

TATIANA (TANYA) KORINFSKY: ACTOR, DIRECTOR, POET, INTERNATIONAL ARTIST



It all began in April 1950, when George and Edith (nee Enepetz) Korinfsky boarded the boat "General M L Hersey" at Naples, Italy, with their three children Maria, Alexander, and Tatiana to begin a new life in Australia, following the ravages of WWII. George was of Russian background and his wife, Edith, of Latvian descent. George had been drafted into the Soviet Army, and had escaped the fate of his brother, Vladimir, who had been sent to a Siberian labour camp for anti-government activities and where he was subsequently executed, because in the chaos of war, the authorities were not exactly sure where George was. Their Mother also spent ten years in Siberia, for being the Mother of an "Enemy of the State". George eventually became a prisoner of war, as so many of his countrymen, and was eventually released by the Americans. Interestingly, his first choice of relocation as a displaced person was to the United States, but due to an abscessed tooth, was unable to make the interview, thus losing his place. He was offered Australia, instead.

That's how we ended up here — all due to an inflamed tooth!



Edith and George Korinfsky with Alex and Maria, Germany 1947.

Like so many others, we started out life in Bonegilla camp. Eventually, scraping together enough money to buy land in St. Albans, they built a modest dwelling of two rooms, complete with wood stove for heating and cooking. Washing was done in a copper outside and bathing took place in a large aluminium tub, often outside when the weather permitted.

I have memories of long (to us children) walks to the Maribyrnong River (behind Errington Rd) with family friends and swimming in the water holes. In the evenings, our parents often visited neighbours or friends, and I can remember playing on the floor in the same room as the adults, and just seeing various legs under the table as we played. You heard vague voices and stories being exchanged among the adults, and it seemed that people were happy and contented to some degree. They were safe, independent, could find work, and had a roof over their heads. Their children could be educated and live safely in their new environment. Pleasure and fun was found in simple activities and there were always other parents and children around. So we have mainly wonderful and happy memories of our earlier childhood.



Edith Korinsky with Maria, Alex, Tanya. East Esplanade St Albans c.1952



Maria and Tanya, East Esplanade, St Albans c.1952.

Life became a little more challenging when our Mother died at the age of 32 (due to the effects of high blood pressure). Her funeral was attended by many people — testament to her friendly and generous character, and the community we lived in. She had come from a well-to-do family and I often marvel at how she adapted to life in a place like St. Albans, cooking on a wood stove, getting the iceman to deliver ice for the ice-box and trying to keep things cool in the blistering summers, washing sheets and clothes in the copper, and working night shift in the canteen at The Herald newspaper in the city. Nevertheless, she always made time for her family and others, no matter what. Christmas was always a special time, with white linen table cloth, candles, huge Christmas tree, carols, special food and drink, and those without family or a place to go were invited to join us. All this in the small room that served as a

living/dining/bedroom for parents! The other room was occupied by us three children and the wood stove. When we added to our living space by having a small one-room structure placed next to the bungalow, instead of it being used by the family, our parents installed a homeless and jobless compatriot! He repaid them by giving us three children basin haircuts while our parents were away!

School in the beginning was at the only primary school that existed in St. Albans at the time, located way past the railway station, on West Esplanade. Even now, I am amazed that it was just expected of five-year-olds to walk all that distance, unaccompanied and unsupervised. On the way home, we called in at the shops and spent our pennies, thruppences, and sixpences, buying lollies and swap cards and marbles. The shop near the station was a veritable Aladdin's cave, filled with all manner of treasures and wonderful items, and the shopkeeper always obliging and patient as we peered into the glass cabinets and shelves and took ages to decide on our purchases. Mother always came to the school to see the teachers, end-of-year days, and I suppose parent-teachers meetings.

Father made a living by cutting wood (on the land he bought near Kyneton) and delivering it to the locals, so we had a sense of community and belonging right from the start. He then started a saw-milling business, supplying timber for housing. Again, looking back, he simply adapted to the new reality, and never really complained that his teaching and educational qualifications were not recognised here. He was not alone. There were many who had been writers, poets, teachers, engineers, and professional people, but who ended up in factories, labouring jobs, restaurants, and other low-paying industries in order to put food on the table and ensure their children got an education.

We were lucky also that our parents never forgot their heritage and told many a story of life in their respective home countries, giving us a concrete sense of our heritage. Curiously, we just accepted our two realities and identities.



