

***Portraits of Survival* grew out of a simple act:** sitting with Holocaust survivors and listening. Some were soft-spoken, others surprisingly fierce, some hesitant, some unstoppable. What they all carried was the weight of memory; not abstract history but lived moments of terror and courage and resilience. These conversations became the basis of my paintings. These are not just likenesses, but vessels of story and presence.

As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, these stories have always lived around me like shadows in a room. They shaped my family and my sense of the world. Yet I have often found it hard to look them directly in the eye. To paint these portraits meant stepping into that gaze. It meant allowing myself to meet the ghosts I have inherited—the fragments of songs, the absences at family tables, and the unspoken grief passed down like heirlooms.

Each survivor holds their own universe: a childhood interrupted, a family torn apart, the courage to endure, and the relentless work of rebuilding life in a new land. Many arrived in Australia with nothing but loss, and yet they created families, communities, and culture. Their faces, their stories, and even their silences are not only personal, but part of our collective Jewish memory and part of the wider human story of survival against all odds.

These works are not monuments, nor are they meant to fix their subjects in the past. They are encounters. To stand before them is to meet living witnesses—people who chose love and continuity after devastation. It is also to be reminded that remembering is an act of resistance and that carrying these stories forward is part of our responsibility.

Portraits of Survival is my tribute to the survivors who sat before me, to their families, and to the generations that follow. It is also, quietly, a reckoning with my own inheritance, with the knowledge that survival does not end with the survivors themselves, but continues in those who remember, create, and bear witness anew.

A

A large, stylized, cursive script of the name 'Elka' in a light pink color, positioned at the top of the page.

Elka Ekstein

(No. 74197)

Elka's life was marked by bravery and endurance. She and her sister Sonia leapt from a deportation train, survived bunkers, Auschwitz, and a death march. Liberation brought not just freedom but the chance to begin again. In Melbourne, she built a family with Yosl and raised daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Elka carries her number 74197, but she is defined by resilience and love.



Sally

Sally Felzen

Sally's presence is gentle but deeply strong. A survivor who faced profound loss, she created a life of family and continuity. Her quiet grace, passed down through generations, is proof that even after devastation, love remains possible. Wearing her wedding veil, Sally transports us to a moment of pure hope and heart.

Buba Ester

Ester Braitberg

Buba Ester. A soft-spoken tiny woman with a major spark who is clearly the most loved matriarch of a large and warm family. From Łódź to Auschwitz she carried her mother's last words:

“Esther, run. Don't let them beat you.”

She ran toward life: love in Belgium, a home in Australia, and generations who now carry her story.



Magda

Magda Steiner

1923–2025

Magda's presence was luminous.

A survivor of Auschwitz and Allendorf, she carried herself with knowing strength and extraordinary dignity. When I first met her, I was struck by her beauty — ageless and utterly disarming. After the war she began again in Melbourne with her husband Erno, raising daughters and building a family rooted in resilience and love. Beyond her own home, Magda gave herself to the Jewish community, remaining a passionate advocate and a cherished matriarch until the very end of her long life.



Sonja

Sonja Cowan

At sixteen, Sonja boarded a Kindertransport with only a suitcase and her mother's parting handshake. "I'll see you in Eretz." It was the last time they saw one another. That moment shaped her forever. She grew into adulthood in Britain, even serving in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, before meeting her husband Ralph and eventually building a new life in Melbourne.

Their home became a place of welcome, filled with daughters, music, and the rhythms of community life. At her 100th birthday, Sonja was surrounded by children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Holding them close, she said she finally felt like somebody.

Tommy

Thomas (Tommy) Moses Beck

1929–2024

Tommy greeted me with a wink and subtle flirt. His life was vast and colourful, which was immediately clear. Born in Budapest, he survived the war, spoke eight languages, lived in more than a dozen cities and married six times. He loved sun, music, and company, and chose to have his ashes scattered in open air.

His story is one not only of survival, but reinvention, and a generous spirit too large to be confined.

The word "Dita" is written in a large, elegant, cursive script. The letters are light pink and have a slightly textured, hand-drawn appearance. The 'D' is particularly large and loops around the 'i', which is also stylized. The 't' and 'a' follow in the same fluid, cursive style.

Dita Gould

Dita was just eleven when war overturned her childhood. Caring for her little sister, enduring starvation and separation, she survived with courage that never left her. After reunion with her parents, she came to Australia.

She often said her life was spared so she could give back. She lived that promise fully.

Vivienne

Vivienne Spiegel

Vivienne wore polka dots for our portrait—a tribute to the last image of a loved one. At six she read aloud the letter that sent her father away forever. She escaped the *Velodrome* roundup that claimed thousands of children and was hidden by Catholic farmers until the war ended.

Orphaned and displaced, she built her life again in Australia. In her nineties, she still speaks for those who never could.

Mr Goldberg

Abram (Abe) Goldberg

1924–2025

Abe often says his survival is his victory. In Auschwitz, torn from his mother, he promised her he would live and that he would tell. He has kept that promise with stubborn devotion, speaking to tens of thousands of people over his lifetime, ensuring the world could not look away.

