

OTTO CZERNIK: ELECTRONICS TECHNICIAN, QUALITY MANAGER, CATTLE BREEDER

Introduction



My family heritage is of European origin, with a Polish-Ukrainian father and a German mother. I was born in Germany in 1948 before the family migrated to Australia in 1950 under the sponsorship of the International Refugee Organisation. At first we lived in the Bonegilla and Broadmeadows migrant camps before moving to St Albans in 1952. I have a younger sister, Helen, who was born in 1951, the year after we arrived in Australia.

Wladimir Czernik

My father, Wladimir Czernik, was born in Lvov in 1911 and grew up in that area which had been part of Poland for centuries, but was taken over by the Russians and annexed to the Ukraine.

During Russia's control of the area they had pursued a policy of intense "Russification", which included trying to suppress the teaching of the Polish language and culture, as well as dividing the landowners from the people who worked on the land. These policies had led to the rise of nationalist movements amongst the Polish and Ukrainian peasants. The Ukrainian people in the area also wanted agrarian reform, partly because the big landowners were either Russian or Polish.

Some families in the villages surrounding Lvov were of Ukrainian ancestry, others of Polish, and some were of Jewish or other minority background. Within the surrounding region there were even villagers of German ancestry, so it was a real multi-ethnic population and one can guess at the heartache that local people endured when these three nations were involved in battles against each other, particularly when the battle fronts invaded their own farms and villages.



My father was drafted into the Russian army and in 1943 was fighting against the Germans. When his platoon was defeated, surrendering to the Germans was the only option, but from the Russian army's point of view surrender was treated as desertion, because they expected you to continue fighting even at the cost of your own life. Later this was described as Stalin's "last bullet order", where a soldier was expected to keep the last bullet to kill himself rather than be taken prisoner.

As a prisoner of war my father was sent off to the town of Kassel in Germany and assigned work in factories. When the Americans liberated the area he was employed with them as a trainee mechanic working on the maintenance of jeeps and other army vehicles. The Americans had access to better food supplies and prospects seemed more positive.



Annalise Helmuth

My mother, Annalise Hellmuth, was born in 1927 in the Hessen region, part of the Central German Uplands. Her parents were farmers in a small village called Alten Bauna, just south of Kassel, and mum grew up in this pretty little village, which later became part of a bigger town known as Baunatal.

Having seen some paintings of the landscape, I know that the old village setting in the 1930s was a picture of rural charm. Returning from the trip to the main town must have been a wonderful sight, because mum described how you would see the beauty of gently undulating fields planted with oats or rye, with sheaves bundled together into stooks where the harvesting had already started. Harvesting was done the traditional way: farmers wielded their scythes while others, including the women, came along behind them to bind the sheaves.

Country farming may not be quite as romantic as the pretty pictures of the countryside, but it is an honest living, and mum carried out her share of the farming responsibilities, alongside her sister and brother, looking after the livestock and working in the garden. Pig farming is not delicate work, but mum did her share, which including helping with the slaughter of animals when it was necessary.

Her other job was as a baby sitter for farmers around the district, but payment for this was often 'in kind' such as a bag of potatoes. There was also the regular chores in the fruit and vegetable garden for their domestic consumption.

During the war mum was working in one of the factories, and this is where she met her future husband, Wladimir Czernik, probably in 1943. Some of the factory workers were billeted in the village, and this is where they had the opportunity to meet again. She was in house number 30, he in number 98, so it was inevitable that they should meet again sometime. They continued to meet when they could, and so their romance developed.

Mum and dad married in 1947 and then in November 1948 I was born.



Emigrating to Australia

Mum and dad decided to emigrate because much of Kassel had been destroyed through the war, and the political turmoil in Poland and the Ukraine meant it was impossible for dad to return there. So, in 1949 they were accepted by the International Refugee Organisation as part of the program for resettling displaced persons.

On the third of March 1950 the family arrived at Station Pier, Melbourne, on the US-registered ship the Heinzelmann. Passengers were taken by train and bus to Bonegilla on the New South Wales border for processing, before being transferred to other regional centres.

