. The country living with its fresh air, fresh produce, and the clear Korana River running nearby gave Branko an ideal start to a life full of potential for a boy gifted with an enthusiastic attitude, sharp mind and good skills. Whatever he put his mind to he was able to accomplish.

For this country boy life was about the simple things: with Yatsan at his side he thought he could conquer the world. Yatsan was his favourite ram, and when Yatsan was around with his strong legs and long horns, Branko felt as safe as could be. Sitting high and proud, looking down from his position of strength on Yatsan's back, this young boy thought he had the world at his feet.

On top of that, the local forests delivered their glorious trophies to the willing fingers of anyone who ventured to take the opportunity to rummage through the shrubs and vines. Branko was a willing adventurer. The blueberries, hawthorn berries, dogberries, rosehips, blackthorn berries, and hazelnuts were discovered with wide open eyes, gathered with wide open hands, and consumed with wide open mouth. A child never went hungry in those days - not in that area. It did make it difficult to eat all of your dinner when you came home with a belly already full of 'trophies' from your adventures, so mother wasn't always pleased with her son.

The world-renowned Plitvice Lakes were a mere 20 kilometres away, so regular trips down there put a sparkle in the eyes of this active young lad. Swimming energetically around and diving to the bottom of the crystal clear turquoise water holes would keep him and his friends enthusiastically occupied for hours. But with the Korana

River within walking distance, basically in his backyard a few hundred meters away, he didn't have to wait to go to Plitvice for a swim. Summer was a dream come true for Branko and his mates.

How quickly life can change! His dear dad passed away unexpectedly at the age of 58. He was so young and left a wife and three children behind. One thing Branko clearly remembers about his dad was when he looked into his eyes and said, "Son, if I could only know what will happen to you in your life." Thank God this is not something He allows any of us to know. I think it would crush us to know everything before it happened. It is true; some things are good but ...

And then the world changed forever. Adolf Hitler roused his army into a frenzy, reflecting his own unbalanced sense of reality, and practically overnight the world spiralled into the depths of despair in the grip of war. Yugoslavia was not exempt from the ravages of people who were forced to fight or perish. It's so unfair that so many die by the choices and decisions of the few. The sad reality of the time was that Branko's family were Serbian and were not of the local majority ethnicity or religion. Living in an area surrounded by others who were now pressured into eliminating the 'enemy', his family became the target of the rage and illogical reasoning of minds fuelled by fear and revenge.

His loving family, huddled together in the warmth of a small home while taking shelter from the cold, was an easy target for soldiers hell-bent on eliminating those who were not on their side. In one foul swoop almost the entire family was eliminated! They tried running but most were caught by the soldiers and killed. Haunting memories of violence forever etched themselves into the soft and pliable mind of a previously innocent child. War leaves behind very little innocence. How he escaped that ferocious event is a miracle. Yes, Branko and his mum escaped the carnage at the hands of the soldiers, but the wintery blast greeted them as they left the house and ran through the forest. Mother, not being able to continue any further through the deep snow, in a desperate effort to save her precious boy yelled, “Run son, run!” And that he did! Many of their neighbours also tried to run from their homes. Some were caught and killed while others managed to escape through the cold.

A sight for sore eyes

Partisan soldiers found Branko and others and led them to a safe haven in a not too distant village which was not under attack. The war left Branko an orphan and only child. His sister died on that fateful morning, together with their sister in law and her four children. His brother was killed eight days from the end of World War 2. As to his mother's fate, there is no knowledge of her passing, and no grave to remember her. Her body was never found. The details of what happened to the people who were caught, I can't repeat in a book of this nature. His dad had died prior to the war and so didn't face that tragic experience himself.

The people from the village later returned to their homes when opportunity allowed, only to find that their homes had been burned to the ground. They picked up the pieces and rebuilt; Orthodox families supporting one another, as you do when you have lost everything you once had.

When the war finished it was time to leave Croatia, so Branko, at the tender age of fifteen, hopped on a bus and headed to Belgrade, the capital of Serbia and Yugoslavia. Finding a distant relative, he was able to find a home in Zemun, a small town across the river from Belgrade. This would become his home for the next 70 years before moving to Australia, but that's another story.

Branko found an opportunity to become an apprentice and was qualified as a shoe maker in 1948. In 1950, using his gifted feet and running talent Branko tried to escape Yugoslavia for a better life in Italy. He and two friends were stopped while trying to pass through a forest just near the border. This led to 8 months in jail. So close and yet so far!

