

Austria's beautiful mountainous Tyrol region is where cows amble along in summer wearing bells and sometimes daisy chains, where winter visitors gather from all over the world for blissful skiing holidays, and in the midst of it all is the enchanting medieval village of Kitzbühel.

And that's where Erika Gartner was born, to parents who ran a transport company with buses and taxis — and of course plenty of horses for Erika and her sisters to ride.

1933 was not a propitious year to be born. Adolf Hitler was trying to convince Austria that it should unite with Germany. In typically Hitleresque fashion, when words failed to convince, he and his troops entered unannounced and the Anschluss saw Austria annexed in 1938.

Thus Erika's father and uncles were despatched to fight in the terrible WWII Russian campaigns, emerging changed forever, silent men who would never speak of the nightmares they had witnessed.



Most Club members refuse to pose nude, but not our Erika



The three sisters

Erika's early schooling was in Kitzbühel, and then through the War years she and her older sister boarded at a school in St Anton, the starting point for the 13.9 km Arlberg road tunnel through the mountains, and gateway to its famous ski area — so mountainous, it largely escaped bombing, although Erika recalls American aircraft interminably droning overhead.

Her mother remained at Kitzbühel during the War and visited St Anton whenever she could. At the end of the War in Europe she came to the school in St Anton to take her daughters back home. It was May 1945 and the 200 km journey home took them three days. All was complete chaos. They would walk for a while, catch a lift on a friendly farmer's cart for the next leg, then find a solitary bus, sometimes a

train, waiting endlessly at bus stops, train stations. We read nowadays of concert pianists setting up their baby grands to entertain fleeing Ukrainian refugees. In 1945 the heroines were Erika and her sister singing to lift the spirits of the crowds making their way across a battered country.

Back home eventually, her father slowly put together his transport company, and tried to keep his three daughters as close to home as possible. At the age of 16 Erika met the love of her life, Pepe Gartner. They married when she was 18 and set up home in a small house on his parents' estate. Pepe's father had been a farmer but by then owned a local factory.



Both sets of parents wanted the couple to stay on to run the two families' businesses, but Pepe had dreams of greater freedoms. He wanted to migrate to either Canada or Australia, whichever came through first. Australia won and the small family, now with son Peter, arrived here in 1955, living first in migrant camps in Maitland and then Sydney, before buying a house at Yagoona, south-west of Sydney.

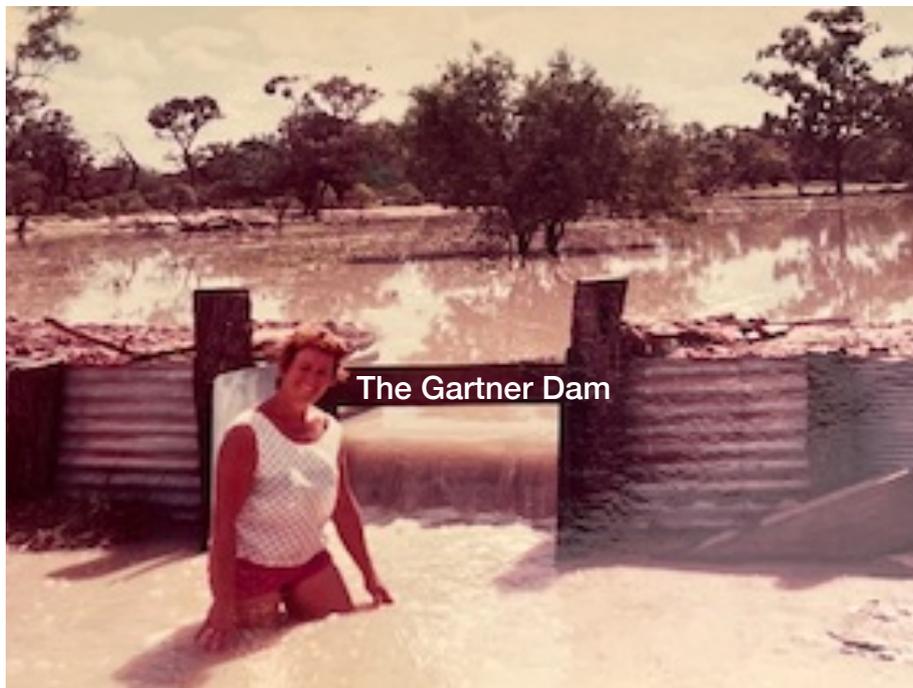
Erika had learned English at school, and spoke well enough to get by but the ever-enterprising Pepe did not have a word of English. He charged ahead regardless, learning to become a printer. Erika became part of a Tyrolean singing group that performed all over Sydney and on radio and television. The Austria versus Australia question was resolved when they returned to the Tyrol for a year, but both missed the open spaces and freedoms of Down Under.

