



INTERVIEW WITH HALINA ROBINSON

The Courage to Care program and travelling exhibition is a community outreach initiative that demonstrates the importance of standing up to bullying and prejudice. The exhibition showcases the stories of Holocaust Survivors and their rescuers, and will be held at the Glasshouse Regional Gallery from July 18 to August 31 ...

Andrew Havas – Chairman, Courage to Care (NSW) Inc. *Courage to Care celebrates the people who put their lives at risk to rescue Jews and other minorities during the Holocaust. True heroes, they were among the foremost defenders of human rights. A social tolerance program, the aim of Courage to Care is to empower the bystander.*

In 15 years, Courage to Care NSW has held 41 exhibitions all over Australia. More than 185,000 people have visited the program, including 90,500 school students. A key part of Courage to Care is our education program, particularly directed at students Years 5-12. Through the power of education, we inspire young people to become passionate about their community. We recognise that young people are the generation making changes for today and tomorrow, which affect us all!

HALINA ROBINSON - contributing exhibitor and Holocaust survivor.

Please provide a brief summary of the early years of your life ...

I was born in Kalisz (Poland) on 13 February 1928.

My father, a doctor, held a private practice as the ENT specialist and worked in the "Holy Trinity Hospital". Mother, a pianist, disrupted her promising career of giving recitals and due to my birth become the provincial piano teacher.

When I was close to 5, Mum had to go to the Sanatorium. I was left in Przemysl, with my grandmother. Dad visited us a few times and when I started going to school, took me home to Kalisz, but Mum wasn't there. A governess supervised me after returning from school.

I was more than eight when we met Dad's friend, Yaga. She was wonderful.

Three months before I was to go for my

usual vacation to Przemysl, Yaga married my dad and moved to live with us. I had returned home only a week before commencing my last year of primary school; this never happened. On 1st September 1939, the Second World War started.

The Kalisz authorities were concerned that Germans who'd badly damaged the town at the outbreak of the First World War might do the same if the war looming at the end of August 1939 started. As a doctor, Dad was a "reservist" in peacetime. He was called up, and had to stay with his unit, and asked Yaga to go with me to Warsaw.

To what do you credit the fact that you survived the war years?

There is no doubt if I'd stayed in Kalisz I would've perished when the whole Jewish community was exterminated. In Warsaw I survived a long array of torments with which Nazi Germans treated Jews, but I was still alive when their "final solution" was implemented within the Warsaw Ghetto.

Friend Loda, a Gentile woman who visited the Ghetto in spite of the risk of being killed if she was discovered, told me that with my appearance and impeccable Polish accent I could be hidden amongst the Polish teens if she could smuggle me to the "Aryan" side of the city.

Very attached to Yaga, living with her, her mother and sister, I didn't want to be separated from them. When Yaga was taken from the factory where she worked and sent to the death camp, I thought the only thing I could do for her was to attempt to save her mother and sister. I contacted Loda, who promised to do whatever she could.

“In Warsaw I survived a long array of torments with which Nazi Germans treated Jews, but I was still alive when their "final solution" was implemented within the Warsaw Ghetto.”

Within a few days she arranged for me to go over the top of the wall surrounding the Ghetto with a group of smugglers. She kept me in her place for two days, and started the most unbelievable story of my rescue, consisting of 13 different hiding locations and 4 sets of false documents. Close to a hundred Catholic Poles risked their lives trying to save me ...

I hold real gratitude for the people who saved my life, including Loda, who did not survive the war. It was with thoughts of them that I gave every help I could to many refugees, when employed in the CES offices in Sydney, until I retired in 1993.

How long have you lived in Australia?

We arrived in Australia in July 1961.

After such bad experiences of German Nazism and Soviet communism, my husband, Edward, and I just wanted to take our children as far from the turmoil of Europe as feasible.

Describe your panel, which is one of the pieces included in the "Courage to Care" exhibition...

The story of my rescue consists of a few sentences and two photographs. One is of the girl from the Jewish school at the beginning of the school year 1938/39; the other from 1942 shows how I looked after the people trying to save me made me look like a Gentile Polish girl.

There are also objects and photos connected to my story in the exhibition: the medal from Yad Vashem with the name Truchanowicz, the family who hid me the longest time; the armband with the Star of David, which Jews older than 12 had to wear on their right arm; a picture of a woman I saw selling these armbands on the street of the Warsaw Ghetto; the photograph of the daughter of Mr and Mrs

Truchanowicz receiving the medal from the Israeli ambassador long after the war. By exhibiting these objects I wanted to prove that the story is not a figment of imagination, but an example of terrible things allowed to happen in the past, which should never happen again.

You became an author late in life. Why was it important to you to share your experiences, both through your books and *Courage to Care*?

When my second husband, Leslie, died, I started to write about times, places and people he didn't know. This was a remedy for my pain, as it didn't hurt that he wasn't there. I never expected this to be edited into a novel, but some friends convinced me that it should. A *Cork on the Waves* was published and launched when I was 77. It may be borrowed through the Municipal Library in Port.

As the readers wanted to find out what happened later to people they have met, I wrote *Treading Water in the Promised Land* and *Upstream Belonging at Last*. I shall bring them to offer to the library for future use.

Writing *Upstream*, I wanted to leave some description of my difficult but full of achievements life in Australia. In a lifespan of barely two generations, the country has changed unbelievably. I am certain that the country is thriving by becoming multicultural. We only have to make it to work well.

Courage to Care is a different story. It teaches that even a small person can make life better for many. I was called to participate in the program as a survivor of terrible things which shouldn't ever happen. Differences don't matter, as we are all human and should treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves. I feel happy showing heroic efforts of benevolent people who saved my life. I'm grateful for this, but also for showing me the model of behaviour. That's what I try to present in the program.

Thanks Halina and Andrew.
Interview by Jo Atkins.