

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6399

Bassat, Nina

(1939 -)

Born 8 April, 1939, Lwów Poland

Occupation Campaigner, Chairperson, Community activist, Community advocate, Community Leader, Jewish community leader, Lawyer, President, Solicitor, Teacher

Summary

Nina Bassat is a Holocaust survivor and former lawyer who was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2004 Australia Day Honours List 'for service to the community as an executive member of a range of peak Jewish organisations and through the promotion of greater community understanding'. The first woman to be president of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, she also served as president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry – the first Holocaust survivor and first woman lawyer to attain that position.

Details

Janina 'Nina' Bassat (née Katz) was born on 8 April 1939 to Izydor and Hadassa Katz (née Wargo?) in Lwów, Poland. Soon afterwards, the country was invaded – first by Germany and then by the Soviet Union – and World War II was declared. On 25 July 1941, Bassat's father, who had graduated from the University of Lwów law school but, unable to practise law as a Jew, was instead employed at the Lwów brewery while pursuing a doctorate, was taken away and killed. Bassat and her mother would eventually spend more than a year in Lwów's ghettos – Bassat once narrowly avoiding being taken to the Bełżec gas chambers – before escaping and going into hiding.

After the War, the surviving members of Bassat's family – her mother, maternal uncle, and maternal aunt and cousin who had been interned at Auschwitz-Birkenau and then at Bergen-Belsen – and she wound up in a displaced persons camp in Bad Wörishofen, Germany. Concerned that her now eight-year-old daughter could neither read nor write, Bassat's mother arranged for her to have a governess. It proved an unhappy experience for Bassat and led to her attending the town's local convent school instead – its only Jewish pupil.

Following the death of Bassat's aunt; rejection of their applications to go to what was then Palestine; and fuelled by a desire to get as far away from Europe as possible, the stateless family of four arrived in Australia in February 1949. At first, Bassat attended Hutton Street Primary School (now Thornbury Primary School), later transferring to Wales Street Primary School when her uncle bought a house for the family in Darebin Road, Northcote. After a stint at Fairfield Central, she entered University High School where she completed Years 9 to 12. While a student, she worked in the milk-bar which her mother and step-father (Abraham Teicher, whom her mother had married in 1953) owned in Brighton.

At 16, she met her future husband, Robert 'Bob' Bassat, who had recently finished school. Born in Egypt, Bob had lived in Belgian Congo, attended boarding school in South Africa and was about to begin studying engineering at the University of Melbourne. The couple married at the Toorak Shule on 23 February 1960, Bob having graduated the previous year. They would have three children: Sally, Andrew and Paul.

Having obtained a Commonwealth scholarship, Bassat embarked upon a Bachelor of Laws degree at the University of Melbourne in 1957. In 1962, following the birth of Sally, Bassat deferred her law degree which she had been undertaking part-time and completed the arts degree she had also commenced. In 1965, pregnant with Andrew, she took up the postgraduate study which was then required, along with articles of clerkship, to practise law. In between having her children, Bassat taught English as a Second Language. She also lectured in Australian literature at the Council of Adult Education.

Being a woman who was also married and had children, Bassat struggled to find someone willing to offer her articles. Local Brighton firm William Kosky and Associates finally took her on in September 1974. Admitted to practice as a Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Victoria on 3 May 1976, she remained with the firm for a further 18 months before setting up her own practice in 1980; she specialised in litigation, property, succession and family law. (For approximately 15 years,

she was heavily involved with matters concerning gett (Jewish divorce)). She combined the running of her practice with significant involvement as an executive member of a number of peak Jewish organisations, and was active at state, federal and international levels.

Bassat was president – the first woman elected to that position – of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) (1996-1998; 2011-2014). Helping those affected by the 1997 Maccabiah bridge collapse was a preoccupation during her first term as JCCV president and during her term as president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) (1998-2001). In 2011-12, the issue of child sexual abuse galvanised Bassat and her colleagues to convene a child protection reference group to develop and implement a strategy for the community. Bassat was co-author of a submission to the Victorian government and gave evidence at the parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations in 2013. It was around this time that she also chaired Maccabi Australia's Committee of Review into Sexual Abuse Allegations.

With her appointment as president of the ECAJ, Bassat became the first Holocaust survivor, first woman lawyer and second woman (after Diane Shteinman) to attain that position. During her term, she was occupied with a range of matters, including the inappropriate use of Holocaust imagery, issues relating to Nazi war criminals and the promotion of Aboriginal reconciliation. An initiative during her presidency was the setting up of, with the assistance of the Pratt Foundation, an Australia-wide telephone hotline which enabled thousands of survivors across the country to make claims – particularly of slave labour – for restitution.

Beginning in 2000, Bassat served as a board member and honorary secretary to the New York-based Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. She has been a board and planning committee member to the Claims Conference (also based in New York), that is, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany Inc, the mission of which 'has been to provide a measure of justice for Jewish Holocaust victims, and to provide them with the best possible care'. From 1998-2001, while serving on the Claims Conference board, she was also Australian Jewry's representative to the executive of the World Jewish Congress Inc.

Other organisations to which Bassat has contributed her time and expertise over many years include Jewish Care Victoria, the International Council of Jewish Women and the National Council of Jewish Women of Australia Victoria, of which she was vice-president between 1985 and 1996. For over a decade from 1997 she was a trustee of the National Council of Jewish Women of Australia Foundation. Since 2008 she has been a trustee (now director) of the Jewish Holocaust Centre Foundation. Bassat has won praise for the part she has also played in supporting interfaith projects. She was recently active in Kynnections, a program 'bringing young people from diverse religious, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds to participate in project based activities to create social cohesion and harmony in Victoria'. She is a former deputy chair of the Parliament of the World's Religions' Melbourne board of management.

Bassat's outstanding communal service has been recognised through a number of awards. In 2000, the National Council of Jewish Women of Australia honoured Bassat with an achievement award. The following year, she was made an honorary Maccabian, 'in recognition of outstanding contribution in assisting the victims of the bridge tragedy at the 15th Maccabiah – July 1997'. In 2003, Bassat was an early inductee onto the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. She was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia 'for service to the community as an executive member of a range of peak Jewish organisations and through the promotion of greater community understanding' in the 2004 Australia Day Honours List. In 2007, she was named Woman of the Year by the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO) Victoria, and in 2009 she received the General Sir John Monash Award for outstanding service to the Victorian Jewish community.

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Nina Bassat interviewed by Kim Rubenstein](#)

Author Details

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