

# Labassa *lives*

Volume 2, Issue 3, 2014



## The Kazers: long-term landlords

Wolf and Hinda Kazer (formerly Kajzerowicz) owned Labassa for a total of 30 years, longer than any pre-National Trust owners. The Kazers bought Labassa in November 1949 for £16,000 after it was passed in at public auction for £14,500. As an investment, it offered a gross annual income of £1,315 and a pre-existing Council permit to build an additional eight flats. According to Colette Wengrow, wife of Wolf Kazer's nephew Jack, "Uncle very much appreciated the manor and enjoyed going there but it had to bring money to the table."

The Kazers presided over an era of momentous change to the character of the property. In the end, however, it was the family's appreciation of Labassa's decorative features, and a sentimental attachment, that likely saved the mansion from 'the wrecker's pick'.

Wolf Kazer, a skilled tailor in Warsaw Poland, arrived in Melbourne in September 1938, shortly before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. His wife, Hinda, a dressmaker, followed in 1939 seven weeks before the German army invaded Poland. The Kazers built their new prosperity as manufacturers of clothing and as property investors, first entering the market in 1941 when they applied to the Commonwealth



Government to buy property in Brunswick. The Alien Land Transfer laws restricted 'aliens' from buying land while Australian citizens were serving overseas or working in the war industries. This restriction was overcome for the Kazers when Wolf became an Australian citizen in 1945. Wolf Kazer also had a factory in Elizabeth Street Melbourne where he manufactured coats, jackets and wedding frocks which were designed by his nephew Jack Wengrow. Jack, now deceased, whose migration Wolf sponsored in 1947, became a crucial figure in the survival of Labassa's interiors.

*Above:* Owners Hinda and Wolf Kazer (formerly Kajzerowicz).

*Photo:* Courtesy Wengrow family.

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## *The Kazers (continued)*

The Kazers had no children and Wolf invited Jack to take anything from the house that he liked: "You can take anything because it will be trashed by the tenants." It is a sad irony that this invitation included a specific offer for Jack to take the lamps from the newel posts at the base of the staircase. These lamps were subsequently stolen by non-residents in the late 1960s.

Jack, an artist, was enthralled by the beauty of the ceiling paintings and hand sculpted chimneys and declined his uncle's offer: "I can't take anything. It's criminal to take anything away."

Labassa's exterior nevertheless went through a series of changes between 1950 and 1962 that further diminished its original 19<sup>th</sup> century grandeur. Following a complaint from a tenant about falling debris, the urns and brogas were removed from the balustraded parapet. In 1957, the Kazers sold the land on the south-west boundary to Arnold and Elaine Bloch who built four flats, the new boundary making it necessary to truncate Labassa's western veranda.

In 1960, the Caulfield Council granted a permit for a double-storey cream brick house to be erected in the front yard. According to Colette Wengrow, the cream brick house was intended as a new family home for Wolf and Hinda: "Uncle did appreciate Labassa. He built the house on this land because it was cheaper – it made economic sense. To him it didn't take away the importance of the mansion. It didn't even occur to him."



*Above:* Hinda and Wolf Kazer c.1958.

*Photo:* Courtesy Wengrow family.

Wolf and Hinda's time at 1A Manor Grove was brief. Wolf died in 1962 and Hinda moved out, selling the recently completed house on a separate title to Marcelli and Dina Munzer in 1964.

Management of Labassa became increasingly complex due to Hinda's worsening schizophrenia for which she had been receiving treatment for many years prior to her husband's death. While Hinda had left Europe before World War 2, not one member of her family had survived the Holocaust. She said she could hear the soldiers coming to get her.

Hinda increasingly relied on Jack Wengrow to help with her affairs but the mounting repairs on Labassa were beyond her means. Colette Wengrow recalls a quote of \$30,000 to replace damaged roof tiles. The replacement for a broken curved bay window had to be made in Italy.

A special mould had to be made for a damaged window handle. Hinda nevertheless refused to sell the property as it had been bought by her much loved husband.

According to Labassa's title, and correspondence retained by Flat 8 tenant Judith Cordingley, the Housing Commission inspected Labassa in August 1974. Eight flats were found to be in a "state of disrepair" and the agent was ordered to carry out repairs. In October 1974, Labassa and the Willas Flats were entered on the Historic Buildings Register.

