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## Sophie Caplan, Holocaust survivor who helped preserve the memory of others

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After the Second World War, Holocaust survivors did not want to talk about their experiences. Whether it was because the thoughts were too horrible to contemplate, they just wanted to put them away and get on with their life, or no one was interested, survivors did not tell their new friends, their relatives or children what happened. This void created space for the emergence of a small group of Holocaust deniers, such as David Irving as portrayed in the recent film *Denial*, but there were plenty on the left and on the right. A win for the Holocaust deniers would be like a second victory for the Nazis.

Sophie Shoshanah Caplan, OAM, did more than anyone in Australia to preserve the memories of Holocaust survivors, so the next generation would never forget.



Sophie Caplan, left in the sitting group, at Chaumont in 1944.

Working with Professor Konrad Kwiet at the University of NSW, she started a research project to record the testimony of survivors. With her detailed knowledge of the Holocaust built on years

of study, she clarified details and dates and probed for more information in a scholarly, but also sympathetic way, because of her own experiences of the Holocaust.

Sophie was born in Germany to Abraham and Berta Topf, who ran a shoe store, in 1933 - the year Hitler came to power. Her father died when she was nine months old. She was raised in a single-parent household during the Depression until her mother remarried in 1937. The family desperately tried to obtain visas for Australia before war broke out, because other relatives were already living in Sydney, but were unsuccessful.



Sophie Caplan with her husband, Leslie, and their children Jonathan, Gideon and Benjamin.

On the day Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began, Sophie went with her uncle Ben to Belgium, with her mother and stepfather soon following. Within months the Germans invaded Belgium, so they fled to France. In France they were eventually forced into internment camps at Agde and then Rivesaltes, near the Spanish border.

Ben volunteered for work in Rivesaltes to avoid the enforced idleness of the internment camp, including small building jobs and cleaning the latrines. As a result, the family were allowed to sleep in a disused washroom rather than the barracks.

In August 1942, French paramilitary police came to take away Jews, emptying out the barracks but not looking in the washrooms. The family huddled in the washroom for three days and nights, afraid to come out. German documents record the Germans deported 2313 Jews from Rivesaltes, via Drancy in Paris, to the Auschwitz death camp.

With the aid of Quaker volunteers, Sophie was smuggled out of Rivesaltes. She was sent to a Jewish orphanage run by the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants in the Chateau de Chaumont in the Massif Central, a poor area of France that the Germans, in a second miracle, did not disturb. The 100 Jewish girls in the orphanage all survived the war. In a third miracle, Sophie's mother and stepfather also survived and were reunited in December 1945, before finally moving to Australia in 1947.

In addition to her own research, she enlisted a brigade of researchers by commencing an essay competition at Moriah College, a Jewish school. Year 10 students had to write an essay about

the history of a member of their family, or a prominent member of the community. Many of these essays were about the story of a parent or grandparent's Holocaust experiences. The students often recorded the history that no one in the family had heard before. In some cases, the essays were written in the years before the parent or grandparent died. Without the competition, their history would have been lost.

The annual competition has been replicated at numerous other Jewish schools around Australia and overseas. It is estimated that in the more than 40 years it has been running, over 10,000 essays have been written. Thus, Caplan ensured the memory of the Holocaust experiences did not die with the survivors.

She studied at Sydney Girls High and won a scholarship to Sydney University, graduating as a high school English and history teacher, before later taking further studies herself and moving into a tertiary position. At university she met her future husband, Leslie Caplan AM, who predeceased her by 11 years. She enjoyed helping others to repay her good fortune, giving tens of thousands each year to charity. She would always give money to anyone begging on the street, even if their sign read "Need money for drugs". Leslie and her three sons were keen on sport, but Sophie did not share their passion. Nevertheless, she volunteered at the Sydney Olympics. When she was asked which sport she would be interested in volunteering at, she said "None of them!" and so she volunteered in the dining room and helped the athletes get enough to eat.

In 1991, Caplan started the Australian Jewish Genealogical Society, to help other people trace their family tree as she had been doing for decades, by interviewing older family members for their memories and recording it all in her notebooks, combing through online and overseas archives for births, deaths and marriage certificates, and visiting cemeteries to photograph gravestones. She also always ensured the reverse of old family photographs listed every person who was in the picture. Caplan served as its president and newsletter editor for 11 years. The society now has branches across Australia. She was subsequently president of the Australian Jewish Historical Society for seven years.



Sophie Caplan, aged 3, with her mother Berta, in Eschweiler, Germany, 1936.



Sophie Caplan in Sydney in the early '90s.

She was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in the Australia Day honours in 2000 for her services to history and genealogy.

She is survived by her three sons, Gideon, Jonathan and Ben and four grandchildren.

**Gideon Caplan**