

JERRY OSADCZUK : CHEF, TEACHER, ARTIST



My name is Jerry Osadczuk and I went to St Albans High School in 1960 and finished there in 1965. My father Dymitr was Ukrainian; he passed away last year at age 95. My mother Maria is Belarusian and is still going at 92 years. They emigrated to Australia in 1949 on the Dutch ship called the Skaugum, so I was only one year old when we arrived and my brother Robert was three. Like many people we ended up in Bonegilla before transferring to Somers Camp on the Victorian coast. While we were at Somers my father was working on the Snowy Mountains scheme. He worked there for a couple of years and then we bought a block of land in Ardeer where he and friends built the house. I remember he would buy timber and bring it home balanced on his pushbike.

Friends used to help each other to build their houses, that's how amazing it was. We lived in someone else's room while we were building our house and when our house was finished another family would live in one of our rooms while they built someone else's house. It was a pretty amazing example of cooperation.

I started at the Mother of God school in Ardeer for my primary schooling and then I went to St Albans High School for my secondary schooling. I'm not sure why I was sent to St Albans but there was a bus going past our house so that was probably the easiest way to get to a school. I think Sunshine High School may not have had any vacancies. I started at St Albans in 1960 in form 1D and played up most of the time. I'm not sure how they decided who were the clever kids and who were less interested but we were all allocated classes and the two brightest kids in our class were Leonid Troszczyj and Tatiana Korinsky. I liked playing up and I gave teachers a bit of a tough time right throughout high school. I received a lot of detentions, but that was okay.



Jerry Osadczuk (centre row, second from right), Form 1D, 1960.

I was really interested in art, especially drawing and painting. I had a teacher called Mr Youd and he was marvelous because he knew how to treat kids and never screamed at them. He had this calm temperament – he would tell kids off but it was never in a screaming fashion. Because he liked art and I liked art we got along. That was good. Mr Henry was there in the later years

and I had him for biology classes. He must have had an accident because he had a caliper for his right hand which he could use quite dexterously and I remember him using a scalpel with that hand to do dissections. I loved biology and I loved his method of teaching. Miss Coutts was also nice but some of the boys gave her a bit of a hard time probably because she was pretty. There were times when she came to tears in the classroom, which was a shame to see it happen. I'm reminded of it these days because my wife Toko is a primary school teacher and sometimes she comes home and tells me she's had some kids giving her a hard time.

Mr Scarff was a really tall guy and another good teacher; I liked him also. Mr Smith was a science teacher who loved throwing things at the students, e.g. chalk, dusters, and once he threw a sandwich at me. He was strict but a very interesting teacher. They need someone like him in the education system these days. Unfortunately teachers are treated with contempt these days by the students and by some parents and do whatever they like and can get away with it. Teachers are definitely an unprotected species. The French teacher (can't remember his name) had a very strong French accent.

I've forgotten the number of times I went to Torpey's office to get the strap. He was pretty tough, and if you drew your hand away as he was about to strap you he got even more determined. He was kind of strict yet he was perceptive and could see that some of the kids going off the rails a bit, like I was. In about Form 4 I was getting a bit bad and he gave Paul Ledney and myself a project repairing chairs. The school had these really heavy wooden chairs and with age they were falling apart with the glue joints coming apart and brackets coming off. Torpey was paying us to fix the chairs and all we needed was glue and some big clamps. This was all done after school, but what he didn't know was how many we fixed, so we would add a couple extra chairs to the tally. He was paying us about fifty cents per chair. We did it over a year and I don't think the budget stretched that far but he kept us going. I think he realised we were padding the numbers but it made me realise he wasn't such a bad guy because he humoured us. He obviously had to be the judge and jury on occasions at the school and maybe that's why he was so tough.

When I left high school me and a friend of mine, Eugene Lobczuk, got jobs in the city. Eugene used to live in View Street and we often disappeared to enjoy a smoke together. Another good friend, Goodall, used to live over the fence from the high school, about halfway along Stradbroke Drive. We'd hop over the fence into his place and drink coffee and have a fag.

I liked English literature as taught by Mr Macleish. He was another good guy who loved sports and running; I think he took up marathon running and did that regularly. He was at the school a long time. Pavlov was a wonder and I remember him sitting on the desk having a smoke, which just wouldn't happen these days. Even my wife, Toko, said that when she was at school in Japan there were teachers smoking in the classroom. When you think of it, how does that not encourage kids to smoke? A lot of the time I couldn't understand what Pavlov was saying because he had a pretty broad Russian accent. I think that's why I never concentrated. I never continued any of the maths subjects and I was hopeless in economics. I tried to say to the teacher a couple of times "How can $x + y = z$?" It doesn't work.

