

## LEONARD SUSZKO: WRESTLER, LIFE SAVER, BOUNCER, BUSINESS ENTREPRENEUR



I promised my mother a couple of years ago before she died that I would do a family history and go to every property that we had ever lived in and rented or owned and do a little book for her. Unfortunately she passed away at the age of 83 and I missed out on that, but I'm still going to do it. What I'm doing at the moment is a family tree though I can't get past my mother's mother and father as the records stop there. All of dad's stuff was lost during the Stalin era.

We landed in Melbourne in June 1949 at Station Pier, which you can see just outside the window. So I've come a long way in my life - about 700 metres. I think we landed here with ten quid, but that was a long time ago. I remember The Strand at Williamstown when I was a young boy about ten or twelve because I used to sleep on the pier and catch fish and sell them at the hotels during the day. I vowed to buy a house on The Strand if I ever made the money. Well, I looked at it later on and decided that The Strand was not as nice as this side of the bay which is why I'm living in Port Melbourne overlooking Station Pier.

### Nina Suszko



My mother was Nina, an ex-Ukrainian, who was kidnapped with 30 other girls from her area and they were taken to Salzburg, Austria; the girls were between 14 and 18 years of age. They were on a farm that was owned by a farm implement guy in Salzburg and he was mixed up with the SS there, and that's why the Austrians were still a little bit pro Nazi but all underground. Mum was raped often. I didn't find that out until I offered to take her there for a holiday and she started crying really badly and I felt so bad. It took a few weeks for my sisters to drag it out of my mum, but they did find out why she didn't want to go to Austria. Mum was learning to be a nurse and when she was kidnapped she went to a DP camp, a Displaced Persons' camp in Salzburg and was nursing at the camp. She was the only nurse among all the local German nurses and DP nurses who had a pair of stockings and as much chocolate as she wanted to eat.

### Philip Suszko



The rogue, my father Phillip Suszko, was ex-Ukrainian and was a medically-trained specialist in malaria and dysentery. I don't know why they wanted a malaria specialist but that was in the Red Army, I think, but I'm not sure. He had to go there from the Ukraine. His first wife and four kids, his first wife's mother and father and grandfather who was 108, all sixteen of the family were killed and hung up on a barbed wire fence with their guts cut open, because that's what happened during the war. My father, who was a black marketeer and was also a medical officer, came back to the house when he had a few days off and his friend Ivan who only had one leg came over and my father was digging under the barn where he had buried a weapon. My father said: "I'll kill every Nazi I ever see." And Ivan said to him: "Don't kill the Nazis, Phillip. This was done by Stalin. All these dead Ukrainians, the whole village was done by Stalin. Direct your hatred at Stalin and not someone else." That's what he did. He fled there and got himself arrested near Czechoslovakia by the Americans and they took him to the DP camp where they put him to work as a medical officer and that's how he met my mother.

My father was a real savage black marketeer. If you wanted false teeth, if you wanted eye glasses, if you wanted wine, he would get it. He used to trade with the American troops and the locals because he could speak German. He couldn't speak much English but he got himself understood. Hence my mother had nylon stockings, which was a great elevation in status. It doesn't sound like much to you or me but in the war time they were unobtainable. The stockings and chocolates probably made my mother fall in love with my father more so than his looks, but it worked and they got married there. I was born there in September 1947. My father did a lot of work in looking after some of the Marines with stuff that they wanted, such as Luger pistols. They got him out very quickly to Naples and he was put on the boat Fairsea at Naples. It left Italy on 11th May 1949. I was one-and-a-half years old at the time.

## Arriving in Australia



We arrived here at Station Pier, Port Melbourne – you can see the pier if you look through the window – on the 8th June 1949. It took just over a month to get here. They jumped on a train at that station for Spencer Street and from there they went to Bonegilla. At Bonegilla the families were separated: the women stayed there with the children and my father was shipped off with 42 other men. Some went to Wagga Wagga, and I think most of them went to the Snowy Mountains and a few somewhere else. For two years my father who never had a blister on his hand in his life was laying railway sleepers. Every second weekend the men were allowed to come and visit their wives for conjugal rights.

My mother gave birth to my sister in Wagga, because they took her to Wagga instead of Bonegilla, so my sister Lena was the first Australian Suszko. Two more daughters followed: Olga was born in 1953 at Graham Street in West Newport, and Nadia was born at Williamstown Hospital.



Nadia was adopted out to one of my mother's so-called best friends, who said she would look after Nadia for a couple of years. My father had met with an accident and mother's friend said she would look after Nadia for a few years and then give her back, but she never did. Nadia is now part of the family again. That family were ultra, ultra, ultra Ukrainian so much so that Nadia speaks with a Ukrainian accent as if she'd just got off the boat. It's terrible that they kept her away from the family, but that does happen. Now we've reunited as one family again.

## Living in Spotswood

Mum and dad eventually filtered their way to Spotswood where my father bought a house on The Avenue next to the football ground. I think it cost about five hundred pounds. My mother used to earn three pound and three shillings a week, which was three guineas a week, working for RVB in Spotswood making car horns for Holden and Ford. Dad worked at the other end of Spotswood station in a large engineering company called Baltic Simplex which made all the milking machines for Australia. That was in the fifties.

They had their house in Spotswood and he also purchased a block of land in Graham Street West Newport which runs off Blackshaws Road. They slowly built a bungalow and moved there. In those days five or six families, all mates, got together and built their houses. Timber and tiles were all on the black market and very hard to get hold of but they all worked as a team.