When Hinda Kazer died in 1980, Jack Wengrow and his sister Helen Sharp became two of the beneficiaries of her will along with three charities. Rumours that demolition had ever been considered by any level of government or the owners are incorrect. Jack was relieved when Labassa was purchased by the National Trust, an organisation that he said "would respect the integrity of the building".



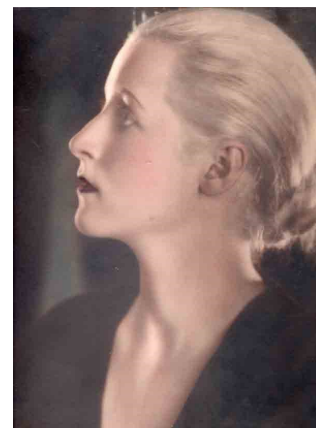
*Above:* Colette and Jack Wengrow.

*Photo:* Courtesy Wengrow family.

# Looking for Love



*Left:* A vital clue: Labassa's Loves at nearby Sandhurst. *L-R* back row: Sister Marjorie; Mona's ex-husband Fred; Sister Florence; **Rosamond (Mona) Love**; Oscar and Dorothy Hammerstein. *Seated:* Mona's parents Henry and Marian. *L-R front:* Sister Eleanor; **daughter Rosamond**; **daughter Lorraine**; niece Margaret, niece Susan. *Right:* Rosamond (Mona) Love.



Many ex-residents are elusive – there are no photos, no back story and no known descendants. This included 'The Loves' – three women who shared Flat 3 (upstairs south-west). A neighbour provided a couple of clues – they were sisters and worked in 'sales'. The Electoral Roll confirmed that Rosamond and Lorraine Love lived at Labassa in 1937. A broader search revealed that they were mother and daughter but little else – until the revelation that Rosamond's sister Dorothy had married lyricist Oscar Hammerstein.

This single fact quickly led to a trove of photos, diaries and family stories. Rosamond (known as Mona) and daughters Lorraine and Rosamond not only belonged to a prestigious Melbourne family (the Blanchards of Sandhurst in nearby Alma Road), they had close family connections to a celebrated writer and producer.

The Loves lived at Labassa from at least 1936 until the early 1940s. During this time Lorraine and Rosamond were popular hostesses at the Depression Times Club, which invited Melburnians to "Drive Depression Times Away".

A gossip columnist enthused: "The Love girls, Rosamond and Lorraine, [are] natural platinums, and lovely at that, Rosamond being very Ann Hardingish while Lorraine is nicknamed the 'Harlow Lady' ... "

Lorraine was a chorus girl in *Something Different* at St Kilda's Palace Theatre in 1934 and took part in at least one bathing beauty contest. In 1935, Rosamond went to America to visit Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Oscar. Her detailed diary describes encounters with MGM executive Louis B. Mayer and a myriad of 'stars' including Mae West and Jean Harlow whom she describes as "a darling". The Loves' celebrity connections were boosted when Dorothy's daughter, Susan, by a previous marriage married Henry Fonda and later Richard Widmark.

It's tempting to think that Labassa was the perfect home for the glamorous Loves but Mona had a more prosaic purpose. She supplemented her wages by renting unfurnished flats and then sub-letting rooms as furnished. By 1949, Mona had sublets in two other St Kilda apartment blocks.

*Below:* Rosamond, 1935. *Bottom:* Lorraine in 1936 Beach Parade. *Photos:* Courtesy Clive Eastwood.



Lorraine  
centre, left.



## New land, new life, new friends



CLOSED INDEX CARD		27. Juli 1951 <i>Left for Australia</i>	
A. J. D. C.		EMIGRATION SERVICE MUNICH	
Last Name	APFELBAUM	File No.	US 3858
First Name	Dawid	Sex	m
Address	Munich Landshuter Allee 23	Opening Date	18 Apr. 50
Birthdate	25/2/20	Birthplace	Bendzin
Nationality:	Present	Former	
Occupation:	Present	Former	
Country of destination	U. S. A.	Accompanied by	Chaja, Manes Gitman
		Closing Date	

*Left (L-R):* Unknown visitor; Helen, Rachel, David, and Manes Apfelbaum. *Photo:* Courtesy Apfelbaum family.

*Above:* David Apfelbaum's Emigration card.

