

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Suzanne Davidson on behalf of – The Deseo Family – An Oral History

Interviewed by Edie Swift, Paddington, Sydney, 25th June 2016



Today I am interviewing Suzanne Davidson at her home in Paddington, NSW. I am Edie Swift and I am interviewing for the Thredbo Historical Society. We are going to talk about Suzanne Davidson's parents, Kornel and Suzie Deseo and their adventure building Candlelight Lodge in Thredbo.

So can you give me your parents' names, and your grandparents' names? We always do this just to put you in history, that is all.

My mother married my step-father just before we came away from Hungary. So my-step father was not actually my father but he brought me up as if he had been. So I don't think my grandparents' names would help you in this case.

We escaped Hungary at the end of 1949 when my mother realised that the communist regime was going to get worse. She decided she wanted to leave, so my step-father, Kornel, found a guide, one of the village boys, and paid him to guide us through the three electric fences surrounding the whole country, which were all mined between the fences. It was all very dangerous stuff. We were taken first into the Russian Zone in Vienna, and from there we went to Salzburg, where I was put into the Convent as a Boarder.

Kornel and Suzie went on to Kitzbühel, where they thought they would ski for the last time before coming to Australia. They were both wonderful skiers. Kornel was European langlauf champion for three years running, and Mum skied downhill, slalom and langlauf. They both loved the mountains.

We arrived in Australia in 1950. It took six weeks on a boat. It was a lovely boat trip and they really thought they would never see snow again. Once we arrived they worked terribly hard to establish us in a new country. Kornel, who had been a lawyer, couldn't speak English, so he started work in a factory. He worked in three different jobs, leaving home at dawn wearing his beautiful handmade suits, coat and shoes – that is all he had. And he would arrive as a workman looking like the managing director.

Mum who had never needed to have a job before, found work as a cutter in a shirt factory and ended up in a few months as their chief designer and cutter. It was terribly hard for both of them. They never did anything for fun. They just worked day and night and saved money.

They bought a house. I remember going with Kornel to get a loan from the bank because he couldn't speak English well enough yet. They offered him a twenty five year loan and he just laughed and said "I will pay you back in a year." The bank manager thought he was nuts and said "Why would you want to do that?" And he said "Because over 25 years I would have to pay you

three times as much.” He did pay it back in a year, after which the bank offered to lend him anything he needed for any project he wanted.

At first, Kornel just hated Australia. He didn’t know anyone. He had no friends. He had left all his mates behind. In Hungary he was well known and he was a success. Here he was nobody. So he was terribly sad.

I was a dance student, and in 1955 we decided that I should go to England to build a career in dance. In those days England was often referred to as “home” by most Australians. So I went off to London and that made my mother desperate. By this time she was running what became a very successful business called “Candlelight Creations.” She designed shirts and skirts, shorts and general sportswear. She designed and cut out everything and home workers made up the garments. Kornel was the quality controller and packer and he looked after the business. It was an extraordinary success.

But eventually Mum came out in a terrible rash and she couldn’t get rid of it – she was covered from head to toe in a cream and in the greatest heat wore a head to toe silk jersey cover-all. Finally the skin doctor said to her “You are just going to have to stop doing what you are doing. You are allergic to the dyes in the rolls of jersey.” This was terrible news, because they had sunk every cent they had into the business.

They were just desperate and at that point they were suddenly invited to go up to what eventually became Thredbo. There was nothing there except a little hotel and Mrs Hughes had a place and I think the Ski Club of Australia had a little timber hut. There was a group of European people who decided that Crackenback could be a good mountain and they held an international skiing competition. They asked Kornel and Mum to go up, have a look, and give their opinion as to whether it would be suitable for a skiing village. You know that in Thredbo it is sometimes wonderful snow and it looks like Europe, and at other times not so much. This was one of those good years.

They arrived there in the middle of the night and they couldn’t see anything. In the morning Mum said she will never forget opening up the roller blind and looking out at the sun shining fair on to Crackenback which was completely white and glistening. She said it was like Kitzbühel. To them it was unbelievable. Then Kornel said “I am going down to the office to find out where we can buy a place here”. And Mum said “Don’t you think it is a bit soon?” He said “No, I don’t.” He went down, he walked into the office – it has become history now – all the oldies will remember Kornel walking in and saying “Good morning, whom do I speak to, to buy a place here?” They all looked at him and said “You’re nuts, come on!” and he said “No, I am serious.” Somebody, I think it might have been

Tony Sponar laughed and said "Go up the mountain and put a stick in where you want to have a place, and you can have it."

