

A LIFE OF TIME AND CHANCE

Ralph Podolski

A close-up portrait of an elderly man with short, grey hair and a full, grey beard. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is wearing a black zip-up jacket with white stripes on the shoulders. The background is dark and out of focus, showing a blurred figure of another person in a light-colored shirt.



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THIS IS MY STORY

My name is Ralph Podolski. I am an artist and painter and live on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Australia.

The year is 2023. I am 96 years old. This is my story.

I was born Rafal Podolski in the eastern Polish city of Lublin on 22 November 1927. My early life was a time of privilege, wealth and education which all changed with the German invasion of Poland on 1 Sept 1939, and the horror of the Second World War.

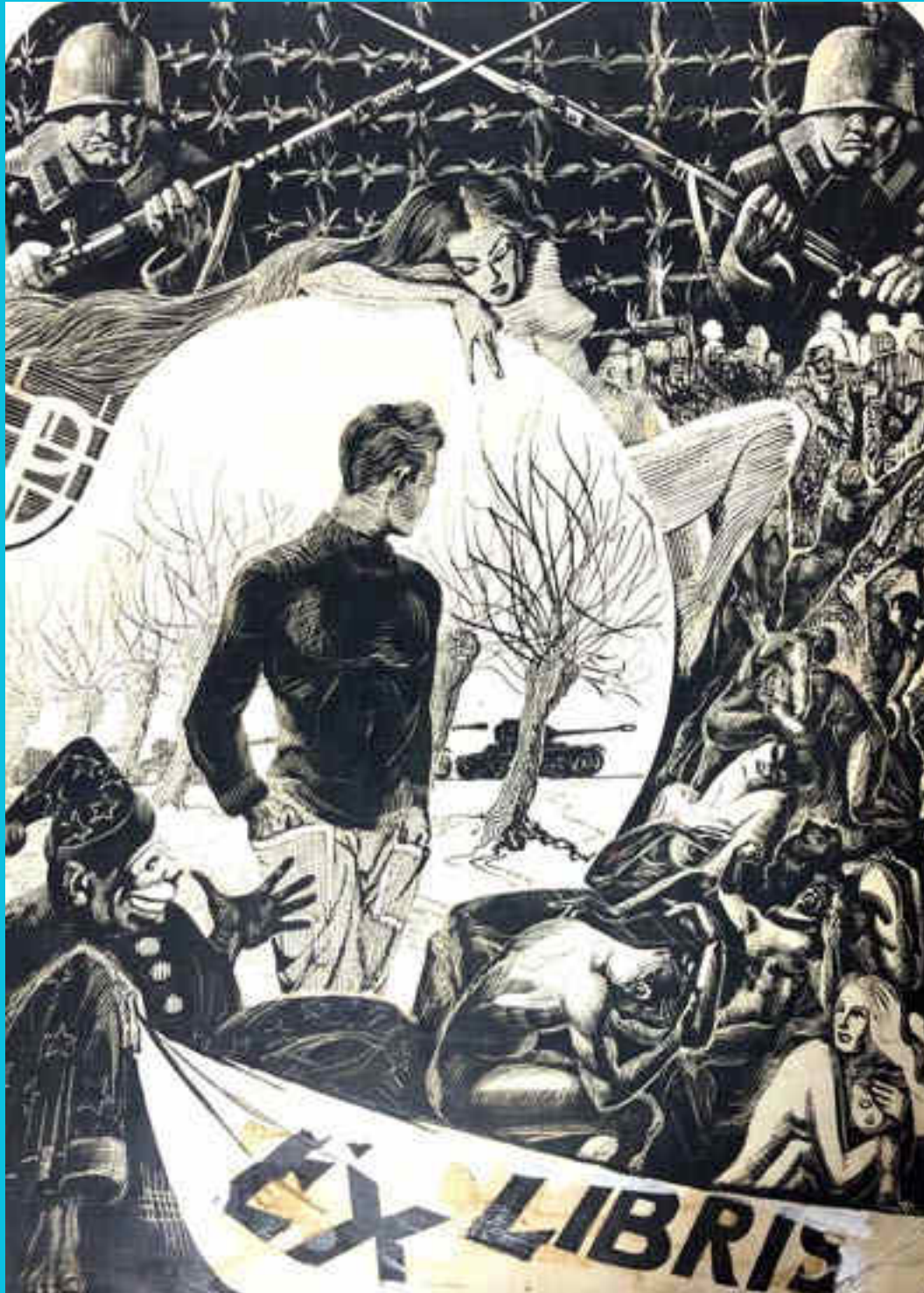
At 15, I joined the Polish resistance and was injured in action. During the war, my family and I were confined inside the brutal and inhumane concentration camps. Fortunately, the Germans were unaware that I fought in the Polish Resistance, otherwise I would have been executed.