Two years later in 1952 he was called up for mandatory military service for Yugoslavia. He enrolled and served for the compulsory two years, attaining the office of Sergeant. This suited his strong character that a life of hard knocks had developed. It was easier for Branko to give orders than to take them. As soon as his two years of mandatory service were completed, he packed his bags and headed back to civilian life.

He decided to train as an electrician, because standing in one spot making boots was not his idea of a life work. This became the trade he would continue for the rest of his working life.

Besides his work, he went back to his passion – boxing. He had actually begun boxing 5 years earlier at the age of 17. Together with his judo training, aikido training and boxing training, Branko was kept very busy and extremely fit during those years. The fact that he was a professional boxer, his cheeky character, and his jovial and outgoing personality,

made Branko a very well-known celebrity both in Zemun, Belgrade and everywhere he fought.

One story that stands out to me, as his son-in-law, was the night he attended a dance at a nightclub put on by a local factory where a particular lady happened to work. She was merrily dancing away with a gentleman when Branko spotted her dancing from a distance. Being the shy and timid guy he was, he walked over to them, tapped the gentleman on the shoulder and said, "You can leave now. She is mine." Seeing it was 'Topper' the local boxer, the gentleman simply walked away without a word of protest and left Topper dancing with his new partner. Her black hair was a standout, her dancing a delight, and her future, well let's see. This was the first time they had met but certainly not the last. This dance lasted from 1957 to 2015.

What is life?

One day back in 1963, Branko was waiting for a bus on a quiet Zemun Street. A man came along to catch the same bus. He said to Topper, "Can you just watch my brief case as I'm going across the street to buy a packet of cigarettes?" Branko obliged his request. A few minutes later the man came out of the shop with his purchase and began to cross the road. As he was distracted with lighting his cigarette he didn't notice the oncoming car, and made the greatest mistake of his life. He walked straight into the path of the car and was knocked to the ground. This turned out to be a fatal blow, and this moment another turning point in Topper's life.

He decided to go for a walk along the quay beside the Danube River which flows beside Zemun. There he reflected on the sudden death of the man back at the bus stop, and his memories of WW2 flooded back into his mind. "What is life? One moment you are here and the next you are nothing," Branko thought to himself.

An unseen Observer, who never misses an opportunity, was about to answer this question for him. A Jehovah's Witness man that Branko knew was walking along with two fellow JW ladies when they saw Branko walking along with a vague, forlorn look on his face. After a short discussion as they

walked together, they invited him back to their kingdom hall where they answered some questions and gave him a Bible. This was the breath of fresh air he was desperately longing for that day.

He took the Bible home and began reading; finding great hope in the words he read. After attending the kingdom hall a few times, Branko kept reading intensely by himself at home. He found the Sabbath mentioned there and wondered why Christians go to church on Sundays, the first day of the week, when the Bible is so clear that Sabbath, the seventh day, is God's day. He raised this point with the people at the kingdom hall, and found their reasoning and answer not to be in harmony with what he was reading.

He remembered at one meeting at the kingdom hall there was a lady sitting near him who had a small book on the seat beside her with the title 'Steps to Christ' on the front cover. He thought to himself, what a wonderful title for a book. But what surprised him that day was when the man leading out at that meeting saw the book on the seat, and while motioning with his hand, and with strong passion in his voice said, 'Quickly, quickly, take that book out of here.' This was a standout moment for Branko, leaving him a bit confused. This scene, coupled with the Sabbath question, prompted him to decide not to return to meet with that group of friendly people any more. They were so helpful and

genuinely meant well, but some things just didn't add up, so Branko continued his search for answers alone.

[note: Please remember, dear readers, this story is not an attack against people of different countries or different religious affiliations. It is simply the story of one boy and his journey through life. What Branko has found, looking back over the years, is that every human soul is precious in his sight: because he has learned that every soul is precious in his Heavenly Father's sight. God, our Father, just wants His children to know Him and come into harmony with His ways: loving Him and loving each other.]

Confused by the differences he was finding in the Bible compared to the things he was seeing and being told by others, Branko kept reading at home by himself. One day he asked his wife if she knew of anyone who went to church on Saturday. She said she knew a couple, Veljko and Bojana Sremac, who attended a Sabbath keeping church. The penny dropped when he heard about them. He recalled that people often referred to that couple as 'Subotari' or Sabbatharians. Now he understood why.