So he did. He went up the road and put a stick in where Candlelight is now. A few weeks later, Kornel ran into Anton, I think, who said "Kornel, I hear you are going to buy a place up in Thredbo. Are you mad?" And Kornel said "No, I am not mad. I am buying it because it will become an international ski village." And they put every cent they had into it. He went back to the same bank manager, who just said "How much do you want?" ... and they built it. They were in their early forties.

What year are we talking about?



1956. Yes, winter of 1956, they went down and had a look and this happened then. They opened the Lodge in Easter 1957. Everything in the lodge was designed and made by my mother except the furniture. But whatever wasn't made by her, she had organised for somebody to make it. She had all the lamp stands, all the brackets made by a local blacksmith. I have got one of the lamp stands in my home.

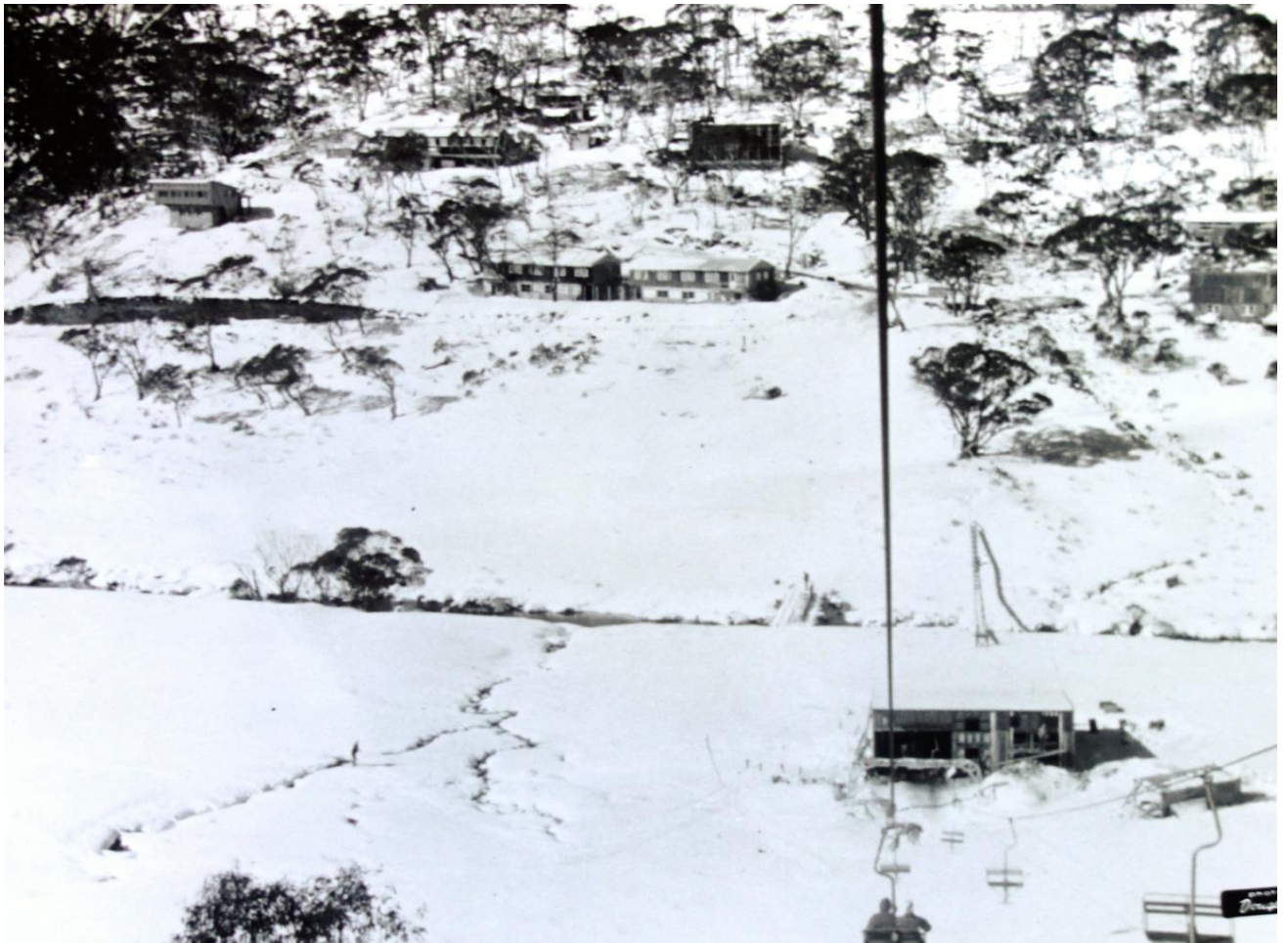
Candlelight Lodge 1958

She made all the doona covers, the bed covers, the curtains. They were all sewn by her from material she had sourced in Austria - beautiful old fashioned Austrian material, winter material, peasant stuff.

There was a very nice woman in Cooma, I think or near Berry and she was a potter who made plates, cups and saucers. Mum ordered a whole heap of things from her. Now my daughter has all the soup plates endorsed with the maker's name, McCredie - they are just beautiful. When you went into Candlelight, it was like walking into Europe in the mountains.

They put so much love into it. Mum hand painted lots of things in the place. Her first terrible shock was when the architect proudly showed her the design and she said they were very pleased with it and asked “where is the kitchen?”

He had forgotten to include a kitchen. So she ended up with this tiny kitchen which ran the length of the lodge at the back, and which also had to include the pantry. She did all the cooking by herself for the whole twenty-one years they were there, and all the ordering, and she had never done any cooking, except for us after the war, because in Europe, in those days you had a cook to do the cooking. You had a maid and you had servants who did things. Hungarian girls were trained in housekeeping so she knew how to housekeep, but she just never had to do it until after the war. She used to always say to me “I know you are a good cook, and I know your friends are always telling you to start a restaurant, but don’t ever do it. It is quite different to cook professionally. It is not just cooking twenty things instead of just one. It is quite different.” So she had to learn all that from scratch. There was no one to teach her.



