



CHAPTER TWELVE

REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST 1978-1995

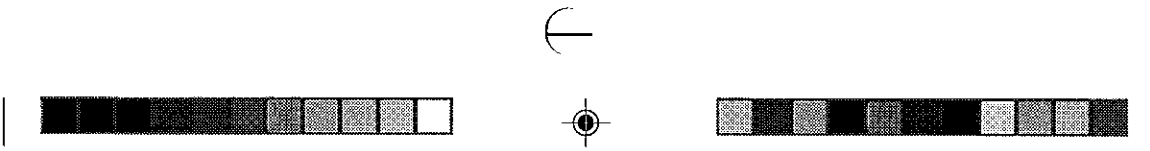
INTRODUCTION

In the period after 1978 there was a growing awareness among Sydney Jewry of the importance of not only remembering and commemorating the events of the Holocaust, but also of ensuring that survivor experiences were recorded before it was too late. As a result of this growing awareness, which was part of a world-wide phenomenon, the Jewish Board of Deputies was at the forefront of a number of important initiatives relating to Holocaust remembrance during the 1980s and 1990s. These were a superb example of the ways in which the Board was able to create new programs, institutions and ideas, some of which were extremely pivotal for the development of Sydney Jewry.

Compared with other parts of the Jewish world, Australian Jewry is much more aware of the Holocaust because such a large proportion of the community are Holocaust survivors or their descendants. Indeed, it would be rare to find a Jewish family in Australia which is not touched in some way at a family level, even if by marriage, by a person who actually survived to tell the story. The reason for this large proportion of Holocaust survivors in Australia relates to the immigration policies of the free world.

Between 1945 and 1954 the countries of the free world did accept a few Jewish refugees, but the inbred nature of antisemitism and the fear of a political backlash often meant that this intake was only a token gesture. In Canada the attitude to the immigration of Jewish Holocaust survivors was reflected in the unofficial comment of a Canadian immigration official that 'none is too many'. This phrase is the title of a study of Canadian immigration policies towards Jewish refugees from 1933 to 1948, written by Irving Arbella and Hersh Troper.¹ They have shown that from 1945 to 1948, Canada admitted only 8000 Jewish survivors, and the total number who entered Canada by 1955 was 40,000 adding to the 1945 Jewish population of 190,000. Similarly the United States was very reluctant to accept Jewish survivors and between 1945 and 1948 only about 30,000 were admitted. Only after the creation of Israel in 1948 did the United States liberalise its policies, so that a total of 160,000 Holocaust survivors arrived there by 1955 adding to the Jewish population of five million.² In South Africa, it was extremely difficult for Holocaust survivors to migrate, whilst Britain was also reluctant to accept many survivors so that only about 2000 survivors actually settled there. As a result, the percentage of Holocaust survivors in these communities is relatively small.

Australian policies in regard to post-war Jewish immigration, initially under the leadership of Arthur Calwell, mirrored the negative attitudes and limited responses seen elsewhere in the free world. However, the Australian government was slightly more liberal than other English speaking countries. After Israel, Australia accepted the second highest number of survivors of the Holocaust on a pro-rata population basis. This influx more than doubled the size of Australian Jewry from 23,553 in



1933 to 48,436 in 1954 and 59,343 in 1961. The increase of Australian Jewry was largely due to postwar immigration with a total of 27,000 Holocaust survivors migrating to Australia by 1961 (17,000 between 1945 -1954 and 10,000 between 1954 and 1961). This figure included Hungarian Jews (around 2000) who escaped at the time of the 1956 Hungarian revolution.³ This high proportion of Holocaust survivors is very important in understanding the nature of Australian Jewry and the intensity of the development of Holocaust remembrance activities after 1978. But, at the same time, it is important to remember that many more could have benefited from the chance of a new life in Australia. In the immediate post-war years, departmental officials held the view that the proportion of Jews in Australia should not be increased radically and a series of quotas and other discriminatory policies limited the number of Jewish survivors who could migrate to Australia each year. The effect of this attitude was that the largest Jewish intake of any year after 1945 was in 1949 when 3,800 arrived, and Australian Jewry continued to constitute only 0.5 per cent of the total population.