After high school, Eugene Lobczuk and I went for an interview in with Norwich Union in Queen Street in the city; they were an insurance company. It was funny because they employed both of us and we were sitting at desks by ourselves and not knowing what to do. It was strange. It was also the first time that I wore a suit and I hated it, especially in the summer with the tie and jacket. We were getting \$30 per fortnight, but you could buy things really cheap. We lasted there about a year. I hated working there from the start but a year's experience in an office was good so the next job I got was with the taxation department. I found that pretty boring as well. There was another guy from St Albans working there and we were called "searchers" i.e. people who were searching for paper files because that's how everything was documented in those days: huge, big files that were stored on different floors and we would bring them back for other people to do whatever they did with taxation. What we discovered early was that there was pub

very close by, so the searches sometimes took the whole afternoon because we were at the pub playing pool. When we got caught the first time they gave us a warning. The second time we got another warning, but obviously we did not take things very seriously. The third time we both got sacked.

I also worked for the Victorian Pipelines Commission and I remember the guy who was in charge of me smoked a pipe. I hated it so much and I was a smoker at the time but this guy had a desk almost next to me and the smell was overpowering.

At that stage I was getting on a bit so I thought I better start thinking about my future and what I'm going to do. I absolutely loved cooking, I think because I always used to help my mother in the kitchen and she was a very good cook. She was Ukrainian and cooked a lot of traditional Ukrainian food, but sometimes I would experiment and cook whatever I wanted to do. I knew you could go to William Angliss and train there, so I applied and got in. I got an apprenticeship even though I was a mature age student, so I went to school three days per week and was billeted out to restaurants on the other days. I just loved that and that was it. I ended up working in restaurants in South Yarra and other places and even worked in Madison's Disco which was over in Exhibition Street. It was really great because I would do the cooking and when that was finished I would go down to the disco and get free drinks and meet all these lovely ladies.

I think the best job I had was at Two Faces in South Yarra. It was owned by Hermann Schneider who was a Swiss guy; he had a limp and occasionally would come screaming into the kitchen because he reckoned the service was not good enough or something like that. I remember one of the chefs who was being told off threw a knife at Schneider who ran as fast as he could out of that kitchen. Schneider was a really, really good chef before he went into the restaurant business. It was great job.

I met a Japanese guy who was working at the restaurant. We worked together for about 6 months and then he decided to go back to Japan. Because we worked together very well he said to me that if I ever went to Japan he would get me a job there. He was the head honcho at his restaurant and I had no commitments in Melbourne so I went over to Tokyo to join him. That was in 1985 and I worked with him for two years, six days a week. Sunday was the only day we had off and that was spent mostly in sleeping. We used to start at 8 in the morning and work till 2 in the afternoon, then we had 2 hours off and in those 2 hours we'd push a couple of chairs together as a bed and we'd sleep. Then we'd work through till 11 o'clock at night. It was pretty tough but it was very enjoyable.

After a couple of years I came back to Australia and met my now wife, Toko, who is of Japanese background. – weird isn't it? We were together for some time and then in 1991 we decided to go back to her home town. She came from Kyushu, which is the western island of Japan, and her family were in Nobeoka. She knew a person who ran a cooking school and they were looking for someone to teach western cooking. Everything sounded great so we said let's go. I was teaching apprentices and then about 3 months into my contract the owner's wife ran away with the chef somewhere to the eastern side of Japan. The owner was so distraught because they had kids and the whole situation was ugly so he closed the school. We didn't know what to do because I didn't want to go back to Australia and in between my cooking classes I had been teaching some people English so there were some possibilities of staying. I thought: why don't we open an English school? because there was nothing like that around as we were 50 kilometres from the nearest city and I knew people were willing to pay to learn English. My wife's parents owned a dry cleaner's shop and her father would deliver to hospitals and knew there was an old maternity hospital that had been closed for ten years because the owners had built one of those new private hospitals where the owners and their families manage and work in the facility. The old place was of concrete and pretty horrible but it was available for rent. I think we paid about 3,000 yen a month, which must have been \$30 – it was a token payment but meant someone was looking after the building. We used a small part of the area and refurbished it for

an office, a classroom, and living space for us. Our living room was the old baby delivery room, which was unusual because the floor and walls were all tiled.

We set the whole thing up, put an ad in the paper and started slowly with students enrolling a few at a time. When we left there we had 140 students. My wife and I were the only ones working there. I used to teach the adults and she taught the kids. When we first started, because my Japanese was zilch, Toko would sit in the class and basically translate. Then we realised that people were relying on her too much so we decided to throw them in the deep end, to immerse them in English, because Japanese people are really shy and won't try hard if they don't have to. So I started to teach the adults on my own using books, and it worked – people couldn't rely on her and became more confident in trying things on their own. We had a routine going where I would teach the class and Toko would bring in Japanese tea and stay there about half an hour or more and talk to them in Japanese. We ended up calling the group "The Down Under English Club." That formula worked very well. My wife taught the kids during the day and I would teach the adults at night. We would arrange outings such as a barbeque near the river. I thinks that's something they enjoyed because Japanese people like a bit of repetition and they loved going there every week. Sometimes we'd organize a disco party or go to a restaurant and we'd hold Christmas events. I had some students for 8 years – they couldn't speak perfect English but they enjoyed the experience of learning.