Elation ensued after the victory against Germany. but it also marked the loss of all that I knew and loved: our property and wealth, my friends, life in Poland, and the death of my father in a concentration camp.

Fortunately, I embarked on a new life in Australia where I met my wife Rhonda and celebrated the birth of our daughter Yolanda. I also dedicated my life to art.

I look back in disbelief at my long life: the privilege and happiness of living on our estate in Poland, surviving the horror of the Second World War, followed by my new life in Australia. At 96 years of age, I will have had my first solo art exhibition in January-February 2024 at the Gosford Regional Gallery, NSW, Australia.

*"My life has truly been one of
Time and Chance".*



Ex libris is Latin for 'from the books of' or 'from the library of.' It's often used as a label in a book to indicate ownership, typically with the owner's name or a personalised design. People use *ex libris* labels to mark their books and showcase a sense of personalisation or pride in their library.

Ralph's 'Ex Libris' design
1955, Victoria

Chapter 1: Before the Second World War



My father at University in Warsaw.



My father In New York.

I was born Raphael Podolski in the eastern Polish city of Lublin on 22 November 1927, however, my passport and other official papers, including my birth certificate, give my birth date as 1 January 1928. That was my mother's doing. She wanted to ensure I would avoid four years of National Service in the Polish Military. By moving the birth date to the next year, we could delay military service until after I had completed my degree. Even today, my NSW driver's license shows my date of birth as 1 January 1928.

My parents

My mother, Maria Czarnota, was a primary school teacher in Lublin. My parents met on a little bridge over the Vistula River. It was love at first sight. They owned their house in Lublin. I was their only child.

My father was Jan Podolski. In 1912, he was banished from Warsaw because he'd become involved in an anti-Tsarist movement. At the time Poland as a country didn't exist politically until independence in 1918, and even that was temporary.

Warsaw was part of Russia, so he moved to Lublin which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time. Even there he was considered an activist, so he migrated via Trieste in Italy to the United States. He was housed at Ellis Island in New York harbour, the largest immigration station in the US. More than 12 million people were processed there in the 60 years to 1954. Ellis Island is now part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument.

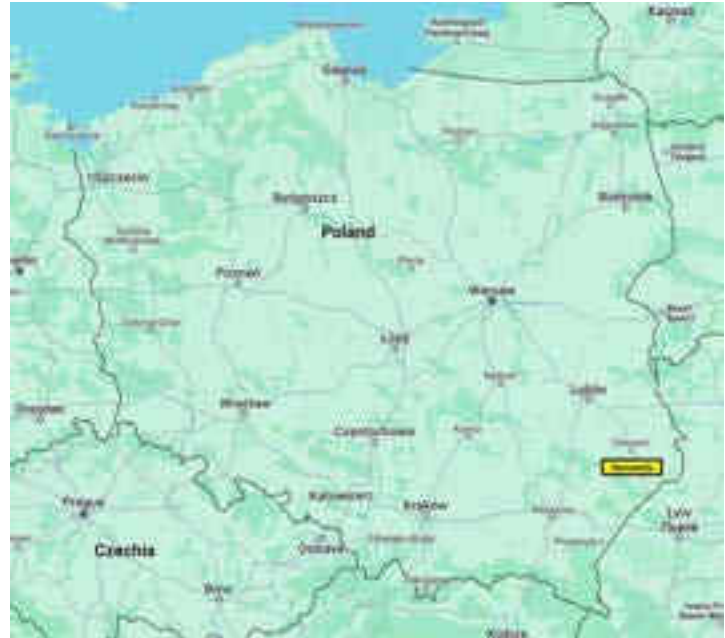
My father started studies in medicine. During the First World War he was drafted into the United States Army Medical Corps as a medical orderly. He was honourably discharged in 1920.