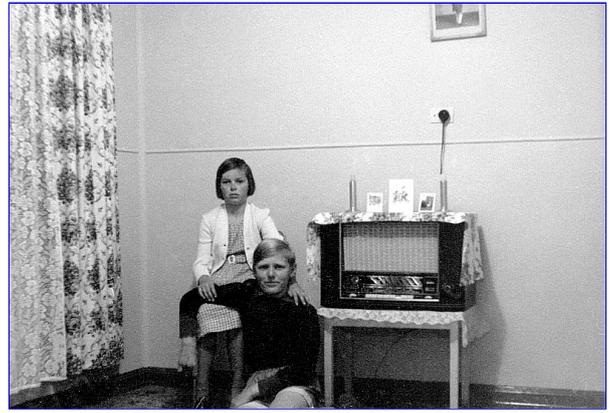
Some close friendships were formed on the ship and at the hostels, and people have remained in contact ever since. Dad and some of the other men were sent off to Williamstown to start their two-year work contracts while their wives and children went to Broadmeadows. Basically, dad worked for the PMG digging ditches and laying cables. Mum sometimes talked about the hardship that separation created for families. There was little privacy for individuals or couples in these camps. The women would sleep in dormitories while their men lived many miles away closer to their work during the

week and would return on the weekends. The camp had rows of tents lined up along one side and couples had to take turns using these for a bit of marital privacy.

After a while some of the women got fed up with this arrangement, and mum was one of them who said she wanted to normalise the family arrangements by moving to where dad was staying. The authorities in Williamstown were not happy when Anna and a friend turned up on the doorstep demanding to stay with their husbands, and threatened them with deportation. When the women called their bluff the authorities had to back down. Eventually some suggestion was made about the possibility of sharing a caravan nearby.

Settling in St Albans





In 1952 the family bought a plot of land in Fox Street, St Albans. At that time this area was just open fields. The house site was near the corner of Fox and Theodore Streets, and in between was a low point in the otherwise flat landscape. This would flood in the wet weather into a large pool being fed by water flowing across the paddocks from Taylors Road. Sometimes the only way to get across the flooded road was to take off your socks and shoes, roll up your skirt or trouser legs, and walk across barefoot. In fact, for quite some time this had been the site of a dam which had served as the first water supply in the area.

Building the home started with two small structures: one was the laundry cum bathroom and kitchen, while the separate bungalow contained two small bedrooms. Gradually the rest of the weatherboard house was added on. Dad did most of the work himself. This is where the friendships established in the hostels proved their worth as several families helped each other in the tasks of building, the men taking turns to work on each other's houses.

Apart from helping with the house-building, mum worked in the garden to help feed a growing family.

Of course, St Albans in the 1950s was a much smaller place than it is today. Then, as people will often tell you, you would leave the money for the milkman or the baker outside in the milk box and no one would take it. People were so trusting they would not even lock their doors. Now you couldn't do it.

There were very few shops then. A number of houses or bungalows were being built around the place, many of them by Mr Eisner who was one of the few builders in the area.

Dad worked as a machinist with Massey Ferguson for over 25 years, and ended up working as a fitter and turner, then worked at Mitchells the Brush People for a while before being asked to return to Masseys. He retired at the age of 65, and then he died of a heart attack in 1982 at the age of 71. My mum died in 2000 at the age of 73.

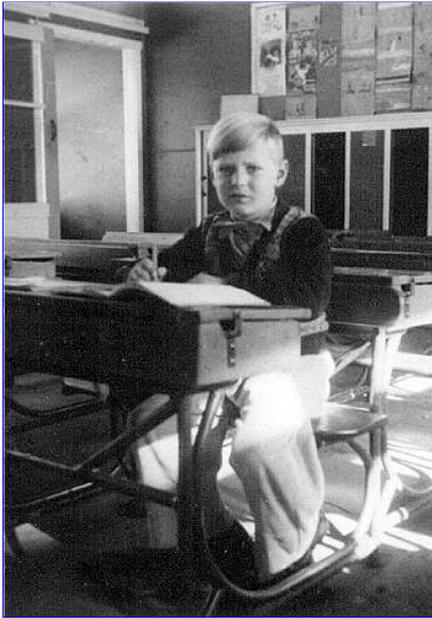
Primary School



St Albans Primary School, Grade 1B. Otto is back row, five from the right.