Candlelight from the chairlift, far left, in the late 1950's

In the early days they served breakfast, lunch and dinner. When they extended the lodge, the first time they extended it, she ended up cooking for thirty five rooms, which is huge. Sometimes she would have seventy people in the dining room. She only ever had one or may be two people in the kitchen once they had extended the Lodge. The kitchen moved from where it had been, to a better space to where it is now actually, but the people who bought it from them, opened the wall and you can now see into the kitchen. Mum would never have allowed that. The presentation of the food was part of the magic of Candlelight -- it was unique.

In Australia if you went to a restaurant, no matter how good, you were served on individual plates. My mother served everything in large dishes and everybody helped themselves, like at home. She said it was horrendous to try and teach people not to over-help themselves, because then she would have to throw out all the left-overs. Anybody who went through the war found it difficult to cope with wasted food. When something was left over in the kitchen she created something else with it. She couldn't bear to see waste. Another shock in the beginning was the first time somebody asked for that great Australian standby, tomato sauce. She had served them this wonderful banquet and they asked if they could have tomato sauce. She had never heard of tomato sauce! It was very funny.

Anyway, they built this lodge. They were really going to come over to England and visit me because I had been there on my own for three years by then, and they wanted to come and see me but when they built Candlelight, they didn't have any money left and no time so there was no choice. Kornel used to say that his life in Australia really began with Thredbo. He said until Thredbo, he was just a refugee. But he said on the mountain, everyone is equal. Of course, he was a fabulous skier. He looked wonderful and he was a very elegant skier. Mum worked hard physically, but Kornel didn't because he did all the booking and paper work so he was at his desk. But every afternoon they would go up on the mountain and ski.



Kornel Deseo in the late 1950's

To them, that was just wonderful. I used to have people telling me how funny it was to see them every afternoon, as people would go up on the chairlift, they could see Kornel swishing down in wide sweeps “zoom, zoom zoom” with Mum behind him busily keeping up.

