

Obituaries

Kitty Fischer

**Human rights campaigner
1927 - 2001**

The selflessness of a man whose concentration camp uniform bore a pink triangle was repaid many years later when Kitty Fischer joined the fight for gay and lesbian rights.

She took up the cause after witnessing first hand the devastating toll that HIV-AIDS was having on the gay community.

Fischer, who has died in Sydney at the age of 73, was born in the town of Puchov, Slovakia.

Early in World War II she and her younger sister, Eva, were sent into hiding in a convent. However, they were found and sent to Auschwitz.

There she met a young academic portrait-painter who would save the lives of her and her sister.

The man wore a symbol on his prison uniform different from that on Fischer's - a pink triangle rather than a Magen David. Fischer asked him what it meant, and he replied "Ich bin schwul" ("I am gay"). She in-

quired if that was a religion, and he laughed and explained that he was homosexual. He and his partner had been interned in Auschwitz.

The man befriended Fischer and managed to smuggle to her a hot potato every day. This she shared with Eva, and it was through this extra nutrition and sheer determination that they survived the horrors of the camp.

After liberation Fischer studied sociology. She emigrated to Australia in 1948. In 1954 she met Kurt Fischer, and in 1956 her son, Paul, was born.

Fischer bought a children's clothing shop in Kogarah, known as Robyn Ann, and ran it successfully by herself until 1964.

In 1965 she embarked on a new project. She migrated to New Guinea and stayed there until 1972, working as a business advisory officer, developing the native textile industry in the country.

The New Guinea Government sponsored Fischer for a course

in agronomy in Israel, and she was there at the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, staying until 1975.

News of the destruction of Darwin by Cyclone Tracy, in December 1974, prompted her return to Australia, and she went to work for the Darwin Reconstruction Commission until it was disbanded.

In 1976 Fischer began a new project - a novelty shop in Mount Isa. She worked happily in the shop for seven years, stocking it with quirky items (some of a dubiously legal nature at the time) and was often raided by the police as a result. The raids amused her and she would always threaten to sue the police.

On her return to Sydney, she moved into the Orient Hotel in Kings Cross. It was here that she was confronted by the effects of HIV-AIDS in the gay community.

Fischer had not forgotten the man who had saved her life so many years ago. She joined Ankali, an organisation dedi-

cated to the emotional and psychological support of people living with HIV-AIDS.

She publicised her personal story in order to promote human rights.

Fischer fought for gay and lesbian rights in the wider community, and in the Jewish community, involving herself in many of the gay and lesbian Jewish groups that sprang up in the late '90s.

She never tired of fighting for reconciliation between the gay and lesbian community and the Jewish community.

The culmination of her struggle was the establishment of the Gay Holocaust Memorial which stands in Greens Park, Darlinghurst, a symbol to the many gay and lesbian people who have died because of prejudice.

Justice Marcus Einfeld, speaking at the dedication of the memorial earlier this year, at which Fischer was present, remarked on its proximity to the Sydney Jewish Museum, and made the point that neither

memorial diminished the other; rather they both enforced the idea of eternal vigilance against prejudice and bigotry in the community. She was delighted.

Three years ago she lapsed into a sudden, mysterious coma, and since then had battled to regain her health.

She eventually moved to the Charingfield Catholic Home, Waverley, where she was treated with great respect by the staff and residents, many of whom were retired priests and nuns. Fischer still worked for reconciliation, this time between Jews and Christians in the home where she was living.

She became involved in Shoah (Holocaust) Project video testimony. She was also the subject of a sociology doctorate into migrant women.

She was also very involved in the B'nai Brith Albert Einstein Unit for many years, working against discrimination.

She is survived by her son, Paul, her nieces, Helen and Naomi, and her nephew, Sam. Joseph Toltz