After the First World War, he started a shoe-making company called Polus with three others. They expanded to thirteen American cities. In 1925, he returned to Poland to set up the shoe making business there, with factories in nine cities. Then came the Great Depression in 1929. It was a devastating time for all businesses in the United States and everywhere else. Unfortunately he didn't transfer his assets from America to Poland. His company went bankrupt and he lost an enormous amount of money. Bata was a large competitor to my father's business Polus, but because their business was based in Czechoslovakia and not in America, Bata survived and still flourishes to this day. The Polus factories in Poland were made into spaces for the homeless.

My early years

In November 1927, I was born in Lublin. My father came to the hospital and said to mother, "I've bought a property in the country." My mother burst into tears. I spent my first three years in Lublin. We then moved to our country estate in Tarnowola, central eastern Poland.

The house needed to be renovated. It was on one level with brick stucco walls and a shingle roof. The entrance was portico in style with colonnades. It was a large house with twelve rooms. I remember, just as you entered the house the dining room stretched all the way to the back wall where a balcony looked over two lakes full of fish. One of the lakes contained Pike and the other Carp. They had to be kept separate otherwise the Carp would eat the young Pike. Fish was often on the menu.



Map of Poland showing Tarnowola.

It was a wonderful place to grow up. We owned 700 hectares of land, with a large part covered by forests and the rest consisting of fertile grounds ideal for crops and cattle.

The property in Tarnowola was always busy with local villagers coming to work and produce being loaded on to vehicles bound for the markets. We often entertained neighbours and village dignitaries for dinner in the dining room. There could be up to 40 guests at a time!

Father had some of the land allocated to share farmers and there was about five families who lived there. Each was allocated a parcel of land to farm. 90% of their produce went to the estate as rent and 10% to the families. Most of the remaining agricultural land was used for dairy farming. Twenty labourers from the village worked during the day milking the cattle, making cheese and butter and loading the trucks, all under the supervision of the estate administrators.

We also had chickens, ducks and pigs, as well as vegetables and cereal crops. We were completely self-sufficient for food. As a small boy, I had many adventures on our wonderful property. One of my earliest memories on the farm was in autumn.

I woke early with everyone to start work. Wearing just my night shirt and bare feet, I ran down to the two fish lakes. I didn't notice the cold and scooped up the new ice floating on the surface of the lake. I turned around to show my mother, who was standing on the balcony smiling. the first ice of the season, I loved riding my horse Chestnut. The horse was huge compared to me, so I would lead it to the fence and use it as a ladder to mount. Getting off was quicker, the horse either threw me or I fell off.



Age about 6, with my father outside the cow shed.



Tarnowola - sketch at age 6 outside the milking shed.

One day while riding I ducked to miss a low hanging branch, but there must have been a protrusion from the branch because it cut a groove into my scalp causing a lot of blood. I still have the scar.

Our farm was 3.5kms through a thick forest to the city of Józefów, where I became friends with the two children of the Mayor. One day when I was about 6, I rose very early and went to the lady who did sewing and domestic work on the farm to get her to do up the buttons on my trousers for me, since I was too small to manage myself. I then set out through the forest to visit my friends. To their surprise, I arrived around 7am. What they didn't realise was that one of the large lakes on our farm had been drained as people searched for my body.

Luckily the sewing lady said, "Oh yes, he must have gone somewhere, because I had to button his trousers." I became famous as the 6-year-old boy who walked alone through the forest!