There has been much historical debate and discussion as to why it took over thirty-five years - more than a generation - from the end of the Holocaust for a commitment to remembering and recording to emerge. This was a factor not only in Australia but throughout the Jewish world. For example, Rochelle Saidel has just written a book entitled *Never Too Late to Remember* discussing why it took fifty years, from 1947 to 1997, for New York's Holocaust Museum to be built.⁴ There were persuasive reasons for the initial low-keyed approach. Many displaced Jews believed that the best way to keep their story alive was by having children to replace those who had died. There was a very high birth rate in the displaced persons' camps, with the new arrivals often being named after loved ones who had perished. This link was not a public one but provided a verbal message within the family. Further, Holocaust memories were too painful, and survivors, bent on using all their energies to build a new life, refused to speak of them with others, especially their own children. Many sought to suppress their memories of their recent horrific past. Some did not even tell their children that they were survivors and, even if they did, they refused to talk in detail about their experiences. Wishing to protect their children from the horrors, they felt the best way to do this was by not talking about their past.

This wall of silence and the importance of Holocaust memory has recently been explored by Dr Mark Baker in his prize winning book, *The Fiftieth Gate*. At a recent talk at the Sydney Jewish Museum about his book, Dr Baker stated:

I grew up in a household where there was silence - silence about my parents' stories. I didn't ask, so my parents never answered me. We didn't talk "about that". My parents never spoke, but their dreams - their nightmares - are my dreams. These dreams were inarticulated, they were communicated in silence. I carried their dreams, their pain... With my book, I wanted to know. I wanted us to talk about those dreams. I wanted to break the silence. Why? Part of it was shame; part of it was that I was teaching courses on the Holocaust, but I did not know my own parents' story. I knew something of the pain, but I knew nothing. Therefore, it was time to break the silence.⁵

However, it took forty or fifty years before many survivors and their children came to this conclusion.

A telling example of this phenomena are the experiences of Marika Weinberger, president of the Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors since 1990. For many years Marika Weinberger was not able to speak of her Holocaust experiences and she was very reluctant to attend the Association's 1985 Holocaust Gathering in Sydney, finding that she was not able to sit through all the sessions. Then, in 1987, she became a voluntary guide for the Holocaust exhibition, 'We Are Here', at the Great Synagogue and found that she was able to speak to strangers about her experiences before she spoke to her own family. She came to the realisation that:

Those of us who survived have an important role to play - an obligation. We are here against all odds. As *Zachor* - to remember - is a commandment, it is a commandment to fulfil the role for which we survived - to tell the story.⁶

She was also influenced by Professor Yaffa Eliach, who was one of the keynote speakers at the Gathering and who said that 'the voice of the survivor is the authentic voice of the Shoah'. Marika Weinberger believes in that message and realises how important it is for survivors to talk, particularly in the face of Holocaust denial, for they can say 'I was there; I know'.

It was not only that survivors did not talk to their families, but non-Jews did not wish to listen. Those survivors who did write about their experiences initially found that their publications had no impact. They were talking to a brick wall as non-Jews responded with silence, perhaps because of a sense of guilt that they had stood by while the Holocaust happened.

Israel itself also had problems coming to terms with the Holocaust. While Yad Vashem was established in Jerusalem in 1953 with the brief of documenting the *Shoah*, its activities were at first very low keyed. This only started to change in the late 1960s, possibly because of the urgent practical problems facing the State in the initial years after its foundation in 1948. A sense of guilt may have been a factor since there is much historical debate in relation to Zionist activity and the Holocaust. In addition, in the years immediately after the Holocaust, many Israelis were critical of the Jews of Europe who, they believed, went 'like lambs to the slaughter'.