From 1952 until the early 1960s the upstairs flats underwent a 'baby boom'. This new generation included Manes and Rachel Apfelbaum, Reuben Benkel and Eva Taurig, followed by Susan and Peter Gruner. Their parents had left Post-War Europe to establish a better life away from trauma and injustice. Dates and names are sometimes vague but there are exhilarating adventures and even a first encounter with the mystery of death. Chapter 1 of this story begins with Mrs Helen Apfelbaum who knew all of these children.

### Penny by penny

**Mrs Helen Apfelbaum** describes the 11 years her family lived at Labassa as "a wonderful thing". Originally from Poland, David and Helen Apfelbaum and their two-year-old son Manes, migrated from Europe to Australia in 1951. Mr and Mrs Apfelbaum had been offered a choice of three destinations – Australia, Canada or the USA. Not knowing which to choose, they put each name on a piece of paper and allowed their baby son to make the choice. Manes chose Australia four times. David Apfelbaum, now deceased, said that even then he was unsure why they disembarked in Melbourne because they actually had tickets for Sydney. The Apfelbaums arrived in Melbourne on 6 August 1951,

the day and month that David had entered Auschwitz in 1943.

The Apfelbaums left Europe with nothing and arrived in a country where they spoke no English, had no family and there was an acute housing shortage. David found work in the clothing industry and the family moved into Flat 4 at Labassa in June 1952. Moving to Manor Grove brought the family closer to the Jewish community. David was invited to join the Mizrahi organisation where he became a highly respected cantor, leading the congregation in prayers for the Day of Atonement.

Flat 4, the original upstairs master bedroom suite, was in a ruinous state.

The wallpaper was peeling and so the Apfelbaums painted the walls. They changed the light fittings and polished the floors. Manes has a childhood memory that some of the objects from this renovation were put in a box by his father and buried in the backyard as a kind of treasure chest. David and Helen also bought some new modern furniture which Helen still owns.

An important part of making Flat 4 their home was placing mezuzahs (parchments inscribed with Hebrew verses) on all of the main doors of the apartment. The outlines of these mezuzahs are still visible.

At first there was no refrigerator, only an ice chest, which they kept in the hallway. Mrs Apfelbaum used the small laundry attached to the Willas Flats, washing everything by hand or in the copper. Winter was particularly hard. "We didn't pay for electricity, only gas. At first we used a radiator which we weren't allowed to do, so we bought a kerosene heater.

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## New land, new life, new friends (continued)

It was hard to keep warm and we stayed most of the time in the family room," says Helen.

The rent of £2 per week was collected by real estate agent David Feiglin. "It was a lot of money," says Mrs Apfelbaum. "Wages were only £7. Slowly, slowly we built ourselves up. Penny by penny. The surroundings were pleasant. The neighbourhood nice. It was luxury after Europe."

The Traurig family who lived down the hall in Flat 3 joined the Apfelbaums for Jewish festivals and celebrated Sukkot together. The Apfelbaums constructed a Sukkah, or temporary hut, on the balcony adjoining their family room as part of the festivities.

The Apfelbaum family moved out in 1962 so that Manes (13) and Rachel (10) could have separate rooms. Manes and Rachel's memories of Labassa are full of youthful high jinks. Manes remembers falling and breaking his arm after running along the top of the front fence, playing marbles in the long corridor and regular games of 'Fastest down and up the stairway'. Rachel loved sliding down the banisters: "They were our horses. We used to play lots of cowboys and Indians."

The Apfelbaums were among the first residents to have a TV set. Manes thought he had 'won' a TV set after answering a radio quiz. As it turned out it was only a short-term trial. "Somehow I convinced my parents to buy it," he says. *The Cisco Kid* and *The Texas Rangers* were firm favourites.

### Living in a castle



*Above left:* Lois Benkel with baby Reuben. *Above right L-R:* Claire Spencer; Simon, Reuben and Lois Benkel. *Photos:* Reuben Benkel.



**Reuben Benkel** was born in 1952, the year his parents Luba known as Lois and Shimon known as Simon moved into Flat 6. The most powerful memory of his childhood is of his 74-year-old friend Percy Spencer. Reuben visited Percy in his downstairs flat (Flat 7) every morning where he was treated to toast. One day, aged four, Reuben went down to see Percy and found him asleep in his bed. Reuben ran to his father: "I can't wake Percy up." Simon, understanding what had likely happened, reassured his son and went down to find Percy had passed away.

