

Elizabeth Maas

The story of Dutch-born Elizabeth Maas, an early aviatrix who died in Nelson in November 1993, is hard to pin down.

Mrs Maas was awarded the honour of Righteous Gentile at a special Holocaust ceremony in Wellington in 1985 for hiding Jewish people through the war.

Her certificate of honour issued by the Commission of Homage – set up by Yad Vashem, the Authority for the Commemoration of the martyrs and Heroes to determine the Righteous Gentiles – was also based on the testimony of witnesses.

It paid homage to a woman who “by endangering her own life rescued persecuted Jews from the hands of the Nazi oppressor during the Holocaust of Europe”.

Like Mrs Sipos, she was granted the Medal of the Righteous among the Nations of the World and had a tree planted in her name in the Avenue of the Righteous on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem.

Holocaust commemorative reports describe briefly how she hid one Jewish family from the bombardment of Rotterdam.

The husband, a tailor, had later given himself up fearing his presence would endanger them all. Two children had been moved to another safe house.

In Buchenwald the Germans had put the father to work as a tailor, making uniforms.

“He was useful to them so they allowed him to live,” said Mrs Maas. “He survived, but weighed only 35kg at the end of the war.”

While the bombs of May 1940 ravaged the city and evacuees jostled among the ruins to escape, Mrs Maas opened her house to “many other Jews sought by the Germans.

An old friend, interviewed by The Dominion, described a crowded, busy house always open to evacuees, whether Jewish or Gentile.

At one stage rationing had stopped and the whole house had to survive “on a packet of matches” for a month.

The families had survived by going in to the country and swapping personal property for food with the peasants.

She had temporarily moved to The Hague, then to her parents’ house near Arnhem where she had continued to take in people hiding from the Nazis.

To illustrate the dangers, Mrs Maas recalled firing a cleaning woman for stealing meagre food supplies. The woman had gone to the Gestapo and reported her for harbouring Jews.

“That evening there was shooting and banging on the doors,” Mrs Maas said at the citation ceremony. “It was a very frantic moment.”

The woman she was harbouring at the time, Clara, had a designated place to hide in the cellar, but instead panicked and ran outside and hid in the snow.

Mrs Maas and her family ran into her room, stripped it and dumped everything in the attic.

“They looked everywhere and they never found anything,” Mrs Maas said. Clara had come back to the house and peeked in only a foot away from the back of a soldier.

The Germans never found any of the people Mrs Maas hid.

Asked about her courage years later, she said: “I saw cattle trucks and Jews being rounded up in the cities to be taken away. It was horrible – a dreadful time.”

Interviewed at length before her death for the National Library’s oral history archives, she dismissed her war efforts in a couple of sentences.

“I had Jewish people staying with us right through the war and we were hiding them,” she said matter of factly.

“I’m not going to say a lot about those years because I could write a book about them.”

The war was a time of intense personal tragedy. Mrs Maas’s husband, an aircraft designer, had, with three others, attempted to sail to England believing he could help in the war effort.

The men had built a remarkable small boat designed to look like a fowl house to fool local eyes. They set sail but were never seen again.

After the war, fearing Russian tyranny would supersede German, Mrs Maas sailed for New Zealand in a small boat with her son and a new husband.

The boat became disabled in a typhoon near Bermuda, leaving the group to be rescued by a Norwegian trawler which towed them to New York from where they flew to New Zealand.