I can remember walking from the market at Spotswood Railway Station with my mum and dad coming back from the Vic Market with string bags with everything. A Dutchman – Mr van Kloof? I don't remember his name exactly – was our next door neighbour and a Polish gentleman was four doors down. There was a group of three and they'd walk with their wives and kids. We were walking from the station and just near the crossing into South Kingsville there were five or six young twenty-five-year-old or thirty-year-old Australians, who were pretty rough and pretty drunk, and they would abuse us as we walked past and stone us. It happened once, and the second time my father and the Dutchman stood up to them, ripped the palings from the fence and gave these guys a real hiding, smashed their ribs and everything. The Dutchman and dad were arrested and taken to the Newport Police Station lockup and put in there. But the man that lived across the road was an Anglican – not a priest but a man of the church – he went to the Newport police station and swore an oath what these guys had done two or three weekends before, especially throwing the stone and cutting open Mrs van Kloof's forehead, so they were let out of the lockup. They used to walk past that group over the next six to eight months that I remember with never a peep out of them. They used to call us Balts and Dagos, all that sort of thing. My father put up with it once but never a second time.

My father couldn't find work in the medical field anywhere because he couldn't speak English. He got plenty of jobs but not in the field he wanted to be in. He was extremely effected mentally by that and I think he ended up as an alcoholic and I think he pissed up several thousand dollars worth with his mates. That's the way he was. A lot of the Russian, Ukrainian, German, Polish, and Austrian people that I grew up with, firstly at Newport and then St Albans, seemed to have that inherent psychological trauma of what happened to them during the war. My old man saw shitloads. He used to tell me he'd cut off 20 legs a day – saw them off and put bitumen on the end because they'd run out of sutures. There was no penicillin. He said he'd throw a leg out in the snow and come back ten minutes later and there were rats bigger than cats eating it.

His outlook on life was very tragic. He didn't care. If this six-foot-six bloke walked up to him and said "Hey, you Dago c\*\*t," he'd hit him right in the mouth. He would never ever pull back from a fight, which was terrible and really affected my mother, because when they were away a lot of people used to be racially intolerant. A few of his West Newport friends would say "Your old man is a bit aggressive" but when he came to their aid they said "Lucky your father was there." My father wasn't tall; he was five foot eleven and in his prime would have weighed about eighty kilos. He didn't believe in God though Mum did. Dad was a devout anti communist and a few times he was picked on by people at the church who weren't members of the church but spoke perfect Russian.

### **Father's disaster**

On the 27th October 1957, my father was pushed under a train at the Newport Railway Station by a drunk from the RSL. Dad lost his right leg above the knee, his left leg at the hip, his right arm above the elbow, part of his cerebrum and some of his intestines. He lived for 16 or 17 years in the Footscray hospital, the Frankston Rehabilitation Centre, back to Footscray Hospital, Kew Cottages, back to the Rehabilitation Centre. He was wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life. I used to give the nurses money for his cigarettes. All he wanted to do was smoke 60 Camels a day and on Saturday he would have six stubbies at Kew Junction Hotel where one of his mates would take him and they'd come back drunk on a few cans. One day the friend dropped something and let go of the wheelchair to pick it up so dad rolled all the way down Princess Street where the freeway is now and got collected by four cars. He spent twelve weeks in hospital in intensive care. He asked me to kill him many times. All his fingers were cut and broken on his left hand but he survived. The bugger was a survivor. After being run over by the train he only had one functional limb, his left arm, but when the nurses made his bed he would lift himself up from the overhead rail. He had a strong bicep and long fingers.

Even when my father was in the Kew Cottages or Footscray Hospital he would always abuse me for not doing my maths. For him, mathematics was the most important thing. He used to say if you conquer mathematics you conquer logic and you conquer your thought processes. My thought processes were all over the place like a mad women's shit, because that was my life. My life would change from hour to hour, like my father. You end up being the scrotum you came from. That was my dad. He eventually died of pneumonia on 31 October 1976 and when I went to see him at the morgue he was just a short torso on the table. Every hair on his head was white. I asked the doctors to sew him up in a canvass sack and don't let my mother see him. He was buried over there in the Brooklyn Crematorium. My mother died in 2007 and is buried next to him now.

### **Mother's work**

My mother sacrificed everything. She worked her arse off to bring me and the kids up, always in rented properties after dad's injuries because the money was swallowed up because there was no insurance in those days. We sold both houses to pay for everything because my old man would always have his mates over and he would spend half his money on piss.

Mum worked as a cleaner on night shift to bring up the kids so she was there during the day. Then she worked during the day and on night shift so we could have school books. So at the tender age of ten I started selling newspapers. At fourteen I used to work every school holiday and all the term holidays at Borthwicks. I knew the guy on the gate and he used to put me down as an adult and the adult wages were unbelievable. Actually, I got Wally Kosiak a job there. He was studying and needed money for schoolbooks. I got him a job turning skins and he didn't like it because of the maggots and everything; I don't think he lasted very long. But I got jobs there for four or five guys from St Albans High to help pay for

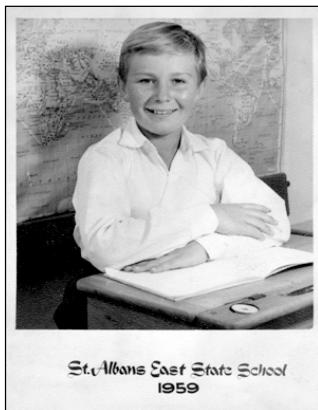
their books. For me it wasn't that I would go there for fun, I had to make sure my mum had money to pay for my school fees, my school jumper; it was tight.