All of Reuben's other memories are happy ones: "For a kid, Labassa was like living in a castle with lots of places to hide. The staircase was the biggest thing in my life. I used to spend hours on the staircase running up and down and sliding on the bannister. I also loved the interaction with other families. It was great as an only child to have others to play with and there was a feeling you were surrounded by people who knew you. Doors were

left open so you'd walk into a neighbour's flat and talk. You could just run around. It was amazing for a five year old to have that kind of freedom."

The Benkels arrived in Australia in 1948. Simon from Grabow, Poland and Lois from Kovno, Lithuania had been interned at Auschwitz and other camps. They met in Germany after the war. Lois was alone and only 15 but tall for her age; Simon was 26 and promised to look after her. Neither was religious. Reuben says his father 'lost' his religion after his five siblings died in the Holocaust. The War also heightened the frugality Simon had known as a child. "Until the day he died," says Reuben, "he would eat half an apple and put the rest in the fridge and take it out later and finish it." The family made a success of their new life. Simon set himself up as a glazier with his own shop in Glenhuntly Road, Elsternwick. Lois, equally enterprising, ran her own dress shops.

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## New land, new life, new friends (continued)

### Childhood magic

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641  
642

Republik Österreich  
Bundesministerium für Inneres  
Gen. Dir. I. d. St. Sicherheit  
Abteilung 4 – Referat A/PA  
W. 18, L. Teufelstraße 4  
Bundespolizeidirektion Wien  
Paßamt

zu Zl. PA.83995/50

**Reise-Ausweis**  
(Nur gültig in Verbindung mit dem umseitigen Sichtvermerk)

Der — Die auf dem nebenstehenden Lichtbild Dargestellten ist — sind  
identisch mit:

Vor- und Zuname: **Salamon Traurig**

Staatszugehörigkeit: **ungeklärt**

Ort und Datum der Geburt: **Matisova, 22. Mai 1913**

Beruf: **Küschner**

Wohnung: **Wien, 18., Währingergürtel 97-99.**

Gesicht: **oval**

Farbe der Augen: **grau** Farbe der Haare: **schwarz**

Besondere Kennzeichen: **trägt Brille**

Eigenhändige Unterschrift:

und dessen Gattin (Vorname, Mädchensname): **Malvine, Zapf**

Ort und Datum der Geburt: **Kosice, 18. Febr 1917** Beruf: **Schneiderin**

Wohnung: **Wien, 18., Währingergürtel 97-99**

Gesicht: **oval** Farbe der Augen: **braun**

Farbe der Haare: **schwarz** Besondere Kennzeichen: **keine**

Eigenhändige Unterschrift:



*Far left:* A page from the Traurigs' travel documents.

*Left:* Salamon, Eva and Malvine Traurig at Labassa.

*Photos:* Traurig family collection.

Eva Traurig was two and a half when she came to Australia on the *Napoli* with her parents Malvine and Salamon Traurig, and around five in 1953 when the family moved into Flat 3, where they lived until 1957.

Malvine, a dressmaker worked from home doing 'piece work'. Salamon, a furrier, initially worked in a factory making koala bears, and later for fur merchant Stephen Dattner, himself a Post-War migrant. In coming years, Salamon supplemented the family income by working from home using a room in the tower as his workshop.

Eva says her childhood was "magic". Although she had her own play area outside the bay window room, as an only child it was a joy to always have someone to play with especially Joseph White from the Willas Flats, Manes, Rachel, Reuben and downstairs resident Margaret Manton. The children ran in and out of each other's flats, and played on the balcony.

Eva's special sanctum was the large magnolia tree and seat in the backyard.

Like the Apfelbaums, Eva has fond memories of some of the older residents: Mrs Brearley who was a "very kind lady", always dusting and polishing, except when she was telling the children to walk not run up the stairs, and Mrs Miriam White who helped Malvine to write letters in English.

One of the first things the Traurigs did on arrival was to place mezuzahs on every door in the flat.

Apart from celebrating Jewish festivals with the Apfelbaums, Eva also remembers their own flat being a centre for friends and gatherings on Sundays, during Passover and on other holy days.

Salamon and Malvine, originally from modern day Slovakia, shared few details of their wartime experiences with their daughter. Malvine had been in a concentration camp while Salamon was on the run travelling with false identity papers.



*Left:* Eva Traurig.

*Photos:* Traurig family collection.

