

Labassa *lives*

Volume 1, Issue 3, 2013



Family matters in grand spaces



Above: Miriam Gregory, Shane Pieper and their son Ardian. Photo: Bruce Postle

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Stories portraying Labassa as a hippie haven or a bohemian artist colony abound. The truth is that while many artists and others seeking an alternative lifestyle lived at the mansion they coexisted alongside many low key individuals and families.

In 1981, *The Age* published a feature on life at the National Trust's newly acquired property focusing on the occupants of Flat 2¹: Miriam Gregory, Shane Pieper and their son Ardian. While only three photos were used in

the spread, the 15 photos that survive, along with family photos, offer an insight into how families occupied Labassa's grand spaces.

Labassa has strong family connections for Miriam who "inherited" the flat from her sister Jessica after she, her husband Peter Tarpey and their son Malachy moved to Bairnsdale.

¹ Flat 2 includes the Music, Billiards and Smoking Rooms.

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Looking for . . .



These photos are believed to be the work of former resident Mark Klos. The young women are Isabel Brunacci and Lillian (standing) whose surname is unknown. Are you able to help us find Mark, Lillian and Isabel?

Family matters (continued)



Above: Shane Pieper, Ardian and Miriam Gregory in their "Lounge Room". *Photo:* Bruce Postle

Before meeting Shane and marrying at Labassa in 1980, Miriam shared the flat with another sister, Leonie, and artist John Money. Miriam and Shane's sons Ardian and Liam were born at Labassa – Ardian in the Billiards Room and Liam in the Music Room. Ardian tragically passed away in 2000.

As a family, they lived nomadically using the larger rooms when it was hot and retiring to the more cosy Smoking Room when it was cold. Some winter mornings were so cold that fog would appear at ceiling level in the Music Room. Ardian and Liam slept in the Music Room (where Shane used the stage for playing guitar) while Shane and Miriam slept in the Billiards Room. Miriam remembers lots of kids playing in the Music Room: "Despite its grandeur the music room has had a lot of children's

laughter in it." Miriam also hosted the Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective Film Group in 1980 for a series of workshops with director Erika Addis. "We hosted a few of these while deliberations on a proposed film dragged on among a gaggle of playful children."

For Shane and Miriam Labassa wasn't just a family home. It was a "magic", "peaceful" place where "time stood still". Shane also observes that it was "impossible to think small when your bedroom is four times the normal size"!

When Miriam and Shane moved out it certainly wasn't for financial reasons: the rent had only risen from \$17 per week in 1976 to \$50 in 1986. They left to give their children a backyard in which they could play.

Right: Miriam in the Music Room
Photo: Shane Pieper



Above: Shane and Miriam in Labassa's "front yard". The brick house at the front was demolished in 1988. *Photo:* Bruce Postle

Bruce Postle photos

While only three of the images that *The Age* photographer Bruce Postle took for the article were actually used, he kindly printed up 15 shots and sent them to Shane and Miriam. The negatives were discarded by *The Age* when they went to the digital format. Bruce's initial generosity has now been repaid with Miriam and Shane providing him with digital copies of the photos he thought had been lost forever.



Norman McCance: Radio star

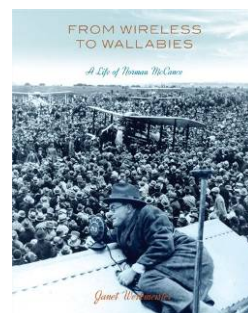
Long-time residents of Manor Grove will remember Norman McCance, an immensely popular radio broadcaster in pre-World War 2 Melbourne for 3LO, now known as 774 ABC. Norman is recorded as living at "Labassa Flats" in 1928, possibly while the family home was under construction at 3 Manor Grove. In a career spanning 60 years, Norman was a wrestling commentator, *The Argus* newspaper's State Political Reporter and a broadcaster of major events including the first international flight to Melbourne in 1926. In 1930, Norman was asked to provide a daily news bulletin to 3UZ called the "Cheerful Breakfast Session" which was also relayed to country radio stations.



3UZ installed a broadcasting microphone and dedicated phone line in the sleep-out at the back of No. 3 from which Norman would make his

daily 7.30am broadcasts. Norman was also a wildlife enthusiast and his backyard menagerie with its pheasants, fish, lizards and other small wildlife was an object of fascination to the children of Manor Grove. Norman's biography – *From Wireless to Wallabies* – has just been published by Janet Werkmeister and includes a chapter on his time as a Manor Grove resident. For information contact Janet via janetw211@gmail.com or Werkmeister Productions, 2 Silvana Crt, Wheelers Hill, Vic. 3150.