Nina Suszko working as machine operator, 1950s.

Sometimes I can remember skipping meals when I was eight or nine years old; my mother didn't have the money to put bread on the table. She always treasured food, and I wanted to be sure that none of my children, family or grandkids go through what my parents had to go through for me. My greatest thing when I was young was that "I've got to get out of St Albans, I've got to get out of St Albans." Well, mum didn't want to get out of St Albans. I bought her an apartment in St Albans and she wanted to stay there. She later moved to Ringwood and then I bought her a house across the road from us in Templestowe. Now I live in Port Melbourne but find myself every second Sunday driving to Alfrieda Street. I eat Vietnamese food and go looking for the Tin Shed and looking for Ma Cameron's old sports shop because she sort of brought me up in an indirect way. When I was in Millawa Avenue I'd jump onto my back fence and walk along that and jump into the Camerons' yard and have breakfast with Les and Garry, which was just a slice of vegemite toast and cup of warm Milo. There was that social interaction. Ma was brilliant to us. I went to her funeral recently and was disappointed with all the people I know that she helped in her life that weren't there, which bothered me. She was a woman who would help anyone. I really treasure that early interaction I had with her.

### Life in St Albans



In St Albans we lived with a bloke called George Korinsky who was of Russian background and came to Australia in 1950 with his wife and children Maria, Alex and Tatiana. He used to print a newspaper called "Russian Truth" and because of this I think he was under the eye of the Russian communists. After his wife died my mother and he lived together in a ten or twelve-year relationship. George had a degree from Moscow and taught at St Albans High in the late sixties and early seventies and I think he then went on to Sunshine High. He was a man who could take a 600 page book and read it in two days. He didn't have a photographic memory but could tell you the full details in quick summation and not get anything wrong. He had what I call a studious brain that could accept information rapidly. We grew up with them and I'm very fond of Alex and Tatiana Korinsky. That was our life in St Albans.

We lived in Millawa Avenue and then moved to Alexina Street, St Albans. One of my bouncers owned that block of apartments, a bloke who used to work for me and in security at the airport. Mum was happy living there and then I bought her a house across the railway station and down a bit.

When we were at Millawa Avenue I used to have the bungalow down the back so no one ever checked on what I did and who I did it with. I always lived a guilt free life but was always in trouble with the local

police: riding motor bikes without a licence, shoving potatoes up Ford Anglia and Studebaker police cars, being locked up for the weekend for those offences and being told by Sergeant Percy Whitley: "Son, you are either going to play footy for St Albans or wrestling and boxing for the YMCA at the Tin Shed, or you'll be in jail every Friday night and I'll let you out Monday morning." That's what he did. So I became a wrestler. I represented Australia and won a few medals but that was a long time ago. Since then I've had two hip replacements and this is my third. I've had a kneecap replacement, and a femur bone replacement.

### St Albans High School

The first school I went to was Spotswood State School, the second was West Newport State, the third was Williamstown State School and the fourth was St Mary's the Catholic school in Newport. I lasted two weeks because I couldn't pray; I was pissed off with praying. Then St Albans State School, then Footscray High, then St Albans High School. I was expelled from St Albans High School in fifth form. From there I went to University High School at night and worked during the day because I needed money to live. I stayed there a couple of years and got my Matric but didn't do anything with it. Then I went to RMIT night school for two-and-a-half years for a management diploma. I chucked it in. One Wednesday night it was pissing down and I said to myself "What the hell am I doing here? I'm wasting my life and my time." I could never understand how I could ever use a distribution curve in my life or to try to convince myself that I could use trigonometry. To this day, and I am 68 years of age, I have never used any of it; it was totally useless verbal diarrhea. I felt that schools taught us whatever was useless, like tits on a bull, nothing that would be put into practice.



Leo Suszko (back row, centre) Form 5A, 1965.

I learnt to respect some of my teachers. I came to St Albans from Footscray after Form 1 and at Footscray we had Les Joslin the Australian cricketer, we had Ray Tomlinson the Australia basketball champion, John Herriot the South Melbourne football player – all Aussies, all good sportsmen, but only ten percent were dagos like us. When I came to St Albans I felt more comfortable in keeping with the people around me. They were the same basic socio-economic group as I had, apart from Heather Goddard. I thought Heather was the most wonderful person and friendly with Tania. She was lovely to me and lovely to everybody and had a big heart. She married Les Cameron who was a different character, far left wing at school but there's nothing wrong with that, it came from his mother.

While I was still in first form at St Albans High on Saturdays and Sunday and some of the holidays when I wasn't working at the abattoirs casually, I would take some kids from around my area and we'd walk from St Albans at five in the morning up the Overnewton Castle near the Calder Highway. Around the back there was Jimmy the Macedonian and the rest of them were Australian market gardeners. When the tomatoes or whatever were in season and needed picking was when casual labour was in demand. I'd

walk down with ten or twelve boys and allocate one to each of the farmers, who would pay the boys a wage and pay me a dollar for bringing the boy and I would charge the boy a dollar. That's how I made money. We would set fishing lines in the Maribyrnong River so we'd catch some fish. On the way home we'd shoot one or two rabbits. So I'd come home to my mother with some money and probably six to eight fish and maybe half a dozen rabbits. We did that for years. As I got older the number of guys that I took down there would triple. It was a way of making money because, believe me, in those days money was scarce. It was really hard. I didn't do a lot of social interactivity because I was too bloody hungry trying to survive. We didn't have some of the luxuries that other people had.