As this couple lived in the area where Branko was the local maintenance man, he decided to go visit them one Friday evening to have a chat about what he had discovered in the Bible. The couple were delighted that someone would come

to visit them to discuss themes about the Bible. What amazed them though was that it was 'Topper,' the local boxer, who was in their lounge room asking the questions. They mentioned that the next day, being Sabbath, there was to be a large gathering at the biggest Seventh-day Adventist church in Belgrade, and invited Branko to come along. Branko quickly and delightedly accepted their invitation.

The following morning, full of excitement to be going to church on Sabbath, Branko got up early and arrived at the church long before anyone else had arrived. While he was standing out the front, waiting at the locked gate, two men that he worked with (Voja and Bosko) came along and saw him standing in front of the church all dressed up and ready to go in. In shock, they questioned him, "What are you doing here?" After a short response, the two friends hurried off muttering between themselves about the boxer at the church. The date 16th March 1963 is forever etched into the mind of the man who was slowly learning about his God. Spring was in the air, and the blossom of God's love was forming ever so gradually but surely in Branko's heart.

Veljko soon arrived and was amazed to see that Branko had already been waiting for him. His first words were, "I didn't think you would come!" Little did he know the determination of the boxer, not only in his boxing, judo,

aikido, and jujitsu, but even more so now in his quest to know God and find the answers to life's great questions.

They walked up the stairs together and made their way up to the gallery overlooking the lower floor where people were arriving and taking their seats. He was in awe. He had never seen such a sight in his life. On top of that, not one cigarette was to be found amongst those worshippers. Now that was interesting! When the choir came out and took their place on the rostrum, Branko was awestruck, as if in a trance; he just watched and took in the joy of the morning. The music filled his heart like nothing had ever done before. He felt like he was in the presence of angels. In fact, I know he was.

This was the start of what, up until today, has been 57 years of joyful discovery; learning things he had never imagined about the God of Heaven and His most wonderful Son, Jesus Christ. He requested Bible studies to learn more about the Bible, and so the local pastor was invited to begin a series of studies which led to Branko's baptism on the 28th Dec 1963.

Having lost his father so early in life, and left with questions about life after witnessing the death of the gentleman while waiting for the bus, it was a great relief to discover the reality of his Heavenly Father's love and care for him. He had tried to make a name for himself through boxing. He had tried to make people proud of him through his achievements

in the ring, and through his charismatic personality and performance on his guitar singing with friends wherever they met. But now things were somehow different. He found that he didn't need to impress God to be accepted. God loved him no matter what he had done in the past, and continues to love him now unconditionally. To God, Branko was a son who had finally turned to listen to his Father's voice. Yes, Branko had become a son of God. That made him a prince in the family of God. Wow! This was an amazing discovery. The boxer had become a prince.

James 2:5 "Hearken, my beloved brothers, Has not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to them that love him?"

Romans 8:16-17 "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together."

One evening, a couple of weeks after that meeting in the Belgrade church, Branko, deciding to kneel and pray for the first time, took up his position on his knees beside his bed. As he began to pray he heard a knock. He wondered, 'What in the world is that noise?' Ignoring it he began to pray again. Again there was the knocking. The strange thing was

that the knocking sound was coming from the wardrobe. He thought somebody must have crept in through the front door during the day while the house was empty, and now was hiding in the wardrobe. So he got up and opened the wardrobe door, fully expecting that he would have to use his fighting skills to restrain whoever it was from hurting anyone. After all, his 5 year old daughter was sleeping just feet away. But no one was there in the wardrobe...

He returned to his knees and began praying again; deciding that he would not stop praying for anything: even if something should fall on his neck. This time he prayed and nothing interrupted him. Praise God! Whatever it was, it no longer caused a problem in the house. He had completed his first prayer on his knees and his precious little girl was safe under the watchful eye of his God. Amen.

1 Peter 5:6-7 "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he cares for you."

The verses and promises in the Bible were becoming a reality in Branko's life. He was discovering that God is very interested in being involved in our lives. We only need to invite Him, give Him permission, and He is there to help.