Thus, until the late 1970s Holocaust memorials were largely 'within the family'.⁷ There were reunions, such as those held in Melbourne by the various *landsmannschaften*, or the annual ball of the 'Buchenwald boys' who had migrated to Australia as a group after the war. But it required broader historical events to create awareness of the importance of commemorating the Holocaust at a community level. The first point of change was the Eichmann trial which was held in Jerusalem in 1961 and began to raise issues of studying the Holocaust. But despite the trial's impact, there was still a resistance to Holocaust awareness in the 1960s. Both Eli Wiesel, well known Holocaust novelist, and Holocaust historian, Raul Hilberg, had problems finding a publisher for their work in the 1960s. The two major wars of 1967 and 1973 had a further impact, especially the Six Day War when initially there was a real fear of Jews again facing mass slaughter as Arab rhetoric spoke of driving Jews into the sea.⁸

By the late 1970s the turning point had been reached. In 1977 Menachem Begin was elected Israeli prime minister and 'more than any previous leader, he used evocation of the Holocaust to defend Israel's existence and its policies'.⁹ At the same time there was the rise of antisemites who denied that the Holocaust had happened, and the Jewish feeling that they had to be answered. In addition, the war crimes debate began in the late 1970s as it was realised that there were a number of war criminals living freely, not only in Germany but also in other countries such as North America, Britain and Australia. In 1977 the United States Justice Department set up the Special Investigations Unit to prosecute alleged Nazi criminals living in the United States and in 1978 President Jimmy Carter made Holocaust memorialisation an official program of the United States government. The concern about Nazi criminals in the West and increased interest in Holocaust scholarship was fostered by the opening of government archives at the end of the thirty year period from 1975. Also, the passage of time was such that more academics were becoming involved in researching the Holocaust since it was felt that sufficient time had elapsed to allow a more objective approach to the issue.¹⁰

In 1978 the showing of the first major television series, *Holocaust* written by Gerald Greene, also brought the issue of the Holocaust in a powerful way into people's loungerooms for the first time. Saidel interviewed Rabbi Irving 'Yitz' Greenberg who described the eleven years between the 1967 Six Day War and the 1978 television series as a time of 'soaking ground' because:

The miniseries never would have been produced or had the reverberations but for this ten years... It took ten years of saturating the ground, building up a scholarly following, building up a religious consciousness. And then it was like striking a match, when you had saturation with benzene. And it blasted off.¹¹

By the late 1970s many secular Jews felt disillusioned with Israel's policies in the territories and Holocaust memorialisation provided an alternative secular focus for Jewish identification. This was further fostered by the emergence of the multicultural philosophy and support of ethnicity within the general community. All of these factors meant that a belated awareness had emerged in relation to the issue of the Holocaust.¹²

CREATION OF THE HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE COMMITTEE

As discussed above, until the late 1970s there was very little focus on Holocaust Remembrance. There was the annual remembrance function, initially the Warsaw Ghetto Commemoration and later renamed the Solemn Memorial Day. In the 1970s this function was organised for the Board by Folk Centre deputy Severyn Pejsachowicz who, in August 1979, suggested that the Board establish a Holocaust Committee. In November 1979 this proposal was implemented with the establishment of a Holocaust Committee under the auspices of the Education Committee of the Board. This new committee was chaired by Board stalwart Gerald Falk who became instrumental in the major changes which were to take place over the next few years in the area of Holocaust remembrance.

The formation of the Holocaust sub-committee was given impetus by two important events which took place in mid 1981. The first World Gathering of Holocaust survivors took place in Israel at Yad Vashem and the ECAJ arranged for an Australian delegation to attend. At the same time the first major Holocaust exhibition was held in Sydney at the Lower Town Hall from 28 June to 10 July 1981. This exhibition was sponsored by B'nai B'rith, the Board of Deputies and the State Zionist Council with the aim of promoting 'a greater awareness within the community at large of the Holocaust and its ramifications, not just for the Jewish people, but for humanity in general'.¹³ It was coordinated by John Lilienfeld, chairman of B'nai B'rith, assisted by Robert Klarnet, then the Board's public relations director. The exhibition was opened by Neville Wran, premier of New South Wales, and over its three weeks between 30,000 and 40,000 people visited it. In his annual report of March 1982, Board president Robert Goot said: 'On any assessment, this Exhibition was one of the most important joint activities mounted by the New South Wales Jewish community at any time, and is a great tribute to the organisations and those dedicated people who acted as guides for the Exhibition.'¹⁴

While annual reports tend to be given to hyperbole, in this case the importance of the Town Hall exhibition cannot be overemphasised. It marked a watershed in the history of Holocaust remembrance and was the catalyst for other developments of the 1980s. It heightened the awareness of Jewish leaders of the need to educate the community about the Holocaust. It emphasised the need to record Holocaust stories before it was too late. It also raised the importance of involving Holocaust survivors in the whole process. The preparation of the voluntary guides for the exhibition, in which Sophie Caplan and June Lewis were closely involved, produced a group of dedicated people who were enthusiastic to continue their efforts for Holocaust remembrance and it also sensitised a number of concerned Christians to the whole issue of the Holocaust.