One man who absolutely denigrated me at school was Pavlov. Calling me useless, telling me that I couldn't understand maths. I said to him: "Mr Pavlov, it's not that I don't understand, it's just that I am not interested. You are an absolute wiz at maths and I respect you for it, but I am useless at maths and I don't want to be a mathematician and don't want to be a school teacher, so please just put up with me." His daughter Tania was good at maths and did very well in business. But when you are schooled in a family as an only child and hear all about mathematics and geography from your parents, you've got to be good. I was somewhat jealous of that, but I had no capacity whatever to be a mathematician. I was good at biology and geography and all the non-important subjects. I think after a while Mr Pavlov understood and put up with me. He was a good teacher because he really took the time to see me after class and say "Leo, do you understand?" I said "Mr Pavlov, I do but I am not interested." Then he gave up. But he was interested in the person that he knew if he taught them and if the person wanted to he would get them through. He had the faith in me and, don't get me wrong, I had that faith in him. As a teacher, I would classify Pavlov very high up in wanting to help students who were interested in learning. But once he found that he couldn't and you wouldn't, then there was a separation. Alexandra Shegedyn, who married George the doctor, was a lovely lady. Kathy Hatjandreou was very good in giving advice and guidance. I had a lot of respect for the girls in the class because they were all lovely people.

Mr Youd was terrific. I was an arts buff and Youd was the first teacher who said I was doing well for the school. About 1964 I would go and spend ten or fifteen pounds from picking tomatoes with all those kids and selling the newspapers on buying the ingredients for the fried rice. No one gave me money for that. Youd was the one who came up and said you're doing a good thing for the school. Torpey wasn't interested. Matthews was really good. Youd encouraged me in art. He said "If you feel like painting, forget what the rules are, forget what the colours are supposed to be, you do what you want to do inside you." I used to paint twenty paintings a week and give them to my friends. I could have made a living out of art if I didn't have a wife and kids to support. I looked around but I never found a rich artist. I looked where the art shows were and the people who were making the money were the ones selling the pictures and not the ones painting. The middle man was making the money and not the artist. So I understood that you have to be a middle man to be successful. And basically that's what I've been doing all my life.



Leo Suszko (back left) with Eric Youd (back centre) and Sandra Crofts (front centre) at football club ball, 1967.

Sloko Muc and I were always in trouble but we never did any devious stuff. We held these fundraising events that went to the building fund.

There was a business called Hoods Furniture Removals from Ascot Vale and in 1965 I used to hire one or two of their vans for trips to the country. This was a thing where my fellow classmates and I would go to the snow, the beaches, we'd go to Blackwood Forest, all these places. I used to charge fifteen bob or a pound to cover the cost of the van hire, the BBQ meat, bread and tomato sauce. Whatever was left over would go to the school building fund. In those days social life for us at school was very limited. We had our friends at school and maybe the next door neighbour. For most of us those outings were possibly the first interaction of a kiss on the cheek and it was interesting to see later in life that some lasting relationships were formed through such outings. We used to do about twelve trips per year. I started that and Alex Pliaskin continued it after I left. It was a way of getting together because our mums and dads didn't have the cars to take us out socially or take us to the swimming pool.



There were several swimming holes along the river, the main ones being at the end of Stensons Road and the farmer's dam further north at Green Gully. Some of us used to walk to Arundel for the swimming. The Romanovkis and I would all go down there and that's where he met his sweetheart in Keilor. Before we met her we would jump in their pool at night – I think they now own Village Roadshow. We were mischievous buggers, but we never ever wrecked anything though we might pinch a beer if we found one. The Romanovskis lived across the road from the high school. Their father was a beekeeper and one of the boys died after being bitten by a bee, not the common farmers' bee but a wild one at Mt Macedon.

My first "girlfriend" at school was Dace Zvaigzne. She taught me to be not as aggressive as I was, to be more respectful. Her parents were very nice people and good teachers about life. Dace guided me into more scholastic interests and encouraged me to go to University High School and also my RMIT management course. I thank her for a lot in life because I was a juvenile and she helped me see the right track. I've met many girls through my life but she was my "blonde haired surfie chick."

I got the arse from St Albans High by Mr Torpey because I had organized the end of year dance breakup and raised a lot of money for the school building fund which I always did with those weekend trips and picnics. That all went to the school building fund. Torpey pulled me into his office after he told everyone that if they went to the end of year breakup they would be expelled. Teachers went and a lot of school



kids went. He told me that day, and I quote as it is burnt into my brain, that I would amount to nothing in life because I was a misfit, a square peg in a round hole, and useless to society. Unquote. That's what he told me. I loved school for all the wrong reasons, everything except the scholastic pursuits: I loved basketball, baseball, football, everything, especially the weekend socializing.

The only thing I put to use that I learnt at school was French, because I've traveled to France and can understand when people are trying to bullshit me. So that's the only thing I've applied, apart from the social growth within the school: team spirit, class spirit – that was more important. Most of the scholastic stuff that I saw being taught at school was totally useless. As I said before, useless at tits on a bull. We seem to groom people for reading, writing, 'rithmetic whatever it may be – and there may not be enough of it now, but in those days it was totally useless.

