

Thank you all for being here today. To see so many people who knew my Dad and want to be here to pay their respects is just incredible.

As I started to write this I wondered how I would ever sum up the 88 years of his life – I know some would say that he had a long good life, but as a daughter it will never have been long enough. I can just hear him nudging the person next to him saying “Bloody Hell – that’s my Mel speaking in front of everyone”. .. so here goes ...

Driving to the hospital last week I remember writing an essay for my English language GCSE exam and I chose to do the question that asked me to write about “The person I most admired” – given that this happened 20 odd years ago, the fact that I remembered this, and my response, is quite astonishing. I chose to write about my father. At the time he was 64 years old and had lived quite a life. I remember writing about him being born in Yugoslavia, involved in WWII, settled in South Wales, wife, work, redundancy and ultimately 4 children – the last of which (me!) was born after a 17 year gap. Having an “older than my mates” dad was something that I was always conscious of and it wasn’t until I hit my teens did the slight embarrassment become pride.

Now slightly (ahem!) older I know that my dad was so much more than what I’d written about, and I have been lucky enough to have known him as an adult – there are so many stories and memories that I couldn’t choose just one or two that sums him up and don’t get me wrong he was no angel, so I’ve chosen to just tell his story: He was born in 1924 in the tiny village of Cetina in Yugoslavia, and used to love to tell anyone that would listen, about his time herding goats in the mountains – he never attended school, as he was needed at home and even if he could have gone his childhood was interrupted by world war two. At the age of 14 he left his home - he would never see his mother again, to do his bit for his country and ultimately ended up fighting with the allies at Monte Casino. He did try to tell me about the things he had seen, including seeing family members killed, but it was difficult for him and he even said I didn’t need to know about it. Several years after the war had ended, he was awarded a medal by the Yugoslav Royal family and he was immensely proud of this.

His journey to Wales was long and involved a few detours and diversions in Italy, but eventually he ended up in a displaced persons camp just outside Newport – today we would call them refugees - he was put to work, and ended up working at a farm. The Yugoslav community in and around Newport was very close and through a friend he was introduced to my Mam, who he eventually married and very shortly after this, Michael was born - a few years later Stephanie, then Nicholas were born and everyone thought the family was complete. The early years of marriage were tough - the shop was built and my mother’s life then revolved around the business whilst dad worked at Pilkingtons and then Whiteheads steel works. I know that I have his “accident prone-ness” – but have yet to lose a toe or put my foot in a tank of acid!

The first and only family home has always been in Marshfield Street – it has been the only real home my dad has ever known. Everyone knew everyone else, and you couldn’t get away with anything, especially as the shop was at the hub of the community. Life went on for my parents and just as they thought they were coming to the end of their parenting days – along came another surprise. At 38 my mother was pregnant – by this time my dad was no longer the immature father he’d been as he was 48 and being parents the second time around for them at their age meant they approached parenthood differently. When I was born my father cried because he thought he’d never walk me down the aisle – he did – and joked that I’d kept him young.

He took early redundancy in his 50’s and then spent his time tending the garden, helping mam with the shop, cooking for the family and generally getting under mams feet – which is probably why she was so keen on loaning him out to family and friends when they needed help. Around this time he also became a sort of “adopted” dad to Nicola and Helen when they moved in with us - he loved them like daughters, and seemed to have a real connection with Helen – he never got over losing her.

On the only visit mam made to me on her own, she stood in my hall and said “you do know we love you don’t you? “ to which I replied “of course” – she then went on, to say “and you know that I love your dad – we could be fighting each other but I would take on the world for him”. It is my everlasting memory of how they felt about each other and can only imagine what life was like for him when she died 15 years ago. But he coped, with the help of Steph, Richard, Mike, Julie and the grandkids but also great friends like Angela, who welcomed him into her family - to which I say Thank you.

Over the years the family has continued to grow - he was a grandfather to 13 and the great grand children just keep on coming – something he was immensely proud of, and loved to tell anyone that would listen that he has such a large family, and that’s before you got him talking about the extended family and friends that were “as near as” you could get to family. He has coped with living on his own, health issues and 12 months ago he lost a son, Nick, in a motorbike accident. He has had to deal with persecution in his neighbourhood, having lived there for 60 odd years and in recent years his health has been affected by an evil disease.

Most of you will know that there was so much more to my dad than the person he became as the dementia took hold. It is a disease, which nobody likes to speak about because it could end up being “us” or our family. Unfortunately it was “our” family, but right until the end he was there – I was able to tell him how much he was loved, how many people will miss him and how grateful I was for being his daughter. So in hindsight, maybe recalling my English exam isn’t so astonishing, given that my dad to this day remains my hero.

Having read what I’ve written, I realise that no matter what I write about him, I can’t do his life justice and I know for some of you what I’ve said will conflict with your own recollection and perception of my dad for he was so many different things to different people. He was a son, a husband, a father, and father in law, a granddad, an uncle, a neighbour and a friend; he was known by so many different names, Rade, Peter, Rade gramps, granddad, uncle Bulgaria, old goat and even Fred. To me he was plain old Dad – and I am sorry to say he was also occasionally “miserable old git” and believe it or not he answered to this.

I don’t want you to think it was all doom and gloom – far from it – he touched so many people. He was the life and soul and loved to be the centre of attention. So Thank you, Dad, for just being you. Thank you for making me want to make you proud of me, and thank you for making sure that I have known I was loved every day of my life.

I love you, Dad, and I miss you more than I can say.

Thank you.