

# Couple who hid Jewish baby honored by Yad Vashem in New Zealand

SYDNEY (JTA) – A Dutch couple who hid a Jewish baby during the Holocaust posthumously received Yad Vashem’s Righteous Among the Nations honor in New Zealand.

At an emotional ceremony Wednesday at Parliament House in Wellington, the children of Johanna and Godefridus (Frits) Hakkens accepted the official certificate and the medal from Israel’s ambassador, Shemi Tzur.

The Hakkens — the first Kiwi citizens to receive the honor — hid 2-year-old Elli Mantegari (nee Szanowski) in their Amsterdam house in 1942 for two years after her father was killed in Mathausen and her mother fled to Switzerland.

Tzur told the more than dignitaries, lawmakers, ambassadors and Jewish leaders that the Hakkens were worthy of recognition.

“They will be part of us and their memory will last forever in our capital city Jerusalem,” he said.

Elli Mantegari, who could not make the trip from Brazil, wrote a speech honoring their “bravery, altruism and kindness.”

“Fritz and Jo saved my life,” she wrote. Of their descendants, she wrote, “We are not linked through blood, but we are linked by the love and memory of this brave couple.”

After years of fruitless searching for Elli, a great-grandchild of the Hakkens saw a movie in New Zealand in 2010 about the Kindertransport and urged his grandmother Gloria — the daughter-in-law of Johanna and Frits — to try one last time.

Through Yad Vashem, the Internet and Skype she finally tracked down Elli in Sao Paulo and, months later in an emotional reunion, they wept at the gravesite of Jo and Frits near Wellington.

Gloria Hakkens said in her speech, “It may seem the end of a long journey, but for my children and grandchildren I see it as a new beginning as they take hold of the legacy, the challenge that their grandparents and great-grandparents have given them.”

Four others have received the award in New Zealand, though the Hakkens are the first citizens of New Zealand to be so honored.