I remember I would go up there when they had career information sessions and there'd be representatives from industry. The first one there was the school teachers union; they all wanted you to become a school teacher. Then the Commonwealth Bank, then the State Bank, then BHP. All these companies and semi-government companies offered cadetships or something like that. After a while when I got to know some of these people later in life I learnt that these cadetships were being offered because they were getting grants from the government, and they had to re-teach people what they had learnt at school. To this day I see stuff being educated in schools that I feel is totally useless, but they still do it. I think it's because of the attitude of "I'm the professor of this and I want them to understand that."

## Wrestling



In my wrestling days I used to run from St Albans to Albion and back, three or four times a week, not in Dunlop Volleys, but in the ten-and-six Dunlop flats. Today amongst the wrestlers, anyone over 85 kilos does not run. They do still-stepping and stretching for warm up. But we had to run miles, miles and miles, and I thank my coach for that even though it's mucked me up with my bones and that, because unlike the other wrestlers I could outlast them because I had the stamina. I found that by doing a lot of running I had the ability to outlast my opponents. I thought of becoming a professional wrestler and had a few fights, but I gave it away because at that time wrestling was bullshit on Channel Nine. I had a couple of bouts as "The Masked Destroyer". I shared that role with a policeman because we



had the same physique and the same financial conundrum. He, being a policeman, wasn't allowed to have a second job and me, being an amateur, wasn't allowed to do it professionally. My coach always wanted me to wrestle because he said "You've got it in ya." But I was more interested frankly in making money from my physical ability than getting medals. I've got medals and cups – they don't mean much to me – because when you come from nothing ...

In 1969 The Herald had a photo of me wrestling with Hughie Williams of Queensland in the Australian Wrestling Championships at the Apex Club in St Kilda. He beat me on that occasion. Hugh Williams is the current Transport Workers Union boss in Queensland. He's 74. He was in the wrestling team in the 1964 Summer Olympics. I tried out for the Olympics as a wrestler. It turned out that you were chosen but you don't go because there was no money for the Olympic wrestlers. What I did was devote my time to the Royal Brighton Yacht Club for the 1971 fund raiser where I got all the meat and staff for nothing through the Diamond Division of Borthwicks and got my name on the menu as the chef and controlled the 32 people in the kitchen on that night. I used to be a busy boy.

## Life Saving

I was a wrestler when I was still at school and I also took to swimming. I was a member of the Williamstown Life Saving Club and the Bancoora Surf Life Saving Club from 1964 to the early 'seventies, and I still donate money



to the Bancoora Club and the one at Port Melbourne for the nippers. I don't do much with the Williamstown Club these days. I send six junior wrestlers to the Iowa College games to the States every year and they are all kids mostly from single parent families. With the life saving club I bought 30 surfboards for them for the juniors, because when the nippers finish they've got nothing to do so I bought scuba gear, fishing gear, surfboards, jetboards, to keep the kids there, because if there's nothing there they all piss off. That brought all the young girls back there because they could learn surfing. All of a sudden our intermediate membership rose rapidly because they had access to all those "toys" which we never had.

When I started there all we had was the rowboat made out of timber and heavy as buggery that eight of us carried on our backs to the life saving club. We loved it. I used to dedicate about 26 of my weekends to be on patrol as a life saver. I was the beltman for our club, in other words the man who had to swim out because I was a strong swimmer. I was vice-captain of the A grade surf boat crew and have had lots of injuries with joint dislocations and broken bits and pieces from all the boat accidents. The injuries were a problem because at that time I was working with Olympic Cables and I never got any sick leave. But that was life, and my sport was more important than my job. We found it a privilege to be a lifesaver and part of the team; and again, team is the important thing in a boat crew. You've got your feedout crew, you've got your linesmen, in the boat you've got the stroke, your second stroke, two rowers and your sweep, it's a five-man crew and if you don't work together your boat will tip over and you'll get hurt. I used to drag my girlfriends up there and they'd be sitting knitting or reading New Idea while we were in the front talking about boating tactics. That's what it was like when you were eighteen years of age.



Leo Suszko (R) and the Bancoora Life Saving Club.

## Working

Upon leaving school I was hungry for money. Even when I was at school I started a toy business to make wooden dolls houses which we sold to Myers. There were five other men, one of whom took all our money and disappeared into a kibbutz in Israel for twelve years. That was a long time ago. My first job after high school was with Edmund Dunklings commercial artists. I was very good at art, but in six weeks I learnt that art would never feed a family, so I gave that up. I then went to work at many companies including Olympic Cables, ASCA Electrics, Prestige, and Holeproof.



Between 1966 and 1970 I had a restaurant called Branding Iron Steak House in Little Bourke Street and I used Cryovac meat in the restaurant. It was the only non-Asian restaurant on the street at that time. We served BBQ steaks with live country and western music and had musical 'Jam' sessions till 5am. Before that I had a strip club there selling booze and I used to pay to keep the police away.

About 1968 I finally got into a company called W.R. Grace which sent me all over Australia and all over the world in the meat and food business dealing with packaging. I was 21 years but I told them I was 27. They asked how did I know so much about Cryovac, which is vacuum packaging around meat. Well, I said, I've been using it for years

in my restaurant. There were 27 applicants for the W. R. Grace job and I was the youngest and bullshitted my way through and got a job that really put me on my feet. It was the best position I ever had, fantastic company, extremely high learning curve, sent me to varied food production facilities all over Australia and New Zealand. I made long term relationships with business owners that still exist to this day in our meat and food machinery businesses. I learnt so much from some very good people and I traveled all over Australia. I should have been paying them for what they were teaching me. If I had to work for anyone again, that's where I'd go, because it was such a fantastic job. My wife always had a suitcase packed for me and I used to average 15 to 20 interstate trips a year, so it was a bit hard.



