

Holocaust survivor Vera shares a message of hope

Tracey Fairhurst

WHEN Albina Neufeld received a handwritten note from her husband Edo, smuggled out of the bloodied walls of the Gaspic concentration camp with the help of a guard, telling her to 'take the girls' and flee to Italy, she knew she had no choice but to run.

Against the protests of their family to stay, Albina, six-year-old Vera and her nine-year-old sister Lea gathered the possessions they could carry and fled as Nazi troops, occupying Yugoslavia after bombing Belgrade in 1941, declared Croatia a new independent state under their rule and the next to undergo the process of racial cleansing.

"They started straight away cleansing the country of Jews, Serbs and gypsies. I was just six years old – I don't remember much of that day," Vera, 80, said as she clutched a picture of her young self in her hand. The era of the Austria-Hungary empire was a time of great prosperity, according to Vera, when Jewish people had the freedom to excel as intellectuals.

"It was a time to thrive. My father did very well as a solicitor while my mother lived at the time like a luxury lady. She had her own car in 1938 which was just incredible for a woman."

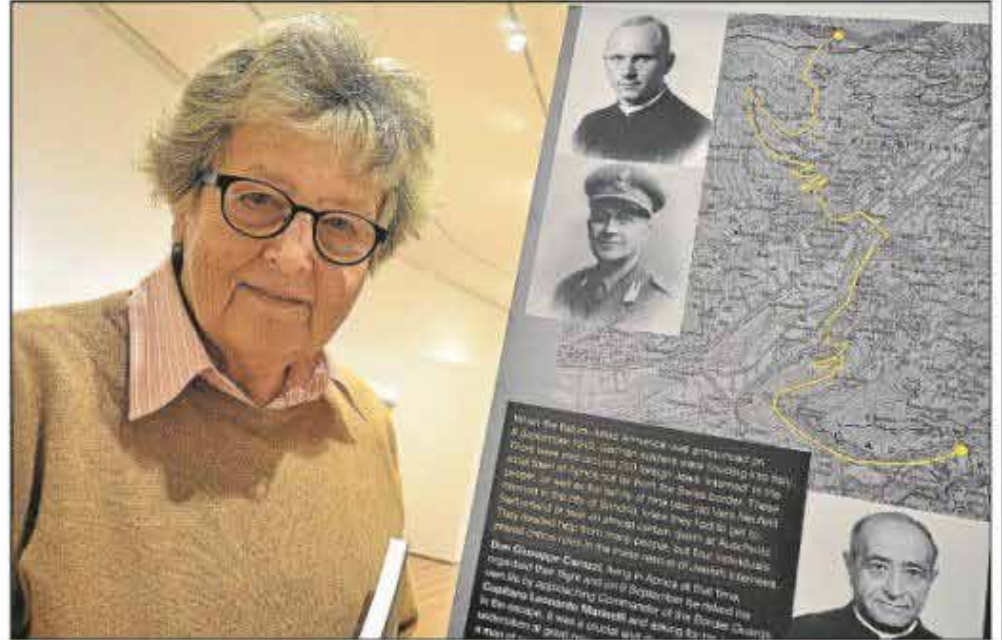
Her father was taken prisoner with many other Jewish intellectuals including doctors, lawyers and academics and taken to the Gaspic concentration camp.

"He witnessed many atrocities by the Croatian radicals – it was quite blood-thirsty. They were killing people in the most horrible ways and throwing their bodies into the pits," Vera said.

"My father soon realised that this was a time not to ignore."

Vera speaks of her mother's courage as she made the brave decision to flee with her children to an unknown place, not knowing if any of them would survive. She says Albina Neufeld is her hero – a strong, creative, inventive woman – a survivor. "She took us and she saved our lives," Vera said.

Following his escape from Gaspic, Edo was reunited with his family in Susak, only to be threatened with immediate deportation. Albina feigned an illness and under instructions from Edo, Vera



Survivor: Vera Neufeld is travelling with the Courage to Care exhibition, now featured at the Glasshouse Regional Gallery, sharing her story of survival as a child of the Holocaust.

cried and screamed so police officials might take pity on her and allow her to stay with her mother. Edo and Lea were deported, but escaping again, the family were reunited in Flume.

Desperate to avoid another deportation, Edo attempted to bribe a police officer and was arrested. After winning an appeal, Vera and her family were sent to live in the alpine town of Aprica.

"We met our father again in the pastures of Aprica. We stayed there with other refugees and went to school for a year," she said.

Due to Edo's health, they were moved to Sondrio, living as internees in relative peace until the Armistice in September 1943. Sensing the imminent danger, and with the help of four men who risked their own lives to save the 220 refugees from certain death, Vera's family agreed to the treacherous journey to freedom over the Swiss border.

They separated into groups of 20 and began the arduous four-day journey by foot over the alps. For a nine-year-old, the terrain and conditions were strenuous. She recalls relentless climbing and being distraught over the loss of her suitcase down the steep slope.

Vera says for many years she would not talk of her story of survival, believing she

didn't deserve that privilege when so many millions were tortured and murdered as a result of the most evil acts in human history.

"I can't even watch the news some days. I don't think we've learned much," Vera said. "It bothers me when people start fighting anywhere in the world. But you can make it with the help of good people."

And this is the essence of Courage to Care, a program in its 15th year, spreading the very simple message that ordinary people can make an extraordinary difference. Four strangers took a risk in the face of extreme adversity to save the lives of 220 refugees who without them, had very little hope. They were Don Giuseppe Carozzi, Capitano Leonardo Marinelli, Bruno Pilat and Don Cirillo Vitalini.

Their act of human kindness is a lesson for us all, Vera says.

Courage to Care chairman Andrew Havas said Hastings school students will be inspired to reflect on the impact they too can have on others.

"A small act of kindness does make a difference. Our message to young people is don't be a bystander."

Vera Neufeld will be the guest speaker at today's coffee morning at the Glasshouse from 10am. To reserve a seat, phone 6581 8888.