

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Gabi Racsko – An Oral History

Interviewed by Jerry Krejzar, at Happy Jack's, Thredbo, 24th July 2018



Bela Racsko 1924 - 1998

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We are sitting in Unit7 Happy Jack's with Gabi Rascko who has agreed to do an interview for the Thredbo Historical Society; and Gabi you will allow the interview to be transcribed for the Thredbo Historical Society, and the subsequent interview to be accessed by the public at the Thredbo Alpine Museum.

Correct.

Good, good. Well we are mainly going to talk about the time Gabi spent in Thredbo with her husband Bela and the architectural contribution he made to the lodges and architecture in Thredbo. But firstly let's start for the record, Gabi when were you born and where were you born.

I was born in Kirribilli in Sydney, 2nd of May 1935.

What about your grandparents, do you want to mention your grandparents at all?

No

What about your parents?

My mother was a New Zealander, my father was English and I was a first generation Australian, what else?

Well it does not have to be in great detail; in that you were a first generation Australian, and all of a sudden Bela came along; because he fled from Hungary so, when did you meet Bela?

I came here skiing in 1960 and loved it, and went back to Sydney and applied for a job at The Hotel as secretary to Charles Pelc. I came in the summer of 1961 and the job entailed secretary, looking after The Gift Shop, waitressing, making beds, etc.

You know these days you would call that a 'ski-bum' job.

I was called a 'Jack of all trades and master of none'! And then I met Bela in May, and we got married on the 11th of August, in 1961.

We will get to Bela because he has a separate history in his time in Thredbo; he obviously came earlier, because he started working on the Lodges in 1957 if I am not mistaken.

Yes he came out in 1956 on the first planeload from Frankfurt, and welcomed by Mister Menzies; given a cup of Nescafe which he thought was appalling, and then sent out to Skyville, which was a camp under the Blue Mountains near Penrith; and Bela, of course his degree was not recognized in Australia, so his first job if I remember; he worked on a 'jack-hammer' in St Mary's Munitions factory.

Can I ask you to expand on that, I as a migrant, we came out buy boat. Flown out, why were they flown out?

I have no idea I just know they were the first planeload of the 1956 lot of the Hungarian uprising.

That's fine, now I understand why, that Australia must have taken a lot of refugees; when the communists put down whatever attempt was made for democracy, and that was put down

From what I can gather they walked from Budapest to the Austrian border, and there were land mines and snipers and guards and things. And they arrived in Vienna first; I think the American part of Vienna, as it was still divided into four zones; then they were sent to Frankfurt, and how Bela and Steve Szelocky came to Australia was that a group of five Hungarians put their names of the countries into a hat and 'whoever draws it out will go there' - and so Australia came out of the hat, hence they got onto a plane for Australia.

A great story.

Then as I said they went to Skyville and from Skyville there was a guy called Mac Munro who had a property out of Cooma at Countergereny. And Mac was getting married and he had from what I could understand lovely old Federation house, and he sort of wanted it 'improved'. So Bela and Steve went there, and then Mac got them involved in bringing over one of those demountable lodges that had been at Munyang, and he bought it over and they had been used as huts

By the Snowy Mountains Authority.

Yes they had been originally from Germany and Norway they were built in Germany I think, as far as I can remember.

Would you please go back one step if you would; how was the hiatus between his internment in the Blue Mountains to Cooma? Can you remember that at all?

Look I don't know, I think they weren't very long, I am only saying what I can remember Bela telling me that it was at that time.

So he then moved to Thredbo, in 1957 you said?

I think it was in 57 and he bought the first Roslyn over which was a demountable, and then Bela and Steve were to live above there Punchinello, (which we built), originally was; and I still have got photographs of the old tin-shed; and Bela always used to tell me there was a race between him and the rats who got the milk first. He said it was unbelievably cold.

So what did Bela tell you about his architecture? About the way he went about his designs, because when you think about it, all the base material he used was granodiorite, the natural local rock in the area.

Well that was part of the stipulation from the National Parks that x amount had to be granite, and then x amount had to be timber to blend in with the environment, and I must admit Bela was very clever with space, not many architects are brilliant with space; and space, as you can imagine was a very high priority because that cost, nobody had a lot of money; and it was interesting too, as I was saying to Chas, most of the building of any lodges was done on a handshake; very few contracts, ever.

