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Long before the Voice to Parliament, Stephen and Helen Wurm wanted to hear what Aboriginal people had to say

By [Craig Allen](#)

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The search for the previous owner of this 1976 kombi van led to the discovery of the story of two migrants who dedicated much of their lives to preserving Indigenous culture. (ABC News: Craig Allen)

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It could be a photo ripped straight from the pages of National Geographic.

In it, two casually dressed westerners stand flanked by three Lardil men with painted bodies adorned with feathers and elaborate woven hair headdresses.

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this article contains images of people who have died.

It's September 1960, and the two visitors are about to witness a ceremonial corroboree on the remote Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The woman is dressed in a paisley skirt and white blouse – her husband in high-waisted shorts and a short sleeve shirt. He has a bandaid stuck above one knee.

There is a stark visual contrast between the two cultures, but the pair have been granted privileged entry into a normally restricted community.

But who were these two outsiders, and how were they allowed to document sacred rituals in the far north of Australia?



An archival photograph of Dr Helen Wurm and Professor Stephen Wurm with three Lardil men on Mornington Island in 1960. (Supplied: Australian National University)

A VW kombi and two pioneering trailblazers

My research into these two strangers began with, of all things, a vintage campervan.

Ever since we bought a 1976 kombi van more than 20 years ago, I'd always wondered who might've owned it before us and what adventures they might have had in it.

I had just a single clue to begin my search: the name 'Helen Wurm' on a mechanic's receipt.

What I unearthed was an unlikely tale of two post-war migrants, who evaded the Nazis and the Soviets, and their decision to dedicate half a century to preserving Indigenous culture.

As it turned out, the van's previous owners were husband and wife doctors of social science, Professor Stephen Wurm and Dr Helen Groger Wurm.

Stephen was a linguist, Helen an anthropologist, and they'd emigrated from Austria in 1954.



Stephen and Helen Wurm did part of their travel to remote Australian communities on a motorcycle. *(Supplied: Australian National University)*

The Wurms fell in love with Australia and travelled to its four corners to learn more about the people who lived there, by motorbike, VW beetle – and later by campervan.

From Australia's rugged bushland to its vast deserts, the Wurms absorbed the ancient history written across the land through Indigenous lore, art and custom.

A treasure trove of photos



Archival image of two Lardil men making a fire on Mornington Island in 1960. (Supplied: Australian National University)

As academics attached to the Australian National University (ANU) and the Institute of Anatomy, Stephen and Helen Wurm were engaged in a race to preserve Indigenous cultures that they saw being whitewashed by government policies of assimilation.

In the 1950s and '60s, as generations of Indigenous families were being torn apart by the forced removal of children, Aboriginal languages were fracturing and, in some places, forgotten.

And time was running out.

So the Wurms documented their journeys extensively on tape and film, and their personal papers now form a massive archive at the ANU.



Deadman's dance performed on Mornington Island in 1960. (Supplied: Australian National University)

Helen moved widely through Indigenous communities across the Top End, recording rituals and commissioning art works for the future National Museum of Australia.

Stephen, a master linguist, took countless tape recordings of Aboriginal languages that he feared were dying out before his eyes.

The ANU now houses the [collection of thousands of digitised slides documenting the couple's fieldwork](#) in Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific, Europe and Asia.

Captured on film are lighter moments too, like a 1962 photo showing the couple as tourists astride camels in front of the sphinx in Egypt.

Inexplicably, Stephen Wurm is still wearing a suit and tie beneath his Bedouin cloak and headdress.



One of the archival images showing Stephen and Helen Wurm riding camels in Egypt. (Supplied: Australian National University)

'He could tell a lie with a straight face': Stephen Wurm's wild imagination

When the Wurms came to Australia from Austria in 1954, they'd left behind a homeland torn apart by war, and later by Soviet occupation.

By luck, Stephen Wurm had narrowly avoided conscription to the Hitler Youth and the German army.

During World War II he studied Russian languages in prisoner of war camps, and afterwards, was jailed by Soviet authorities on suspicion of spying.

After he arrived in Australia, something unexplained began to happen – he started to re-fashion an elaborate life story.



Stephen and Helen Wurm on their motorcycle in 1954. (*Supplied: Australian National University*)

By the time he sat down with ANU Emeritus Professor Jim Fox to record an oral history in 1996, it was hard to separate fact from fantasy.

Professor Fox said Stephen Wurm had "fabricated a personal narrative" in which he moved around the world as a child from Russia to Turkey, Argentina to Norway, China to Port Moresby, learning dozens of obscure languages as he went.

"He could tell a lie with a straight face," Professor Fox said.

"I have to say, at the time I recorded it, I believed it. I'm afraid I believed more stories than I should.