Hebrews 4:16 "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

At this time his wife Zivka was at the local hospital preparing to deliver their second child. This was the motive for his prayer. He already had a little girl but desperately wanted a boy: so he pled with God to hear and answer this request. The good news is that Milan was born a happy and healthy little boy. How good is God!

Concerned about what had taken place that evening as he prayed, Branko went to the pastor and questioned what that knocking might have been. What was going on? The pastor asked him if he had any pictures on the walls in his home. Branko said he had two large pictures of fairies hanging on the walls. The pastor informed him that this was the breach in the home that had allowed Satan to enter the house and cause the distraction, and that he should go home, take them down, and see what would happen.

Needless to say, Branko headed straight home, took the photos down, and threw them away quick smart. The knocking never again disrupted the prayers of that family. They have been protected by the watchful, unseen guests sent from heaven above through all these years.

The health message

1 Corinthians 10:31 "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

One of the interesting things often overlooked by those who read the Bible is the fact that God actually cares about our health in the present as well as our eternal destiny in the future. At one study with the pastor, Branko learned that there were certain foods that God had warned were unclean. This meant that certain things in his fridge and pantry were not in harmony with the Bible's clear instruction for good health - Leviticus chapter 11. He thought, 'How is it that all my life I ate these things, and now they are unclean?'

But being an honest man, and determined to do things right, and having read this for himself in the Bible, he decided to go home and clean out these unclean foods. Imagine his dear wife's shock at this request. Zivka never argued with her husband, she was always faithful to him, and so she simply asked if she could give the lard to the neighbour next door. Branko, with his typical, straight to the point logic said, 'If it isn't good for us, it is no good for them either. Throw it in the bin.' This she did.

When Branko had first decided to attend church, Zivka told Branko that she was glad to see him go, as he really needed

to go. She hoped it would turn the charismatic boxer's life around, as that lifestyle often meant he was out till all hours of the night while she stayed home with her little girl. One night while crying about the situation, Zivka's little girl came up to her and said, "Mummy, don't cry. Dad will come home when he is hungry."

As she watched her husband slowly changing as he learned these wonderful truths from the Bible, she began to listen intently to what the pastor was sharing with her husband. This led her to also make a commitment to follow Jesus and be baptised. Over the years her faithfulness, wisdom, and giving heart were well rewarded with opportunities to bless others. Truly a princess, representing her Father honourably, she touched so many people's lives with good advice, timely assistance and generous gifts. What a blessing she was to her family and friends.

Taking the health message to heart, Branko became a vegetarian, and has been such now for over fifty years. Fasting regularly has also been a part of his health plan; usually once a week but sometimes twice if he is praying for something or someone in particular. What has been the result of his health practices? As I write these words I can tell you he has lived in my house here in Australia for 5 years and has never taken as much as a Panadol for a head ache,

and is not on any medication. In July we celebrated his 90th birthday.

I also remember ten years ago, while he was still living back in Serbia, asking him what he wanted for his 80th birthday. He asked for a new skipping rope. Crazy boxer! We took one over to him when we visited. I have video of him using it with delight in his house back there in Zemun. Now he is ninety, he complains that the skipping rope I have is not as good as his old one, as he struggles to skip these days. He tries but just can't get the rhythm anymore. He is an inspiration to me as his son-in-law. I too have been a vegetarian for thirty-five years. His little girl became my wife 29 years ago and we have never had meat in our house, and we have enjoyed great health. Praise God.

Obviously Branko stopped boxing soon after discovering the truth about God back in 1963. The surprise from his fellow boxers was immense. They could not believe that 'Topper' would give up such a great career to become a Seventh-day Adventist. These had to be the strangest people in the city. Why would you become one of them, they enquired? Being a man who doesn't know what the word timid means, and being afraid of no one and nothing, Branko was always quick to give a reason for the hope that he had found in the Bible.

1 Peter 3:15 “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:”

Jesus had saved him and that was that. He was on a journey to heaven with his wife and kids: and nothing else mattered.

Music only music

Psalm 9:1-2. "I will praise you, O LORD, with my whole heart; I will show forth all your marvellous works. I will be glad and rejoice in you: I will sing praise to your name, O most High".

In his language, Branko often says, "Samo pesma, samo pesma!" which means "Just sing, just sing!" He would play his guitar and sing all day given the chance. To this day, despite having broken his wrist after a nasty fall down a flight of stairs a few years ago and now unable to play guitar for long, he still sings his heart out in his bedroom for long periods of time. I often hear him, after he's finished singing one of his favourite songs of praise, say, "Amen. Hallelujah."

