This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

Profile: Professor Emeritus Sir Gustav Joseph Victor Nossal

CV in brief

Sir Gustav Joseph Victor Nossal, AC, CBE, MB, BS, BSc (Med) (Syd), PhD (Melb), Hon LLD (Mon), Hon LLD (Melb), Hon MD (Mainz), HonMD (Ncl), HonMD (Leeds), HonMD (UWA), HonDSc (Syd), HonDSC (Qld), HonDSc (ANU),HonDSc (UNSW),HonDSc (LaT), HonDSc (McMaster), HonDSC (Oxon), FRCP, FRACP, FRCPA, FRACOG (Hon), FRCPath, FRACGP, FRSE, FTSE, FAA, FRS

2000: Australian of the Year
1998- Chairman, Strategic Advisory Council, Bill and Melinda Gates Children's Vaccine Program
1997-2000: Deputy Chairman, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation
1993- Chairman of committee overseeing World Health Organization's Global Programme for Vaccines and Immunization
1989: Companion of the Order of Australia
1965-1996: Director, The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research and Professor of Medical Biology, University of Melbourne

A NATIONAL TREASURE

The young boy travelled half way around the world to a new country, his family fleeing horrors that he did not yet fully comprehend. On the last leg of the journey, he was terrified the huge waves would swamp their ship.

Starting school in Sydney in 1939, the boy met a "noisy wall of silence". He couldn't speak English or understand a word of what was being said. He was a bit of a wimp, no good at sport and attracted the occasional attention of the school yard bullies.

Several months after their arrival, his father was put in jail. In war time, outsiders raised suspicions, especially if they had a foreign accent. But

the family had friends in high places, and the prisoner was soon released.

The father had been a businessman in Vienna, but in Australia he learnt to work with his hands, manufacturing sheet metal. Meanwhile, back in Europe, the boy's grandmother was lost to the concentration camps.

For some, these difficult beginnings could have left a dark mark. Not Gustav Nossal. It is so typical of the man he became that the young boy seized the positive in his new life, and sailed forth.

Nossal remembers his childhood as happy. He soon picked up English and was excelling at school. He loved exams because he liked coming first.

"I guess I must, even then, have been an obnoxiously ambitious little boy to whom coming first in the class mattered more than anything," he says in typically frank and self-deprecating style.

He also loved arguing with his parents' friends and "explaining what the war was about".

"They must have thought I was a bit of a pill," he says.

Unlikely. Nossal is such a natural at engaging and charming his audience, whether it be a single person or a packed auditorium, that you can't imagine he was ever otherwise.

He is also so approachable that it's easy to feel comfortable calling him "Gus", despite a knighthood and string of honours, most recently being featured in an Australian Legends stamp issue.

A story is often told about the time a group of scientists at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research (WEHI) in Melbourne were discussing the sudden death of their elderly car park attendant. The others were surprised when the Institute's director asked, who is going to look after the man's wife?

Only Nossal had taken the time to get to know the attendant and to learn about his invalid wife.

His tireless curiosity about others, gregarious nature and love of a gossip - these traits are also reminiscent of Nossal's mother, a member of the Austrian aristocracy who adjusted to her new life without servants, and loved finding out about the lives of those she met on the train or at the shops.

Her husband was the opposite, rather gruff and stern, and could seem aloof. He didn't like Americans, thinking them too materialistic, and instead valued the professions and the world of the intellect.

"I think Gus has got his mother's charm and his father's brain," says Sydney gastroenterologist Nick Talley of his old university friend.

The Nossals were like a second family to Talley, an Hungarian immigrant without family in Australia who was struggling to put himself through university. When he graduated, they threw him a party.

Kay Ellem, former deputy director of Queensland Institute of Medical Research, is another old university mate with fond memories of the Nossal household.

He remembers a farewell dinner for one of Nossal's brothers who had landed a job overseas. "After the main course Gus rose from his seat and delivered a formal speech, typically off the cuff," Ellem says.