Possibly the first tangible offshoot of the Town Hall Exhibition was the restructuring of the Holocaust Committee in May 1982. At the May plenum meeting Gerald Falk proposed that a separate Holocaust Memorial Committee be formed with the following terms of reference: 'To supervise, organise and assist all Holocaust education, memorial and remembrance activities within the Jewish community of New South Wales and to organise and conduct the Jewish Day of Remembrance and the Martyrs' Memorial Service'. This motion was carried by the plenum and in June 1982 the first committee was constituted with seven deputies being nominated. In July 1982 the program of the committee was set out as follows:

1. Report of Mrs Caplan [referring to the Caplan/Kwiet oral history project] in Information Bulletin.
2. Education sub-committee preparing teacher's kit.
3. Proposed rally for Raoul Wallenberg
4. Liaison with Yad Vashem
5. Reorganisation of Jewish Day of Remembrance and Martyrs' Memorial Service.
6. Formation of a Holocaust Survivors' Association
7. Setting up of an Australian Holocaust Exhibition.¹⁵

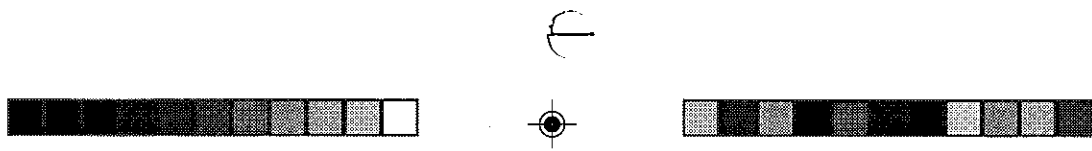
By November 1992, with the opening of the Sydney Jewish Museum sponsored by John Saunders, all these objectives had been achieved. (For some years prior to the opening of the Museum, regular exhibitions took place at the Great Synagogue, with Holocaust survivors as guides.)

The success of the Holocaust Remembrance Committee is largely attributable to the calibre of its leadership. The formation and early achievements of the committee were a result of the determination and perseverance of its founder, veteran Gerald Falk. It is interesting to note that although Falk was part of the established Australian community, he did play a seminal role in this development, which occurred during the presidency of Robert Goot. The next chairperson was Gerry Levy who, as a child of pre-war refugees who had arrived in Sydney in 1939, was very dedicated to the concept of Holocaust remembrance. He was followed by Mendel Gelberman, the first Holocaust survivor to head the committee. Gelberman served as chairman from 1987 to 1990, and was succeeded by Val Stern, who served until 1991. In 1992, Ida Ferson, another Holocaust survivor, took over the reins and under her inspired and dedicated leadership the committee's activities reached new heights. In 1995, when Ida Ferson stepped down, Mendel Gelberman returned to lead the committee.



Mendel Gelberman

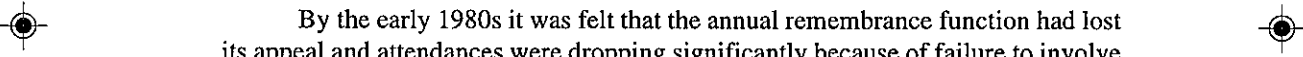
Born into an orthodox home in a *shtetl* called Ternova in the Carpathian region of Czechoslovakia, Mendel Gelberman was only twelve when he was rounded up and placed in the ghetto of Matiszalka in 1944. A few weeks later he was transported to Auschwitz, but only remained there for a short time. After that, he was taken from one camp to another, sometimes by train and sometimes by forced marches, including Buchenwald, Gleina, Rhensdorf, finally ending up in Theresienstadt from where he was liberated by the Russians. On the final leg of



this horrific journey, from Rhensdorf to Theresienstadt, 7000 Jewish prisoners had set off with Mendel but only 385 survived to the end of the journey. Most were killed by Allied bombing at one of the train stations before they set off on the forced march, and the rest died from hunger, disease and exhaustion on the march. After liberation, Gelberman finally managed to return to his home town where he found that of a family of nine, only three had survived - himself, his brother David and his sister Yenta. Another family member to survive was his brother-in-law, Martin, who had married Mendel's elder sister, Sarah, who perished with their two children. Martin later married Yenta.