Excitement of the hunt

There were numerous wild animals and birds on our property because of the forest. My father invited friends and local dignitaries to join us on our regular hunts. The sports hunters hunted for bears, elk and deer, as well as partridge. After a hunt, the estate took a share of the kill, so there was always plenty of game on the menu. Imagine how much meat was available after shooting an elk weighing 400kg? The game had to be hung for at least 6 weeks to age in our large underground cool room, otherwise it was inedible.

Mother wouldn't allow me to go hunting for fear I would be shot, but I often managed to escape and follow the hunters. They always looked after me and made sure I was always close to and behind them.

I had my own rifle, a 22 calibre, but I couldn't use the 12-gauge or 8-gauge shotgun because of the strong kickback. The excitement of the hunt was wonderful, and from an early age I had a strong desire to draw the spectacle. Around the age of 6, I sketched a hunting scene featuring dogs, hunters, deer, and birds on the freshly painted white stucco walls—it was a significant moment as my first serious sketch though it wasn't appreciated by my parents!

Early imagination

Around the age of 4, I commenced education. Full time tutors who lived in the house taught me to read, write and arithmetic. I loved reading and would read books by myself from a young age. I would often make drawings using my imagination from the stories I read (like the Three Musketeers).



Sketch of The Three Musketeers at (aged 10).

From an early age, I was also privileged to go to the movies and theatre and listen to music. During our many dinners with guests, the music was live, but occasionally it was from records. I listened to classical music which I learned to love.

I can't remember the name of the first movie I went to see with my mother when I was very young. Perhaps it was Dracula, because I do remember my mother covering my eyes when she thought there were bits I shouldn't see. I would often make sketches based on what I had seen at the movies or theatre I experienced.

A new life

The Great Depression was devastating for my family. My father lost a lot of money and his shoe business. Fortunately we were self-sufficient for food at Tarnowola, but my father needed to start a new career. He joined the Public Service. He was appointed as the Assistant Post Master General for Poland.

This was a prestigious job with good salary and many perks, but he had to start in a lower position so that he could learn the business. His first role was in Katowice in South West Poland. It was difficult for him because he was appointed over many existing employees, so there were bad feelings towards him. We still owned Tarnowola and left it in the hands of the Administrators to run. I never lived there again.



Sketch of a character from a book (aged 10).



Drawing of actor on stage aged 12.

We moved to Katowice and lived in a small, rented apartment. For the last two months of year 3, I went to the local primary school. I started year 4 on 1 September 1934.

The school was co-educational, something I had never experienced. Unfortunately, my mother had my hair cut in a page-boy style with a fringe over my forehead and hair down to my shoulders. The boys laughed at me and called me a girl. I was very upset, so my hair was cut that night!

The teachers were very professional and efficient. I can remember thinking how important they were in stimulating interest in my education.

After 18 months, my father was transferred to Warsaw to take up the senior position of Assistant Postmaster General. The job came with many perks, benefits and authority. He bought a house in Warsaw and we were well off.



Sketches of film stars Linda Darnell (l) and Ann Sheridan (r).



Age about 8 with Mum and Dad in Katowice.



Polish Jesuit School, Chyrow

Mother and father organised for me to go to the Polish Jesuit School in Chyrow (now part of Ukraine with the town re-named Khyriv) about 450km from Warsaw. This school was recognised as one of the best schools in Poland. The education was exceptional. They taught the national curriculum but also the importance of understanding the subject, critical thinking and not to accept the status quo. Many of the county's leaders were educated at the Jesuit School in Chyrow.

I remained at the school until the end of the academic year in July 1939 and returned to Warsaw for the summer holidays. Because of the impending hostilities with Germany, my parents decided that I wouldn't go back to the Jesuit school in Chyrow.



Holiday in Gdynia 1939 on the Baltic Coast with a friend.

Chapter 2: The War Years

During my first day at school, 1 September 1939, I witnessed the first German planes flying overhead. It was about 2pm. Little silver planes flying left to right in threes. They were about to bomb the airfield near us, and the bridges, and the centre of Warsaw. Everyone was at their windows and balconies, looking up. One old lady was shouting angrily, “get out, go away”. They took no notice. After the first day, the bombers started at 4am, bombs everywhere. When the sirens sounded, we went to the centre of our house. Fortunately, we were in a suburb of Warsaw which wasn’t bombed.

