

In the second of a two-part story, **LANCE GIRLING-BUTCHER** follows fisherman Loui Kuthy through years of hardship, tragedy and eventual triumph

Living the hard life — storms on land and sea

Escaping Hungary after the Russian invasion in 1956, Loui Kuthy came to New Zealand with nothing but the clothes he was wearing and a dream to make his living on the sea. That dream was fulfilled, but at a price

IN 1969, Loui Kuthy bought a 32ft Windex-designed crayboat, powered by a 175hp diesel.

"I wanted the boat for crayfishing in a newly-found ground in the North Taranaki Bight. I named it the Alf Amor after a local fisherman who helped and encouraged me through my early fishing years."

Unfortunately, Amor was wrecked on the night of February 3, 1970, on Wai-kawau Beach near Awakino after the anchor cable parted and the boat drifted ashore in rough seas.

Reflecting on his first 14 years in New Zealand, Loui felt his adopted country had been good to him. He had his own business and he was working on the sea — something he had longed to do since he was a little boy.

But making a new life had not been easy. Mastering the English language was minor compared with gaining the knowledge and expertise required to operate a fishing trawler.

"My first day at sea I thought you had to be brainless to do this job. How wrong can someone be with first impressions? The skills involved to operate a successful fishing business are daunting. You not only have to have the physical attributes to handle the constantly changing moods of nature, but also be a jack of all trades. You cannot call the electrician or the AA when something will not go. Unless your swimming skills are exceptional you are on your own. Improvisation was a skill I acquired through necessity.

"My friends keep reminding me today of the time I ventured out too far. It was sunny, the sea calm and life was wonderful. Home was in my thoughts, Mum and Dad were with me.

"The mountain was prominent, but the fish were not biting. Maybe a little further. Maybe they were in deeper water. At last I found them, but where is the mountain? Can't be that little blob on the horizon?"

"Bloody hell, look at the time! It will be dark soon. Now the engine won't go. What's wrong? Pull it apart. Quick, it's getting late.

"The top was off the outboard and it was obvious a new gasket was required. No spares. No phone. Plenty of bread. Obviously! Don't eat it. Make a gasket! And many years later it still was not replaced.

"So much basic knowledge and ability is needed to be successful. Breakdowns are costly; not just the repairs but loss of productivity. Navigation, electronics, mechanics, refrigeration, plumbing, knife handling, net mending and don't forget cooking, housekeeping (the boat is home as well as a workhorse), bookkeeping, accounting, marketing all need your attention."

ALL this leaves little time for pleasure, but it was time to make some. It had been nearly 15 years since leaving Hungary, family and friends. Loui decided to return for a visit, but fishing was never far from his thoughts.

"On my way through England a new fishing method caught my attention — pair trawling."

The basic difference between single and pair trawling is that in single trawling the net is spread by two-otter boards. With pair trawling the two boats pull the net



STRANGE VISITOR: Taranaki's old man of the sea Loui Kuthy with a sun fish caught off the Taranaki coast.

apart wider, faster and use less fuel. Another advantage is that in case of breakdown, one boat can tow the other.

Back in New Zealand in 1972, Loui spent a few days with the skippers and crew of the Tauranga trawlers Seawife and Brothers, who were experimenting with the method. The timing was perfect. He bought a trawler called the Geneva

'I was so happy I had resisted temptation and advice to settle earlier at 50 cents in the dollar'

May from David Urquhart and began pair-trawling with the Norman McLeod. They were ideally suited for this, having identical eight-cylinder Gardner engines with three-to-one reduction gearboxes.

"The trouble was, we had to design all the necessary gear and chattels that the new operation demanded. We got there, and finally a new era of fishing was about to begin from Port Taranaki."

With the purchase of the Geneva May, Loui also acquired a small processing plant and chiller at Waitara.

FRESH A Fisheries Ltd was formed with two minor shareholders, Willy Watts and Stan Gillbanks. The facilities were upgraded in preparation for the projected catch increase. Three crews were employed on a roster system to enable the vessels to be at sea as much as possible. When the operation settled down, the boats landed some excellent catches at New Plymouth.

