

OBITUARY

HARRY HOFFMAN AM, ADVERSITY TO PHILANTHROPY

The *Jerusalem Post*, 9 December 2022, published a death notice for the late Harry Hoffman, who had died in Perth on the 5 December 2022. It read:

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem mourns the passing of Doctor Philosophiae Honoris Causa Harry Hoffman of Australia. Generous benefactor, devoted friend and a champion of education who worked tirelessly to develop the next generation of social and community leadership.

There are few people, who when they pass can have done all this in their life, but Harry, with the support of his devoted wife of nearly seventy years, Sylvia, and his family had achieved all of this and more.

Harry was born on the 11 December 1929 in Dubove in what then was eastern Czechoslovakia, the region of the beautiful Carpathian Mountains, formed after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Great War. His parents, Jakob and Sarah Leah, had married around 1927 and had three children, Harry the eldest, followed by two sisters, Rachel and Brana. The family ran a general store in Dubove.

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in the Second World War, eastern Slovakia had been ceded to Hungary, thus somewhat delaying the full tragedy of the Holocaust befalling Harry and his family. This region of Europe had always been multilingual, which no doubt put Harry in good stead, because he became fluent in Czech, Hungarian, Ukrainian and later German and English. By late 1943, the Nazi oppression had come to Dubove, and the family sheltered in a bunker supported by some local community. It was only when Harry was seized in the forest that their location was finally revealed. The family were deported in June 1944 to Auschwitz. It was here that Harry was separated from his mother and sisters who perished in the death camp. His father had put his great coat around Harry, which made Harry appear bigger and older and thus in Dr Mengele's eyes, better for hard labour, and thus

they were transferred to Birkenau to work.

Harry, aged 14 years, spent his days filling bags with sand and by good fortune avoiding the roll calls of death which were a part of the Jewish experience in Auschwitz. As the Soviet army advanced west, they were transported west to Allach, in the vicinity of Dachau as part of Organisation Todt.¹ Harry's job was unloading blue metal; his father, Jakob, was tasked with repairing boots in Dachau. After some six months Harry was shifted to Dachau, which he described as being 'more orderly' as it was run by the Wehrmacht, the regular army units, which showed more humanity towards Harry and helped him survive with extra rations. The proximity of Dachau to the BMW works and other heavy industry ensured that it came under regular attack from American bombers. As the war moved into its final stages, they were once again transported, by train, to Chiemsee in Bavaria. From here they were forced to march for over three weeks to Neuhaus and Mittelwald. The Dachau death march was to be their last and after hiding in a pumping station, Jakob and Harry were rescued by a US Army patrol on 5 May 1945. They were at last free in war-torn Europe. Harry attributed his survival to his father's care, compassion and cunning.

Harry and Jakob returned to Dubove, only to find that their former life had vanished as had most of their family members. Harry travelled to Budapest to learn a trade but his time there was short-lived, and he returned to Dubove at his father's request. It was then they made the decision to go west to Kosice carrying their US issued passports and arrived in the town of Kadan, in western Czechoslovakia. Harry was apprenticed to a Christian watchmaker for 18 months; the watchmaker's wife took Harry under her wing, and he attended the local technical school. His father decided to remarry and move to Israel, and this forced Harry to make decisions for himself. At the end of 1946, he and a group of Jewish refugees crossed the border into Germany where Harry remained in a displaced persons camp near Hanau for some three years until 1949 when he decided to emigrate to Australia.

Harry used this time to learn German and English, driving vehicles for the US army and earning US dollars and thus became equipped for the ordeals of living independently in a post-war world. On the 4 March 1949, Harry received his Certificate of Discharge from the US Army having 'served honestly and faithfully'. Like many would-be 'new Australians' Harry departed Naples on the SS *Amarapoora* arriving in Fremantle on Saturday 23 April 1949. He was nineteen years old.

Sunday afternoon in Perth was an occasion for some Jewish community members to go to Fremantle and see who was coming down the gangplank of the migrant ships. Of those who went down to Fremantle that Sunday afternoon was fourteen-year-old Sylvia Frochter and her friend Dinah Gorenstein. Sylvia was born in Perth; her parents having arrived from Palestine in the 1920s. She was a student at Perth Girls' School. In 1949, Perth's Jewish community was made up mainly of early Jewish settlers and later settlers from the Ottoman Empire and more specifically Palestine, such as the Frochters, in addition to the European Jewish refugees who arrived and kept arriving after 1938.

Harry, as a sponsored migrant, had to work where he was assigned. His first month in Perth was spent at the Grayland's migrant hostel, where the cook, an Australian ex-serviceman who had served at Beersheba during the Great War, encouraged Harry to attend the Brisbane St Synagogue. It was here that Harry re-established his Jewish connection and met Godel Korsunski, later one of the founders of Carmel school.² Harry soon learned that to prosper in this new land he would need to do it himself. He was given a pound by Rabbi Rubinzacks and was on his way to his newly found employment in Manjimup in the timber industry.