After Mother passed away, Father decided it was time to put his efforts into activities aimed at countering the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. He spent many hours and his own money funding such activities, including the publishing of a Russian-language newspaper, which he sent around the world - some of his readers were Igor Sikorsky (of Sikorsky helicopter fame) and remnants of the Russian Imperial family in France. Donations sometimes dribbled in, but were mainly small, and Father took a job at a printing factory to supplement income. Thus, money was always in short supply for paying electricity bills and buying clothes, but he felt it was his duty to follow this path, after his experiences growing up in the Soviet Union and the fate of his family. With an unbroken line of priests (since the introduction of Christianity in Russia in 988 AD) on the male side of the family, and also including poets and architects, the family's fortunes suffered after the Russian Revolution in 1917.

After many years of struggle, sleepless nights, and hard times he finally chose to switch to teaching in 1970 — at St. Albans High School! — after his qualifications were finally recognised through Melbourne University.

Primary School — St. Albans East

After the second primary school was built in St. Albans East in 1956, life became a little easier for many. Now the walk was about 10 minutes and we often came home for lunch, when Mother made sure we always got a hot meal, often inviting neighbours children to join us — all this still produced on the wood stove.

We often went to the school after hours to see the Charlie Chaplin films that were being shown — a real treat in a pre-TV era. I remember also that we students were involved in a tree-planting exercise to beautify the rather stark surroundings of the school. Each student planted a tree around the fence perimeter and I remember not being terribly happy at my assigned tree — a Lilly Pilly — I guess a foretaste of my intense interest in gardening and plants later in life! When TV was introduced, I remember going to someone's house to watch what seemed to be the main fare of Cowboy and Indian films and Walt Disney cartoons. However, I also loved reading and spent many an hour after lights out under the blankets with a torch reading book after book. Then, we were often packed off to bed when it was still light (probably summer)!



Alex and Maria Korinsky in Grade V, St Albans East Primary School, 1956.

We generally led a very free life, however, often being allowed to play in the street, visiting friends' homes, and roaming around unsupervised. We kept ourselves amused with all kinds of physical games, often making up our own games and using our own imaginations, and dragging out household items or making things out of branches, wood, or whatever was to hand. We swapped cards and marbles, played hop scotch, and when the Olympics came to Melbourne in 1956, the street became a sprinting track and our backyard was turned into a discus, javelin, high jump, and long jump area.

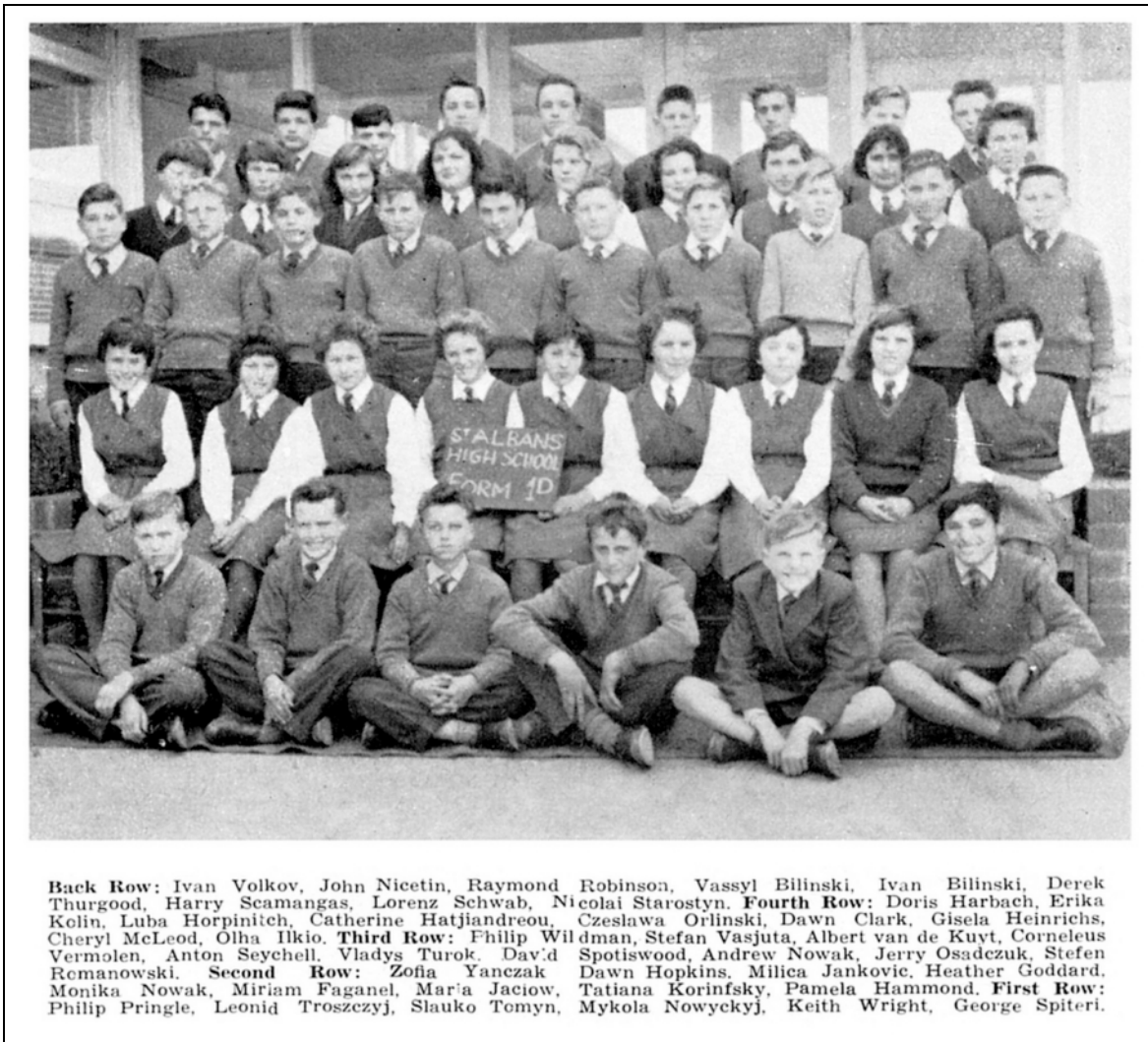
When we had to come in to eat, it was often a roast lamb with mint sauce and roasted vegetables, which our Mother somehow perfected, despite being of European background. We were fortunate also in growing up with many pets (some were simply strays which followed Mother home, and they were all taken in and given a home), and when our pet dog died, Mother helped us to arrange a proper funeral and burial, and so we learnt many things about life and death. She also engendered in us a love of animals, gardening, and Nature.