Yes I gathered that. I guess some of these lodges if we go through them were before you met Bela; because Candlelight would have been built in 58.

Otto Ernig designed it and Bela built it. He built Sasha's and then Sasha's was a half a building; and when they could afford it they built the other half.

It's interesting that it was all done on a hand shake in those days. Now could you clarify for me – Bela built with Steve Szelocsky, or did he design the lodges in his own right; his architectural aspects, was he qualified before?

Yes, and he also received an award, which for the life of me I cannot remember; he went back to Hungary to receive the award, a medal, from as far as I know the University, for architecture. I have the medal somewhere, in a safe place. He was very good at design.

And he got involved in the building I take it?

Well no, from what I can understand while they were doing architecture at university they still had to go out, during in-between semesters and they were apprenticed to a builder; so they had to learn the electricity, the plumbing, the carpentry, the joinery, everything; and they would not get their degree if they did not have satisfactory results, it was a much more inclusive thing.

On-site skills.

Yes you had to have on-site skills or you did not get your final.

Did Bela then go for a degree in Australia as well?

No he didn't. It wasn't recognized here but he was....

So he was a bit like my father who was a dentist, and he did all the Czechs (teeth), but he wasn't registered.

I think it was Professor Molnar, who was a Hungarian who was head of architecture at Sydney University. He always used to say to Bela 'come back and get your degree formalized'; and Bela said 'why should I'? Well then the government started to ask him to do a few things....

I guess as a migrant and you have gained your qualifications in another country, it seems a little pointless to go through the process again.

Yes that's how he felt, it was pointless.

When you got together and you married in 1961 you moved to Thredbo, you were already in Thredbo; let's talk a little bit about your experiences in Thredbo before we get back to Bela. You worked in the Hotel for Charles Pelc, and how was that? Charles Pelc, what was he like?



Gabi and Bela Racsko, Thredbo 1961

I think Charles Pelc was a very good manager, he ran a very good ship so to speak; he was good to work for, I mean we remained friends for years because we all lived down in Merimbula where we decided we had to go somewhere a bit warmer.

What year was that, way after the Thredbo years was it?

We left Thredbo; I think it was 87 or 88. He built the first Roslyn and he built the last Roslyn.

You are talking about you and Bela, you stayed until 87 or 88 and then moved to Merimbula. Well that's a good period of time; they were the early years from 1961 to 1988. So looking at those years let's look at the early years what you remember about Thredbo and some of the characters.

Well there were four Australian girls here that was all. It was like in the middle of Australia we were plonked into the middle of a continental alpine village – (we laugh) – and it was lovely; and I remember...

I like that, 'plonked into the middle of a continental alpine village'; I remember that's what it was like in Thredbo in the 60's.

It was, I remember thinking about it, everybody was European! We were the ones that were odd; I can't remember whether Leonhart was already here

He would have been, yes.

He and Helmut Pfister, and then there was Sigi Wollf; he was a good instructor, Sigi Wollf; he used to get cranky with us though; and then there was, they used to call him 'Black' Walter, Walter Auer who married Hanni who was an Olympic equestrian rider; and I am assuming this, they had a property down in Victoria.

I think you are right, Walter Auer is still around.

And Helmut Muckenschnabl, and I think Rudi was here; Chris was after me; and of course there was Kasee and then Ann; and then there was John and Pam Hughes; Bela built Silver Brumby for them; and the Lucas's' over at Alpenhorn; and I was telling Chas about the building called Fort Knox and

Well tell me about Fort Knox.

Well Albert..... Was here, and next to it was an enormous building that Bela built; it was sort of Besser brick walls, and high.

Below Alpenhorn?

No above Alpenhorn yes, it's still there, and it was owned by Walter McGrath. Walter McGrath originally did the Hotel. He was Walter McGrath, 'Coach House Inn's' or something; and Peter Muller who designed Wombiana, the one on the edge of the hill.

Well I know Wombiana because I managed it for a while.

Did You? Bela built that.

We were friends with John Hales who was a doctor in Canberra for a while; and John Hales was a paediatrician, and his mother had bought it from the Victa lawn-mover people, just trying to think of his name; and so John Hales was too busy doing his paediatric degree and we drove down to look after Wombiana every now and then. It's a beautiful lodge, heated floors the whole thing.