ANU Emeritus Professor Jim Fox recorded Stephen Wurm's oral history in 1996, but says some of it was the product of Professor Wurm's imagination. (*ABC News: Greg Nelson*)

"Many people, and some of his closest colleagues, when they would talk about Wurm the man, they talk about a man who could hardly control his imagination.

"It doesn't change my immense respect for his linguistic abilities because to me, it's unimaginable."

Working against a White Australia policy

Professor Fox remembers Stephen Wurm as a giant of linguistics, with an "inhuman" ability to learn language.

Professor Wurm became best known for his pioneering work studying New Guinea languages and published an atlas of the world's disappearing languages.



Stephen Wurm recorded Indigenous languages to preserve them for the future. (*Supplied: Australian National University*)

"New Guinea was one of the world's most complex, possibly the most complex linguistic area," Professor Fox said.

"So [Wurm] walked into it. And after a relatively short time, within 10 years, he was making sense of what was going on there.

"He was such a polyglot – he knew so many languages, possibly as many as 50 languages.

"To me it was unbelievable, I think it was almost inhuman. How could any human do that?"

And at a time when Australia's Aboriginal mission system was stripping Indigenous communities of traditional dress, culture and language, Professor Fox said the Wurms wanted to learn.

"For Stephen and his wife Helen, they were actually in awe of what they were finding," he said.

"What they were always saying is that you're unique, you're precious, you have something to tell the world.

"What they were trying to do was promoting the importance of local language – but they were pushing that 50 years ago.

"[Indigenous people] were the teachers, and he was receptive."

The woman with secret 'men's business'



Six Lardil men perform the Deadman's song on Mornington Island in 1960. (Supplied: Australian National University)

During the 1960s and '70s, Helen Wurm was welcomed into northern Australian Aboriginal communities – even by male elders who wouldn't usually share their customs with women.

But as traditional life was being eroded by the government policy of assimilation, she was able to convince them to pass their knowledge on.

"It became apparent that the way of Indigenous life in Arnhem Land was on the threshold of considerable change through the pressure of western civilisation," she later wrote.

Senior Indigenous Curator at the National Museum of Australia, Margo Ngawa Neale, said Helen Wurm was a trailblazer.

"Probably the most notable thing about her was how highly regarded she was by particularly the Indigenous senior men," Dr Neale said.



National Museum of Australia senior Indigenous curator Margo Ngawa Neale says Helen Wurm was a trailblazer. *(ABC News: Greg Nelson)*

"It's quite remarkable that men from that era who [have] a very strict gender, ritual, ceremonial life, would pass on such knowledge to a white female outsider.

"They could feel the winds of change and they needed to pass it on beyond their own for survival of the culture purposes.

"[Helen Wurm] says herself that she was very privileged, this little old white lady, and feeling so privileged that they would entrust her with the sacred knowledge."

Between 1965 and 1970 Dr Wurm collected around 1,250 items, from bark paintings to headdresses and painted log coffins – as well as 'taboo' objects connected with men's ceremonies that today remain under lock and key in restricted archives at the National Museum.

She wrote at the time: "The women by-passed me widely and I was called 'the woman with men's business'."

It didn't all go smoothly – and Helen Wurm was once reportedly threatened with being speared, after being caught in the middle of a community dispute over the sale of some sacred items.

She wrote books and articles on Aboriginal bark paintings – and argued they should be considered sacred story-telling documents, not merely aesthetic pieces.

The campervan mystery



A Lardil ceremonial headdress collected by Helen Wurm on Mornington Island in 1960. (ABC News: Greg Nelson)

Professor Stephen Wurm died in 2001, and Dr Helen Wurm in 2005, and they left their entire estate to the Australian National University, where an endowment fund today supports young researchers.

As I scoured the archive of photos and documents, I tried to definitively link them to the vehicle that had kickstarted this research: our treasured campervan that the Wurms had reportedly bought in Canberra back in 1976.

It took a trip into the ANU Butlin Archives to discover the proof I needed – a collection of holiday snaps of the pair travelling around Australia in the VW van in question.



In the ANU Butlin Archives there is a collection of holiday snaps of Helen and Stephen Wurm travelling Australia in the kombi van. (*ABC News: Craig Allen*)

When the kombi came into my family shortly after Stephen Wurm's death – there had been scant evidence of its previous owners.

Until one day I found a vintage 1960s travelling first aid kit that had slipped down into a hidden compartment beneath the campervan's rear seat.

Along with its smelling salts and antiseptic vials, was a selection of bandages and sticking plasters.

I can only guess – but perhaps one of those bandaids had found its use on Stephen Wurm's knee on the remote Mornington Island in the Gulf Country, to be forever immortalised on film in the ANU's photographic archive.