I started at the old St Albans Primary School in 1955 and was there till mid 1958. I don't remember very many specific events, though it wasn't all fun a games. I've always tended to be a quiet person but I soon learnt you had to defend yourself when you were picked on in the school ground – having your head thumped into the

metal taps by someone from behind when you were trying to have a drink of water was not a very friendly experience. My sister Helen, who is three years younger than me, lost the sight of one eye in her first year at school when some boys threw an explosive device they'd made into the shelter shed and a piece of metal pierced her eye. Another girl was luckier because she only had her ear pierced.



Mid way through 1958 the St Albans North Primary started operating, and because my sister and I were living virtually around the corner, we were both transferred there. Because we were so close we never had any excuse why we couldn't get to school on time, except in the winter. Between our house and the school was a low-lying area that would get flooded and in bad conditions would be impassable, so that was an occasional opportunity to skip classes legally.

High School

I started at St Albans High School in 1961. One of the unfortunate accidents that occurred early that year was that a family friend, John Kasjan, died in a hit and run accident. He had decided to go swimming in the Maribyrnong River at Green Gully and set off on his push bike. When he didn't return people went searching for him but didn't find him until the next day. He'd obviously been hit by a car because he'd suffered horrific head injuries and was in a coma in the hospital for two weeks before dying.

In the early 'sixties a few new Polish immigrants started arriving at the school. One of them was in my class and though I only spoke a few words of Polish I tried to help him whenever I could because there was no other help provided to these students apart from pairing them off with someone who could communicate with them. During one of the religious instruction classes he asked me a question about what was going on and when I replied I ended up getting detention for talking in class. So how are you supposed to help someone if you are not allowed to talk with them?

Mr Pavlov and Volley Ball

I was not good at playing either football or cricket, but in 1962 I started playing volley ball, which suited me much better. Mr Pavlov was a good and just teacher and he was a very encouraging coach and motivator to the volley ball teams. I think it was under his guidance that St Albans won the schools' Western District Championship pennant for 6 years in a row.



1962 Volley Ball team: (Rear) B Wale, J Vandekolk, B Gerlinger, J Kamiernack, C Castanioti, (Front) V Troszczji, V Dasler, Mr Pavlov, J Catasgna, K Kulbys.

A couple of years later I joined a group of the senior players who still wanted to continue playing volley ball though we had already left school. We started practising at the St Albans Community Youth Club for a while, which wasn't big enough, so we had to find other premises and ended up at West Footscray YMCA where there was more room and bigger court areas. The condition of using their facilities was that we had to represent that

centre for 12 months in the YMCA competition, which suited us fine. So about 1965 we played under the name West Footscray YMCA Renegades and won the championship that season for them, which was their first ever major win.

Paul Pavlov was a fantastic support because he continued to coach us over this time even though at that stage we were no longer connected with the high school, and he usually went out of his way to drive some of us to the matches. He'd always told us he'd be happy to help us if we were interested in continuing playing the game, so we accepted that. We joined the Victorian Volley Ball Association in C Grade and very soon were playing in A Grade. We just lost the Grand Final in our final year because several of our key players couldn't make it as they were sitting for university exams. From memory, the team over this time included David Pringle, Tony Vandekolk, Leon and Victor Troszczji, Claude Calandra, Vander Dasler, John and Zbigniew Kruk, and a couple of others whose names I've forgotten. Unfortunately a number of our players had to devote more time to their university studies and I was busy with my apprenticeship, so after about three years we called it quits. We had enjoyed ourselves tremendously and were grateful for all the support we received from a dedicated teacher: Mr Pavlov



Ex-high school volley ball team at the award ceremony for B Grade Champions, Victorian Volley Ball Association, circa 1965-66. Otto is second from the left.

Working in Electronics

In 1962 I started experimenting with making crystal sets. While other boys were playing cricket or football after school I was more interested in electronics. In those days television had been around for only a few years, and though radios were much more common they were the big, old designs using valve technology. Except, of course, for the crystal sets. I became fascinated by them because with a diode, coil, and earpiece you could make yourself a little radio; you didn't even need batteries. With transistors starting to come on the scene the earpieces were now quite small.

When I was at high school I worked out that you that you could put the diode and coil into the shell of a fountain pen, for the aerial you clipped onto the metal frame of the desk, and you'd conceal the wire to the earpiece by running it up your sleeve. The reception range was not broad, but it was great for listening to the cricket, as long as you were discreet about its use in the classroom. After all, it was only natural that boys would be fiddling with their fountain pens.