How did they get the food into the lodge?

The meat and sausages came from Handlers down here in Sydney, in Rushcutters Bay. Mum sourced a baker at a village on the way up and they bought most things in Cooma I think, and a lot of things from wholesalers here in Sydney. To get to and from Thredbo they bought a car which I think was a little Wolseley. It had done 100,000 miles and used to just chug along in the end. It was completely full of food when they would arrive and you know, she had to work out how much she needed of everything. It was a very hard job to do.

I asked her once: “Did you ever run out of anything?” She said “Oh, yes, but you do something else then.” She had to work out things like how many chickens she would need; how many of this and how much of that. She made wonderful strudel and she had a bloke in William Street here in Paddington who was an Italian who made strudel pastry. If you walked in the front door of this terrace in William Street, it was completely white with flour. When I came back to Australia I would go up to Thredbo. Mum would ring me and say to me “Go and pick up some strudel – I’ve ordered it and he will have it.” And I would take it up to Thredbo.

After they had been there for a year, a Czech couple whom they had known from the skiing world – Sasha and Karel Nekvapil – came to ski up there. They could see how well Candlelight was going and decided they wanted to do the same. Mum and Kornel encouraged them, saying “come on, you are Europeans, you are skiers. Do it.” And they encouraged them and fed them Mum said, while they built their Lodge. Karel and Sasha decided to build right next door to Mum and Kornel, who were not thrilled, but they didn’t say anything. It must have been very competitive in those early days, you know. Mum and Kornel were never very sociable – well, perhaps they were sociable but they were not social. Kornel came from an old aristocratic family and he had been brought up to be self-effacing. He didn’t encourage people to be too friendly, so they didn’t have a network of connections. Their network of friends really comprised their early clients, and a few of the later ones.

Mum told me once very proudly that Ken Myer, who was already the chairman of the ABC – and head of the big Myer family - used to come and stay there every winter. And Ken and Jack Hannes, who had built up Hanimex – ran into each other in an airport once. As their plane was

running late, they decided to compare notes on which places they had stayed in, and which places they liked most. They talked, and talked, and talked and ended up agreeing that Candlelight was the best place where they had ever had a holiday. Mum was very proud of that, and so she should have been because these guys had travelled everywhere.

It is such a wonderful story. You tell it so well and I just wondered if there any of these big storms or things that you remember when you couldn't get supplies in?



Oh, no. There was nothing like that. They went up usually at the beginning the winter season for the June long weekend and stayed open until the October long weekend. Mum did have a few dramas; she used to employ these young girls who would come up mainly to meet young men.

Suzanne and Kornel in the 1960's

Many of them worked during the day in the lodges as these were being built, and there were more and more, so there were more places to work in. And afterwards in the evening they would go down to the Keller or down to the Hotel where there was music and dancing, and drink at the bar, and meet young men. When Mum interviewed them, she would try to work out whether that is what they were up to, or whether they were skiers, because some of them wanted to work in Thredbo because they liked to ski.

Anyway she had one girl, who she said was a very pretty girl, a very nice girl, but who had absolutely no idea what to do in the kitchen. She finally taught her how to make a bed but she was useless in the kitchen. But she said, "I couldn't choose and she was the one I had. She couldn't remember any instructions and I constantly said to her 'Just concentrate on what you are doing.'" Anyway one day Mum had made an ordinary date cake. She said to this girl "Now take it out of the oven and just put it on that stand but don't drop it." And of course, the girl did. She just dropped it. Thank God, Mum was so fanatical about cleanliness, that you could eat off the kitchen floor.



Menu of the day - from the 1960's

The girl burst into floods of tears. Mum just picked up the whole thing and put it all in a big bowl, poured some rum into it, stirred it up and made little balls out of it. She had some little chocolates that looked like ants – you know those tiny little chocolate things – she rolled the balls in them and served them as rum balls. It became the favourite dessert.

Many chefs do that - Peach Melba became Peach Melba because of some disaster in the kitchen. I think Pavlova was the outcome of a disaster. Lots of very well-known dishes are outcomes of disasters. Anyway this one is one of Mum's favourites. She had another story – she made wonderful pancakes– not American ones but crêpes and she would fill them with apricot jam, or with ground walnuts and sugar, or various fillings. She often served pancakes for dessert. One day, quite early on in their career, she decided to hold a pancake eating competition. She wrote to me “Well I am never doing that again, I made 250 pancakes and they were all eaten.” All wonderful stories.

