



Never forget



Rose Freilich, the Centre's librarian with a Yizkor book of her hometown of Czestechowa, Poland

At the Holocaust Research Centre in Elsternwick a dwindling core of survivors work with a dedicated knot of volunteers to ensure that the history cannot repeat itself.

THE MUSEUM'S MISSION WITH BERNIE KORBMAN

In late 2004, my wife Naava and I travelled through Eastern Europe on a sort of genealogical pilgrimage. After more than a month travelling through areas in which entire Jewish communities had been brutally annihilated, the reality of the Holocaust suddenly hit, like a sledgehammer to the heart. Even though my family, Southern African, wasn't directly affected, as a Jew standing in the vacuum of the vanished Jewish world of Eastern Europe, I was profoundly moved. It is the mission of Elsternwick's Jewish Holocaust Centre to impart that feeling in a single visit.

From this sidestreet building, a universal lesson is delivered. "The Holocaust Centre plays a dual role in Melbourne's community," Bernard Korbman, the centre's director, explains.

"Firstly, it's a place for the remembrance and commemoration of the six million Jews who were killed in the Holocaust.

"But secondly, it's in a unique position to be able to speak to the entire community about the importance of being vigilant and protecting our democratic institutions." Being a bystander in such a situation, he goes on to say, cannot be an option.

ROSE'S LIBRARY

When Naava and I were in Poland, we went to Czestechowa, the town from which her ancestors escaped just before the onset of WWII.



The museum's soon-to-be-upgraded exhibition space

Discover a part of history that must never be forgotten at Elsternwick's Holocaust Museum

We found the enormous Jewish cemetery almost jungle-like in overgrowth, on land now used by an iron-smelting operation. "They are making plans to buy it back," says Rose Freilich, librarian at the Holocaust Centre. Born in Czestechowa she presides over a meticulously organised reference collection of volumes in Russian, German, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, English and Hungarian.

I had mentioned to Rose that my wife Naava and I made the trip, and with a glimmer in her eye, she says, yes, she knows her family. "I knew Arnold (her grandfather)," she says. Rose even remembers the address of the Lederman family shopfront we went in search of. It's incredible to be able to place her as a remnant of Czestechowa, and Poland's destroyed Jewish heritage.

Rose asks me if I have a moment, and locates the Czestechowa's *yizkor* book, a bound memorial that records the tragedies that befell the town's Jews.

"Such a beautiful synagogue," she says, pointing to a photo of what is now a concert hall. All that remains today is the dedication stone.

THE GUIDES AND THE EXHIBITION

Frankie Pinch, the centre's PR coordinator, tells me the museum space is about to receive a complete makeover, which will hopefully be complete by March 2009. "The race is on to capture the essence of these survivors," she says, "and pass it on through technology."

The late Chaim Sztajer's hand-built model of the Treblinka extermination camp is a centrepiece of the current exhibition.

As one of the precious few able to provide first-hand evidence of the atrocities perpetrated there, Sztajer assembled the large replica in his Melbourne lounge room. Now that he has passed on, it serves the precise purpose he intended.



Sculpture remembering the entrance to Auschwitz concentration camp



KITIA'S STORY

Melbourne is about as far from Europe as you can get. This is one of the many reasons our city by the bay ended up with one of the largest populations, per capita, of Holocaust survivors in the world. Thirty-five work as volunteer guides at the Holocaust Centre, more than any other Holocaust museum in the world, including Jerusalem's renowned Yad Vashem. For the most part, they're in their eighties and nineties.

Kitia Altman is one guide. She once famously debated Holocaust denier David Irving live via video link, and recorded her life in a 2003 book *Memories of Ordinary People: for those who have no-one to remember them*. Kitia survived by working in a factory making winter uniforms for the German army; working in a secret salt-mine bunker on Hitler's V2 rocket program; and through the humanity she retained through a friendship maintained in her three months at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. "In spite of thousands of human shapes that moved around, you were totally alone," she says. "The fact that you had someone who knew your name, the fact that you had somebody you could say to in human language 'Goodnight', and call each other by a name, was very humanising."

The SS-employed manager of the textiles factory in which Kitia worked, Alfred Rossner, who was hanged by the Nazis in 1944, as well as Genia Pajak, a Polish woman who sheltered Kitia's young niece, have been recognised as 'Righteous Among the Nations', after Kitia nominated them. The title is bestowed by the Israeli Government on non-Jews who endangered their lives to save the lives of Jews during the Holocaust.

Kitia says it's especially important for Australians to know and understand the message of the Holocaust.

"Education is the most important tool to fight prejudice, intolerance and racism," she says. "There is no other tool. History has shown us. No politics, no guns. It's only education."

- AT A GLANCE -

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Survivor and guide Kitia Altman