From being the life of the party prior to becoming a Christian, Branko turned his love of music to praising God. He determined that his children would join him in this love. As his two children grew, he encouraged them to sing with him almost everywhere they went. This included singing on the bus when they were going to church or down to the Danube River. They'd sing at church, of course. They'd sing on the train when going on holidays to the Adriatic Coast. They'd sing in the hotel where they were staying while on holidays. Just about anywhere, if there were people around, Branko would have his guitar out and just call out a number.

Instantly the children knew which song he wanted to sing; and they would oblige their father.

His daughter, Zlata, also started playing the guitar at age 7 and started playing piano at age 12. The need to play piano came as they didn't have a piano player in the church at that time. Zlata just sat down and did her best to figure out how to play one song, and slowly taught herself over a period of time to play other songs. You can imagine how happy her dad was to have a daughter that could accompany him in singing, guitar and piano. His son, Milan also plays guitar and sings well. What a greatly gifted family: all to the glory of God!

Many years later, while Zlata and I were travelling around Europe, we met a pastor and his wife in Salzburg, Austria. We had been given their contact details by a friend from Bogenhofen, the SDA College in Austria. When we arrived in Salzburg, the pastor met us and took us back to his home. While we were there, and because they were also Serbians like Zlata, they freely talked and shared stories in their language. When the pastor's wife learned that Zlata played piano, and I played guitar, she jumped at the opportunity to have us do a few songs for them on the piano they had in their home.

After singing one particular song, the pastor's wife said she remembered being down at Sutomore on the Adriatic coast decades earlier listening to a man with two young children playing guitar and singing, bringing joy to all those who were listening. This song brought back special memories of those days. When Zlata told her that it was her dad, her brother and herself, the woman was amazed and full of joy just to think that the little girl was now a guest in their home and had stayed faithful to the God of her childhood.

Challenged over the Sabbath

Philippians 4:19 “But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

Not everything is a bed of rose petals when you stand for the truth of God. After committing to keeping the Sabbath of the Bible in Exodus 20:8-11, Branko was told he had to work on Sabbath by his boss. To this Branko replied that he had decided that he would no longer be working on Sabbath. When his boss said he would lose his job if he didn't work on Sabbaths, and questioned him how he would provide for his family, Branko told him that God would look after him and his family. The boss said, “You have gone too far with this,” and Branko lost his job on the spot. When he told his wife when he got home, she had the same question: “How are we going to survive?” Again Branko said, “God will provide.”

He went and picked up a few odd jobs here and there, as his maintenance skills provided him opportunity to help out many people during those days. This experience showed Branko's determination to be faithful to God no matter what the circumstances. If the Bible stated something clearly, then that was what he would do. It was that simple!

James 1:22 “But be you doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

By now his boxing friends thought he had gone crazy, and his workmates thought the same, but Branko was on a journey which he believed would give him the desire of his heart: eternal life with his heavenly Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ. To that dream he included the desire to have as many families and friends as possible join him on this journey to heaven; so he was always prepared with tracts in his pocket to give to anyone he met, always ready to give an answer for the faith that he now had, and was always ready with a song.

Three months later, his boss had a change of mind and offered Branko his job back. If that offer included not working on Sabbath, Branko was happy to return. His boss said fine, and Branko again had a full-time job, which, by the way, lasted until he retired. How good is God! Although never a rich man, Branko always had enough for his family – and at the end of the day, what else do you need in life? As a prince in God’s kingdom, he knew his inheritance was not in this present age, but in the world made new.

Mat 6:19-21 “*Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust do corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust do corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*”

Mat 6:33 *“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”*

During these years, five families were touched by Branko’s sharing of his faith in God and joined him as members of God’s family. Many others, as yet, have chosen not to join him on his journey, but they have been blessed to know the God of the Bible, and His great mercy. The local watchmaker’s shop in Zemun is one example of Branko’s passion to share his love of God. The watchmaker would do his repairs at the bench in the shop, but when no one was around and he had a few moments to spare, he would go out to the back room where Branko would be sitting and sharing his faith with friends who would gather to listen. This has been going on for decades, because they have known each other since his boxing days. When the watchmaker’s daughter joined him to work in the shop, she began to join in the studies as well, eventually signing up for a correspondence Bible study course. It was my pleasure to meet these dear people when I went to Serbia: joining them out the back of their shop, and answering a few questions as well.