Bela Racsko, Kornel Deseo & Steve Szeloczky – Thredbo 1958

It was great.

Now what about some of the other, apart from the ski-instructors, Charles Pelc's staff, do you remember much of the Hotel and that?

The other girls I used to room with were Patricia Young, who married Stan; Stan he worked in the Hotel, he was under Charles.

Not the Stan that used to grease the poles in the Schuss Bar.

Could have been

Was he Czech?

He was Czech

Well that's him, that's Stan.

He married Patricia Young and I was bridesmaid.

So how do you spell his 2nd name?

It was Stan Mouchka, that's all we used to call him anyway

So he was quite a figure about the place for many years. I remember everybody used to pull his leg because in the Schuss Bar, that's where he used to grease the poles so people... the drinkers would drink a little too much, and they used to climb up the metal poles ... so he used to grease them! (Laughter).

In Chas's book I think the Reinstadler's and Stan and somebody else all in a poker game ... and the next thing Stan whips out a 'pop' gun, and a hole in the wall!

Well that sounds like the story about the 'Black Lodge'.

Yes! Do you remember the Old Lodge?

Yes I do ... that is a story about a bullet hole in the wall.

I can't imagine Stan doing it. Unfortunately I don't think that marriage survived. Stan went, he did opal digging.

So he left Thredbo; it must have been about the late 80's was it?

No he left before. That's right, Charles left and he went and got a pub in Wagga, and I think then Stan left as well, I remember that vaguely.

That would have been the early 80's?

That would have been early 80's.

Now Gabi we have talked about your time in the village, which was obviously a very nice time; and I liked the fact that it was such a unique place in Australia at the time.

It really was.

Let's now move to the Sigma Building Company, which as I understand from 1962 Bela was the driving force; would you like to take it up from there?

Yes – put it this way, from approximately from 62, I can't remember the exact date.

It's not important.

He was sole driving ... he designed, he did the plans, he did the ordering, he got all the contractors and he did the building as well.

Despite his English not being that great.

Look it did start to improve, I mean up to that stage Steve did most of the translating and everything like that, but Bela, he was the driving force.

Yes, yes Steve wasn't a partner as such?

They were equal partners in Sigma Building Company from when they came, and they formed the Company until approximately 62 when the partnership was dissolved.

That's interesting; from 62 it was solely Bela.

Yes.

Good, now let's go from 1962 what your memories are of some of the key lodges. We have covered Candlelight and Black Bear, and maybe Golden Eagle and Karoonda which might have been built before you met Bela.

Karoonda was next door to Punchinello, and that was one of the lodges Bela built, and he and Steve; it was units, and he and Steve each had an attic apartment, in Karoonda.

I thought that Karoonda was up the hill a little bit, before the Silver Brumby.

You have Silver Brumby here, Gore Hill, which was the Doctor's lodge from North Shore, then you, had Karoonda; then we built Punchinello.



Silver Brumby in 1966, a pregnant Gabi Racsko, & their boxer Punch

But Punchinello is much further down.

No, no it's next to Karoonda, and an accessible car park; and then you had Pindari.

I see it's just that as a young guy I stayed in Karoonda when it was owned by Jerry Kucera; do you know that name, a Czech, he had an apartment in Karoonda.

At first there was the two Griff brothers, Sid and Ben, they had an apartment each; and underneath was Sigma Building Company.

Oh I see, well that is important; so Sigma Building Offices were based underneath Karoonda?

Yes on the ground floor. You came in and there was the ski area and then there were the offices, and then you went up the stairs to the different apartments.

Let's then look at this sequentially; we have covered those early lodges.

You have forgotten Sasha's Lodge.

I have got Sasha's as the Black Bear, which is called the Black Bear today; then we have got the Silver Brumby which is probably the next one in sequence.

I think so, I think so.

And the next one is Koomerang, which I don't know very well.

Oh Koomerang, I think Bela built that and it was for Scotch College in Melbourne; because they used to have a lot of working bees.

I'm getting Punchinello mixed up with Shlupfinkel.

Well Shlupfinkel used to be Ashton's; which used to be the polo playing, the four brothers; and Bela did Ashton's lodge, and that was probably one of the first ones.

I have got Kasee's down as next but I am not sure.