It only took 35 days for the vastly superior German forces to conquer Poland. The German strategy was to use devastating mechanised forces, tanks and aircraft, followed by the rapid advance of a well-equipped army. The Polish army fought valiantly but could not stop the advance.

On the 17 September 1939 Russia also invaded Poland from the East while Germany was invading it from the West. This resulted in an agreement with Germany to divide Poland, Russia taking Poland east of the River Bug and Germany the land west of the River Bug.

Education in the streets

My education was spasmodic and in secret after the defeat. Under the German occupation you were not allowed to get a high school education. In primary school no history was to be taught, and Polish language was not to be used. Only trades were allowed to receive an education – good preparation for slave labourers.

My education happened privately, in the streets. Groups of four or five of us would go to a teacher’s house, or if you could afford it, you would pay for a teacher to come to your house three or four times a week.

I was fortunate, my parents could afford it, but we had to be careful not to be caught. Machine guns at the corner of streets. Anyone on the streets after the 8pm curfew were arrested or shot.



Sketch of the Polish Army fighting against the German invasion early Second World War.

Brutal rule

Life under German rule was brutal. Pockets of resistance started with attacks on German soldiers and equipment. Innocent civilians were rounded up, put against a wall and shot. One such incident involved about 100 men, women and children being rounded up and slaughtered with machine guns; their bodies were left for the Polish residents in the area to bury.

The SS commander responsible for this arbitrary, brutal retaliation against civilians was Franz Kutschera known as the "executioner of Warsaw". He came from Austria. The Resistance carefully planned his assassination. In February 1944, they carried it out. It was one of the most successful operations in the history of the Polish Resistance. In retaliation, the Germans arrested and executed several hundred people. Subsequently, the rate of arbitrary executions of civilians decreased significantly.

The Polish Jews in Warsaw were rounded up and forced into a small area of the city which became known as the Jewish Ghetto. It was operational from November 1940. The ghetto had approximately 30% of the population of Warsaw crammed into 2.4% of the city area that was surrounded by a 10ft wall with barbed wire on top. The result was extreme overcrowding, minimal rations and unsanitary conditions that resulted in disease, starvation and death. It was demolished after the Ghetto uprising in May 1943 when an estimated 300,000 Jews were killed. Food and medical supplies were in short supply in Warsaw so my parents decided that my mother and I should return to our property in Tarnowola. However, our property had been taken over by the Germans, and we couldn't return to our house in Lublin because my mother's sister and family were living there.

We went to the nearby city of Jozefow where food and accommodation was available as well as teachers to help continue my education. It also turned out to be the main centre of the Underground.

The Underground Resistance

I discovered that my teacher, Konrad Bartoszewski, was the Commanding Officer for this area. His pseudonym was Zadora. He was in charge until 1943 when he was shot and spent time in hospital before returning to command in Jozefow. Initially, the Underground developed spontaneously and involved everyone - soldiers, teachers, shop keepers, students, clergymen, doctors, whole families. There were many different groups, all of them well organised and secret.

The unifying goal was to collect and store armaments and ammunition, and use them against the Germans. Activities included destroying German supply lines (bridges, roads, railway lines) and providing intelligence reports to the British. Part of this intelligence in 1942, was a report to the Polish government-in-exile in London, and also to the British and US governments, about the Holocaust of the Jews. This was ignored or disbelieved or thought to be exaggerated.

Eventually the various Resistance groups took on a military character, with squads, platoons and companies, with training camps for infantry and for nurses. It is estimated that the Polish Resistance organisation was the largest in Europe, with a strength of 650,000 people. The Nazis insisted on calling members of the underground army "bandits".

I first started with the Underground by working in printing works that were in the forest. I was doing leaflets, drawings, all sorts of things for the whole area.



Ralph (kneeling second from right) with his Unit in the forest. His rifle was nearly as tall as him!