I made a few of these and sold them to classmates. It was fun to do and it got me a bit of pocket money. Things were going well until, in the relative quiet of one classroom, several of the back row students simultaneously shouted out because of some marvellous catch or something. Of course the teacher then sussed it out and confiscated the devices for the rest of the lesson. He ordered me to stay behind after school. I waited for him, uncertain as to how much trouble I was in. As it turned out, he was quite impressed by the things and wanted me to make one for him, so that was a relief. That was my first public venture into electronics.

I finished High School at the end of 1964 and then started a TV and radio apprenticeship with Teletone, which was a one-man business in Main Road West. The apprenticeship was between 1965 and 1969. That didn't mean that my time in the education system was finished, because as well as the apprenticeship school one day a week I was also enrolled for evening classes that I continued for 7 years. Then in 1970 I joined the Department of Civil Aviation in their Radio Installation Department and worked for them for four years and also taking on some more evening studies.

About 12 months of my time with DCA was spent at the Tullamarine Airport installing all the cables for their communications system when the airport was being built. This included their videos, emergency services, tower control panels, and radar. I was in charge of five apprentices while that work was in progress, so it more

responsibility for me. Other work for Civil Aviation included installing equipment in Tasmania and King Island. Unfortunately there was little opportunity for promotion and when the internal politics became unbearable I left.

I then started working at the Southern Cross Hotel as their chief technician looking after the radios and televisions in 640 rooms. I was again in charge of some apprentices. The only problem with the job was being on call 24 hours a day, which sometimes was quite inconvenient when you were living many miles away.

Then the Hyatt Hotel approached me to take on a similar role with them, and I went there because it was better paid. This was about 1972 when I had married Christine, a young widow with two children. The Hyatt then asked me to service a new range of equipment they were introducing to automatically dispense mixed drinks. They wanted to send me to Japan to train in the servicing and maintenance of these electronic machines. Being recently married I didn't want to go overseas so I left that work and started up my own radio and TV repair business (O.C. Electronics) from home. While it generated income the cash flow was variable because customers were often slow in paying.

The Security Job that Wasn't

When in 1974 Chris was expecting our first child I decided some more regular and reliable income would be desirable. I thought of taking on some security work with one of the main armoured guard companies. I had obtained my licence to work as a security guard but hadn't yet applied for a pistol licence when they asked me to relieve in the security line-up guarding \$4 million in bullion on display at the Southern Cross. I was uneasy about this and refused to do it before I had acquired all the proper licences. Then on the way home there was a news flash that two security guards had been shot at High Point. When I got home Chris was so affected by that news that she said if I became a security guard she would leave. Anyway, I withdrew my application for that position.

O. C. Electronics

In 1975 I worked with the ABC while I continued operating the home business after hours. Then in 1976 I rented a shop in Macedon and tried building up a business out there. I was there six months when the ceiling caved in after some rainstorms and destroyed most of my stock, so I moved to newer premises in Gisborne. The rent was \$75 week, which doesn't sound much these days but it was big enough then when profits were small. Working from Gisborne was OK though it required Chris to give me a hand running the shop when I was out on service calls. She was looking after the baby, Melissa, at the same time, so it was a bit of a task.

We bought a house in New Gisborne. After about four years we experienced ongoing problems with neighbours and decided to move to South Gisborne. We bought a largish block of land and I designed the home to take advantage of the views. We might have been in Gisborne but there were views all the way to Geelong as long as you used the binoculars to see that far.

Unfortunately the business suffered because of the high mortgages and the high interest rates that people were paying – I had to buy on credit at a hefty rate while customers tried to delay their payments as long as possible to earn that fraction more interest for themselves – and I was caught in the middle.

The transfer over to colour TVs also caught me with many unpaid bills as customers brought their black and white sets to be repaired and then didn't pay, deciding instead to buy a colour set from somewhere else. I also learnt the hard way that installing antennas on a deferred payment arrangement was not much good when the house was resold or repossessed and the customers were not traceable for debt collection purposes. As a small business in a competitive market you worked on small margins and had to offer some benefits to attract customers, but the risks were great.

With trade creditors to be paid and my bank overdrafts at high rates I was well and truly caught in an increasing debt spiral. Furthermore, my bank manager would only give me a loan if I had a permanent job.