Leo Suszko and WR Grace managers with awards for Cryovac system; Sydney Royal Show.

In January 1968 there were two stories about me in the Age, the big one being about saving two kids at Williamstown beach. When the kids were saved and the sharks came in we were pulling the dogs out of the water and the photographer took snaps of me with a dog to illustrate that. When mum saw the paper instead of telling me what a good boy I was for saving the kids she told me off because there was a story about the police closing down my sly grog night club and making it illegal for anyone to be on the premises. Do you remember San Remo? I used to buy 20 litres of whiskey from them and put it into little Johnny Walker bottles. The waitresses were dressed in rawhide outfits and weren't paid in wages but got tips and a share of all the bottles that their customers bought. We charged \$20 for a bottle of Scotch that cost me \$2 and the girls got \$5. Every bottle of beer they got a dollar, every bottle of champagne they got \$10. I used to buy the \$2.50 bubbly and we made good money on it.



### Bouncing

Even then at night I was working as a bouncer in the late '60s through to 1969. I had a small private company called Impact Security Consultants and was one of the youngest people in Australia to get a guard agents licence, private investigator licence, and process server licence. I used to follow people for divorces, internal security, thieving in companies, stuff like that. I'd hire off-duty policemen to do it. On the night of my first date with my future wife (who I met at my restaurant) we had to break into a nine-story block of apartments near Como in Toorak. I pulled up there in my Valiant station wagon, with the eight inch mattress in the back that I told my mother was for sleeping when I was at the life saving club, and six of my bouncers who were all very tall men. We had grappling hooks with ropes and got

up on the balcony. A lady was hanging out the window saying she'd call the police. I said "Madam, I am a Private Investigator" and showed her my licence with my photograph. I said we were getting our client back into her apartment. We broke into her apartment because all the locks had been changed by her estranged husband who was a violent cocaine user. Her father was later killed in the big holdup across the road from the town hall. In those days what you'd get paid for a job like that was three or four hundred dollars, but we got five thousand because we were able to rescue a lot more than that for the lady. So that was my wife's first date - she'd been waiting in the car and as soon as we'd finished the job I took her out to dinner at Fanny's Restaurant in Lonsdale Street.



I worked at the Lido nightclub at the front door in a dinner suit. The bouncers would give me a dollar an hour out of their pay; that's how I made money. I had more money than brains at that time because that's before I met my missus. I used to spend money like it was absolutely going out of style. Those days my bouncers and myself worked in night clubs, hotels, the Lido nightclub, the Purple Cow, the Ski Club, every illegal brothel, every illegal card game in Melbourne, the Baccarat game on the corner of Victoria and Errol Street ... they were all my bouncers. I got my first bullet put in by Les Cane; that was at the Winston Charles Night Club or Playboy in Toorak Road South Yarra – there used to be an aeroplane there, a café, we were 12 boys down there. Les Cane who was depicted in Underbelly got a whole lot of bullets put in him in his house in Blackburn – he's the one who shot me, but it was only a 22 so it wasn't much. Since then I've had quite a few bullet holes through my bouncer job. The last time I got several bullet holes was in my office in Coburg. The guy who was involved in that got his throat cut and his wife and two of his boys who were shot in the back of the head in front of three children by a bloke who's in jail now. He got 32 years non parole for that and was up for five charges including attempted murder on me. That was the last time I got shot. A lot of people say I'm lucky to be alive. I say they were all bad shots. The way I grew up in my life you never dob anyone in. Sometimes that's a wrong procedure, but that's how I grew up, so I never dopped anyone in my life. Later on in life that caused me a jail sentence. That happens.

## Marriage

That was bouncing. I had to be a bouncer because my wife was a nurse doing contract work and she did twelve hours a day seven days a week and she made more money than I did. I thought I can't have a girl making more money than I did, so I worked seven nights a week. We paid for our properties very quickly.



When all my friends would be on holidays I'd be working, but I had a good reason because I had three kids. I put them all through Ivanhoe Grammar. I used to argue with my wife about sending kids to state school. When I was going to state school the only dickhead in the class was me but the rest of them all did something worthwhile: they became teachers or did something with their lives. Me? I was a bum, so I had to work hard to make sure we had something for the future.



Marriage of Leo and Lin Suszko, 1972.



Some of us become complacent because we think because I couldn't get into dentistry or science or medicine, so I'll become a teacher. A lot of kids I knew got lazy and said bugger it, I'll go to teachers college. We were lucky in St Albans because we had good teachers. But who knew what they wanted to become when they were at school? I wanted to become a train driver. Then I wanted to be a fisherman and then I wanted to be superman but those positions were all taken. I found the times I suffered most in life was when I needed to have an MG or a Ford Mustang and that was when I was eighteen, so that I could take a lovely chick to the drive in, not in my 1948 Morris Minor that my mum gave me eighty dollars to buy. Understand? That's what I needed then. Now I have a stable of sports cars downstairs – Bentley, BMW, Mercedes – but I don't need them now. So that need when I was seventeen has taken all them bloody years to hatch. I think all of us as boys really loved to have a sports car, you know? But we never had the money, not where I came from. My dad had a Mansfield pushbike and used to dink me on it. I thought it was terrific, but we didn't have a car.