When did they decide that they would have to move on and close Candlelight?

They didn't close it, they sold it. They ran it for twenty one years. I think Mum would have been about 67, when she said “I don't ever want to have a kitchen again.” By that time they both had had hip replacements. Kornel skied with his super plastic hips. God knows how he did that. They X-rayed his hips, and his surgeon said “I don't know how you can walk”. Kornel decided to have both his hips replaced at the same time. The surgeon didn't think he would be able to cope, but Kornel was determined. So they did both his hips and that winter he was back on skis.

When did they sell the Lodge and to whom?”

They sold it to Hubert Engel. I had never met Hubert, but I think he was German or perhaps Austrian. He was another skier and he loved Thredbo, so Mum felt ok about selling it to him, because Candlelight was her baby. She and Kornel both felt the same about Candlelight and Thredbo, but mainly about Candlelight. Kornel and Susie died within six months of each other and with Hubert's permission their ashes were interred in the garden that Susie had created. Their resting place was marked by a beautiful Black Sally eucalypt and a special memorial plaque.

Frankly, it would have taken Thredbo a great deal longer to evolve into the international skiing village it has become if they hadn't established Candlelight when they did, because nobody could imagine putting all their money into a place that had nothing in it. Before Candlelight was

built, at the bottom of the road I remember there was a thing called "The Hotel" which was really a pub. It had a bar and it had a Post Office and it had the staff quarters at the end. Directly opposite was Mrs Hughes' house and I can't remember where the Ski Club's tiny little hut was, but it was somewhere along the same place and that was it. And then came Candlelight.

Candlelight was a success and it was obviously a going concern. You had to have vision to do that sort of thing. You just can't do it out of the blue. These two both knew what could be done. They were genuine pioneers.

When they sold, what year was that?

1978.

Did they move on

They sold because my husband and I couldn't take it over. He was a Lecturer in the Sydney Teachers' College at the University of Sydney, and I was a dancer, who had founded what became the Sydney Dance Company. So we had a life in Sydney and the children were growing up here – Mark was in his early teens. He started skiing at age 4. Mum took him up on the mountains and he became a fabulous skier. She had to drag him up there; in those days, you had to walk up the mountain. There was no lift. Up in the Basin, if you could get yourself up to the Basin, they had a tow. But that was it, like at Kiandra. I remember them dragging me up to Kiandra the first time they were actually able to ski in Australia when they discovered there was such a thing as Kiandra and Kosciuszko. They went up to Kiandra and Kornel used to spend every weekend there during the winter as an instructor.

What year was that?

It would have been 1951-1955.

Well I think we are ready to conclude. I think it was just wonderful to hear all this about the lodge. They did a wonderful job. They moved on to Northbridge, did they?

They had their house in Northbridge .

Just one more thing, about when Lend Lease took over Thredbo Village. Dick Dusseldorp, who had founded Lend Lease, bought the village. He became a great fan of Kornel's and when Thredbo celebrated its fortieth anniversary, Dick travelled my parents up there and invited Kornel to give a speech on behalf of the lodge owners. I remember, I said to Kornel, you will have to write your speech down. "Oh no, oh no, I can speak." I said "You will be surrounded by many people. You are speaking in English. This is not your first language and you will forget things you don't want to forget. Trust me I have a big speaking engagement circuit and I wouldn't dream of going out without my cards. Write down in Hungarian what you want to say, I will translate it and type it up into paragraphs on cards." That is why I know what he said that time. Thank God I did that because Mum said he was in such a state. For Dick Dusseldorp to have recognised them, as he did, meant a great deal to them. I did try later to have Kornel and Susie recognised by the Village but I couldn't get management to do it. Their reaction was: "Oh we can't recognise everyone." I told them: "They are not everyone. What they achieved with Candlelight was actually the beginning of Thredbo as an Alpine Village."

Well thank you very much. Now would you donate this to the Thredbo Historical Society and to transcribe it?

Delighted.

Well thank you so very much.