But an unfortunate chain of events soon threatened to destroy Loui Kuthy's dreams. The first was the grounding of the Norman McLeod north of the Waiwakaiho River on the night of February 9, 1973. The Geneva May towed the vessel off the rocks at high tide. There was only slight damage to the hull, but the propeller blades were bent. It was decided to take the vessel to Nelson for what was meant to be a two-week repair job, but that turned into a nightmare lasting 2½ years.

A combination of poor judgment by the skipper on the Norman McLeod when she went ashore and a bad decision by a Marine Department inspector, who mis-

takenly thought a waterlogged area in the hull was rot, struck a major blow at the operation. A belated apology from the Marine Department did not compensate for the losses Loui suffered in those years. "I was forced to charter a replacement vessel to work with the Geneva May and had incurred added costs having the Norman McLeod shipped out of town. I also lost my two minor working shareholders. Stan had a calling from the Jehovah Witness that was stronger than Fresha Fisheries and Willy had to retire from the sea for health reasons."

LOUI was on his own again and was put into receivership in December 1979.

"It was a very frustrating feeling, knowing that despite all the potential we would probably lose everything."

He was not going to give up easily, however. The first call was to the Development Finance Corporation (DFC).

"The office was elegant and comfortable. I was there with my future wife, Verna, to plead for one more extension of our loan repayment. A little more time or a fresh loan was all we needed, but the general manager would not bend.

"By the time we got home, my receiver, Alwyn Burr, had the order to close Fresha Fisheries forthwith. It really seemed to be the end of the road."

As a last resort, Loui turned to Tony Friedlander, then Minister of Housing and MP for New Plymouth. Friedlander persuaded the DFC to allow Loui to stay in business, but sacrifices had to be made. He would have to sell his home and the company's three retail outlets.

Friedlander had to think hard before supporting the loan application, but he felt that with Verna backing the venture, the two could trade their way out of trouble — and they did not disappoint him.

The catches increased, the demand was steady and the profits started to accumulate. Some sacrifices were made. The Merrilands retail shop did go, but he managed to stave off the other closures.

"Very long, lonely days and nights were my lot for the next few months. I was determined to prove to myself, my creditors and the authorities that I could survive. I still had two trawlers, a processing factory and two retail shops to organise.

"I had to skipper one of our vessels, which meant leaving the shore to a manager. It was not smooth sailing until Verna, who had been working on her days off from her job with Police Service, joined forces full-time. Stability returned. Verna took charge of the shore facilities and book work while I was able to concentrate on the catching side. At last I was going to be able to show that with dedication, hard work and perseverance, you can remove the weights imposed. It is not without a little mirth that I recall reading the demise of the DFC itself.

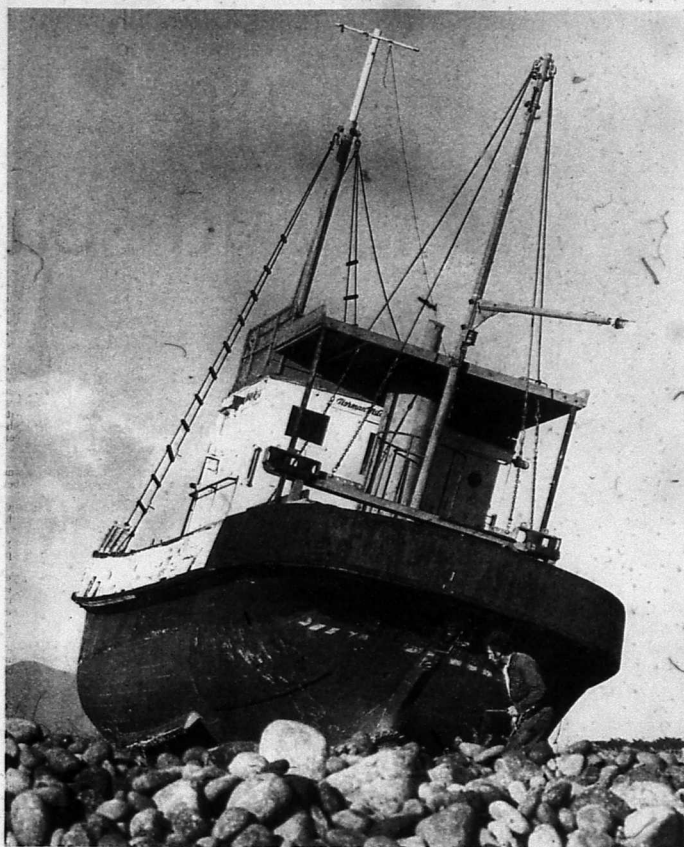
"Some four years after that dreadful news of receivership we were proud to be able to pay all creditors dollar for dollar. I will always be grateful for their faith in my ability and the immense inner satisfaction of experiencing their reactions when I was able to settle their accounts. I was so happy I had resisted temptation and advice to settle earlier at 50 cents in the dollar."