For a while Mendel lived with his sister and brother-in-law, but he then met Anita Glass who was seeking young Jews under the age of 18 to migrate to Australia through Union OSE and the Welfare Guardian Society. Mendel agreed to join the group which travelled on the *SS Radnick* under the care of Dr David Sheps and his wife, also Holocaust survivors. They arrived in Sydney on 4 February 1948 and Mendel gradually found his feet in Sydney. He became involved in community affairs during the 1960s with the Illawarra Synagogue; became active in freemasonry; from 1980 to 1984 was president of the Illawarra Synagogue; and was inaugural Vice-President of the Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, serving with presidents Albert Halm and John Engelman.¹⁶ His chairing of the Holocaust Remembrance Committee was a natural extension of these activities.

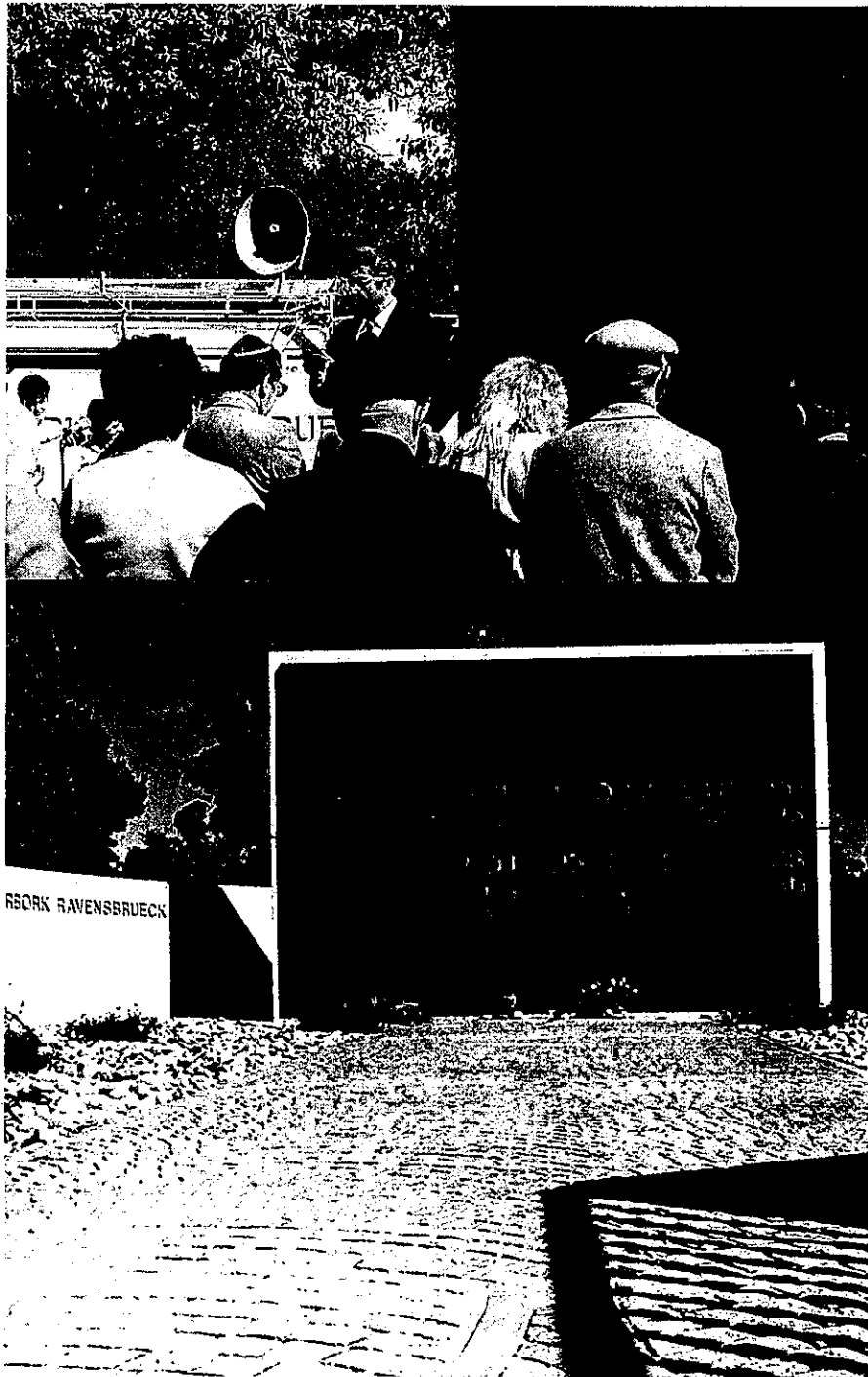
YOM HASHOAH AND HOLOCAUST AWARENESS WEEK