No Kasee's came later. Forget chronological order because I can't remember which one.

Ok, all right, that's fine. Just go for the ones that you can remember.

And then there was Des Hing's lodge, it used to be called, is it Leatherbarrel now?

There is a Leatherbarrel, but that's not on the list.

That's right. No. Des Hing's lodge was known as Chamonix.

Oh, that's not on the list either. There are so many of them. After Kasee's I have got Geehi, I have got Roslyn of course which you say was built twice.

Yes Roslyn on the corner and the other Roslyn. As Chas said to me, ‘well you started with Roslyn and you finished with Roslyn’.

A nice way to put it; and there was Twynam.

Yes Twynam, which was Dieter Kahlbetzer’s.

With the property down the valley at Tom Groggin Station, Kahlbetzer’s; and he moved to Argentina. Max Parker and Pru used to stay in Twynam.

And also they used to stay in Golden Eagle.

Did they; and they had a ferret?

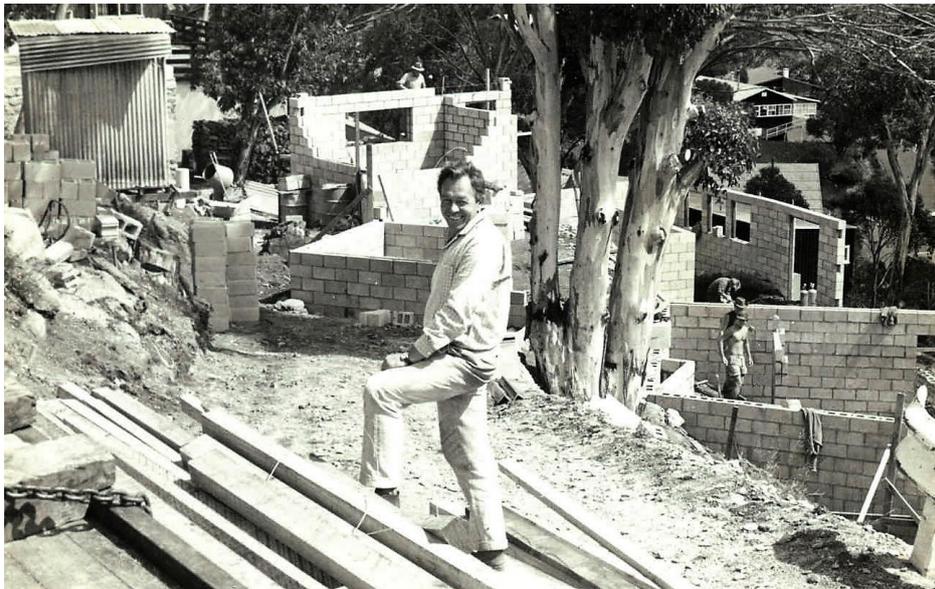
Yes and they started in Golden Eagle.

Then we have got Munjarra, we have got Celicia.

Have you got Laverty’s? They were Czech.

There you go the Laverty’s race and I did not even realize they were Czech; that goes to show you.

And what about Avior?



Bela on-site building Kasee’s Lodge - Thredbo 1966

I haven’t got Avior down. You are mentioning names I have not even got on the list. I have got Bialbo; I have got Bimbadeen which of course is the one that slid; and that’s got nothing to do with the design, but the National Parks and the road. Did Bela say anything about that?

All I can remember, because he got very sick at the time the court case was on.

Was he called to the court case?

Yes but he was too sick to attend; but we had two detectives who came down and took down what he could remember; one of the things he made very clear, was that area on the maps was designated as a slip area; and he sent somebody from the Snowy

Mountains Authority who was a geologist and a hydrologist to come and give advice in regards to the foundations; and that's why from what I can remember that area of the village, there was never an excavation because the land was too fragile. From what I can understand they had to put in big concrete piers, footings, huge, and all wrapped around with steel; so that was the method of building.
But despite that it slid.

Yes, I can add a little bit more but I don't think I should.

Well feel free.

From what I can remember there was a lodge above it, the one that came down.

Carynia.

Yes, and they used to do an awful lot of excavating at the back; and above it was a ski-lodge and that was owned by the Palmer's, and they were sort of on the edge; and there was a lot of build up of water from the other side of the road because the drainage was ineffective; so that's what we heard were the reasons.