Applying himself with diligence, he avoided the temptations of alcohol and gambling as was so common in county towns like Manjimup. The timber yard foreman and local policeman, who introduced him to roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, encouraged Harry to return to Perth. In Perth, he worked at a sack factory earning four pounds ten shillings per week and attended night school. He next worked at a quarry in Gosnells and boarded with the Morris family in Glendower St, in what is now trendy Northbridge.

Harry started to mix and mingle in the local Jewish community. He had a number of jobs at this period of his life including working for Leon Zeitlin in his slipper factory and later for the Gunzburg family, the owners of 'Comfortwear' footwear. It was at the engagement party of Max Baranski, a Polish Holocaust survivor, that Harry was re-introduced to Sylvia Frochter in 1951. Two years later on 22 December 1953 Harry and Sylvia married. Team Hoffman was established. Sylvia had left school and had attended City Commercial College learning shorthand, typing and bookkeeping. The newly married couple, after honeymooning at a hotel in Albany, decided to go north to Geraldton.

Sylvia worked as a legal secretary for E.M. Franklin, solicitors, and Harry worked initially as a barman at the Freemason's Hotel and later as a wood machinist at the Geraldton Building Company. In 1955. they moved back to Perth and, after a number of short-lived positions, Harry found employment with Hungarian real estate agent E.M. Kovacs.

Harry was dispatched to the Kalamunda³ office and made many sales in six months, becoming their best performing salesman. After about a year Harry joined Sheffield Real Estate and came under the influence of its principal Frank Conti who was supportive of Harry. The Hoffmans welcomed the birth of their first born, Susan, contemporaneously with establishing their own real estate business, Ardross Estate Agency, in 1957 along the Canning Highway in Applecross. Sylvia had been working at a number of positions throughout this period which gave her corporate and managerial skills and experience in the emerging post-war corporate life of Perth.⁴ Harry had the 'gift of the gab' the only uncertainty being, in which language. Sylvia kept the home and office fires burning with tenacity and flourish and thus they prospered. They realised the importance of having a solid Jewish home life and were able to employ a dedicated Hungarian housekeeper, Mrs Fekete, whose culinary skills were legendary within Perth's small Jewish community.

With true foresight, Harry and Sylvia used their real estate business to acquire land for themselves and thus when they established Ardross Estates, they were ready for the expansion of the so called 'outer suburbs' to house Perth's growing population, brought about by post-war migration. Harry's business acumen became legendary. I will not delve into the business success of Ardross Estates, other than to acknowledge that it opened the opportunity for Harry and Sylvia to support those less able than themselves. This they did this in a manner that should be inspirational to future generations.⁵

Carmel School, Perth's only Jewish school, became a major beneficiary as did the Maurice Zeffert Home, Perth's only Jewish aged care facility, the Perth Hebrew Congregation, and many other charities in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. In 2009, in recognition of Harry and Sylvia's unwavering contribution as well as that of the original benefactor, Carmel School became known as the H&S Hoffman and G Korsunski School Incorporated.

Harry and Sylvia have been great supporters of the Holocaust Institute of Western Australia, which will feature prominently in the

opening of the new Jewish Hub in April 2024. This will be a lasting legacy to Harry and all the other Perth Holocaust survivors, who contributed so much to Perth's Jewish life.

The crowning philanthropic achievement has been their contribution to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJ). The Hoffman Leadership and Responsibility Program⁶ ran for 13 successive years and allowed 140 scholars at the HUJ to develop knowledge and skills for 'The Benefit of Humanity'. Prof Amalya Oliver, one of the original Hoffman fellowship coordinators, wrote in 2020:

You, my dear fellows, are part of an incredible chain that brings to the world important and valuable qualities that the world needs badly. At times of illness and wrongdoing, careless in power and merciless in actions, it is good to know that you, Hoffman fellows, are all a light of optimism, inspiration and hope.

Prof Hannech Gutfreund, former president of the HUJ and one of the world's leading Einstein scholars, who was instrumental in assisting Harry and Sylvia to establish the Hoffman fellowships, wrote in 2020 in the middle of the Covid pandemic:

The events of the present days with the Corona pandemic, the social injustices and economic crisis affecting millions around the world provide compelling arguments why programs like this one are so appropriate. The graduates of your programme sooner or later will find plenty of opportunities to apply the lessons they have learned here. Harry and Sylvia, your visits to the programme have always been a source of inspiration for all of us.

It is fitting to end this obituary with the words of Prof Gutfreund, 'Harry, your life is a tale of resilience, optimism and great success, despite the diverse and serious challenges you have faced in your life.' Harry has left his mark on many as an inspiration to others, by recognising and sponsoring education, the commodity which he was denied by totalitarianism and political and ideological evil. Harry was well aware of the fact that education, once you have it, cannot be stolen from its owner.

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