Now that Branko lives in Australia he is dearly missed by his friends. The back of the shop is so much quieter these days.

How good is God?

And how about this! One family accepted the message of God, and joined Branko's local church in Zemun. Years later they immigrated to Australia. The family had three daughters who loved to sing with Zlata. How she missed them when they went to the other side of the world. A few years after they had settled here in Australia, they invited Zlata for a holiday to visit them. While here she met a young Australian man, and wouldn't you know it, they became best friends, married and lived happily ever after. Today, it is my privilege to write her dad's story.

Challenged again

Proverbs 22:6 "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

Another hurdle he had to jump over was the fact that in Communist Yugoslavia all children had to attend school six days a week. This of course led to a confrontation with the Education Department in Belgrade, because he decided Zlata was not going to school on Sabbath any more.

The teachers at her school hadn't raised it as an issue, but what happened was the father of one of the other children contacted the school and complained that his daughter had to go to school for 6 days, so it wasn't fair that Zlata only

went 5 days. When he shared this with other parents, the rumbling got louder in the community. The director at the school finally contacted Branko and told him that parents were complaining about this situation, and so invited Branko to the school for an interview.

He arrived at the school and found the director's office. Entering the office, he sat down, and they began to discuss the situation at hand. Upon hearing the circumstances surrounding the complaints of the parents, and hearing that they thought Zlata should be forced to go to school on Saturdays, Branko replied, "Where I go on Saturday, Zlata goes."

The director of the school informed Branko that he would have to take this decision, not to comply, on to a higher authority. This led to a meeting with the head of the education department in Belgrade. When they heard the story: that he had become a Sabbatarian and no longer worked on Sabbath, and now was taking his daughter out of school on Sabbath, the education minister told Branko that it was ok if he wanted to become crazy with his infatuation with religion, but not to pass that on to his children. This, the minister said, was unfair to the kids. Branko informed the minister that this was his decision based on God's word, and he wasn't about to change his decision for some government law.

[Remember that many people that Branko had to deal with knew him as Topper the boxer. They knew he was the most strong-headed and determined man around. So to have him go down this religious path was difficult for them to understand.]

The following week the education minister sent a representative from the department to the school to investigate the matter further. He spoke to Zlata's teacher, Cveta Gavrilovic, and asked her about Zlata. She replied, "If every pupil was like Zlata, it would be enough for them to attend only five days." With this testimony in favour of Zlata, the matter was laid to rest and Zlata never had to attend school on Sabbath during the rest of her education. Branko's training up of his child in the way that she should go had paid dividends, and God was blessing them abundantly for their faith in Him.

One Sabbath, when Branko and his wife were taking the children to church, he was carrying his little boy in his arms while Zlata was faithfully by his side, holding her mum's hand. It was winter, and they had to walk the two kilometres to the main road through the snow because the buses were only on the main road.

Who should happen to be passing by that morning? It was the director from the school. He pulled over to see if he

could help the family walking in the snow. When Zlata saw who it was, she shivered more than she already was. When the director saw who the family was, he asked Branko, “Where are you all going today in the snow?” Branko replied, “You know where we’re going. It is Sabbath today! We’re walking to catch the bus to church.” The director smiled and said, “Hop in my car. I’ll give you a lift to your church today.”

This little family was touching people everywhere they went. By the way, this experience of getting a lift to church happened more than once.

When Branko was young, he, due to his self-confidence and abilities in performing anything he put his mind and effort into, thought he was able to ‘achieve all things’ by his own effort. But as life went on, he came to realise more and more that it was the gift of God, and His blessings, that had actually caused him to be so successful. Why wasn’t he killed as a child in the war? Why wasn’t he hit by a car while crossing the streets around town? Why wasn’t he ever seriously hurt in any of his professional fighting contests? Why did he have his job restored? Why did the education department back down and permit Zlata to attend school only five days a week?

Yes, Branko had learned...

The most precious lesson of life:

"I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST WHO STRENGTHENS ME." Philippians 4:13

It was God who was watching over this little boy every step along his journey. It was God who had protected Branko at every turn, and who had stopped him from doing himself permanent damage during his truly crazy days before his conversion. All praise and all glory go to his Father in heaven who has supplied all his needs throughout his life through Christ Jesus, his Lord. Philippians 4:19. What a wonderful experience has been Branko's. And the half of it has not been told in this short testimony.