By the early 1980s it was felt that the annual remembrance function had lost its appeal and attendances were dropping significantly because of failure to involve the wider Jewish community apart from Holocaust survivors themselves. Many believed the whole evening needed to be revived in order to attract the youth and broader community participation.

After the formation of the Holocaust Remembrance Committee in 1982 this goal became one of its first priorities. In 1983, the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, an innovative program was planned by producer David Toben together with Margaret Gutman who joined the committee. Several new features were introduced and the evening was held at the Regent Theatre. For Gutman this was to be the beginning of her involvement with the Board. The revised program proved to be highly successful with 800 people attending the function.

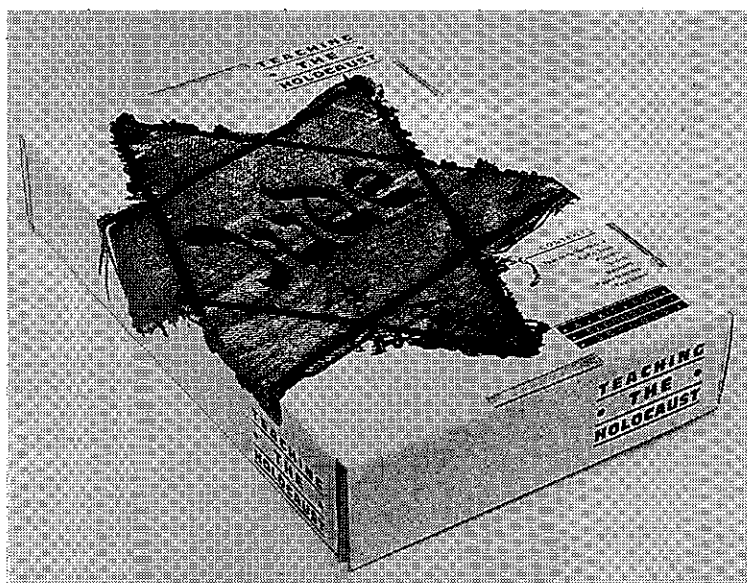
Already in July 1983 planning had begun for the following year, the fortieth anniversary of the destruction of Hungarian Jewry. The Clancy Auditorium at the University of New South Wales was the venue and the evening was again coordinated by David Toben as the executive producer. The keynote address was given by Professor Louis Waller of Monash University, Melbourne, with Dr Shalom Cholawski as the Yiddish speaker and Yael Cass the youth speaker. The evening attracted 1500 people and it was felt that the Holocaust Remembrance Committee 'had transformed a ceremony which was losing support into an event which had attracted 1500 people' and that it had 'surpassed the high standards of the previous year'. For the next few years David Toben continued to provide his professional expertise and he and Margaret Gutman proved to be a highly successful team.



Top: The Holocaust Memorial at Rookwood designed by Harry Seidler
Bottom: Mendel Gelberman addressing the Memorial Service

Subsequently, a small group of senior History teachers consisting of Robert Selinger, Judy Shapira and Howard Wolfers, began to meet to produce a kit on the Holocaust to be used in school history classes and other relevant subject areas for senior high school students in Years 10 to 12. June Lewis also assisted, largely with the production and marketing. The kit was three years in the making and was the result of the voluntary work of these dedicated educators who, in addition to their heavy professional commitments, met on a weekly basis to produce the kit.