By then, Loui was alone no longer. He married Verna in October 1982 on the anniversary of the Hungarian uprising — "No excuse for forgetting either anniversary now. At last, the sleepless nights, the stigma of receivership; had passed. But what an experience?"

"And the sea, that magical element that has drawn me all my life, was still calling. There was unfinished business out there."

But the sea also invites drama, sometimes tragedy.

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HIGH AND DRY: The Norman McLeod aground at Waiwakaiho, the start of a difficult few years for Loui Kuthy.

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THE winter months on the Tasman can be cruel. The Taranaki coast is open and unforgiving.

On August 20, 1963, crewman Ron Budd fell overboard from the Geneva May off the Patea coast. The 26-year-old was on his last trip, looking forward to his wedding just six days away.

Loui Kuthy describes it as a typical winter night off Patea.

"I was fishing with the Norman McLeod, some 15 to 16 miles out. It was an extra-black, cloudy night. There was an 18 to 20 knot south-westerly blowing. We had just laid out our nets which would be pulled in in three hours' time.

"Inside of us, about three to four miles away, there were two other sets of lights. They were also from New Plymouth, the Annabella and Geneva May. They were just getting ready to shoot, judging by the fact their deck lights were all on. Of course, from the distance it was impossible to distinguish who was who. Little did I realise that within minutes I was going to hear one of the most dramatic discussions and call for help from the Geneva May."

The Geneva May had started to shoot the gear and was not quite halfway through this process when then-owner and skipper Alan Rutherford saw one of his men floating away from the stern of the trawler.

In the finest traditions of good seamanship, Alan rushed to the wheelhouse, turned and secured the wheel, then grabbed an armful of magazines and newspapers and tossed them overboard to mark the spot where Ron was last seen. Alan then radioed his brother Jim on the Annabella for help and advice.

Loui Kuthy: "I broke into the conversation and indicated that I had already started winching in the gear and would join his search."

"I managed to locate a large patch of waterlogged papers, but not a sign of Ron. After more than three hours of searching by all of us in weather conditions that made it almost impossible to see, with no moonlight and slight rain and a storm rapidly approaching, we had to concede Ron had gone forever."

"The gale that hit the area in the early hours of that morning removed all traces of this dramatic and tragic event. We did not find even a piece of clothing."

Another time, in the middle of winter, July 1, 1984, Loui was heading home to New Plymouth aboard the Geneva May after pair-trawling with the Norman McLeod. An experienced fisherman from Opunake, Karl Pajo, was relief skipper on the Norman McLeod.

Just an hour out of Port Taranaki, the sea was a bit lumpy, but bearable. Loui had already shed his wet-weather gear and was in the wheelhouse. He radioed the Norman McLeod and asked Karl to help ahead so that he would be ready to help put the last of the catch down in the fish hold when they reached port.

Crew member Todd Birkett (16) was overdue in the wheelhouse. To hurry him up, Loui went on the deck, but he was not there.

"I checked the accommodation, but he was not there either. A quick check everywhere else brought no result and I realised we were in big trouble."

"Immediately, I radioed Karl — MAN OVERBOARD!"

"I instructed him to take note of his reciprocal course, cut his throttle to half and head back towards us. He was a

Life and death off the Taranaki coast

bright fellow and got the message properly. The glaring New Plymouth lights gave a very good bearing in our efforts to retrace an accurate course. I decided to carry on slowly steaming up and down. I was on my own on Geneva May now. Todd had been my only crew."