It was exciting working at all these clubs because there was plenty of wine, women and song, a few damages, a few pellets, but it was all exciting to me. I used to think that the world revolved around nightlife. But later as I matured I found that nightlife was for bums who never had a good home life. It took me a while to get used to that, because to me it was all a way to

make money, which was my prime driver at that time. I had an illegal strip joint and booze stage door club. I turned it into a restaurant called The Branding Iron Steak House and that's when my life changed. We used to put on a country and western dance and to let the girls in for nothing, no entrance fee, but we also had a restaurant and a nightclub. So the nurses would all come there from the Royal Melbourne and Yooralla and stuff like that. One of those nurses became my wife. After a couple of years of on and off relationship we got married. Lin became the autopilot in my rather speeding career and straightened me out. She came from Malaysia of Chinese background and did her studentship as a nurse at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. We had an on-off relationship for a couple of years but only because I was too scared to commit. My lifestyle then was not conducive to having a relationship in any way, shape or form that would last longer than a couple of weeks. We eventually married in 1972. Three boys and seven grandkids later we're still deeply in love and she's been the pillar of my life, putting up with me getting shot up in armed robberies, going to jail, getting lost at sea, going overboard and nearly drowning, and she was always there.

### Surviving adversity

One of the nights when we were going out for dinner... A couple of days before, being a lifesaver at Williamstown Lifesaving Club I pulled a couple of kids in – I rescued them – I was summoned to the Mike Walsh Show. This was about 1970. There was a company in Melbourne at the time called Courage Breweries which was bought out by Carlton United. Every few weeks or couple of months Courage would have their Courage Bravery Award. They were going to give me their award because of my activities at Williamstown Life Saving Club rescuing a couple of kids and one that I'd lost, unfortunately, which nearly made me give up life saving. The kid had a hole in the heart and we didn't know and there was nothing we could do.

The Channel Seven studio was in Johnson Street Collingwood but before we went to that I thought we'd do the right thing and take my lady to dinner. We went to restaurant near the Tankerville Arms and were having a meal when this guy stood up and started punching the owner. Unfortunately the owner was a woman who was the wife of a policeman. The man punching her was a very well known criminal known as Jimmy Fingers Nugent, because he only had three fingers on one hand. Anyway, I went over and dragged him outside and give it to him. His gun mole ran out and gave him a pistol, gave him a little 22 revolver, and he went to shoot me with that but missed so I grabbed the garbage bin and hit him but he fired again and it went through my shirt. I grabbed his arm, pulled the gun off him and smashed him in the face. In those days there was an awning over the entrance and I threw the gun up there. His gun mole gave him a stiletto so he went to stab me but missed and got her. I grabbed the rubbish bin and beat him up. I got my wife, jumped into the car and she drove to Royal Melbourne Hospital where they patched me up a bit and we went straight back to the studio to get the award and I was on for five minutes. I think that was either the second or third date with my future wife. I still have the Mike Walsh Show Courage Brewers mug that they gave me. I used to drink beer out of it but I don't drink much anymore.



That man Nugent was later found dead with three bullets in the head in the fight over the waterside unions. He was a bad man. I'd run into him later in life in one of my bouncing situations and dealt with him very, very severely. But then again, that was another trial and tribulation that my missus went through.

My last shooting was in 1987 when there was an armed robbery in my Coburg office and there was a lot of money in the safe, about eighty grand for the payroll, but we couldn't open it. It was an inside job. They went straight to the Brownbuilt four-drawer cabinet, picked up a canvass sack which had only one-dollar and five-dollar notes - a couple of grand. But as they picked up the canvass bag there was a big brass key to the safe that dropped unnoticed down into the back of a file and so the key couldn't be found. They bashed my foreman, bashed my salesman, then they jammed the shot gun into my secretary's guts so I just went crazy and grabbed the guy by the throat. He fired and shot me and that bullet wounded me in several places. He said: "F\*\*k! I've shot him in the f\*\*king head!" My hair was burnt from the blast but it was the artery that was hit. I slid down

on the ground and started counting. I was taught by the police that if I was ever shot I had to count, you've got to force yourself to count. I don't know how long I was counting but I got to twenty-three. A five-foot-two little short blond-headed police woman came in: "Are you alright luv?" I said "I am now, darling." They went through but the robbers had already escaped in their stolen red Alpha Romeo.

The ambulance came a few minutes later with me spreadeagled on the ground and my secretary curled up in coagulated blood. He said "Move your arm. Do you feel alright?" I said "I'm right, I'm right. It's just a bit of blood." He got this long pair of scissors and cut my pants straight up and cut my shirt straight up so he could see my injuries and said "You'll be right, it's all superficial, there's no broken bones." Well, later they did find a broken bone but that was it. They put me in hospital and I was in intensive care in PANCH. That afternoon my wife had just picked up the three kids from Ivanhoe Grammar and she'd just got home in Templestowe when she heard a newsflash that the owner of Samco Meats in Coburg had been shot dead, when a couple of my employees drove up behind her and told her I was still alive. She'd thought our life was over but we got through it. We got through it.

My mate Peter from the armed robbery squad got some ex-coppers to guard the home. So I was told how to look after myself in the house and had videos and audios installed through the house, and pistols that I had hidden away. I had some good friends in the police because I got to know them through my time as a bouncer and I was a member of the police angling club. That was the last shooting. They traced those robbers. One was dead three days later and within five days the other was shot dead with his neck cut by that one guy. Much later, the police charged Rodney Charles Collins with attempted murder, threats to kill, intentionally cause serious injury, recklessly cause serious injury and multiple counts of assault over the robbery incident, but these charges ended up being dropped as by that stage Collins was already serving life for double murder. He was also linked to other murders including the killing of police informer Terrence Hodson and his wife.

