

## **KAREN BIJKERSMA about her great-uncle and great-aunt, ROMAN and ANNA IVAN MAKAR, BORYSLAW**

**Why do you think that they chose to save all of those Jews during the war despite the personal risks involved?**

My great-uncle Roman Makar agreed to hide Dr Harmelin and his family when the Boryslaw Labor Camp was about to be liquidated, about four months before liberation.

Dr Harmelin had asked Roman's father, my great-grandfather Ivan Makar, if Ivan could hide him and his family. Ivan said he couldn't do it. I don't know why, but he arranged that his son Roman and wife Anna would hide the family under the floor of their house.

The Harmelins were a family of five people; my family wasn't expecting an additional eight or nine people! But they didn't turn anyone away and so they ended up hiding a group of thirteen or fourteen. Maybe they thought they might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, in other words, you will be shot for saving one person so why not save as many as you can.

I think the Makars agreed to this out of friendship. Dr Harmelin was the family doctor and a very close friend of the family. The Harmelins often stayed with the Makars at their property in Schidnytsya, where they went fishing and hunting and played cards together. So when Dr Harmelin asked the Makars to harbour him and his family, the Makars agreed out of friendship. They wanted to save their friends.

I also think they did it because it was the right thing to do. The Makars were an upright, educated, religious family, who were well respected in the town. They were very proper people; people who did the right thing.

Before the war, Ivan Makar had owned an oil or petroleum company, and he and his sons Roman and Bohdan continued to work as engineers under the Germans. Ivan was Mayor of Boryslaw during the last year of the war.

As fine upstanding citizens and essential oil company engineers, the Makars were above suspicion. This gave them a degree of protection I suppose. Of course they would be punished just the same if they were caught.

**What do you personally think about what they did?**

I remember finding out only about five years ago. This was a big family secret that was never discussed and I only really found out by accident. How I found out, and how I found some of the survivors, is a whole other story. What did I think when I found out what the Makars did? I was amazed and proud and very emotional, but my main response was an overwhelming sense of relief.

I had been researching the family tree and history, which lead me to research events in the town, especially during World War Two, which is when my grandparents were forced to leave. It wasn't long before I discovered that a third of the town was Jewish and the Holocaust had extended to Boryslaw. I was shocked to discover this. My grandparents never mentioned the Holocaust; they had only talked about their own struggles during the war, which were significant, but even then they never went into detail.

I read about the role of Ukrainians during the war, in pogroms and so on, and the stories were impossible to ignore. I started to wonder what my own family's role was...had they been

complicit? Did they just stand by and do nothing?...I was really starting to worry...why had they avoided this subject, did it mean they had something to hide?

The only reassurance that I had was that my grandfather, Myroslav Petrykewycz, had helped harbour Jews in the town hall. I'd known this since I was small. He never gave any details and I've never been able to find out more, but I was comforted to know that at least one side of the family had done the right thing.

It wasn't until I went to Boryslaw and met Roman and Anna's daughter Wolodymyra and her family that I learnt that the Makers had done a good thing: they had hidden a group of Jewish people under the floor of their house. Wolodymyra remembered this from childhood. She had been a little girl in the house when the group went into hiding.

I was enormously relieved by this news. Not only had my grandmother's family not done anything bad, they had done much better than that, they had done something good. We could hold up our heads as a family and as Ukrainians. I was extremely grateful that this was my legacy, and that they did not leave their family a legacy of shame.

After a massive sense of relief, my next response was a sense of responsibility. I believe this is an actual, known phenomenon, people feeling responsible for people whose lives they have saved. As a descendant, I very much felt that sense of responsibility. I couldn't hear this story, think "Oh, that's nice", and carry on as usual. I wanted to know who the people were. I needed to know if they survived. I had regretted not asking my grandfather more about the Jews in the town hall. I wasn't going to make the same mistake a second time.

While Wolodymyra remembered "the people under the floor", she had never known their real names. Everyone had been given code names, the names of her aunties and uncles, so she wouldn't accidentally mention any Jewish names. All she knew was that someone came back after the war to say thank you, so we knew at least one person had survived, and that she enjoyed 'playing' with a boy from under the floor. Seventy years had passed but a young boy could still be alive...

Back in Australia, I was half a world away, with no Ukrainian language skills, no Polish or Hebrew. But to cut a long story short, I eventually found Rita Harmelin living in Sydney, Australia. She was Dr Harmelin's daughter-in-law and had been in hiding at the Makar house with her fiance Rolek/Raoul Harmelin.

Rita is in her late eighties now: she was nineteen years old at the time. But she remembered everything, including the names of all the people in the group and she generously told me everything that she could...including the name of the little boy.

It was actually this group, the Boryslaw Drohobycz group on Facebook that helped me locate the little boy Wolodymyra remembered, Jurek Rotenberg. He was the youngest member of the group, just thirteen or fourteen years old at the time.

Why did I want so much to meet the survivors and hear their stories? It's a very good question.

Firstly, I think it's important to know. I think it's generally accepted that people bear witness. That the horrors be acknowledged and never repeated.

And we also need to share that even in the darkest of times humanity can prevail. That ordinary people do extraordinary things because saving a fellow human is the right thing to do. And I hope that anyone faced with a similar choice at any place or time, heaven forbid, can take courage from stories they have heard about the Righteous.

Most of all, I wanted to find and meet the survivors because I found myself deeply caring. My relief and gratitude for what my family did carried with it a sense of responsibility. A special

duty of care. I cared very much whether or not those people survived. I wanted to know what they went through, not out of morbid curiosity, but just because I care. I will care about them for the rest of their lives and for mine. And my children know how important their stories are and how much these special friendships mean to our families.

And so it comes back to friendship. I can understand the actions of the Makars; they wanted to save their friends. Whichever way events might have turned out, I think they made the right choice. What I can't comprehend—and what I am so relieved I do not have to live with as a legacy—is how anyone could have chosen otherwise.

### **Why was this family secret?**

It was a big family secret because of the risk of retaliation from the Ukrainian community, which was a real and serious threat. Rita described Roman shunning her when he saw her in the street after the war, but she understood that this was for safety. Even today, a neo-fascist group will occasionally raise its ugly head.

Also, with the rapid changes in occupying governments they had just experienced, you never knew who might march in next! My paternal great-grandfather was sent to Siberia after WWI for having sided against the Russians. My paternal grandfather, who was a nationalist was wanted by the Polish government, the Soviets and the Germans. He was arrested several times, imprisoned and tortured, and finally had to flee to avoid arrest by the Nazis in the last days of the war.

You had to cooperate with the ruler of the day, but as soon as those rulers changes hands, as they so often did, you were punished severely for collusion. Even in Australia my grandmother was half-prepared for war until the end of her life. She hoarded cat food and kept little emergency kits in every room of the house.

What would you and I have done in the same situation? I like to think I would have done the right thing, and my wholehearted gut reaction that the Makars did the right thing tells me that hopefully I would too. I say hopefully because we can never really know for sure. But the situation was so perilous anyway, you could be falsely denounced at any time, you could be bombed, you could die of typhoid...with so many constant dangers you might as well take the risk, although that is easy for me to say from the safety of my armchair.

I am also aware that everyone who survived experienced many near misses and only survived because they were harboured, fed or rescued by a number of people. Every survivor tells a long and very eventful story. By the time they came to the Makars, everyone had already been through so much, and many people had already risked their lives to help them. I would not want to be the one to break that chain.