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## New land, new life, new friends (continued)

### Three beds and a radio

**Susan and Peter Gruner** were old enough to form clear memories of life at 1 Manor Grove. They arrived with their parents Endre and Rose on the *Toscana* in December 1957, moving into Flat 3 just before New Year's Eve. Endre and Rose had survived the Holocaust, a Soviet occupation and the Hungarian Revolution before making the decision to migrate.

During the War, Rose was in hiding with Peter while Endre was in a forced labor camp. Endre had owned two butcher shops in Budapest – one kosher and one non-kosher. Under the Communist regime that followed the War, the authorities 'nationalised' the non-kosher shop as well as Endre's car and truck. They even 'nationalised' the family garage and converted it into a milk bar. The Gruners were also told that their house was too big and they had to have three families living with them so they invited their own extended family to move in to avoid State intervention.

The crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 was a turning point. According to Susan, some Hungarians blamed the Jews for the failure of the uprising. It was a big decision for the Gruners to leave. Endre was a well-respected butcher and the family was relatively comfortable. They lived on the Buda side of Budapest in an exclusive area called 'Rozsadomb' (Rose Hill). There were stunning views to the city side of Pest. The Gruners sold their house in the hope they would have enough to start a new life but were unable to take the money with them.



*Above:* Endre and Rose Gruner. *Below:* Susan and Peter in the front yard of Labassa. *Photos:* Gruner family collection.

Susan says that when they first arrived at Labassa they had a family meeting to decide "do we buy three beds and a radio or three beds and a heater? We bought a radio and tuned into *The Creaking Door* which was so scary our mother would sit with us while we listened." Susan also loved *Kid Grayson Rides the Range* and says it led to her speaking English with a funny American accent for a while.

As with many migrants, it took years of hard work for the Gruners to establish their butcher shop in St Kilda, now run by Peter, and a local institution. In the early days they couldn't afford a car or washing machine. On weekends, Endre and Rose hand washed the sheets and in winter left them to dry in the tower.

Life at Labassa was a very happy time for Susan. Her private pleasure at age 11½ was drawing on the wallpaper in her flat. Many of her works of art are visible to this day. "It was friendly. Beautiful. Colourful. We just loved being in Australia. At school here no one asked 'What's your religion?' They said 'What's your name? Let's play skippy.' I'd arrived in heaven." Susan often brought her school friends home. "They loved coming here. It was a mysterious house. We looked all over the place for hidden treasure, especially in the tower. It was a lovely place. Welcoming and cheerful."





## Volume 2, Issue 3, 2014

## Forthcoming events in 2015

Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome.

Please forward to:

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

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

January 18

February 15

March 15

April 19

May 17

June 21

July 19

August 16

September 20

October 18

November 15

December CLOSED

## Recent revivals



## A rare survivor returns

The Tennis Pavilion has returned to Labassa's garden thanks to the generosity of the owner of 13 Manor Grove.

Once the setting for grand gatherings, the Pavilion has been restored and is now sited in the newly landscaped rear garden.

The Pavilion will provide a charming backdrop for contemporary weddings and parties. Perhaps some will even rival those hosted by a previous owner, Alexander Robertson.

In 1893, Mr Robertson invited "very fashionable company" to "watch a brisk tennis tournament".

According to *The Australasian*, 100 people attended, including the Misses Armytage (Como), George Chirnside (Werribee Park) and Lady Clark (Clivedon).

Tournament prizes included silver ornaments for the ladies and pen-knives for the gentlemen. A "good band" played in one corner and afternoon tea and ices were served at tables, decorated with belladonna lilies, on the eastern verandah. The novelty of Edison's phonograph playing in the Drawing Room was complemented by speeches from 'Mr Gladstone' and 'Mrs 'Enery 'Awkins', the latter being in the voice of celebrated impersonator, Albert Chevalier.

*Belladonna redux*

A generous donation by a Friend of Labassa, Andrew Dixon, has enabled the transfer of the 1974, 16mm film *Belladonna* to DVD. The footage includes some extraordinary Labassa sequences two of which are pictured below.

Original members of the production team, Daryl Lindquist and Stephen Hall, are working on a final edit from the DVD footage including a contemporaneous soundtrack.



**Top:** Russell Hellyer and Stephen Hall play chess with scorpions while seated in a boat on the staircase.

**Above:** Resident Jenny Strathie in Flat 3.