Together with his beloved Cesia, also a survivor, he built a life in Melbourne filled with love, music, and community. Their home was a gathering place, alive with conversation and celebration, even after so much loss.

For me, Abe was the seedling of this project. His boundless energy, humour, and warmth pushed this forward from the very beginning. Sitting with him, I felt the force of someone who had seen the worst of humanity and still chose life.

Living past a century, surrounded by four generations, Abe remained unbending—a man who turned survival into testimony, and testimony into legacy.

A stylized, cursive signature of the name 'Ken' in a light pink color, positioned in the upper left quadrant of the page.

Ken Hamer

Born in Łódź, Poland in 1937, Ken survived the war in hiding with his mother and sister, sheltering in forests and bunkers until liberation in 1944. Reunited with his father, the family left Poland and arrived in Australia just before his tenth birthday. Despite a lost childhood, Ken thrived: building lifelong friendships, marrying Gerry, and raising three children and two grandsons. Known for his humour, generosity, and community spirit, Ken's life is defined by resilience and love.



Alex (Sany) Heimler

Born in Beled, Hungary in 1924, Alex (Sany) survived the Holocaust before reuniting with his beloved Leah (Puci). They married in 1946, welcomed their daughter Judy in 1948, and began a new life in Australia in 1957. A mechanic by trade, Alex built not only work but a rich circle of family and friends. His greatest joy was their holiday home near Yarrawonga, where waterskiing, boating, and laughter filled the days. Now in his later years, still active and curious, he carries one message above all: never forget. His life is testament to survival, love, and the enduring light of memory.

Celina

Celina Widawski

Celina's childhood was uprooted by war. Her family fled ghettos, hid under false identities, and lived with constant fear of betrayal. Her father perished, but she, her mother, and sister survived.

Later in Melbourne, she wrote her story with detail and care, giving future generations a way to understand her journey.

Bernie

Berni Hamersfeld

Berni was born in Brzesko, Poland in 1936. When the bombings began, his family escaped by horse and carriage. This stroke of fortune that carried them through Lvov, into Russian work camps in Siberia, and finally to Uzbekistan. In 1950 he arrived in Australia aboard *The Napoli*, beginning again on new soil. Now 89, Berni carries the weight of a traumatic childhood, yet is best known for his *joie de vivre* – a spirit that refuses to be diminished.



Wolf Deane

Wolf grew up an only child in Łódź, his happy life shattered by ghetto walls and years of forced labour. Auschwitz took his mother and illness claimed his father. Liberation became his true birthday.

From that beginning, Wolf built an extraordinary life: studies in Israel and London, a career in engineering, and a family with his beloved Asya of 64 years. Surrounded by children and grandchildren, he chose joy, challenge in many forms, and love as his answer to loss.

Little Luba

Luba Olenski

In August 1943, twelve-year-old Luba Frank jumped from a cattle train packed with men, women and children bound for the Treblinka death camp. She had already survived two traumatic years in the Bialystok Ghetto in the care of virtual strangers.

Famished and terrified, she wandered alone through fields and villages for five and a half weeks, begging by day and huddling in the forest at night. With no survival skills she lived just long enough to be rescued by a group of Jewish partisans who brought her back to their hiding place deep in the Bransk forest.

Rebuilding a new life in Australia with her husband Duvche, Luba ensured that the three generations of descendants who lovingly surround her will carry her legacy forward.