"The formal but warm process of well wishing in this way was softened by the informal, direct and unaffected language which typifies Gus' speaking style to this day, and has made him such an effective communicator of the esoteric science with which he deals to a lay audience."

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Our interview is in the small rooms at Melbourne University which have been Nossal's office since his retirement in 1996 from WEHI, after 31 years as director. The table is covered in stacks of paper, the 150 citations used recently in writing a book chapter.

Nossal jokes about his "diminished circumstances of being an elderly retired gent", but he is, of course, not at all diminished by his 71 years or so-called retirement. Not long after "leaving" WEHI (it is only metres

away and he remains in close contact with successor Suzanne Cory), Nossal was appointed deputy chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, and became a strong public advocate for the cause.

The job involved much travelling, public speaking and emotional ups and downs, as well as a few nasty anonymous messages on his voice mail.

The experience convinced Nossal, a self-described optimist, that improvements in Aboriginal well-being will not come quickly.

“I came to have a closer recognition of the depth of the problem,” he says. “In the last analysis, I hate to say it, but a lot of the problems only the indigenous people themselves can solve.

“I think this is going to be a very long struggle. We have to continue the symbolic gestures; we have to continue to strongly promote the wonderful Aboriginal leaders...and strongly be guided by them as to how we can help them more. We have to be prepared to work harder to get to know some Aboriginal people. Very few Australians have ever had an Aboriginal person in their homes.”

Jackie Huggins, who worked closely with Nossal on the Council and now co-chairs Reconciliation Australia, says his contribution to the movement ranks alongside that of former Governor General Sir William Deane.

She says Nossal has proven himself a “great elder” and “a dear friend of indigenous people”.

“I never met a more compassionate and dignified gentleman,” she says. “He was not afraid to speak out - if that meant falling out of favour with the PM and the Government of the day, then so be it.”

Nor has Nossal shied away from speaking out on the Government’s treatment of asylum seekers. “I agree that we must have some level of border protection,” he says, “but that being said, once people do reach our shores, we ought to treat these people with a great deal more compassion than we’re showing at the moment.”

In the Council’s final year, Nossal was made Australian of the Year, making a demanding schedule even more hectic.

“The pair of us were absolutely flat to the boards,” remembers Pamela Dewhurst, Nossal’s personal assistant and formidable minder for more than 23 years. ”During 2000, we got half a dozen invitations a day and maybe even more.”

Nossal may not be quite so much in the public eye these days, but his diary remains full. On the day we meet, he is not long back from Thailand, judging a medical research prize. Before that, there was a trip to Paris to review the work of the Pasteur Institute.

Then there are his commitments to the World Health Organization and the Bill and Melinda Gates Children’s Vaccine Program. And whenever possible, he lobbies good friend James Wolfensohn, head of the World Bank, to do more for global health.

“Somebody is trying to paint his portrait at the moment for the National Portrait Gallery,” says Dewhurst, “and we just haven’t found enough hours in the day to do that.”

There is little time to indulge his love of golf, and all the travel makes it hard for him to stick to his diet.

“I love food,” Nossal says, patting his tummy. “Especially the things that are bad for me. I was very good last night, there was a working dinner at Government House on Australians’ agricultural future - I didn’t have bread or butter. Normally I would be eating everything on the table.”

Nossal is being encouraged by his wife, Lyn, to slow down a little so he can spend more time with their family. Their ninth grandchild is due soon.

The pair have been married 46 years - “the best thing I ever did,” says Nossal.

“I can remember the very first time I saw her dancing with this mutual friend,” he adds. “She is very charismatic, very beautiful and, in the old sense of the word, gay.”

Lyn initially worked as a speech therapist but changed direction mid-career, studying fine arts and history, and became assistant director of the Ian Potter Museum at Melbourne University.

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Of his many accomplishments, Nossal is most proud of those in the laboratory, and nominates two contributions in particular.