Working for Flexdrive

I closed the shop and applied for employment with Flexdrive in Gisborne, and was offered a position in their quality control department. Working full time there and still running the radio and TV repair business from home meant that I was able to pay off all the outstanding business debts. I was working both jobs in tandem as well as trying to maintain the garden and grounds of a large block of land as well as keeping up with some studies.

Health Problems

Looking back it's clear that the pace was too demanding, and what happened in the end was that I had a heart attack in March 1984. They didn't operate on that occasion but told me I had to reduce stress and not work so hard. That's a lot easier to say than to do.

Then in September 1984 I suffered another heart attack, and this time they had to operate, though it took some time to arrange everything. So at the age of 36 I had triple bypass surgery and despite some complications survived it all. I was recuperating in the Queen Vic Hospital when it was rocked by a big explosion – it was the car bomb that had been set off in front of the Russell Street Police Headquarters.

Six weeks after coming home from hospital my wife said she wanted a divorce. It was a complicated time for the family. I went to stay at mum's place and we eventually divorced and sold the house.

While I was working at Flexdrive I also took on some part-time studies through Footscray Institute to get some formal qualifications in quality control. During 16 years with Flexdrive's quality control department I had been promoted to supervisor and then to assistant manager.

Relationship and Career Changes

Alison Strack was one of the other staff members at Flexdrive and she was also divorced. We started going out together in the late 'eighties and then rented a place together in East Kyneton. We exchanged marriage commitments informally at Alison's parents' property in Riddells Creek before a small group of close friends and relatives. We bought eight acres of land in Kyneton and planned to start a small farm specialising in breeding Dexter cattle.

Unfortunately the automotive industry in Australia took a downturn from which it never recovered. Flexdrive was taken over by a Japanese company, and the economic rationalisations they introduced meant mainly one thing as far as workers were concerned: retrenchments. Both Alison and I were retrenched, so we used the retrenchment money to start building our own house.

We parked a caravan on our block of land and lived in that for a year while we were building the house. We had the foundations and slab poured professionally, and after that it was all a hard slog by Alison and myself, and a few friends on the weekends. Though we worked together we also had our specialities. As I was doing the post and beams and the structural framework Alison was attending to the mud brick walls. It's been a slow process. We have now been living in the house for ten years and there are still a few unfinished bits, but it's home.

Breeding Dexter Cattle

We started breeding Dexter cattle in 1994 and by 1999 our cows and bulls were winning prizes in the Royal Melbourne Show and in regional shows. We are a very small concern and to run a home and small farm we both work part time elsewhere. We are members of the Victorian Dexter Cattle Breeders Association, have held positions on their committee of management, and have even been editors of the Association's newsletter.



Otto Czernik (centre) with Helen Smith (left) and Joe Ribarow (right), 2004 reunion.

In Conclusion

Since being retrenched I have applied for many full-time jobs in the quality control area and just about anything else that I might be eligible for, without much success. I have an Associate Diploma in Engineering, an Advanced Certificate in Metrology, in 1997 I was made a Fellow of the Australian Organisation for Quality for 20 years of involvement in the quality control field, and I have been a member of the American Society of Quality Control as part of my professional affiliations. I've done extra courses in computer applications, bookkeeping, train the trainer, running small businesses, etc.

Although it's difficult to prove, I think many potential employers now see me as an older man who has had two heart attacks and has been on Workcover, so why should they take the risk of employing me when there are younger and healthier people available? In fact that very scenario was confirmed to me privately by a professional colleague, but what can you do about it?

At present both Alison and I work part time at Safeways as well as running our own small business, Baunatal Management Services. Apart from breeding cattle, I'm also involved with contract work in farm and property maintenance, including the preparation of estimates, quotations, and tenders for a couple of small businesses with which I have been associated over several years. Life goes on.



Otto and Alison Czernik, 2006

2015 Update

Over the last decade Otto has been working full-time as a quality assurance contractor with Rockwell Australia. A re-think of work and life balance occurred when Alison was diagnosed with cancer, which was successfully treated with radiation and chemotherapy. Otto and Ali have now retired to Tasmania where they enjoy the rural life of raising Dexter cattle and are experimenting in raising Boer goats. What's a family without a few kids running around and getting into trouble? Otto and Alison have not lost their sense of humour.



Otto and Alison's farm at Wilmot, Tasmania, 2015.



The view from my kitchen window, so beautiful!!!!

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Otto and Alison with shaven heads for charity, 2015.