All available flares were fired off for better visibility, but they were not much help and after about half an hour they decided it was hopeless.

"We were about to pack up and go home to the daunting task of facing his parents when I had a sudden idea. I called up Karl and instructed him to stop the McLeod engine and douse his deck lights, and I did likewise. Suddenly there was pitch darkness and an eerie silence enveloped us. I grabbed our powerful spotlight and went to the top of the wheelhouse."

Loui played the light ray in a vertical arch from sky to wheelhouse like the second hand in a gigantic clock. All he could hear was the occasional sound of tinkling chains as the boat rolled.

"One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock,

'With no moonlight and slight rain and a storm rapidly approaching, we had to concede Ron had gone forever'

nothing. Will he or will he not understand our message? Eight, nine, ten o'clock and still nothing. He had been in the cold water for more than an hour. Could he still be conscious? Could he respond if he wanted to?

"Eleven o'clock. Did I hear something? I played the light in the same area and there it was again. The warm feeling of success filled me, but I still didn't want to believe it. Todd was giving an intelligent response to my messages. I rushed to the wheelhouse to radio Karl."

"Go slowly to where I am shining the light; he is there, he is alive."

Karl Pajo recalled later that as they approached the area they struggled to see or hear anything. Then all of a sudden Todd was yelling at them. "Where was he? Good God, he was hanging on to the belting (a wooden chafing strip along the side of the trawler). He could have run him over!"

Back on shore, Todd said he never lost faith. The boats were very close to him several times.

"I know that we saved his life only because we were able to accurately retrace our route and used the silent search and spotlight technique," Loui says. "It was another close call!"

CONSERVING fish stocks has become a big issue with Loui these days. He has firm views regarding stock observation, reinforced over 42 years of harvesting and at times plundering the resource.

"Snapper, for instance, has a regular schooling season of November to Decem-

ber and at its peak the normally cautious snapper congregate in huge schools to take care of the next year's generation. They are not even chasing food. There is one objective only — multiply. And in the course of obeying the order of nature, millions die.

"In any European country the schooling season is sacred. Each species has a few weeks' or a few months' mercy. Here in New Zealand, it is not so."

Loui says quotas are a start but they do not relieve the vulnerability of the species at this crucial time. Amateur and commercial fisherman inflict irreparable damage on the stock.

"I know I am open for criticism — I am preaching water while drinking wine. Yes, schooling seasons benefited the building of my business, yet I was always aware that I was acting against the laws of nature. Did I feel sorry for the fish I was catching? It is not too far from the truth to say that."

NOW, Loui says, his time at sea is running out. He remains grateful to many people who have helped over 40 years of working off the Taranaki coast.

"I also have so many people, individuals and businesses to thank for what we have today."

"I wish to pay special gratitude and admiration to Westgate Transport, formerly Taranaki Harbours Board, for their help and fairness over four decades of association. They have really tried to accommodate our vessels in the safest manner in this very exposed harbour of ours and have always been there in any hour of need."

"And, of course, I have to thank the public of New Plymouth. The loyalty of our customers is indescribable."

Forty hard years have had their effect. The love of the sea is still there, but the body cannot keep up the tempo.

"In the past, after one good night's sleep, I used to be fighting fit again. But not lately, the tiredness is sticking to my muscles and bones."

His "good old faithful Norman McLeod" is still with him, but Loui says finding the energy to take her out and stay out is getting harder. He can look back to a long and successful career at sea, however. After near financial ruin he and Verna have built the fishing business back up to become one of New Zealand's most successful, with a multi-million dollar catching, processing and exporting operation based in a large factory at Brooklands.

"Little did I realise that that small, silvery fish I pulled from the Danube seven decades ago would have such an impact on my life," he says.

Just what role fishing will play from now on remains unknown, but one thing is certain — Loui's interest in the sea and what happens on it and in it will remain.

For now, there is a holiday to show Verna more of another great love of his life, his Hungarian homeland. After that, who knows? As long as there is an ocean in it somewhere, the future will never be dull. Neither will Loui. □