Left: Norman McCance. Photo: McCance family



1958 ABC Panorama

Pioneer ABC producer, Oscar Whitbread has solved some of the mysteries of a four minute silent segment of film on Labassa made for the *Panorama* program in 1958. The segment includes sequences showing the exterior, hallway, original carpet and newel lamps, interiors of the Dining Room and Boudoir, stained glass windows and taps in the upstairs bathrooms.

According to Oscar, he made the film at the direction of architect Robin Boyd. There were originally five properties to be showcased with presenter Corinne Kirby interviewing Robin Boyd live-to-air. We are yet to discover why Robin Boyd chose Labassa.

Stills from the film, however, may provide clues to the identity of the tenants who occupied the Drawing Room flat in 1958, for whom we have no records.

These stills of the Boudoir show personal items that someone may recognise. Note the photo of a fair-haired child on the left mantel shelf. Let us know if you have any thoughts on the identity of the people who lived in this flat c1958.



Jewish Heritage: owners 1946-50

Labassa has a unique Jewish Heritage. All of the owners from 1946-1980 – the Lapins, Aisens, Glickmans and Kazers— were Pre World War 2 Jewish refugees. By the mid 1950s the entire first floor was tenanted by Jewish migrants who had left Europe following the War. In this feature we look at three of the owner families about whom very little has been previously known. Future issues will feature the Kazers and the tenant families.

Lapin family 1946-47



Above: Sima Lapin with son Herman prior to departure for Australia. *Photo:* Lapin family

Theodor, Sima and their son Herman who co-owned Labassa 1946-47, came from Bialystok, Poland. The family remade their lives many times over. Before the First World War Theodor was a commercial traveller in Russia.

After the War, in which he had fought for the Russians, Theodor became a successful businessman and owned a bus company.

When the business was forced into liquidation in the 1920s through Government persecution, the family left for Australia. Theodor resumed his original profession of commercial traveller, working for Sidney Myer but by the 1930s he and his son Herman co-owned a drapery business, Lapin & Blass, with large stores in NSW, South Australia and Victoria.

At the time the family purchased Labassa, they owned the Sunbeam Poultry Farm and La Mart Modes in Flinders Lane, manufacturing women's coats and suits with Sima as a designer.

Over 30 years, the Lapin family sponsored many Jewish refugees and raised thousands of dollars for the War effort. Theodor was an active member of St Kilda's Bialystoker Centre which provided a refuge for Jewish Bialystokers. Why the family purchased Labassa and held it for only two years is a mystery yet to be solved.



Above: Herman and father Theodor Lapin. *Photo:* Lapin family

Charles and Fanny Aisen, Samuel and Zlata Glickman

Owners 1947-50

Charles and Fanny Aisen together with Samuel and Zlata Glickman purchased Labassa and the Willas Flats in 1947 for £12,000 as a business venture. Zlata was Charles Aisen's niece and Labassa was one of several investments the families held together.

Aisen family

Arriving from Chelm, Poland in 1926, Charles initially worked as a milk carter and plumber. His metalworking skills and ingenuity, however, led him to invent a centrifuge-type clothes dryer from which he earned £400 after the patent was sold to Email Pty Ltd.



Above: Fanny Aisen. *Photo:* Aisen family

This enabled the family to turn Fanny's home hand-quilting business into the profitable Victoria Quilt Manufacturing Co. During the Second World War the Aisens diversified into suppliers of sleeping bags and boiled sweets for the Australian Army.

Jewish Heritage: owners 1946-50

Aisen Family *continued*



Above: Charles with some of his artworks and wife Fanny. *Photo:* Aisen family

Like many other migrants, the Aisens also sponsored Jewish refugees and Charles became a member of the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism.

Charles had always been politically engaged. While he had fought for Poland in the 1919-21 Polish-Soviet War his sympathies were with the Soviets. He joined the Australian Communist Party in the 1930s but resigned in 1939 when Germany and the USSR signed the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact saying it was "unforgiveable".

As active members of the Australian Labor Party, the Aisens opened up their home to Party meetings. Tactics for John Cain Senior's 1945 election campaign were worked out around their kitchen table.