It seems like a logical explanation too, considering the instability of the land.

Yes, then I think Bela designed and John Aho built it, where Michelle and Heinz are, and Frank Prihoda, and then what do they call it?

Frankheinstein.

I think that part was off the slip.

Yes it was off the slip.

If I can remember Avior was above it. I can always remember one of the ski instructors rang us up, we knew her for years, she was a girl who came originally from Dalgety, a terrific ski instructor, and she rang us up to tell us what happened; and she rang up again and she said 'Gabi I can't believe it, the place is full of counsellors'! And of course in those days we did not know much about counsellors. She had English parents and she said, 'I can't understand it, why don't they just get themselves together, pull themselves together, get on with it'! She said, 'there is so much weeping going on'.

It would not be politically correct to have that attitude these days.

I had to laugh.

Well it was quite a tragedy of course. A lot of people lost people they knew in the village.

Terrible, I know; look what happened to poor Stuart Diver; if ever a man has had a tragedy that one has. I can remember Wolfgang, do you remember Wolfgang?

He said the mud stopped at their back door. They have still got the foundations there, haven't they?

Moving on from that tragedy, we have Lantern lodge that was also built by Bela by the looks of it.

Bela did that early, that was an earlier one.

And the one that you mentioned that I didn't have on the list was Fort Knox; I didn't have Wombiana on the list, I didn't have Chamonix on the list.

That was Hing's, Des Hing's.

You mentioned Avior; and was Albert very involved in the design of De Dacha?

Oh you would have to ask Albert, I was under the impression; I think Bela designed it, or maybe the two of them designed it together. I think that would have been quite possible.

And Punchinello, apart from the building of it you operated it Gabi; tell us something about that story.



Bela at Catherine & Alexandra's christening at Jindabyne Anglican Church with Sandra Van der Lee in the background – Jindabyne 1968

Well I always remember we were the first apartments in the village, and we had eight apartments; and downstairs was a big area where we had our apartment, kitchen and a big lounge dining room, and balcony's off it, it was great; and I always remember when we opened Dick Dusseldorp came.

That was opposite Dusseldorp's?

No.

I get those two mixed up, that was Shlupfinkel.

And Paynter's.

Punchinello sounds like one of those lodges.

That was named after a clown.

Of course, Punchinello the clown; I am glad you clarified that due to my ignorance of the position of Punchinello; you wouldn't be expected to remember every one.

You can't and as you say you were only a kid.

Well I should know all the positions of the lodges by now. Did you have something to do with Dick Dusseldorp?

Well he was in the village at that stage and we had a sort of opening party, and Dusseldorp came; and I always remember, he looked at Bela and said he wanted to know why we had that big area, he said 'it could be made into another apartment', and I always remember Bela saying 'no, you have to get everybody together; people can come down here and they can sit by the fire, or they can have breakfast, or meals if that's what they feel like doing,' and he said 'you have to have a common area for people to mix'. I don't think that 'Dus' was that impressed. He loved the concept of the apartments but he really felt that that was a little bit superfluous; it should have been another apartment.

More income.

More income; but then we dug out underneath and put in four bed and breakfast rooms, you know cheaper accommodation for younger people, and we put a kitchen down there as well; and if they wanted to they could do their own cooking; that worked well.

Tell me how did the bed-sit situation affect you because that has always been a bit of a bone of contention; in how many beds, you pay, to the company. Nothing has changed from the Dusseldorp years to what it is now at KT owned by Rydge's. That is still in place, we of course all pay a bed levy, how did you fare with the bed levy?

I think we paid somewhere in the region of thirty eight to forty.

That many?

We had ... we paid twenty eight beds originally; our apartment wasn't counted; and then when we added the four extra rooms; six or eight we had to pay extra.

Now Gabi we did not talk much about the bureaucracy involved in taking on all these buildings.

All I can remember that plans had to go to Kosciusko Thredbo, National Park, the Council, then I think there was the Fire Department; I think two more, there was something like five or seven bureaucracies to get lodges approved. In the very early days when Thyne Reid and all those were in it was mainly just KT and the Council.

Which would have made it much easier?

Much easier; then of course the National Parks wanted x amount of granite on the foundations and the building was to be done as much as possible in timber.