Secondary School — St. Albans High School

There was much excitement when a secondary school was finally established in St. Albans in 1957. I attended from 1960, the 5th year of its existence. It was just around the corner from our house in Millawa Avenue and we had to pass the house of the Headmaster (Mr James Barker, at that time) to and from school. He and his wife, Mrs Bernice Barker, also a teacher, lived on the corner of Millawa Ave and St. Albans Road East. We were somewhat intimidated walking past their house, as they both seemed a little strict.

St Albans High was a wonderful school to attend in those days. We had very dedicated teachers, mainly, and although there was less parent involvement, because both parents mostly worked, there was a real community spirit about the school. Most teachers were very committed to furthering our educational development, but were also heavily involved in extracurricular activities, and just supporting and encouraging us individually — they seemed to genuinely care about the students. Teachers who had a profound impact on me were Barry Rayner (Maths), Joan Butler (English), and Alison Gliddon (English). Through Mrs Gliddon I came to appreciate and love Milton's "Paradise Lost" and went on to choose Tennessee Williams plays as my optional study selection — recently I have been undertaking to do Williams' plays in my theatre work, a spark that was ignited all those years ago! I am sure I would not have earned Second Class Honours in English at Matriculation level had it not been for Mrs Gliddon. I would here also like to acknowledge the kindness and support of the Haynes family, the school cleaners

for many years. We often went to their house to watch TV, drinking cups of tea accompanied by biscuits — very decent and generous people.



Tanya Korinsky in Form 1D, St Albans High School, 1960.

From about the age of 15, during school holidays, I got jobs in sandwich bars and cafes in order to be able to earn a little cash for needed or desired items. It was very exciting, and I felt very grown-up taking the red train (the 'old rattler') into the city all by myself.

The student body was made up of students from many parts of Europe in the main. Luckily, most parents left the past behind them in Europe, so most students mixed easily and happily, and history was left to, well, "history". Australians were in the minority. But Greeks sat with Germans, Australians with Russians, Poles with Italians, and so on.

At some point I became House Captain of Kurrajong (can't remember which year, however!), played with the very successful softball team, which won countless Western Division trophies, and was also a Prefect in my final year. Somehow, I also won quite a few races in the swimming championships, although I remember vividly almost drowning myself in the Butterfly event, mainly because I couldn't really do the stroke properly, but winning it through sheer determination! I loved all aspects of school and it provided a kind of safe haven and stimulating space when the going sometimes got a bit rough. I suspect this was true for quite a few students.

