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Collages commemorate Shoah survivors' stories

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At tables in the Jewish Holocaust Centre (JHC), a roomful of centre volunteers sit with children and grandchildren, poring over photographs and documents tracing family members' journeys through the Shoah.

The memorabilia – from household cupboards, shoeboxes and family albums – will be turned into printed collages for a permanent exhibition at the JHC, titled *Memory Reconstruction*.

JHC curator Jayne Josem said families of some 80 JHC volunteers are taking part in the Human Element Project, the brainchild of American Dr Lori Shocket. The Californian physician launched the original project at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles on Yom Hashoah this year.

Shocket told *The AJN*: "I went to medical school as an adult and graduated in my late 50s. I have a passion for science and I love the periodic table, its design and complexity, the many stories it tells."

She modelled the 129 collages she produced from the memorabilia of survivors in California and Nevada in the style of a periodic table substituting "the human element for the chemical elements", she explained. "But in all the elements of the periodic table – like magnesium, oxygen, nitrogen, helium – there's one that's missing, and that's the human element, the emotions of pain, of happiness."

Like a periodic table, each family's panel in the exhibit will have an alphanumeric value representing the initials of the survivor and their age at the time of creating the work, mirroring the table's nomenclature.

Shocket was inspired to preserve Holocaust testimonies after hearing the stories of her father Siegfried Knop, a survivor and professional artist. As father and daughter painted together, he would relate his Shoah memories.

An artistic representation of a periodic table she exhibited at the University of Southern California later became the model for the Human Element Project.



Vivianne Spiegel sorts through memorabilia with her son Michael, aided by Anati Livnat.
 Photos: Peter Haskin



A collage compiled by Viv Parry in honour of her mother Doris Nissen.

After the Los Angeles exhibition drew acclaim, she and her husband Neil, also a physician, went further afield. Melbourne, with its storied survivor community, is her first foreign destination, with Canada and the United Kingdom also on the list.

Shocket was impressed at how meticulously the families of the JHC volunteers designed their collages, showcasing intensely personal narratives of destruction and survival, complete with a 100-word reflection.

When *The AJN* visited the JHC, Belgian-born Floris Kalman sat with her daughter Naomi and granddaughters Tali and Dini, sifting photos and identity papers of her late husband Arie from Piotrkow in Poland. They studied a false identity card stating he was 13, not 11, which let him work in a glass factory, instead

of being sent to a camp. The couple met in Australia after the war.

At another table sat Vivianne Spiegel and her son Michael, compiling their photos and papers, with the help of JHC education officer Anati Livnat, who organised the Melbourne project. Spiegel, a child survivor in France, was orphaned in the Shoah and hidden in the countryside. She has a picture of the farm that sheltered her, while she hoped in vain to be reunited with her dead parents, brother and sister. In 1948, she was sent to Australia and lived at Jewish Welfare's Frances Barkman Homes in Melbourne.

"Doing this gives me a sense of identity," she told *The AJN*, as she positioned her family's photos and a passport on the template. "I don't feel as if I just fell out of the sky."