By November 1984 the kit was sufficiently advanced for the sub-committee involved in its preparation to demonstrate its contents to the Holocaust Remembrance Committee. The minutes recorded that 'all present were most impressed . . . [and that the production of] the kit should proceed with the Board's backing'.¹⁹ It was first shown publicly at the Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, and in mid 1985 it was presented to the plenum by June Lewis as spokesperson for the group. She thanked Gerald Falk and Sophie Caplan for their important contribution in commencing the project and Margaret Gutman for her significant input. The Board supported the proposal that it become the publisher of the kit.



Holocaust Kit Box

The kit consisted of four booklets: a teachers' handbook, a loose leaf collection of resource materials, and a third and fourth booklet, the latter being called 'The Australian Connection'. This outlined what was happening in Australia, reactions of the Australian press and a case study of one family, some of whose members survived in Australia while others perished in the Holocaust. It was assembled in a specially produced box which included twenty large posters from B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League; ten copies of the B'nai B'rith publication, *The Record*; a small copy of Martin Gilbert's *Atlas of the Holocaust*; twenty slides made up from various authentic sources; and an audio tape in which four Sydney survivors answered set

questions posed by Margaret Gutman. In September 1985, during his visit to Sydney, sponsored by the Board and the Joint Committee for Tertiary Jewish Studies, Professor Yehuda Bauer met with the working party for the Holocaust kit and made a number of valuable comments which were noted.

By mid-1986 the kits were ready for sale, priced at \$55, and free copies were sent out to school inspectors in order to create awareness of the project. In December 1986 the Board received a grant of \$5000 from the Secretariat, New South Wales Division, of the International Year of Peace towards the kit's production costs. Between 1986 and 1991 approximately 100 kits were sold each year so that by 1991 the first print run of 500 kits had been sold out. Judy Shapira, then chairperson of the Education Sub-committee, edited a new enlarged teachers' handbook and reprinted other parts of the kit. The second edition, with a further print run of 500 copies, also sold out within five years. Copies of the kit were sold not only in New South Wales, but also in Victoria and other states and some copies were sold overseas including Germany. In 1987 the Holocaust Remembrance Committee distributed 400 free copies of Martin Gilbert's *Atlas of the Holocaust* to high schools and colleges throughout New South Wales and included with the *Atlas* a leaflet informing schools of the Board's speaker service.

The working party involved in the production of the kit held education seminars for teachers in order to promote the kit. In September 1983 the first of these was led by Kwiet at Shalom College and attracted 80 participants. Later seminars were organised in conjunction with the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation Unit and the Guild Centre of the Sydney College of Advanced Education which specialised in the needs of non-government schools and which helped to advertise these seminars and kits through a mail-out of History Teachers' Association members. Survivors who went to speak to schools about their Holocaust experiences also helped to promote the kit.



B'nai B'rith volunteers assembling Holocaust Kits.
Elizabeth Einfeld and Ruth Mandelberg are on the left.

THE ISSUE OF VISITS TO POLAND

The question of visiting Poland has been a vexed one for Australian Jewry. Poland, the location of all the death camps which were built specifically for mass extermination, had the worst record of any country in Europe. Of the six million Jews who died, three million were from Poland, and at the most only about 250,000 Polish Jews survived. In April 1983 the Polish government planned a scientific conference for the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and an invitation was extended to the Australian Jewish community to be present. The ECAJ opposed official representation of the community, although Sophie Caplan decided to attend on an individual basis. This issue again was debated in communal forums when Israel sponsored the concept of the March of the Living to the death camps including Auschwitz and Treblinka, with the group then flying to Israel to celebrate Israel Independence Day. The March of the Living was promoted by UIA, but in Melbourne there was strong opposition to the proposal and, in the end, Australia did not participate officially. In 1988 a Moriah College student, Eytan Uliel, was selected to attend the March of the Living after he won a competition on Jewish heroism, and he was assisted by the Board of Deputies. In December 1989 the matter was debated at the Board during a panel discussion, with Yonni Shapira, the Young Leadership director of UIA, speaking in the affirmative and Sophie Caplan in the negative. The Association strongly opposed involvement with the March because its members believed that it was in bad taste, insensitive and was merely a Hollywood extravaganza.²⁷



Magaret Gutman, Eytan Uliel with his mother and Harold Nagley, April 1988

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