

Remembering a Friend: Olga Horak (1926–2024)

Jana Vytrhlik, PhD, is Prague-born art historian and curator of Judaica, working for The Great Synagogue in Sydney. Her monograph *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney* was published in 2024.

The sudden death of Olga Horak on 15 August 2024, following a short hospitalization, marked the end of an extraordinary life. A survivor of the Holocaust, Olga lived with strong determination, dedicating herself to family, friendship, hard work, Holocaust commemoration and art. She was 98 years old. Only days earlier, she had celebrated her birthday, had continued sharing her testimony with students at the Sydney Jewish Museum, and discussed plans for an expanded edition of her memoir. Her voice remained sharp and clear until the very end—steadfast in her mission to educate and commemorate.

I first met Olga in the 1990s, during the early years of the Sydney Jewish Museum, where she would become one of its most respected guides and a voice central to its mission. So it was to the Museum that I instinctively returned upon hearing the news of her death, seeking tangible traces of her presence among its galleries to say a final goodbye. On the ground floor, I paused at her sculpture *Son of Men, Keep Not Silent*, created in 1994, on the 50th anniversary of her family's deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Olga's younger daughter, Susie, recalls many of these works vividly. One early sculpture, *Exodus*, was exhibited on long-term loan at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra from 2005 to 2017 as part of the *Eternity* exhibition on trauma. "Perhaps one of her best," Susie notes, "the sculpture remains in the family's possession." Another major work, *The Family* (1969), which once stood at the entrance to Olga's home, has recently been donated to the Canberra Holocaust Museum & Education Centre, where it will be permanently installed in the institution's new building as a powerful entry statement.

Susie reflects on Olga's early artistic days in the 1960s: "Initially, she found herself restrained—learning to paint with oils, mix colour, and complete many still life exercises... After working long days, she found a creative outlet through sculpture and painting... she used to come home after classes feeling not just happy but absolutely enlightened... Her paintbox, easel, and smock were cherished items—nothing was ever discarded."

Outside the Museum, my friendship with Olga unfolded uniquely, shaped by our shared mother tongue and family origins in Slovakia. It was further enriched by the insights of Anne Slade, a close friend who—living just a few blocks away—visited Olga at her home in Rose Bay. Anne fondly recalls her own early days at the Sydney Jewish Museum, where serendipity brought her and Olga together. This rekindled an old connection: Olga had known Anne's parents, Hungarian Holocaust survivors, and other mutual postwar friends.

Anne's visits to Olga's home, which I joined in late 2022, were filled with stories, memories, and conversation. Whether we laughed or cried, we were immersed in Olga's world—a European-styled lounge room that felt suspended in time. Anne's recollections, like my own, speak to the depth of Olga's warmth and the profound impact she had on those around her.

It was during one of these visits that Olga led us to the upper rooms of her house, where I truly discovered *Olga the Artist*. As she explained: "Art brought me back to my youth, to the times when I first discovered the joy of creating. I didn't need anybody's opinion then, and I don't need it now. My paintings and sculptures are not for public eyes. They were my diary when the words failed me. Over and over again, my art brought me the happiness that is hard to find in other aspects of one's life."

Olga was deeply proud of her family, and her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were the apple of her eye. Yet, even later in life, she was not spared further tragedy. Only a few years after burying her husband, John Horak (born Jan Hirshmann, 1919–2008), Olga's eldest daughter, Evelyn Levin, aged 64, succumbed to cancer. The painful memories of her past converged with the profound losses of the present. Yet Olga, ever more determined to be a public voice for human suffering, continued her work with the Sydney Jewish Museum and participated in many official engagements.

Olga's lifelong commitment remains a source of inspiration for her grandchildren. Anthony Levin, a human rights lawyer, actively represents the third generation of Holocaust survivors and advocates publicly against antisemitism. Jonathan Sankey, himself recently subjected to an antisemitic slur, has pledged never to stay silent.

Olga was overjoyed when Jonathan introduced her to Zoe, now his fiancée, and encouraged him to marry her. In turn, Zoe was inspired by Olga's strength and elegance. Now, in a time of rising antisemitism, Olga's spirit remains close, and Jonathan often asks himself, *What would Olga do?* Her courage and unapologetic pride motivate and give him strength, while Olga's artistic talents live on in her eldest grandchild, Kirsty Levin Green. Herself a talented artist and teacher, she shares the commitment to Holocaust education and remembrance expressed through art and creativity.

