

They came, they conquered

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They arrived with nothing and now they are some of Australia's most successful executives.

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With almost 25 per cent of our current population born overseas, and a recent US study suggesting that immigrants are four times more likely to become self-made millionaires, it's little surprise that Australia should be home to so many successful executives. Here are six that arrived on our shores with little more than the clothes on their back.

John Hemmes

Merivale group founder John Hemmes left Holland following World War II with just \$20 in his pocket, given to him by his father. He first settled in New Zealand and then migrated to Australia in 1952, where he met his future wife Merivale, and together they built the Sydney-based John and Merivale clothing chain. Initially they lived in a garage at the rear of Merivale's parents' home in Burwood. The garage also doubled as their sewing workshop.

Nowadays, Hemmes lives in a sandstone mansion on the Sydney Harbour foreshore. He is the patriarch of a billion-dollar entertainment empire that includes Establishment and Ivy.

"It's not being an immigrant that makes you succeed," he says. "Whatever country you live in, or are born in, or immigrate to, the key is having a hunger and passion to make the best of your life.

"One job I had was working at the abattoirs in New Zealand – that is a job that can be soul destroying, but I convinced myself it was for the best, because I needed to survive. I was a young boy not long out of a Japanese concentration camp and did not understand English."

Maha Sinnathamby

Malaysian-born Queensland property developer Maha Sinnathamby is another immigrant from similarly humble beginnings. Now worth more than \$820 million, his childhood was spent in a simple home during the Japanese occupation of Malaysia. He completed an engineering degree in Seremaban and moved to Australia where he established Greater Springfield, the largest privately owned master-planned city in Australia.

Another Malaysian-born success story is billionaire mining mogul Sam Chong, who was born in the Cameron Highlands and moved to Australia in 1973 to study mining engineering. He held a series of mining roles before joining Queensland Coal Mine Management (now the Jellinbah Group), a company he still holds a major interest in.

Richard Pratt

Nobody knew more about making big money from cardboard than the late Richard Pratt. Born in Poland, he emigrated with his parents in 1938 and settled in Shepparton, Victoria.

After a successful stint as an actor in both London and New York, Pratt took over the family packaging business – Visy - in 1969. Famous for his philanthropy, his net worth when he died in 2009 was more than \$5 billion.

Zhenya Tsvetnenko

One of the most inspiring immigrant success stories of recent years is that of Russian-born IT entrepreneur Zhenya Tsvetnenko. Still in his 30s, his net worth is estimated at more than \$100 million. But it wasn't always so. He arrived in Perth as a 12-year-old, speaking little English. His parents had two suitcases and just \$6000 to start a new life with their son.

Later, Tsvetnenko married and dropped out of university. In 2005 he launched an SMS Gateway service from his bedroom, living on two-minute noodles and his wife's wage. In less than two years he was turning over more than \$4 million a month.

Harry Triguboff

Harry Triguboff, colloquially known as "High-Rise Harry" has revolutionised the way Australians live. His Meriton apartments have been derided by architecture critics and yet they continue to sell on a massive scale - around 1000 a year, in fact. In 2011, his net wealth was estimated to be more than \$4 billion.

Not bad for the son of Russians who were forced to escape from northern China during Lenin's ascendancy. He arrived in Australia in 1947, was educated at Scots College, Sydney and worked in the textile industry in South Africa and Israel.

On returning to Australia in 1960, Triguboff took a while to find his feet. He worked as a taxi driver, a milkman and a real estate agent. It wasn't until he bought a block of land in Tempe in Sydney on which he built a block of eight units, that Triguboff had his eureka moment. His next development was 18 units on a block in Meriton Street, Gladesville. The rest, as they say, is history.

Frank Lowy

Another successful immigrant is mega-mall-magnate Frank Lowy. He spent part of his childhood in a detention camp in Cyprus and a detainee camp in Palestine. He joined his family in Australia in 1952 and – along with John Saunders (another Hungarian immigrant) - developed his first shopping centre at Blacktown in Sydney in 1959.

BRW assessed Lowy's wealth at \$5.04 billion in 2010. Nowadays, the Westfield Group operates one of the world's largest shopping centre portfolios, with 104 shopping malls across the world.

Other notable mentions:

Tan Le: This 1988 Young Australian of the Year co-founded SASme Wireless Communication and co-founded Emotiv. She arrived in Australia as a Vietnamese refugee in 1982.

Ruslan Kogan: Of Russian descent, he moved to Australia in 1989, and lived in public housing flats. He started the multi-million dollar Kogan Technologies from his parents' garage in 2006.

Huy Truong: A Vietnamese refugee who arrived in Australia as a child and went on to become one of the country's most successful IT entrepreneurs. Truong founded online retailer Wishlist.

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