

# Life lessons from historian Roman Krznaric

MIRIAM COSIC The Australian February 18, 2012



Historian and author Roman Krznaric. Picture: Kate Raworth Source: Supplied

**ROMAN Krznaric has not had a conventional life. In fact, the Sydney-born and raised historian's career is a standing reproach to anyone who to anyone who has let timidity or inertia dictate his path and then regretted it.**

Krznaric has resided, on and off, in several countries. He has professionally pursued his most arcane interests: Guatemalan history, gardening, empathy. He has written a book about real tennis, the forerunner to lawn tennis. He started raising children at 40.

At the moment, as well as bringing out a fascinating new book called *The Wonderbox: Curious Histories of How to Live*, he is a househusband, by choice. "My father worked for the same company for 51 years, which gave him a certain kind of embeddedness and community," he says by telephone from London, where he now lives.

"I don't have that kind of security, neither do any of my friends."

Hence the book. Its purpose is to use history to inform us about our lives - their context and their possibilities - and to help fill the spiritual vacuum that haunts the 21st century. "In a sense," Krznaric says, "you might say that we're floundering because of that lack of contextualisation. And I think there's something else going on, at least for me. In the 20th century we were obsessed by finding the answer to how to live by looking inside ourselves, by contemplating our own navels, by looking at what drives me, what will make my life better, my life successful. It was an era of introspection driven by the self-help industry and psychoanalysis.

"My view is that in the 21st century, we need to flip that over and, instead of introspection, we should be thinking about 'outrospection' ." It's a lovely word, and indicative perhaps of the inner orientation of its inventor.

Krznaric's father was a Polish refugee. After the momentous decision to leave war-torn Europe, he settled for good in Sydney. Krznaric's mother was half Romanian, half Scottish; her mother was Jewish and had come to Australia via Shanghai, a well-worn escape path from Eastern Europe.

Young Roman's childhood was split between two worlds. His school life - North Strathfield and Warrawee primary schools, Turramurra High - was conventionally Australian. But all of Europe visited him at home. "One moment I'd be with my school mates, then I'd be back home and my Dad would be sitting there playing cards with one guy who's Ukrainian, another who's Russian, and another guy who's Czech, and they're speaking four or five languages, depending on what they were talking about. Whether it was filthy jokes or politics, every subject got a different language.

"Growing up like that gives one a broader view of life and of different ways of living."

When he was 10, his mother died of breast cancer. "I have very few memories of before I was 10 years old, which you know often happens with kids with a traumatic experience. I felt quite distanced from people after her death, sort of looking at everyone with a view from nowhere," he says. "After I'd been studying empathy for about 10 years, I had a moment of insight - that my interest is partly a desire to recover that empathic self which I had lost as a child."

His father took on all his wife's roles: for Krznaric, it's nothing unusual to see a man feeding his kids or vacuuming the carpets. But a stepmother soon arrived on the scene, an Italian woman who taught high-school history and whom Krznaric quickly came to love. She introduced him to the world of the past. "Every day when I came home from school, there would be a book on my bed, something that was surprising and interesting, and that's partly where love of history came from."

Nonetheless, when he left home to study at Oxford, he took PPE: philosophy, politics and economics. He lived in Spain for a while in order to learn the language and there he met a Peruvian man who got him interested in Latin America. He began to read books on it, then enrolled in a masters degree in Latin American studies.

Next, he says, came "a very important part of my life". While doing his masters, he travelled to Guatemala and worked as a volunteer human rights observer in a Mayan refugee community in the jungle. The civil war in Guatemala killed 200,000 indigenous Mayans and soldiers would regularly come to the village searching for Marxist guerillas, taking locals away.

His job entailed bearing witness and reporting back to the UN. It was, Krznaric says coolly, "mildly alarming, but not dangerous". It impressed him in other ways. "It was a startling cultural experience, and challenged all sorts of things I thought were important in life."

Afterwards, he wrote a PhD thesis on Guatemalan political history, reaching back through 500 years of colonial history.

He also studied horticulture and became a full-time gardener for a while, mostly to research a novel which he has written but not published. "I've always loved the way gardeners can plant a tree and think, 'I'm never going to see this tree grow but we need to plant these trees for future generations'."

Krznaric has settled down now - the phrase seems to alarm him - with his partner Kate Raworth, a photographer, and their twin three-year-old daughters. What time his toddlers allow him is still devoted to history.