The first is his work on antibody formation, showing that one cell always only makes one antibody, the first piece of evidence favouring the clonal selection theory of antibody formation. It was the precursor to the discovery of how to create immortal cell lines to make monoclonal antibodies. The second is his work on immunological tolerance - how the body distinguishes between self and other.

Nossal sometimes wonders what else he might have discovered if he had not become director of the Hall at the “ludicrously” young age of 34.

“I do have a genuine regret that I didn’t have, say, ten more straight years at the bench,” he says. “But it wasn’t in the hand of cards that I was dealt.”

Then he adds: ”But if you ask me, were I back at the fork again, me being the person I was, unquestionably I would have done the same thing.”

Nossal wanted to be a doctor from childhood, perhaps because he was twice very sick with diphtheria and the doctor who treated him was so admired by his parents.

But he was seduced by the thrill of discovery during medical studies at the University of Sydney and, after residency at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, moved to WEHI. There he worked with Dr Joshua Lederberg, a brilliant US geneticist, who won the Nobel Prize at age 33.

After completing his PhD, Nossal went to work with Lederberg at Stanford University Medical School in California.

It was liberating because he realised he had something to offer the international scientific community. “You find yourself in one of these high

powered US universities and you realise you are able to fly," he recalls. "You realise you're not the dumb dodo from wherever, and that your ideas are respected and listened to."

While at Stanford, he was visited by Sir Macfarlane Burnet with the offer of a job back at WEHI as a deputy director, putting him in good stead to become his mentor's eventual successor.

"He knew me so well," chuckles Nossal. "He knew that this insanely ambitious young man couldn't for an instant resist that temptation. So that brought the second half of my life into being far, far, far, far too early."

Despite the responsibility of taking over from such a luminary as Burnet, Nossal never felt stressed about work. "Work was such a joy to me. I used to walk into work and say, they shouldn't be paying me, I should be paying them because it's so interesting."

Nossal doesn't rank himself in the top league of scientists, putting himself a rung below Burnet, Lederberg and others. "I'm not particularly good at dreaming up an entirely new idea," he says. "The great scientists have always been able to put very disconnected things together. I don't have much by way of those gifts, but I came to grips with that early on, and I've got other gifts that make up for it."

Suzanne Cory has heard similar comments before. "He's one of the greatest immunologists of all time so I think you should take those remarks of his with a grain of salt," she says.

She adds that Nossal is a "a national treasure" and that "the Hall Institute was very fortunate that he did take the job when he was offered it at such an extraordinarily young age. The Institute benefited enormously and so did Australia."

Nossal's main legacy at WEHI - whose size and achievements grew greatly under his leadership - was to bring out the best in people, says the Institute's general manager, Margaret Brumby.

"The evidence is how many of his protégées are now in leading research positions around Australia and the world," she says. "He helped people believe in themselves and what they could achieve."

Brumby adds: “Gus is probably one of the world’s most magnificent humans of our time. Quite apart from his intelligence and his superb memory for places, people, discussions, he sees always the good in people. I’ve never seen anybody leave from talking to him without a smile on their face.”

Don Metcalf, Nossal’s deputy at WEHI for many years, says they were a well-matched team. “I am a dour Scot and he is an extrovert Austrian. Together it was a good combination.”

Metcalf adds with characteristic dry humour: “You could always hear him coming - the shouted conversations and greetings. He’d approach most subjects with an open mouth.”

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find anyone with a bad word about Nossal. He has a few, though. He says he probably wasn’t a tough enough boss at the Hall, that he was a bit too pliant, “a little bit too Austrian”.

“Austrians like to be liked,” he explains.

And there is no doubt that Nossal is that rare creature - a great achiever who is widely liked, as well as admired.

Ray Hollings, a Sydney surgeon and one of Nossal’s old friends from medical school, speaks for many: “Gus is really one of the most outstanding people Austria via Australia has produced.”