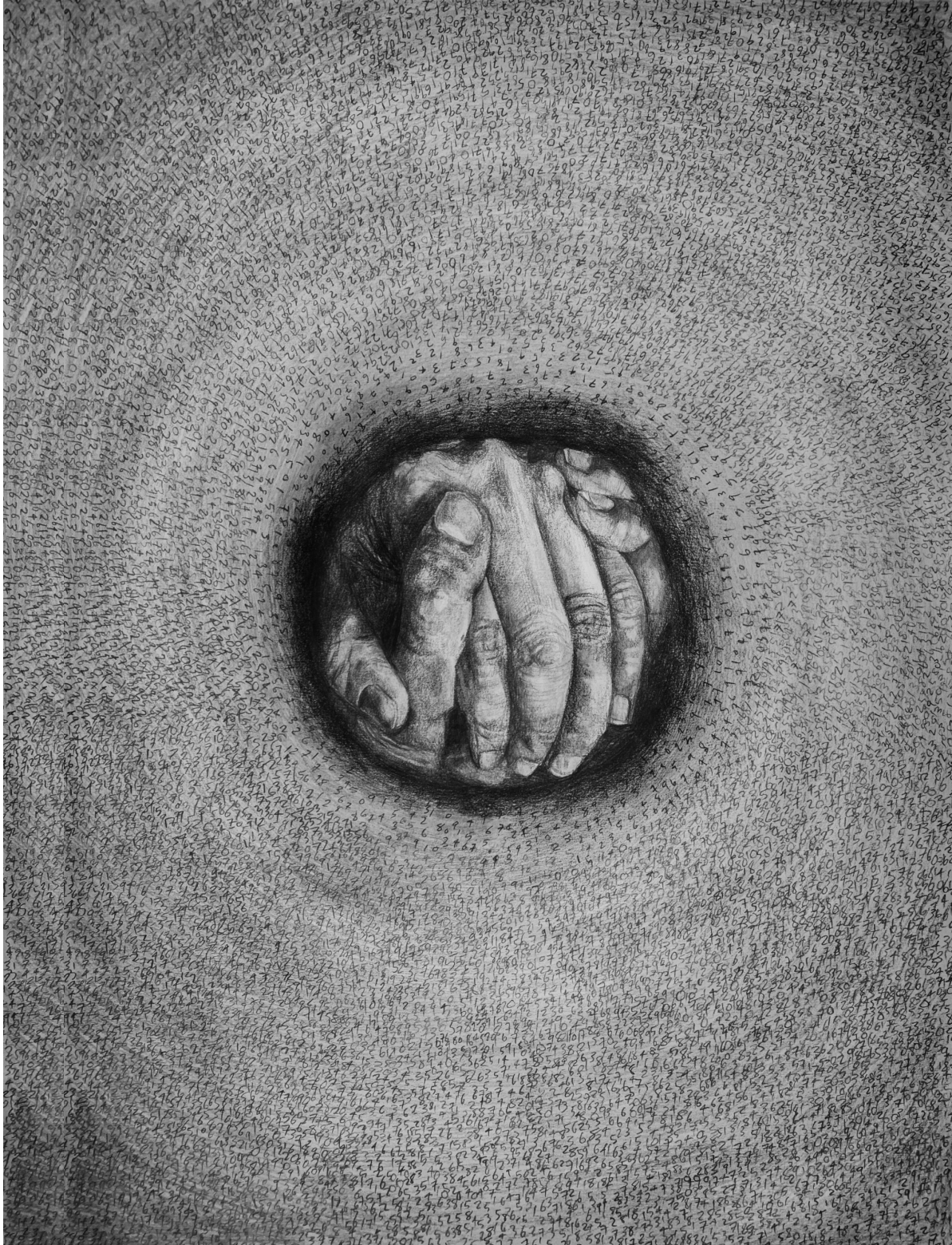
The word "Nina" is written in a large, elegant, cursive script. The letters are a light blue-grey color, and the stroke is thick and textured, giving it a hand-drawn or chalk-like appearance. The word is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the image.

Nina Bassat

Nina spent part of the Shoah in the Lwów ghetto with her mother. After escaping the ghetto in 1942 they lived with a Ukrainian woman who courageously posed Nina as her niece and hid Nina's mother for the remainder of the war. Nina's testimony honours both the family she lost and those who risked everything to save them. Almost her entire extended family was murdered in Treblinka and Belzec. From that childhood of loss, she became a voice of strength – an advocate for justice and the Jewish people. Nina's life is both survival and inspiration.

Filmed by James McPherson, this footage captures the intimate process behind *Portraits of Survival* – from interviews and conversations with survivors to moments of reflection in the studio. These glimpses of Anita at work, listening, sketching, and painting, reveal the exchanges that shaped each portrait, offering a window into how stories became art.





Kaddish By the Ruins

A 20-minute all-Yiddish song cycle based on the poems of Aaron Zeitlin, translated by Dr. Nathan Wolski, spanning liturgy, theology, music, song, spoken word and commemoration. Kaddish By the Ruins spans diverse theological and emotional notes: anger, accusation, lament, loss, despair, doubt, and belief.

The Bashevis Singers

The Bashevis Singers are the children of generations of people who lived their lives in Yiddish. The sibling-cousin trio is comprised of Evie Gawenda, who is an award-winning theatre director singer, alongside Husky Gawenda and Gideon Preiss, who are the core members of the critically acclaimed indie-folk band Husky. The Bashevis Singers' four albums span centuries of Yiddish poetry and song and have brought to life classic 20th century folksongs, new compositions based on mystical poetry written by legendary Yiddish poets, and original songs written in collaboration with their father and uncle, renowned journalist and author Michael Gawenda.

Portraits

OF SURVIVAL

An exhibition by Anita Lester in partnership with the Melbourne Holocaust Museum

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Judy & Leon Goldman Learning Centre

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WITH HEARTFELT THANKS TO THE SURVIVORS AND THEIR FAMILIES FOR SHARING
THEIR STORIES

Nina Bassat AM

Wolf Deane

Dita Gould

Alex (Sany) Heimler

Thomas (Tommy)
Moses Beck z'l

Elka Ekstein

Ken Hamer

Vivienne Spiegel

Ester Braitberg

Sally Felzen

Berni Hamersfeld

Magda Steiner z'l

Sonja Cowan

Abram Goldberg OAM z'l

Luba Olenski

Celina Widawski

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Goldberg Family

Gideon Preiss

Dena Lester

Allan Preiss and
Sandra Cowan