Five years ago, the dance that began at the night club in Zemun, finished when Zivka passed away back home in a Belgrade hospital, aged 87. The love of his life, the woman who stood beside him every step of the way, who faithfully raised their children with wisdom, strength and faithfulness, was no longer to walk by Branko's side. She now waits, sleeping in a cemetery in Belgrade, for that great and most wonderful day, known by Christians around the world as the Second Coming of Jesus.

As a ninety-year-old, whose best days are long behind him, Branko looks forward, with a strength of faith which remains unshakeable, holding to that blessed hope for the glorious

appearing of his Lord. He often talks about his hope of being reunited with Zivka. I too share this most glorious hope to see her again. How many people throughout history have had wonderful relationships ended by the greatest of all enemies, death? Together with all those who have placed their trust in the mercy of our faithful Father above, we wait to be reunited as one great happy family on that glorious day. What a day that will be!

1Th 4:13-18 "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that you sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain to the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

Now as the world takes some strange turns and is becoming filled with sadness, fear, an apprehension born of the uncertainty of the future, and the fear of death, Branko patiently and confidently waits for Jesus' return. He does not share the world's fears because he has Jesus as his Saviour. Living now, as he does, in Australia, he spends his days reading his Bible, singing his songs, eating great vegetarian food, and enjoying every moment with his little girl who married this Aussie nearly thirty years ago. Living in subtropical Brisbane is a great way to enjoy his retirement years.

Branko has not learned to speak English so well, as he came to Australia later in life, but he was determined to learn something so he can share with people as he goes around visiting with us. After many long hours at night, in his bed with the light off, and his torch in one hand and the Bible in the other, Branko learned this Bible verse in English, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

Everyone who knows Branko here in Brisbane knows that he most certainly can do all things through Christ who strengthens him.

I'm sure that Branko's dad would be so proud of what his son has achieved throughout his life. It is such a pity that he never had the pleasure and privilege to join him on his

spiritual journey. But, glory to God, His heavenly Father has watched his boy every step of the way: from one adventure to another, and from one city to another, and from one country to another. And now Branko looks forward to living in a city whose builder and maker is God: where peace eternal reigns. (Hebrews 11:8-10)

One day “God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes; and there will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things shall be passed away.” Rev 21:4

And praise God there shall be no more running.

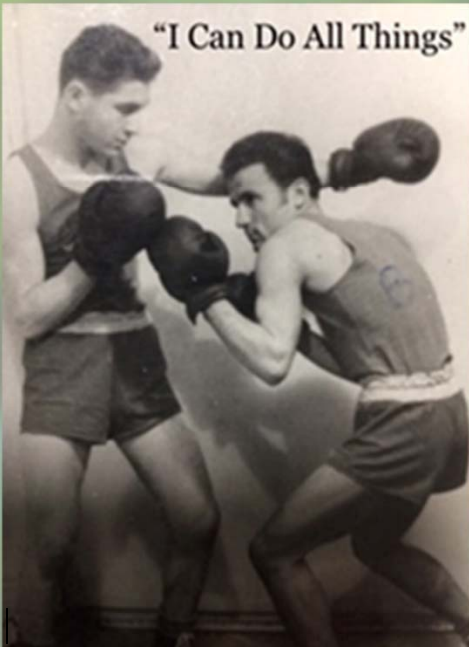
Having followed his mother’s command to, “Run son, run!” Branko has run a good race, and fought a good fight, and has just about finished his course, keeping the faith. He now waits for the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give him at that day. 2 Timothy 4:7, 8

May this story give each and every reader a determination to follow on to know the true and living God, and His dear Son, Jesus Christ, and to join Them, together with Branko and his family, in that city of light. Amen.

***Running for his life
to running the race of his life.***

Join Branko in his journey as he overcomes his fears as a child living through a world war, to his battles against fellow boxers, to his determination to build a new life and beyond.

How did waiting for a bus change his life forever? Not only was Branko not afraid of anyone, he was not afraid to search for the deeper answers to life's most difficult questions; and when he found the answers he was looking for, he was not afraid to change direction in his life. Perfect love casts out fear.



VS.