My son was born in 1994 and was a very cute baby being half Asian and half Western; the students loved to see him and kept coming back. We were teaching for 9 years, but as with everything there was a time to finish. I used to come back to Australia every year to see my parents and the Australian environment. I hated flying but forced myself to come back and catch up with people. Then we shipped up our possessions and came back to Australia with two kids. I was 52 at that stage and the kids were 6 years and 2 years.

I must have been a late developer because I didn't get my car licence until I was 40, and the only reason I did that was because we were going to Japan. I used to ride a pushbike everywhere around Melbourne. Even when I was a chef I would get around with a backpack and riding the bike. The worst thing was after we'd been to the pub after work. At the time I was working in South Yarra and living in Fairfield, so I had to ride down Punt Road and that had its risks. I remember once I broke the windscreen on a bus by punching it. The reason I did it was because the bus ran me off the road. I was riding on the side of the road and the bus started turning into the bus stop and ran me into the gutter. I'm not a violent person but that really upset me. I tried knocking on the door but the driver must have seen me coming with steam coming out of my ears because he shut the door. If he'd left it open and just apologised it would have been okay, but he closed the door and didn't even want to look at me. I went round the front but he still wouldn't look at me so I punched the windscreen and it shattered, which surprised even me because I wasn't expecting that. I basically took off down the side streets. This was all in my younger days before I went to Japan.

We came back to Australia in 2000. I would come back to Australia sometimes every two years, sometimes with my wife and sometimes by myself, because I wanted the children to be educated here. I felt that because my son, the older child, was half Japanese and half Australian he was slightly discriminated against in Japan. I thought it was better to have him here in a more even situation, because I remember even in St Albans there were some hassles about your nationality. Anyway, we came back in 2000 and were looking for a place in the country because I'd had enough of city life. In 1998 we were here for a couple of weeks and it was the last day before we were due to fly back. We were driving around in a rental car driving through Lilydale and I thought just keep driving, so we drove through to Healesville. It was about 5 o'clock and the estate agent was about to close when I saw a house advertised and the price was right. I asked him if it was still available and he said no one had been there in the last two years. He reluctantly took us out to have a look at the place. It was on Myers Creek Road about 5 kilometres out of town and my wife was freaking out because she'd never been in such an isolated area, but when I saw it I knew it was right for us. I talked to my wife and she was unsure at first, but then she said if I wanted to live there it was okay with her. The house was made of

wood inside and out with varnished timber panelling internally. No one had been living there for two years but the place was airy and clean. At the time we never even thought about bushfires, because it was an 11-acre block with trees everywhere and that's what I loved about. It wasn't till much later that I realised if there was a bushfire you would be trapped.

We bought the place and it remained empty for another year until we came back in 2000. It was interesting getting all our possessions shipped out in a container along this narrow dirt road with this truck groaning up this track to our house and the driver saying I don't think I can keep going. The driver left the container but said he would return the next day to collect so we had to unload it ourselves with two young kids running about. We lived in Healesville for fifteen years and moved out about a year ago. We then moved to Woori Yallock, which probably most people don't know where it is – it's on the way to Warburton.

Since coming back I was working as the cook at the Healesville hospital for about 8 years. My wife was working as a teacher at the Badger Creek primary school where, among other activities, she taught Japanese. I think one of her highlights there was when some exchange students came from Osaka and spent time with the Badger Creek kids and engaging with them through language, dance and calligraphy.

I retired from the Healesville hospital about 2010 and since then I've concentrated on my art. I've always liked art since my high school days. I never "took it up" as such, I just never stopped doing it since high school. Even when I was in Japan I studied sumi-e painting, which is brush and ink art and often depicting simple forms of bamboo and leaves. I really enjoyed doing that. When I came back to Australia I started doing it more seriously. I've been in a couple of joint exhibitions and have exhibited at Montsalvat. I was going to send a painting to a gallery in America but that fell through. My paintings might be called surrealist. What I usually do with my paintings is that I don't have anything in mind when I start and everything just happens. I put some colour on the canvas and then I see what develops as ideas suggest themselves. At the moment I'm organizing to have an exhibition at St Andrews. I've done a lot of hard work because I paint nearly every day. That's my calm meditation almost, where you get into that zone where everything else disappears. Hopefully the exhibition will occur in the next couple of months as I have enough paintings to fill the gallery.

My son has just graduated from Melbourne University where he studied architecture and Japanese; he's the brains in the family. He's always been really good at drawing and has a good imagination to inspire his art. He also picked up Kunji, which is the hardest form of Chinese writing but he picked it up pretty quickly. He's finished his undergraduate course but still has to do his masters. He also loves fashion. He got a job with a Japanese couple in Gertrude Street Fitzroy and now he's helping them to design clothes. We really hope he's going to stick to architecture and finish his masters. My daughter is in year 12 and has no idea of her future career.

Jerry Osadczuk
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