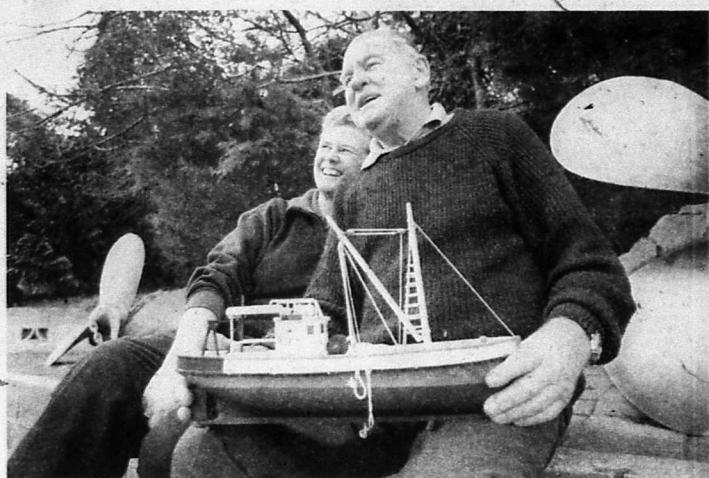


In the first of a two-part story, **LANCE GIRLING-BUTCHER** profiles fisherman Loui Kuthy, the Hungarian refugee who never saw the sea until he was 32



FIRST FISH: Loui Kuthy (above) in 1957 with the first fish he was haul from the Tasman Sea.

HOLIDAY MOOD: Loui and Verna Kuthy outside their New Plymouth factory and coolstore for a holiday in Hungary. Loui is holding a model of his faithful Norman McLeod. Photo: MARK DAVYER

Loui Kuthy — the old man of the sea

Loui Kuthy arrived in Taranaki more than 40 years ago, a refugee from the Hungarian uprising with nothing but the clothes he was wearing. He turned to the sea for a living, fulfilling a lifelong dream and becoming a successful fisherman in one of the toughest oceans in the world. Now he is finally talking of hanging up his sea boots

LOUI KUTHY has always been fascinated with the sea. Even in his childhood in landlocked Hungary he longed for his first glimpse of the ocean.

Today, at the age of 75, he still cannot remember anything more exciting than catching his first fish.

"Even after seven decades I can clearly see the silvery body dancing on the end of the line," says Loui. "A school mate of mine, Masha, lured me out. I was using his old bamboo for rod, cotton for line, bent pin for hook and a matchstick for float. Primitive? Yes, but it worked."

In European inland countries, generations are born and die without seeing the sea. But history had a completely different plan for Loui.

Hungary, which had been subdued by the Russians some 15 years before, was boiling with tension. This flared in October 1956 with a spontaneous anti-communist uprising. Mighty Russia, stunned by the unprecedented and daring rebellion in Budapest, soon beat the Hungarians into submission.

More than 176,000 people fled Hungary rather than stay under the Russian thumb. Loui Kuthy, then aged 32, was one of them.

Before the uprising, everything was owned by the Government. Loui was the equivalent of a general manager in charge of transport in an area the size of Taranaki. "I had four buses, seven taxis and 12 diesel trucks."

He enjoyed the work but not the oppression and fear spread by the Russian authorities. Hoping things would improve, he left his escape very late but in the end decided he had to run. He contacted a group helping smuggle refugees across the border into Austria.

On his first attempt he was captured and taken to a jail at Szombathely for two days of interrogation. Fortunately, the jail was over-full and Loui was released with a strong warning that next time he would be shot. But he headed straight back to the border, after dumping two men in the prison. Authorities had sent him with whom he suspected were spies.

It was November and the air was crystal clear with the first fall of winter snow on the ground.

The underground group hid near a barbed-wire fence patrolled by two Russian guards. Loui laid low in the woodland, still wearing his transport officer's uniform with a light pack on his back, fearing he would be spotted at any moment. "Once they came so close it seemed impossible they could not see me."

As the two-man patrol walked away, Loui heard dogs in the distance and decided it was time to move. He dashed for the fence, every muscle and sinew straining. Driving him faster was the sound of



GOOD OLD DAYS: The Norman McLeod with an example of the sort of 10-tonne haul that was not unusual when Loui Kuthy started fishing with her in the 1970s.

gunfire. "They were probably just having more target practice. I don't know. I did not waste time checking."

Loui dived on to the top of the fence, the barbs tearing at his clothing as he rolled over and tumbled to freedom.

Austrian flags marked the route to safety. "A bloody marvellous sight. The best sights of my life — it brought tears to my eyes." He headed for the nearest village where he was given a warm welcome.

LOUI had no plans, and deciding on a new country was more difficult than he expected.

"I was assigned to a group to go to the United States. Others were envious, but I felt uncertain and haunted by unexplainable emotions. I felt that in such a well-developed country my ambitions would be suppressed, I might remain something like a shoeshine boy for the rest of my life."

"I had heard about two other countries near the bottom of the world that were not as advanced, but remained wild and virgin with land still to be tamed. That was what I was looking for."

Loui went to Vienna and the Australian embassy. But the Australians' refugee quota had been filled.

"Despondently, I took my leave. But hey, there was another embassy using the same building — New Zealand. Australia's neighbour had nothing to lose, it was worth a try. After another long interview, another long wait, my destiny was set."

And so, wearing just the clothes he was standing in, Loui Kuthy began a new life in New Zealand.