My friendship with Olga spanned over three decades, but my opportunities to speak with her in depth about art—particularly her own—were, in the end, limited to a few brief visits: first at the Wolper Hospital and later at her suite at Montefiore Home for the Aged in Randwick. Fate did not allow me the chance to walk with Olga through her home, moving from painting to sculpture, listening to her memories and recording every word. The burden of her past—her traumatic adolescence, the terror she endured, the loss of her mother—was always present. Yet I still wish I could have asked more. Who were her fellow students in those night art classes in Sydney? Did she discuss art with them over a glass of drink? Did she feel she belonged among them?

There are no explicit biblical themes in her work, but compassion and a spirituality resonate throughout her art. In her memoir, Olga recalls the devotion of her grandparents in late nineteenth-century Slovakia. The family, deeply religious,

celebrated Shabbat and Jewish festivals in large cross-generational gatherings. After her grandfather's death, it was Omama who presided over the family. "My beloved Omama was close to eighty when the Nazis came for her. She went with her family on the trains to Auschwitz. She never came home." Olga further reflects: "My father loved and valued his Judaism. Every Friday night after he returned from *shul*, he would bless [my sister] Judith and myself. I can still hear him recite *b'racha*..." In her new life in Australia, Olga's faith was no longer so much religious but became more traditional and directed toward her belief in humanity and the goodness in people.

Surprisingly to some, I don't own any artwork by Olga. By the time her art estate was auctioned ([Theodore Bruce Auctions – The Horak House](#)), I knew it had to be either all or nothing. "All" was impossible—the sheer number of canvases and objects would have required a dry, secure warehouse-sized space. "Nothing" was a difficult decision, made out of a fear of being haunted by Olga's Holocaust memories, which were locked in her art—willingly or not. There were too many parallels with my own past. My mother, born in Slovakia in 1930, was deported to Auschwitz with her parents in April 1944. She was the only one to return.

But there is one priceless artwork I received from Olga, which I treasure above all else. During one of my final visits to her home, I noticed a small picture—a watercolour of a beautiful old house, painted in a style that felt strangely familiar. A closer look at the signature confirmed it: the painting was by my great-uncle, Eugen Barkany (1885—1967), completed in Bratislava in 1959. He had survived in hiding and supported my mother when she returned as a fifteen-year old orphan.

A talented architect and artist, Barkany dedicated his life to documenting the disappearing Jewish culture of Slovakia. He co-founded the first Slovak Jewish Museum in Prešov in 1928. The watercolour had found its way to Olga in Sydney during her early years, and she had treasured it ever since—because it depicted a house in Bratislava's Jewish quarter that she had known well.

After hearing my family's story and the Barkany connection, Olga most generously gave me the painting. I treasure it with both sadness and gratitude, and I continue to marvel at how the destinies of two families could, by chance, cross paths so far from their original home.

Olga Horak never stopped bearing witness. She remained acutely aware of the dangers of history repeating itself. Through her memoir *From Auschwitz to Australia* and her decades of work as a guide at the Sydney Jewish Museum, she spoke to thousands of students. "I want young people to talk to each other, to understand one another," she once said. "Hatred caused the tragedy I lived through. It must never happen again. We must learn to respect one another. That's why I'm still active," said Olga well in her 90s.

Olga Horak lived fully, with resilience and generosity. The horrors of the Holocaust shaped her, but they did not silence her. Her words and her art urge us to remember, and to be her voice. The stage where Olga once shared her story may now be quiet, but

her wisdom – her message of humanity and hope—will continue to be heard, and the dear friend she was to many will always be remembered.



1. *Olga Horak in ocelot fur, aged 29, and her husband at their Naturalization Ceremony in 1955. Family archive.*



2. *Olga Horak in her 30s in Hibodress Showroom, (family business), 1960s. Family archive.*



3. Olga Horak with her portrait by Vanna (1982) and watercolour of Jewish House in Bratislava by Barkany (1959), Photo Robert Brestan, 2023.



4. Olga Horak in interactive testimony with Jana Vytrhlik, Sydney Jewish Museum, January 2024.