

Take a trip down memoir lane

By Ruth Ostrow

MY aunty Myra sat down one day, aged 70, and started to write her memoirs. We all thought that was grand. "What do you think?" she asked me, her "famous writer niece". "Oh, wonderful, aunty. Wonderful," I said to a woman who apart from the odd witty poem written for birthdays, and letters to the editor, hadn't penned much else. I always try to be encouraging.

"I'm half finished, Ruth. What do you think of that?" she said a few months later. Myself, who has been working on The Great Australian Novel for the past 20 years in 20 different guises, said in the same metred voice: "Wonderful, aunty. Wonderful."

"I'm finished now," she said one day. "It's being published by the Makor Jewish Community Library and is being launched by Melbourne University's dean of arts, Professor Stuart Macintyre, and I'll be speaking at the Melbourne Writers Festival."

"What?" I almost bellowed into the phone.

Six months after publication, this thin little book, *Cossacks, Cockneys & Colonials* by Myra Fisher -- a simple story of leaving London and coming to Australia -- is selling like hotcakes. It was well reviewed, including in *The Age* newspaper, and has since been sent to London where orders have started coming in from bookshops.

I've been heartened by my aunt's success. But I'm even more heartened by the fact that the book came about through the efforts of the Makor Jewish Community Library, a Melbourne-based organisation that, under the facilitation of a woman named Julie Meadows, encourages and teaches older people to pen their life stories of war, immigration, the Holocaust; stories it then sends to Canberra and Washington for the Jewish archives.

Having written their precious stories, some people, like my aunt, go on to vanity-publish via Makor. But for those who don't, the experience of writing their lives is equally fulfilling -- not only helping many who were refugees and survivors make meaning out of their lives but also providing them with a nicely bound legacy to leave their children and grandchildren.

These stories are also a gift to the community at large. For how much richer, wiser and more compassionate would we all be as Australians if we could encourage such works from some of our most recent refugees? Or indeed from any of the fascinating characters who make up this nation?

Coincidentally, the Australian queen of life writing Patti Miller turned up on my doorstep a few weeks ago. In Byron Bay for the writers festival and on her way to Paris, she was talking about her best-selling book *Writing Your Life* (Allen & Unwin) and offering a two-day workshop. In view of my aunt's success and the efforts of Makor, I decided to take her popular class.

Miller agrees there are many reasons ordinary people decide to tell their story: to heal wounds of the past, to help make sense of the present, to unlock feelings. But she says whatever the reason, whenever people sit down and begin to find

their voice, they realise they have so much to say and so much rich experience and beauty to offer.

The first thing her class taught me was that life writing doesn't have to mean spanning 70 years of existence. You can be any age, and you can hone in on something that is meaningful for you to document, just as you would in life drawing. For instance, Miller had me in tears reading an extract from one of her many books, *Whatever the Gods Do*, which records the death of her girlfriend and the impact this has on the woman's young son, Theo.

I shared the story of a close friend who, on learning that she was dying, started writing her life story as a gift to her daughter. With only a short time left, the writing focused on anything that would be relevant to her child: stories, anecdotes, life lessons. And she did end up staying alive longer than her prognosis, I would imagine in part due to her passion to say so much.

The most important feature of Miller's teaching is helping people unlock memory, because often people don't think they have anything to say.

There are many skilful techniques in her book but one she used on us in class was very potent. She took us back to "the old house". We all have one. In our minds we drew the old floor plan and walked the narrow corridors of our childhood homes, which unleashed a torrent of writing about objects and people we watched come into view. It's an emotional experience, so keep tissues close.

Miller says the choice to publish is something to decide later; she advises people to write from their creative brain first and let the critical editor come in later. Interesting to note that non-celebrity autobiography is one of the hottest areas of book sales at the moment. As my aunt at 70 proved, you are never too old to start nor can you ever tell what simple stories will deeply touch the hearts of others.

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