One day I come home from work early and our sons were out the back: fourteen, twelve, and eight years of age, with six other boys, and they were "shooting" pistols at each other. My pistols. Thank God I kept my pistols in a drawer that was locked and the ammunition was locked somewhere else. So they found the key to the pistol drawer but they never knew where the ammo was. I put a plastic shell in every gun that I had so that if anyone found it they had to remove the plastic shell with a pair of tweezers and a certain tool, because a friend of mine who was a manager with a national bank came home one day about ten years ago to find that his twenty-year-old and twenty-one-year-old university students had blown their heads off. The daughter came home and found them dead. They were taught how to skeet shoot since they were ten, but something happened that day and they were playing around and shot themselves. That man has never recovered. With regard to my guns, I got rid of them by handing them in when the gun amnesty was introduced.

Then there was the Royal Commission into the meat industry in 1982. All the charges were dropped in 1984 as there was not enough evidence. I had charges of perjury and the DPP said cancel the perjury charges because he never answered yes or no to a question. Which I didn't. My counsel had told me if I was uncertain to say "I don't recall Your Honour" or "Not to the best of my knowledge Your Honour, but I will find the information." With that the prosecutor stood up and said "How can you run a business of 400 employees and can't remember?" They called up witnesses who said "He's had sixteen serious concussions and shootings." In fact I do have a memory problem. The Australian Olympic wrestling coach confirmed that I had been concussed and had memory outages. All those charges were dropped.

Then in 1989 Mr Wally Curran who was the leader of the Communist Party and Secretary of the Meat Workers Union caused me some real trouble. He's the one who put Bob Hawke into power. None of the meat workers at my place belonged to his union. He got one of the state politicians to re-instate the charges as conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and conspiracy to rob the Commonwealth of funds. The conspiracy to pervert the course of justice was bullshit and they threw that out. The commission inquiry lasted for months. Sixteen character witnesses got up for me and testified to all my volunteer community work and all the support I'd provided to the clubs I'd been part of and I know that impressed the judge. But I think there was political pressure from the highest authority in the land to get some conviction and for me to serve at least two years in jail. Judge O'Shea sentenced me to eighteen months but I served only five months. I didn't dob anyone in but going to jail hurt me. Now I have to apply to go to the US and have to get special entry permits because I go there two or three times a year. When I go to New Zealand I have to say I am a criminal, which is what Wally Curran wanted to happen, to make life hard for me. You get over those things. I'm a believer in no matter what happens you just step over it and keep going.

## Current situation

I've got a big future ahead of me because I've got seven grandkids to grow up. To me that's my path. All the shit that I've done, all the wine, women and song that I've had, I've had 50 men's worth. I don't need any of that anymore. I have a granddaughter with Down's syndrome and I want to know that when she's twenty-one she has enough to support her, which is what I'm doing now.

Companies that I own or control at the moment include Pacific Meat Sales, Pacific Meat Packers, Cisco Meat Exports, Pacific Food Machinery, The Big Butcher, Edgars Smallgoods, and Free Range Pork. We were part owners in Hurstbridge Abattoirs, I started Diamond Valley Pork, Swickers in Kingaroy that employs 400 people (I was a shareholder there), and Benalla Abattoirs that I've sold to my foreman and staff. I develop businesses and sell them to the staff. I had Diamond Valley Growers in Hurstbridge where I used to grow the Blue Gum trees that were planted on the sides of the road at Traralgon. We've done all that stuff.

We have 240 people working for Pacific Meat, 60 working for Big Butcher, 20 men at the cold store, 160 at the abattoirs, and 32 in the machinery division. We have a factory in China, one in Korea, one in Taiwan, and we had one in Copenhagen but that's gone because it became too expensive; the wages were too expensive, and that's what's happening here in Australia as I'm watching around me.

When I was a young bloke, Rex Hunt and I used to take a lot of blokes fishing up in Darwin; it's one of our pet loves. We used to talk about the girls and the goods times in those days when we were young. Here we are fifty years later still going fishing but there's only four of us left, and now we take our mobile telephones and compete for who has the most photos of the grandchildren. So we've come a long way. I gave my time up for lifesaving and wrestling. I've supported the Herald learn to swim program and baseball for the kids. Now my biggest thrill is to see my grandchildren growing up and participating. Every weekend I'm at my grandkids' footy, learn to swim, jazz ballet or going to Melbourne University where the kids are on stage doing dance routines, presenting them with their first flowers, and one has joined the Port Melbourne Life Saving Club.

I landed at Station Pier in 1948 and here I am sixty-six years later just 752 metres away and loving every minute of my life. After the first time I got shot I told myself I would live life to the fullest. A lot of people say that but don't do it. Sometimes I might spend more than I should, I might drink more than I should, I might eat more than I should, or I might go fifty miles more than I should out into Bass Straight in my boat. But I do it because I can and I want to, and if I do that and if I die doing something like that that I want to do, then I don't give a damn. Do you know what I mean? I've had some really good life experiences and I've got many more to come and I hope you are still here to share them with me.

**Leo Suszko, August 2015.**





Lena Correlje (Suszko) and Leo Suszko, 2015.



Anton Correlje, Slawko Muc, Leo Suszko, 2014.



Peter and Cheryl Barbopoulos, Leo Suszko, Slawko Muc, 2015.

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