When Charles returned to Chelm for the first time in 40 years he was distressed to find that only 36 Jewish families remained out of a Pre-War population of 20,000.

This experience inspired him to use his metal-working skills to produce artworks that recaptured Pre-War Chelm, the Holocaust and scenes from his life in Pre-War Australia.

Charles's works have been acquired by McClelland Sculpture Park, National Gallery of Victoria, Jewish Museum of Australia, Power House Museum Sydney, Art Gallery of West Australia and several galleries in Israel.

Glickman family

Samuel Glickman aspired to "the better life". At 16, and in the wake of the Russian Revolution, he left Bessarabia (now Moldova) for Palestine where he spent five years of hard labor as a road construction worker.

In 1923, he migrated to Australia where he met and married Zlata (Schechterson) in 1928. Sam worked as a bootmaker for Goodchild Shoes in Abbotsford, eventually becoming Foreman. In 1931, there was an armed robbery at the factory. Threatened with a gun, Sam pleaded that he had a wife and children to support before handing over £2/10 (around AU\$235 in 2013).

This experience may have influenced Sam to review Australia as a "better place" and consider taking the family to live in Russia.

Unable to convince Zlata to accompany him, Sam left Melbourne in early 1932 but returned four months later. Soon after, Sam and Zlata bought into a Carlton bakery business, which came to be known as Glickmans.

The bakery was a popular landmark and many religious people would bring traditional Jewish food, such as Cholent, to keep warm in the ovens on a Friday as they were unable to cook on the Sabbath. Sam and Zlata were active in the Carlton community and belonged to the Kadima culture centre where Zlata performed plays in Yiddish. Sam sponsored at least seven Jewish refugees in the 1920s and 1930s but apart from his brother Joseph he was unsuccessful in bringing his family to Australia before the War.

Glickmans Bakery was sold after 18 years and the family moved into property investment, including a timber business in Colac and Labassa. Sam and Zlata had three sons – Harry, Joseph and John (Jack) who in 1949 aged 19, won the world's highest award for violinists under 30 – the Carl Flesch Medal.



Left

Zlata and Sam with sons John (Jack), Harry and Joseph.
Photo: Glickman family

Labassa bells

Original bell returns



Left: Nathane and Con Sarris; former resident Margaret Manton; Marteene Sarris. *Photo:* Friends of Labassa

The most recent return to Labassa is an amber glass servants' bell button from the Drawing Room flat which was taken by Mr and Mrs Manton who lived there between 1947 and 1956. The bell, one of two being returned, became a much-loved doorbell on their new home in Caulfield where the family lived for the next 53 years. The "doorbell" is now back at Labassa due to information provided by daughter Margaret Manton and the generosity of the Sarris family, current owners of the Caulfield house. Margaret says: "We always felt the bells should go back to Labassa. With the passing of my parents I decided it was time for them to go back to where I have many happy childhood memories."

Con Sarris was delighted to return the bell. "It was a small way of contributing to the restoration of Labassa. I was planning to remove the bell. It probably would have ended up as a paper weight on my desk."

If you have any information that may lead to the return of other items please let us know.



Above: Original servants' bell, which is in exceptional condition.

Slessor's Five Bells

Labassa is immortalised in "Five Bells", arguably Kenneth Slessor's finest poem. The poem in part attempts to evoke the realities of the life and death of his friend, black and white artist Joe Lynch, who drowned in Sydney Harbor in 1927. Kenneth Slessor and Joe Lynch briefly worked together in Melbourne on *Punch* in 1925, giving credence to the story that Joe actually lived at Labassa. Slessor himself, however, set the record straight in his remarks for *Bread and Wine: selected prose* (Angus and Robertson, 1970):

In his bedroom at a North Melbourne boarding house in the days he worked for Punch, Joe found a battered morocco-bound notebook, apparently the relic of some unknown lodger, and gave it to me for scribbling. It contained some pages of manuscript notes written by the lodger (or Joe) which, of course, I had no right to see.

One of these entries is reproduced literally in "Five Bells". Its misspellings ("photoes", "differant", "curioes") give it I think, a peculiarly haunting and convincing flavour. I imagine that Labassa, at the beginning of the extract, is the name of another Melbourne lodging-house and that the writer is describing his bedroom "at the top of the tower". But for the purpose of the poem I have assumed that this is Joe's own entry.

