

Hermina van der Schaaf

The passengers of the Hungarian train travelling from Debrecen to Budapest in 1944 were terrified when they were abruptly confronted by a band of aggressive German soldiers.

Among the crowded mass of families fleeing the eastern border town after the Nazi occupation was a homely looking woman named Eleonora Sipos protectively looking after a young pregnant Hungarian and her two daughters.



New Zealander Hermina van der Schaaf was awarded with one of Israel's most prestigious titles – Righteous among the Nations – at a gala dinner hosted by the Embassy of Israel and the New Zealand Zionist Federation to celebrate Israel's 60th Anniversary on June 22, 2008.

Along with her late husband, Mrs van der Schaaf was honoured for the bravery shown in hiding Jewish people in Holland during World War II.

“We had a big house, and we could have people staying with us, so there were Jewish people as well as other people,” she said.

For two months in 1943, she and her husband hid three Jewish people in their home. By doing so the van der Schaaf's risked their lives, as the Nazis threatened any Dutch people found hiding Jews with concentration camps.

She still keeps in touch with some of those Jews they helped. “We've had contact with the people who stayed in Holland.” The others have gone to Argentina, but everyone has survived.

As to the question of what she felt during the presentation, Ms van der Shaaf keeps modest. “We never talked about it – it was just by accident that someone found out, but I'm quite happy.”

The presentation of the award by Ambassador Yauval Rotem, MP Hon Luamanuvao Winnie Laban and Robert Narev, a Holocaust survivor, in front of the van der Schaaf's five children was an emotional event.

"I was extremely privileged and honoured to attend the presentation," said Winnie.

"Hermina's bravery and that of her late husband in hiding three Jews during World War Two is truly admirable and inspiring. She is an amazing woman, representing the true human spirit of caring for one another, even when at great risk to yourself and your family."

Mrs Laban added: "It is the role of the international community and citizens to support human beings, who like the Jewish community, experience horrendous persecution. Hermina and her family showed clear action. Inaction can also be abuse."

Mrs van der Schaaf, who is 90 years old, has been living in Christchurch since 1963.