Friends painted a glowing picture of life out in the bush, so Erika and Pepe took one of their famous plunges and bought 30,000 acres of grazing land, a property called Waratah, not exactly at the back of Bourke, but about 150 km north-east of the landmark, near the Queensland border. Their new home came with around 5000 sheep and when they bought a second property nearby the flock increased to about 7000.

Sheep need shearers, shearers need food, lots of it. For the first couple of years their cook was the indomitable Erika. Reared on meat pies or steak and eggs, these tough young Aussies were suddenly confronted with European cuisine : goulash, schnitzels, strudels and dumplings. Time was money and their meals had to be produced with military precision. Breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner; on and on the shearers munched. Finally Erika and Pepe hired a cook — back to steak and eggs for the shearing shed.

Apart from hungry shearers there were dogs, at least six of them, sometimes up to 12. (Skippy lovers please turn the page quickly). Our valiant Erika would sally out every evening just before dusk, on horseback — or later on a motorbike, clutching her trusty rifle to bag a kangaroo to feed the four-footers. Kangaroos can be cunning, sometimes playing dead until Erika came close, then jumping up to try and biff her. But as many of us have learned over the years, you can't put one over Erika.

She was always Pepe's first lieutenant, first mate, confidant, comrade-in-arms as he devised schemes to improve their land, saying to her "Erika, you and I are one in a million". Together they worked miracles, channelling wasted artesian bore water in 2 km of piping to fill animal troughs. As the bore water surfaced at 37 degrees, they had to fashion a unique 'runny' type of cement to set the piping in place.



Pepe was even more inventive with the creek which ran through their property, Actually it did not run — it was usually totally dry and dusty but when heavy rains came, the jolly thing flooded. All that water mesmerised Pepe. He could not bear to see it go to waste, so he just dammed the creek. It would probably land you in Court these days, but this was then; Pepe and Erika against the elements.

And of course there was Snorkie. Well, what else would you call a pet pig who was half wild pig and half well-behaved pig and who acted as Erika's guard dog? No-one could get through the gate, even Peter, until she told Snorkie to "Oink off".



Dust storms, you've seen dust storms ? Noosa had one about ten years ago; killed the tree ferns, a thin layer of red dust everywhere. Erika's versions were a wee bit more scary. She had to use a shovel to clear it from the front verandah.

Oh yes, then there was the farm vehicle which used to be a Volkswagen but when one removed the sides and roof and all the bells and whistles stuff it became a very sensible buggy for mustering. Pepe rode in it with the dogs. Madam swooshed along on her motorbike.



Their home was always brimming with visiting friends. The evening before one Fathers Day Pepe assured guests he would not be waking them all at dawn to go shooting or help with his latest project. Come 4 am, Erika saw smoke drifting through a manhole. The house was on fire, but no-one believed Pepe when he started yelling for them to get up. The house burnt down to the ground. Fortunately

they had a cottage nearby for the family to stay, and workshops for their guests. So they just set to and built another house.

After 25 years on the land Erika and Pepe sold the property, returning frequently to help the new owner.

Back in the metropolis, they drove around familiar neighbourhoods looking for somewhere to live. In Canley Vale they passed a lovely two-storey brick place which looked just like Erika's dream home. Rather than consult a real estate agent or check in the classifieds, our forthright Erika dashed down the driveway to call out to a woman on the balcony : "Would you like to sell your house?" The answer was of course "Yes", and there they dwelled happily until Pepe died of cancer, in 1982.



With son Peter

Peter and his wife Regina had already settled here at Cooran. Pepe and Erika had visited Noosa many times over the years and Peter finally convinced Erika to move up in 1988. She set out to sell the Canley Vale house in a leisurely ladylike manner while planning her move to Noosa. Real estate and Erika had a strange affinity, so of course the house sold in one day and Erika was now 'phoning Peter asking where on earth she was going to live.

He found her a pretty villa in the Hibiscus complex in Tewantin, and frequent forays on the golf fairways helped Erika adjust to her new lifestyle. As the lady says, she doesn't do things unless she enjoys them. Golf she loved, and performed well playing off around 15 or 16.

However, in 2006 along came the bad fairy : Erika needed a knee replacement, sadly her knee never regained its original standing and golf became out of the question. That was the year of her last trip back to Austria.

In 2008, along came the good fairy : Erika discovered Bridge. Initially she teamed up with senior player Joy Coop, thinking Joy would instruct her and help improve her game. Sweet Joy of course did no such thing, just played along with a gentle smile.

But Erika loves her bridge and the Bridge Club loves her in return. For many years her home-made cakes presided in style at Saturday sessions, but now that 90 is beckoning in April, standing for a long time whipping up cakes, even for beautiful Bridge Clubbers, hurts a bit too much.



Erika's portrait by Helen Lawson

As Pepe used to say, they were one in a million, and now Erika manages to be that one in a million all on her own. For nearly 90 years she has navigated upheavals and strange new challenges without allowing circumstances to defeat her. Definitely one in a million.

by Susie Osmaston