That x amount of granite; that means there had to be a certain ratio of granite to the building.

Yes it was the ratio of granite to the size of the building, though on the foundations.

Well you need some pretty heavy equipment, like a huge truck for all that stuff.

Steve used to do a lot of going to Cooma to get materials and things, and the road I believe was appalling. A lot of the granite, whether Steve picked it up or not; I think it came out of Windy Creek tunnel somewhere, over there. Or was it Eucumbene tunnel it came out of?

That's a possibility when they excavated Eucumbene.

Windy Creek or Eucumbene, I am not one hundred percent sure.

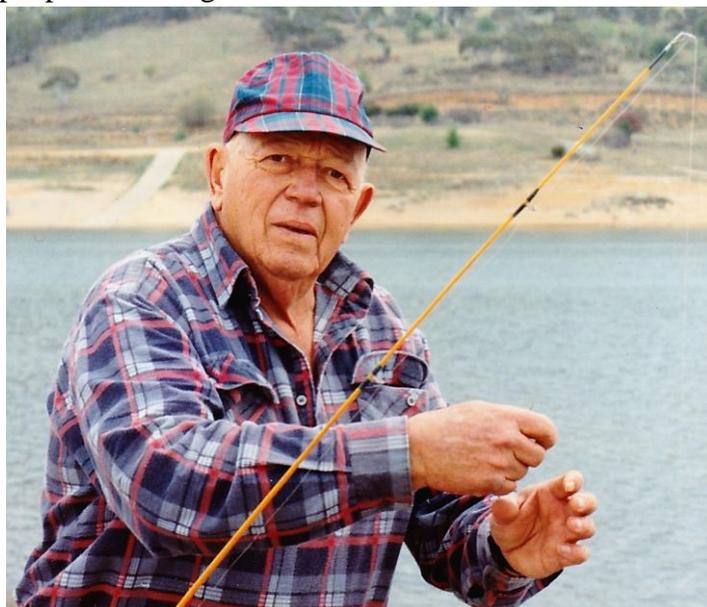
You know there are other lodges that we may have overlooked. I think you mentioned that KT and Bobuck was one of them.

They were like a sort of series of terrace houses; and as far as I can remember Charles Laverty, he was on the corner; and opposite is Frankheinstein, and as you came around the corner the Bobuck.

Yes the Bobuck apartments; they were company apartments to start with. The other lodges we haven't mentioned yet is Winterhaus.

Yes that was built for the Clifford's. That's where the Clifford twins grew up.; and next to it was Puddingweg, that was some friends of ours, the Johnson's from Maringo, they were country people. Jock Pagan.

Having listed all those lodges, and ones that have come to mind, that we weren't aware that Bela actually built but which you just mentioned; one thing they all have in common, and that is that German word called 'gemutlich', a certain 'cosiness', alpine cosiness, do you think that is the case?



Bela trout-fishing at Lake Jindabyne – 1998

They were (are) cosy, all of them had beautiful granite fireplaces, and there was a lovely ambience.

That was a common theme was it?

As I said to you, you know when I first came here; the first thing you know is four 'Aussies' plonked in an alpine village in Australia and I had been in Europe before, and I remember thinking it was absolutely bliss. It was; the whole atmosphere, and the gluhwein and everything; I don't think today has the same atmosphere at all.

No, if you think about those days and that European feel the village had; I mean time has moved on – Thredbo has become a fantastic International village. But when we



get back to the architecture and what has been built since those times, you have got to think that Bela left quite a legacy. Maybe you would like to talk a bit about that?

Bela's Corner -Thredbo

Well I do think he left an incredible legacy, when you think of the fact that he came out from Hungary; his degree wasn't recognized here; he had to work on the jack-hammer, and then through Mac Munro started off, and through Mac coming to Thredbo; and as I said he was very clever with space.

We could say that he was a true pioneer of the village. More than anybody else in the early years, in leaving the village as it is now.

Yes, yes I think so, he did a tremendous job and he was very dedicated.

What a legacy!

He was terrific! That's all there is to it.

Well Gabi we couldn't end on a better note, to say that he was terrific, and what a legacy he left. May I thank you on behalf of Thredbo Historical Society and the Thredbo Alpine Museum where this interview, once it's transcribed and completed the public will have access to it. Thanks very much.

Thank You