"In Auckland we were processed and dispersed to various parts of the country. The bus I travelled on with 40 other passengers arrived in New Plymouth late in the evening. The small community of local Hungarians were there to welcome us, along with local dignitaries."

"The welcome speeches had to be translated as none of us spoke English. Not lost in the translation was the fact that every one was keen to help in any way they could. They wanted to help us settle and feel welcome in our new world. I remember, as the appointed spokesman for the group, replying as best I could to this overwhelming generosity."

"The next day was a busy one," says Loui. "First, we were taken up to the Red Cross building where it took time to realise that we were welcome to choose what we wished from the heaps of clothing, sheets and blankets before us. Then Mrs Bent, a tireless worker of the Red Cross, took a group into town to some shoe shops

and bought brand new working boots. The refugees were taken to the mayor's office for good welcoming speeches. As a closing gesture, each was given a five-pound note. Loui later spent his on a bowler hat and an umbrella, believing these to be the essentials for success in an English-speaking country."

Meanwhile, he could hardly wait for these functions to end. Not that he was ungrateful, but all morning he had been getting tantalising glimpses of the ocean.

"I was bursting with curiosity and was impatient to be closer. Finally, my opportunity came and at a half-walk, half-run, I reached the sea's edge at Kawarua Park."

"Immediately I was on my knees. No, not to pray, but to be able to reach and touch this sea water. To scoop up a handful and taste; it was salty. I had read this in books many years before and now it was confirmed. I was mesmerised and sat on the shore, not able to take my eyes off

the horizon.

To think, less than 10 days ago snow and ice kept me shivering, and here I was now with a gentle wind from the Pacific Ocean caressing my face."

It was January 25, 1957. I was stiff with worry. What was going to happen to me? I was 32 years old. I could not speak the language, and I didn't have any trade or occupation that I could offer the world."

"I was in a strange land where so many things were confusing."

As Loui contemplated this, the first wave of the turning tide mischievously soaked his shoes, bringing him back to reality. What was there to worry about? He was in a free land, with opportunity aplenty.

HE found somewhere to live. The accommodation was with a Dutch family, the Van Beers. They had a large family of their own but were still willing to take on three Hungarian boarders. He also found a job pushing concrete in a wheelbarrow for Tiger Payne, a local contractor.

Loui had been worried that his lack of English would make finding work difficult, but there were so many vacancies that anyone who was willing could have two jobs.

His second job was working night shift at the Barrett St Hospital, where he started at 11pm and finished at 7am, cleaning and going out with the ambulance whenever it was called.

He even worked at the weekends. Woodworking, concreting, earthworks and gardening all became part of his repertoire.

While helping add a wing to the O'Mahoney rest home, he was introduced to Dr James Dempsey, who became not only his biggest part-time employer, but a major benefactor, passing his name to doctor colleagues. From then on he was fully booked, sometimes months ahead.

"All of this time, Loui kept an eye on the sea. He bought some surfacing gear and later a 14ft runabout, but he lost this in the surf off Back Beach."

"It was a bitter lesson. I felt the sea was enveloping me. I wanted this boat back so badly. There was so much left to explore."

AFTER two years of menial jobs and gradually building a sound financial base, Loui Kuthy got the break that would change his life.

"I did not hesitate to jump at the chance to crew on the local trawler Annabella. I couldn't wait for the first trip to start and to be paid for it, too. Amazing!"

"I was not what he had been expecting. The sea was rough, it was wet, cold and miserable. I was not seascap, but very close to it. The vessel tossed and rolled relentlessly. I distinctly remember thinking after just a few hours that my dreams were shattered. What an inhospitable place this was. I was totally disillusioned."

But three days later they were still at sea and the conditions had changed. It was a glorious sea; brilliant sunshine and a school of porpoises came alongside the boat for a visit.

"I was ecstatic. The thrill had returned. I had never experienced anything like it before. To see such magnificent creatures gliding through the water and keeping an interested eye on us."

Loui was hooked. He found Alan and Jim Rutherford, goose teachers who worked on the Annabella for more than two years.

With the help of a loan from Dr Dempsey, he formed a partnership with Max Antanovic. On April 16, 1963, he proudly sailed into Port Taranaki aboard the Norman McLeod. She was a 51ft wooden trawler, built in 1942 and originally used to service lighthouses for the Marine Department. She was an excellent sea boat, with a hull made of three skins of kauri and teak. For £13,000 she was theirs.

The partnership with Max Antanovic dissolved two years later, but Loui continued single trawling with the Norman McLeod. He worked mainly in the Fatoua-Wanganui fishing grounds, where snapper and trevally were plentiful — it was not unusual to fill the boat in one night.

"I was not a New Zealand citizen. I was not permitted even to operate my own vessel's radio and had the embarrassment of 'fresh snapper' for sale."

He was also having difficulty selling his catches. The export market was in its infancy and local demand was not high. "During the summer, when the snapper were running in large schools, there was an invariable excess. In an attempt to sell it, Loui would visit motor camps, his Ford 10 towing a trailer loaded with iced, gilled and gutted fish and him shouting, 'Fresh snapper for sale!'"

Even then there was dumping. "I still visualise large, plump snapper that had to be dumped over the side with lumps of ice still attached, slowly sinking to the depths. It was a shameful waste."

□ NEXT WEEK: Tragedy on the high seas