

Interview with an Australian refugee, Lucie Pollak-Langford

Gabriel Courtney, aged 11

Lucie Pollak-Langford is Jewish. She was born before the Second World War in the city of Prague, in former Czechoslovakia, which is now the Czech Republic. Lucie told me that there is a saying in Prague, that every baby born there is born with a violin in their cradle. Jokingly, she said that she was born with a gramophone record in hers. She remembers that when she was just a little girl, she had a small gramophone which she used to wind up and dance to the music for hours and hours. Lucie's life in Australia has always been involved with music, which she said might be because of the 'gramophone record in her cradle'.

During World War II, the German Nazi Party, took away the property, jobs, and eventually the lives of over six million Jewish people. They kept records of every Jewish person, who could be identified by the yellow star they were forced to wear. So when the time came to take Lucie's family from their home, it was easy to organise them to go to a local 'exit point' as they called it, which was a school in a place called Terezin. At that time, Lucie was only 15 years old. She and her family were taken to

Poland to a concentration camp called Sobibor, upon which everyone was separated into those who could work and those who could not. Those who could not work were shot shortly after. Luckily, Lucie was able to work. She was taken to a place called Sawin, which was one of many small labour camps. The work was digging irrigation canals which was extremely hard, from which labour many people got sick and were sent to death camps for 'orderly disposal.' By this time Lucie was 16 and loved dancing. The prisoners were allowed to have a concert, at which Lucie met a Polish Christian engineer named Jan Hensel, who, though not a prisoner himself, was forced by the

"I think if your life's in danger, and especially if you really love in such a courageous way, as Jan did love me, then it sort of gives you strength to do the almost impossible."
Lucie Pollak-Langford

Germans to work at the camp. They fell in love. Lucie and Jan spent a year in a very dangerous situation, because if they had been found out, they would have doubtlessly both been shot. They realised the only way to keep Lucie alive was to help her escape. During that year, Jan taught Lucie Polish, he fed her, and after sneaking her out of the camp, hid her in his family's home until she could escape from Poland. His family got her false documents, which said that she was a Polish Christian girl. I was happy when Lucie said she had escaped from the camp, but I was sad when she said she never saw Jan again.

Lucie went to Lublin, a city in Poland. She departed from there with a group of Christian girls on a Polish transport to – of all places – Germany, where she ended up working with nuns in a Catholic hospital in the city of Soest for two years. During that time, Lucie said she had to be incredibly careful. That is how she survived for two years, until American forces came and liberated Europe. Immediately after liberation, Lucie had to stay in Germany for a little while – for a couple of years. There she worked in the High Court as an interpreter for the Control Commission of Germany as she speaks several languages – French, German, English, Polish and some Russian. Then Lucie returned to the Czech Republic, but in 1948, the Communists came to power there, which political system threatened her freedom as an individual. So, after some time and difficulty, she managed to get out and went to England. There Lucie worked as a nurse for a year, after which, in 1950, she came to Australia.

Here in Australia, Lucie said she made the rounds of many businesses, but her skill in languages did not seem to be as sought after in this country. One day, she went into a music store named Palings. The people there said that they did not

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really need an interpreter or receptionist, but asked if she would like to work in their classical music department. Lucie answered, 'Ooh yes! I'd love that!' Around that time, she also did find work as an interpreter, because there were many migrants arriving in Australia. They were very eager to listen to music from their homelands, so Lucie became involved in buying foreign music recordings to supply their needs. Since then, Lucie worked for Roe Street Records and has also managed the music lounge of Angus and Robertson bookstore. Most of Lucie's working life has been involved with music and records, just as her life began in Prague! She said: 'I hope that in some way I contributed towards the cultural life of Australia.' Lucie now also gives lectures at universities about her experiences during the war.

Lucie's mother and step-father died during the war, but she did find two of her cousins, Martin and Veran and their parents, who are still alive now. They also had a very interesting escape, which involved the Nazis 'bartering' to be paid for releasing the European relatives of rich American Jews. However, usually by the time that such deals were made, the relatives were already dead. Luckily, Lucie's relatives were sent to Switzerland, and their lives were saved.

Lucie works presently as a guide at the Sydney Jewish Museum. One day, a Polish Jewish woman came to visit the museum as she had some task to do for SBS Broadcasting. She and Lucie began a conversation, and it turned out that she was soon to visit Poland. They became friends, and later the lady rang Lucie from

Poland with exciting news. Lucie had given Jan's name and details to her friend, and she had found his family. Unfortunately Jan had died in 1994, when Lucie herself had been visiting Prague in only 1993! Lucie began to correspond with Jan's family. Then, her husband Peter, who is Dutch, reminded her about 'Righteous Among the Nations.' Righteous Among the Nations is a special department of the Israeli government in Jerusalem, which considers the cases of efforts made by non-Jewish persons – Gentiles – who helped Jews during the war. This department declared Jan and his sister Danuta to be 'Righteous Gentiles Among the Nations'. There is an important ceremony for this declaration, so in 1999 Lucie travelled to Poland, where she met with Jan's family. She became close friends 'like sisters' with his widow, and stayed in her home, where Jan had lived for forty years! His family took her all around Poland, as well as back to the camp where they had been together. Lucie said it was a surreal situation, but an absolutely amazing experience.

When I asked her, Lucie said that she loves living in Australia, and she likes to go overseas on holidays to visit relatives. But, she added, Australia is now home! At the beginning I said Lucie is an amazing person, just like her story. Now she is writing a book about her life, which she hopes will be made into a movie. Then everyone will be lucky, like me, to hear her story too.