Former resident Ian Biarujia researched the Joe Lynch story for his 1988 book *Labassa*. He believes that rather than this revelation diminishing Labassa's connection with "Five Bells" it creates other levels of mystery and meaning. Who was the owner of the notebook? Did he or she live at Labassa? What kind of associations did Slessor have with

Labassa that prompted him to use it in "Five Bells"?



A pearl in an oyster



Above: Jacqueline Lesage.
Photo: Jacqueline Lesage

Jacqueline Lesage well remembers the delight of waking up in Labassa's Boudoir: "I felt like a pearl every day, a pearl in an oyster. That oyster was history which gave a sense of belonging to humanity. You have a strong feeling of belonging to humanity in a place that is not touched and you are not going to touch.

"I came from a small village in France with a 10th century castle - everything was authentic. I thought Australia's urban landscape was quite ugly. Labassa was a gem in the middle of this ugliness because the people were not transforming it. Australia was obsessed with kitchens, white goods and bathrooms and here was something that had not been touched."

Jacqueline was introduced to Labassa in late 1970 when colleague and Labassa resident Pam Marinos alerted her to a vacancy. Jacqueline moved in with partner Igor Persan, initially living in Flat 9 and then the Drawing Room flat in 1972 which they "inherited" when Pam and her husband Lex moved out.

Jacqueline and Igor were intensely involved in the artistic life of Melbourne, most notably Melbourne's first French Theatre. The couple initially established the legendary Bull Frog restaurant in Rathdowne Street, Carlton which quickly became an artistic hub for performers who would call in after their evening shows. The Bull Frog had the distinction of being the first Melbourne restaurant to open from 6pm to 6am at a time when there was no liquor licensing after 10pm, a restriction they soon overcame by serving wine in coffee pots.

Jacqueline went on to work in ABC Radio as a French language broadcaster to Vietnam during the Vietnam War while Igor focused on establishing the Melbourne French Theatre, mime and theatre workshops as well as teaching at Monash University.

In the early 1970s the French population of Melbourne was only around 800. Igor and Jacqueline worked with Alliance Française to start a theatre for those interested in French Theatre and students of the French language.



Left: Jeannie Lewis.
Photo: Jacqueline Lesage



Above: Igor Persan.
Photo: Jacqueline Lesage

Performances were held at the University of Melbourne's Union Theatre and a few at La Mama.

But it was Labassa's grand Drawing Room with its wonderful acoustics that became the main workshop and rehearsal space. The theatre and mime workshops drew a regular flow of visitors to Labassa, among them musician and stage performer Jeannie Lewis.

Guests were entertained in the Drawing Room where whole legs of lamb were roasted on a spit in the fireplace.

Despite the constant flow of visitors, Jacqueline and Igor were very protective of Labassa's interiors. Following a custom established by Pam and Lex Marinos they always used the backdoor to limit damage to the hallway.

Jacqueline left Labassa in 1974 while Igor stayed on until around 1976.

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Please send contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles, indicating whether or not they are for publication, to the following:

vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or
PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,
Chadstone, Vic. 3148

Forthcoming events

Open days (3rd Sunday of the month, 10.30am—4.30pm)

January 19 Regular Open Day

February 16 Ceramics and the
Aesthetic Movement

March 16 Regular Open Day

April 20 Heritage Week: Basil
Watson pioneer
aviator

May 18 Regular Open Day

June 15 Regular Open Day

July 20 Regular Open Day

August 17 Regular Open Day

September 21 Regular Open Day

October 19 Regular Open Day

November 16 Regular Open Day

December CLOSED

Garden revival

At their most magnificent, Labassa's grounds extended to more than 15 acres and were "tastefully laid out" and "planted with the choicest trees shrubs and flowers. There are conservatories, hot houses and ferneries." (12 June 1897, *The Argus*)

While we are unlikely to see the grounds reclaim their 19th century splendor, in recent months Labassa's front garden has undergone a revival, emulating a view of the house that has not existed since circa 1920.

The landscaping includes a new sweeping driveway that enhances the front entry. Myrtle hedging adds definition to the outline of the property and provides an attractive frame for the house.

New plantings include palms as well as cedar and magnolia trees. The cedar and magnolia trees reflect the plantings of the original garden layout as per the photo, below right.

Metal edging has been used to define a graceful curve for the new lawn.

Above right: Labassa, December 2013

Right: "Ontario" circa 1890