My best friends were Heather Goddard (re-established contact just this year after 45 or so years!), whose parents were extraordinarily kind and generous to me because of our family situation, Cathy Hatjiandreou (again, meeting this year for the first time since graduating from high school at our private high school

reunion), whose steadiness and maturity and the long walks and talks that we shared really helped me through some difficult times — and I recall visiting her home and being fascinated by Greek culture and food; and Jan Griffin, whom I saw every year on my annual visits from Japan, where I lived for 25 years. And whom I saw frequently when I moved back to Melbourne about 12 years ago. A good, true, and generous friend. I was devastated when she passed away due to brain cancer in 2011. I am still in touch with her Mother, who is now in her 90s!



Lena Suszko, Tanya Korinsky, Olga Suszko.

One other special friend I would like to mention is Laurie Schwab. We met every year as well, when I visited Melbourne from overseas. I was working as a journalist for part of my time in Japan, as was he, in Melbourne. He was a smart, funny, warm person — also dearly missed. Imagine my surprise when I was walking around the lake at Daylesford some years ago, and decided to take a rest on a bench. There, inscribed on that particular bench, was a dedication to Laurie! It was a special moment.



Milica Jankovic, Erika Kolin, Katrin Schwab, Ivan Volkov, Laurie Schwab, Tanya Korinsky.

There were other students and teachers, too numerous to mention, who, together, made St. Albans High such a special place. To all of them, we owe a debt of gratitude that we have so many wonderful and special memories. To our parents, as well, we owe much — many of them were in a difficult situation, uprooted as they were and often with traumatic past memories and experiences, and some less able to cope than others — nevertheless, with maturity and empathy, we should acknowledge their sacrifices and contributions in helping make us the people we are today.

Life after St. Albans High School

After leaving St. Albans High School, from 1966 I attended Melbourne University, having gained a Commonwealth Scholarship and also a Conzinc Riotinto Scholarship to study Japanese. My majors were Japanese and Political Science, with a sub-major in English. Right through university, on weekends and term holidays, I worked at the Southern Cross Hotel in the Coolibah dining room, enabling me to save some money.

Subsequently, in early 1970, I waved family and friends goodbye and went to Japan on a half-cargo half-passenger vessel. Talk about a rite of passage! I spent about 25 years in total in Japan, returning to Melbourne every year to see family and friends. Life was very interesting and educational in Japan — I feel lucky that I had the opportunity to experience a different culture and different ways of doing things and viewing life. I was fortunate, too, in having fascinating and varied professional opportunities — I worked in journalism, publishing, and teaching (both at universities and at cultural centres), did editing and narration, and also worked for the United Nations University (in the Publications Unit), which was headquartered in Tokyo. Meanwhile I also engaged in theatre and Toastmaster's, and studied art, traditional Japanese instruments, and Buddhism. Traveling extensively, I went to Europe, the UK, and the US, as well as nearly all the countries between Australia and Japan.

In 2005, I decided to shift into the next phase of my life, leaving Japan and coming back to Australia, to settle at Mt Macedon. What a surprise to learn that Svetlana Bohudski was living up the road from me. And that Neville Thurgood (father of Derek Thurgood) was President of the Mount Players, a theatre group I became a member of! Since then I have focussed on my theatre activities (playwriting, directing, acting, producing), photography, and art. I spend a good deal of the year in London and New York, exhibiting my art and photos, continuing to study Buddhism and write haiku poetry, and also doing theatre work. I also regularly visit Japan, which has had such a profound influence on my life.

I went to my first private reunion of St. Albans High School students this year (February 2017) at Nick and Jutta Szwed's — what fun, what excitement to see friends and teachers from those long-ago years — and to learn of Nick and Joe Ribarow's wonderful project. Though I have wandered far and wide since those days, somehow I feel a great sense of comfort and contentment in being able to connect the dots of many roads traveled, including the St. Albans journey that began all those years ago!



Tanya Korinsky, 2017

Postscript

I would like to express my thanks to Joseph Ribarow and Nick Szwed, who undertook the project of putting down and preserving the history of St. Albans and St. Albans High School in this particular era. It is a huge task and an extremely important and valuable one, documenting as it does a slice of social history, mainly comprising post-Second World War European migration and the contributions of the many individuals who found themselves in a place called St. Albans.



School reunion 2017: S Rodda, M Hatjiandreou, Cathy Alexopoulos, Tanya Korinfsky, N Szwed, D Fitton.

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