

“Courage of ordinary heroes on show to stop genocide”

by Larry Schwartz

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WHEN Leora Kahn first visited Rwanda six years ago, she looked for "ordinary heroes" who risked their lives to save others during the 1994 genocide.

"I decided to look at the opposite side of why people do bad and evil things and look at why people do the good stuff, and what difference that makes," Kahn said, explaining the impetus behind an exhibition of photographs and stories opening next week at Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Centre.

The New York-based photo editor, filmmaker and educator is in Australia to curate *The Rescuers*, celebrating acts of courage by people who resisted prejudice and refused to take part in violence in the Holocaust and genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia and Cambodia, where it was shown late last year.

Kahn said the touring exhibition was a "genocide prevention tool" aimed at encouraging the moral courage to stand up and speak out against injustice.

"The project started out as a way to get Hutus and Tutsis to talk to each other and not look at everybody as a perpetrator," she said. "There are role models to be used if violence starts again, so that they might look back and say, 'Oh, wow, my friend on the street didn't participate in the killing. I can do that. I can stand up.' "

Kahn founded an organisation for photojournalists in 2006 called Proof: Media for Social Justice.

She cites Enoch Rwanburundi, a Hutu who cared for injured Tutsi neighbours during the genocide in which more than 800,000 people were killed by Hutu extremists.

He built a separate dwelling when his house proved too small to accommodate the fugitives.

"Many times, the local authorities forced me to appear before the burgomaster (magistrate) and every time it happened, my family would lose all hope of seeing me again," he says in a statement on one of 16 panels on display. "But at the end of the day, I would return."

A Christian, he would "mingle with both sides".

"My neighbours rushed to advise me to evict the refugees from my home as soon as possible but I told them, 'I know that the only relationship between them and me is that we pray in the same congregation, but I cannot chase God's people from my home'."

Kahn will take part in lectures and discussions involving academics, mental-health practitioners and others. The Holocaust Centre will host talks between members of communities represented and others, including the Armenian and Sudanese communities.

She believes we are sometimes slow to acknowledge rescuers and there is as much resistance to honouring the "good Hutu" as "the good German" after World War II.

"Nobody wanted to hear it," Kahn said. "It breaks the myth of the willing executioners, right? It breaks that myth that everybody was willing and participated. And it's not true.

"The narrative is not one that is often talked about or celebrated."

Kahn has been a photography editor for publications including The New York Times Magazine, People, Time, Rolling Stone and The New Yorker.

She has produced films including *Rene and I*, an award-winning documentary about a woman who as a child was subjected to experiments by Nazi doctor Josef Mengele.

She co-wrote *When They Came to Take My Father: Voices of the Holocaust* and edited *Darfur: 20 Years of War and Genocide in Sudan*. She has produced a photo-documentary on conflict resolution for teenagers in Rwanda, the Balkans, and Haiti, and a photojournalism book on child soldiers in Sudan.

She did research on rescuers and their behaviour as a fellow at the Genocide Studies Centre at Yale University.

"Some people do it because of their family background," she said. "They have a history of helping." One woman saved Jews during the Holocaust, even though she was anti-Semitic, "because it was morally her duty as a Catholic".

Kahn grew up in Washington, where her father was president of a local synagogue. She founded a non-profit organisation to help needy Holocaust survivors. Her great-grandparents had migrated from Lithuania and Latvia and her paternal grandmother was from Jerusalem.

The Rescuers is at the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Elsternwick from Wednesday until August 22