

Inge Woolf, founder and director of the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand.



SAFE HAVEN

A confronting exhibition tells the stories of nine women who survived Auschwitz and rebuilt their lives in New Zealand.

Inge Woolf may be 80, but time hasn't blunted the memory of what the Nazis did to her family and friends.

"My aunt and cousin were sent to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where they both died," says the founder and director of the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand. "We were lucky, because my father managed to get me and my mother out of Vienna to England. We were spared the horror of the camps."

To commemorate the 70th anniversary of the liberation of

Auschwitz on January 27, Woolf's Wellington centre has created *Auschwitz to Aotearoa: Survival in Nazi Concentration Camps*, an original exhibition featuring the stories of nine women who survived Auschwitz and later called New Zealand home.

"They came here because it was the furthest they could get from the Nazis," she says. "Somehow, these courageous women were able to put the imprisonment, horror and starvation of the camps behind them to make new lives, raise families and contribute to this country."

Women like Sophie Galler from Poland, who spent four years in Auschwitz. Galler's testimony details the horror of watching her father shot in front of her and of her mother's leg being amputated by the notorious Josef Mengele. "Sophie's mother was bitten by a guard dog and when her leg got infected, Dr Mengele amputated it without anaesthetic, before sending her to the gas chamber," Woolf says.

Galler later escaped to Israel. There she met Anton, a Polish Jew who had fled to New Zealand and was in



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Above: The arrival of Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau, in German-occupied Poland, June 1944.

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Israel on holiday. The couple married and set up home in Lower Hutt, where two children were eventually followed by four grandchildren.

Auschwitz to Aotearoa was curated by two Holocaust Centre volunteers: Dr Simone Gigliotti, the author of several books about the Holocaust and a Victoria University lecturer, and Anna Chapman, whose research on these female survivors formed part of her thesis.

Woolf, matriarch of the well-known Wellington photography family, says the exhibition serves as a salutary

lesson. "These women overcame the worst thing that can happen to anyone, but they still went on to live good lives. They are an inspiration to us all, that no matter how bad things get, we can start again and live our lives as well as we possibly can."

For Woolf, the exhibition has personal significance, given she was three when her family were forced to denounce their Jewish religion to avoid the concentration camps. "Of course, we were only pretending to convert, but it saved our lives."

After a stint working for a

Dr Josef Mengele (far left) was known as "the Angel of Death" for his medical experiments on the inmates of Auschwitz. He stands next to Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, Josef Kramer, the commandant of Belsen concentration camp, and an unidentified German officer (far right).

London department store, Woolf immigrated to New Zealand when she was 23. "My uncles, who were living here, told us New Zealand was a peaceful country – that Kiwis were accepting of all ethnicities and religions, including Jews."

Not long after arriving, Woolf met her husband, Ron, who had emigrated from London as a child. "Ron gave me a 35mm camera as a wedding present and I joined him in the business. He would do the studio shots and darkroom work and I would do the informal wedding photography." The couple's business, Photography by Woolf, was taken over by son Simon when Ron was killed in a helicopter crash in 1987.

Inge Woolf, who also has a daughter, helped set up the Holocaust Centre seven years ago. "I wanted to find something I was as passionate about as photography."

The five-time grandmother, who volunteers at the centre most days, says she particularly enjoys presenting to school groups. "It's so important we learn the lessons from the past, so we never repeat them. And what better place to start than with our young people?"

SHARON STEPHENSON

* *Auschwitz to Aotearoa* is a long-term exhibition at the Holocaust Centre, 80 Webb St, Wellington, open 10am to 1pm daily, except Saturday (www.holocaustcentre.org.nz). From January 25 to February 28, it will be on temporary display at Bowen House, cnr Bowen St and Lambton Quay.