


THE FREEDOM CIRCUS



One family's death-defying act
to escape the Nazis and start
a new life in Australia

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‘Here comes the princess, always dressed for a ball,’ the nurse affectionately said to my grandmother-in-law as we passed in the corridors of the Montefiore Jewish nursing home.

Mindla (pronounced *Marnya*) Horowitz. The Princess of Montefiore. Her hair *always* perfectly set. Her lips *always* painted into a pretty red bow with such precision that Elizabeth Arden couldn’t have done them better herself. Victory Red her favourite shade.

We headed into the dining room, where my husband was waiting. ‘You’re getting fatty,’ she teased him, poking a manicured finger into his belly, ‘but look at me, still bewdiful!’ The diamanté clip in her hair shimmered as she turned her head to be admired.

My husband and I often joked that Nanna’s hearing might go or her eyesight fade, but vanity would be the last thing to leave her before she died.

It really wasn’t vanity, though; it was dignity, the rawest essence of humanity, which she held on to with all her

being. It was her way of saying to the world, ‘You’ve taken everything, but you will never take my pride.’

It was many years after I’d joined the Horowitz family that I began to learn Mindla’s story. My husband, Ralph, would mimic Nanna swearing in Yiddish – which her pet parrot did too, much to our amusement – or relay a joke that his late Pop told when they were children.

Then one day he said to me, ‘I’ve told you their story, right?’

Wrong.

He shared a skeleton version, recalling how Pop would tell his adored grandsons bedtime tales of grand circuses and colourful clowns. And of how the Nazis tried to kill them all.

He described rescuing his beautiful bride who was locked up in a Russian prison, and how they journeyed halfway around the world to eventually live happily ever after. But these were no fairy tales.

The journalist in me fired off a million questions as I was desperate to know the whole story, but sadly by then Pop was long gone, and the family consensus was that ‘Nanna never talks about it so we don’t ask in case it upsets her.’ Fair enough. I certainly didn’t want her to relive any of the awful things I’d heard.

As Mindla got older, though, and it was clear that our time with her was running out, my sense of desperation grew. It was important for our family, for my husband and

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our children to know who they were and where they came from, to understand what their grandparents and indeed great-grandparents endured, and how on earth they had escaped the Germans and made it to Australia.

At the risk of upsetting Nanna, conversations needed to be had.

When we visited the nursing home, we knew not to bring Nanna cakes or sweet treats because she wanted to ‘keep her figure’, but she loved cosmetics, especially the brightest of bright nail polish, and she *loved* to chat while painting her nails.

So one chilly autumn morning I armed myself with a supply of the fanciest new nail polish I could find, some notepads, a voice recorder and a rusty old tin of black-and-white photographs she’d given her daughter-in-law Meg (my mother-in-law), to look after. And, inspired by Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie*, my very own Mondays with Mindla began.

One by one we’d go through the tatty images together.

‘Nanna, who is this?’ I’d ask, ‘and where was this picture taken?’ Always treading gently so as not to upset her.

‘Why do you want to know?’ she’d say in her thick Polish accent, expertly sweeping the magenta varnish across a nail.

At first, she was more interested in talking about how her beloved ‘Collingwood’ was travelling on the AFL ladder and what her great-grandchildren were up to, but slowly I’d draw the conversation back to her and begin to peel away the layers of her life.

And so it went on, week after week, month after month. Each visit followed the same pattern.

After the nails were set, we'd head to the dining room for lunch, deftly avoiding the conga line of Zimmer frames.

At her table, we were always joined by four or five elderly women – Mindla liked an audience – and once my notepad appeared, we'd go through a familiar routine.

'Why do you want to know?' she'd ask again. 'My story is nothing special.'

'What about her, and her, and her?' she asked, pointing a sparkling fingertip towards each of the dear, weathered faces before me. 'We are all the same.'

And then one day it clicked. Although the past was undoubtedly painful, Mindla wasn't necessarily re-traumatised by telling it; she just didn't think her story was anything out of the ordinary because so many of the people around her had an equally horrific story of escaping the Nazis. Of losing loved ones, of family they never saw again. Of lice-ridden bodies, of starvation. Of the stench of war and death. So much death. So much sadness.

Many of these precious elderly men and women with whom Nanna shared her final years had miraculously survived, beating Hitler at his evil game.

Despite her age and declining physical health, Mindla's mind remained razor sharp to the very end, and during the many hours we spent together she recalled her life to me in

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surprising detail. However, when she died in 2015 at the age of ninety-six, many words remained unspoken and questions unanswered. So I embarked on a years-long quest to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of her and Pop Horowitz's lives.

Many documents and records of life's most precious moments – births, deaths and marriages alike – have been lost, bombed or burnt into oblivion, and I am therefore incredibly grateful to the genealogists, historians, academics and volunteers who have generously given their time and expertise to assist me during this process, particularly Krystyna Duszniak, whose inimitable knowledge and connections helped uncover material that not only confirmed Mindla's memories, but also helped us find a lost family.

As I did not have the luxury of interviewing Pop, who passed away in 1986, I've relied on my interviews with Mindla and other family members, especially the grandchildren he adored, to recreate his story; plus photographs and interviews with his former television colleagues on GTV-9's *Tarax Show* in Australia. Among these people, I am notably grateful to the wonderful Ron Blaskett, who shared many memories of Pop before he passed away in 2018. Vale, Ron.

Some dialogue is based on the recollections of others.

Pop Horowitz, officially Moszjes Baruch Horowitz, was known by several other names at various stages of his life: Moses, Kubush the Clown, Kubus Armondo, Sloppo the Clown, Zaydee and Kubush. For ease of reading and continuity I have referred to him as Kubush, which was Nanna's name for him, throughout the book.

I hope you will read this story in the spirit in which it is intended. This is not a historical text and does not profess to be an academic document of the Holocaust; it is simply one woman's story, one family's account, told through their eyes. All attempts have been made to verify information as much as possible.

Hitler did his best to erase the existence, history and spirit of an entire people. Six million Jewish men, women and children were killed by the Nazi regime in World War II. It is impossible to comprehend.

Ultimately, Hitler failed. Why? Because these people have not been forgotten. Piece by piece, snippet by snippet, story by story, year after year the lives of Holocaust victims and survivors and their place in society are being lovingly restored and remembered, the fabric of their lives stitched back into place, acknowledged, understood and valued.

Those souls may have been lost, but they are still loved, still treasured, still talked about. We will honour their past, and their stories fuel our future.

We will never forget.