Krznaric's thinking has been deeply influenced by Oxford historian Theodore Zeldin, who writes books - with titles such as *The French* and *An Intimate History of Humanity* - that examine how history is lived by real people. Krznaric met Zeldin in a typically proactive way. He was frustrated in his day job lecturing in politics and sociology and feeling he wasn't doing much for the world, when he heard Zeldin speak on the radio. Impressed, he tracked him down and made contact. He ended up running Zeldin's Oxford Muse Foundation, which encourages conversation between people who would never normally meet.

"The conclusion he had come to was that was how you change society, by changing the way you and I understand each other, and talk to each other, and make a human connection," he says. "It was a form of microcosmic change."

Krznaric's work at the foundation included "real life projects", as he calls them, inviting disparate people to sit down with each other: "a business CEO talking to a Tibetan monk, or an architect talking to a pole-dancer, and we put between them not a menu of food but a menu of conversation".

He was in his mid-30s, and it was round the same time he was gardening professionally. He laughs when remembering going from eating at the college high table to eating with the hired help. "A lot of my work has been trying to create conversations in unusual places, between government departments, or between rich and poor, to between people of different religions," he says.

He has helped set up philosopher Alain de Botton's School of Life, shopfront premises sandwiched between a botox clinic and a kebab shop in Bloomsbury, which offers thought-provoking classes to locals in an effort to counter the anomie of contemporary consumer-driven secular life.

Krznaric is also curious to find out whether empathy can provide communities and the individuals within them with the social glue religion once did.

It seems a very contemporary idea. Empathy drives human rights theory and practice, and that sprang directly from the horrors of World War II and the precarious position of European minorities in the decades before it. Krznaric, however, takes the origins back to the 18th century and moral thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith, who based their entire ethical systems on the emotion of empathy, though then, he points out, it was called sympathy.

"The ground for emotion was our fellow-feeling for others, for being able to share their emotions, and look through their eyes," Krznaric says.

"It fell out of favour for a couple of hundred years, but I think the way to look at where the idea of human rights come from is to look at the great rights revolutions in history that have been preceded by moments of empathic flowering. The French revolution came from empathic changes in the 18th century, new kinds of connections and understanding between people of different classes."

We've never needed this kind of empathy, for people superficially unlike us, as much as we do today, when television brings earthquakes in China and famines in Africa right into our sitting rooms.

"How do we make that connection across space?" Krznaric asks rhetorically. "And now how do we make a connection across time, thinking about climate change and biodiversity loss and eco-fragility. We need empathy, we need to understand what it might be like to be someone else in order to have a 21st century ethics, I think."

His new book looks through time in the other direction. It is an illuminating canter through places and epochs. Krznaric discusses the six varieties of love elaborated by the ancient Greeks and the pressures imposed by the modern ideal of romantic love.

He outlines the significant role of househusband in pre-industrial society and the fact that the nuclear family isn't as new as people think it is. He meditates on the silence of European meals in the past: "Talk is not for the table but for the piazza," advised an early Italian etiquette manual.

He extols the polymathy of primary school teachers, and discusses the profound and lasting existential impact of the invention of the mechanical clock in 13th century Europe. He examines attitudes to death, and the fact that the Spanish take their children when they go drinking in bars.

The idea for the book came, he says, when he was browsing through self-help shelves of bookshops a few years ago, looking for books which deal with "the dynamics of everyday life -- with family tensions, becoming a father, how to find a fulfilling job". He found psychology books and religious books, even philosophy books, but no history books. He decided to reinvent the wheel. "If you look at the first great self-help book, by Samuel Smiles, published in 1859, he was looking back to history a lot," Krznaric points out.

"And of course so were the prototypes of the self-help book: Montaigne in the 16th century, Seneca [in first century BC Rome]; they realised that you could learn from the past." Indeed, his epigraph comes from Goethe: "He who cannot draw on 3000 years is living from hand to mouth." Krznaric also quotes Thomas Hobbes: "The principal and proper work of history is to instruct."

In the past, Krznaric says, learning from history meant learning how to stop wars and organise political and economic systems, not how to live day to day.

Another motive for the book, he says, was to get some perspective on an era in which things change more quickly than we can adjust to them: online romance, social networking, the consumer society, the end of jobs for life, the Occupy movement, ecological crises, all those things that make us live in the present and the future and forget the past.

"How do they affect our values and how we think about our children's lives?" Krznaric asks. "The Wonderbox is about gazing into the past instead of gazing into ourselves, looking at how other people have lived and seeing what we can get from that."

***The Wonderbox: Curious Histories of How to Live is published by Allen & Unwin.***