There was a weekly bulletin printed by the Resistance, called *Biuletyn Informacyjny*. It was clandestinely pinned up on lamp posts, or left on tram seats, or in hallways of apartment buildings.

One day, the fighters said to me, “Look if the Germans grab you, they’re going to shoot you anyway, so we may as well join us.” To join the Resistance, you had to be familiar with weapons. I had to demonstrate that I could handle a rifle and shoot at a target three times. They would measure the distance between the bullet holes. This was called the triangle of error. It turned out that my results showed no distance between the bullet holes. It was a sensational result with only one in 100,000 people with this ability, so unusual that my commander asked London what they should do? The reply was “give him a rifle”. They gave me a Mannlicher–Schönauer hunting rifle with telescopic sight. My role was to stay back from the fighting and shoot at targets as directed by a spotter.



Sketch of the war in North Africa where Germany suffered their first major defeat.

At the age of 15 and a half, I was the youngest boy sworn in to the Resistance in Poland, and I was classed as a line soldier with a rank of Private First Class.

We were all in different branches of the Polish Underground. I was in Kedi. We had to be always armed and on call 24 hours a day. I was armed with a 9mm handgun and kept it in the back waistband of my trousers. I was still going to my education whenever I could. One day when I was 15 I'd been on duty in the forest when I was wounded. I still have the scars of two wounds in my lower leg, nearly 80 years later.

This is what happened. The German grenades were an explosive ball on the end of a wooden throwing stick. The Resistance fighters were armed with automatic weapons as rifles are useless in a forest setting. Any fights in a forest you need to be prepared by sheltering behind a tree with your back to it for protection, always staying erect to minimise you as a target and to be ready to move quickly. Working in threes was imperative, one to run, the others to cover. The Germans worked in fives, and were often confused about who was supposed to run and who was to cover.

On one occasion I came to a tree, looked around, and was noticed by three Germans. One of them threw a hand grenade to my right-hand side. I threw myself to the left, flat onto the ground. When the grenade exploded, two pieces of wood and metal stuck in my leg. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, the Germans were dead. When the other Resistance fighters came to me they said "Oh, you're alive, we thought you were dead." They pulled the pieces of metal and wood out of my leg. Luckily, because they were so hot, they had cauterized the wounds.

Fortunately, I didn't bleed to death. The Resistance notified the Polish Government in London, who notified Warsaw, who notified my parents. My mother was hysterical and insisted I be transferred back to Warsaw. She arrived by train to Lublin, where I was staying with relatives. We returned to Warsaw once I was able to travel. When I had recovered sufficiently, I returned to the Resistance in Warsaw under Kedyw (the Directorate of Diversion that was responsible for directing the overall resistance in the Polish cities).

Uprising in Warsaw

On 1 September 1944, there was an organised Uprising in Warsaw that was planned and executed by the Resistance movement. It was the largest military effort by any Resistance movement in Second World War. It was timed to coincide with the retreat of the German forces from Warsaw ahead of the Soviet advance. The idea was to liberate Warsaw, so that the government-in-exile could return and prevent a communist takeover. But the Soviets purposely halted their advance, which gave the Germans time to regroup and defeat the Poles. After the Uprising was defeated they destroyed more than 80% of the city in retaliation and about 16,000 Resistance fighters and 200,000 civilians were killed, mostly in mass executions. The Soviet army and air force that could have supported the Poles held back, presumably hoping that the Polish Resistance would be crushed so that they were no longer a force to contend with once Russia took over Poland. The Uprising lasted 63 days and ended with the surrender of the Polish forces. The main beneficiary was Stalin, who was ultimately able to impose a puppet Communist government in Poland.

During the Warsaw Uprising, the unit that I was in was on the other side of the Vistula River from central Warsaw where most of the Polish Underground was fighting the Germans. On my side of the river, there was about 7,000 of us. The Russians were still about 25 kilometres away.

At this stage of the war (before Hitler decided to invade Russia), the Nazis and the Russians, along with the Italians, were allies. All of them wanted to conquer and rule our land.

The Germans had their famous Panzer (tank) Viking Division as well as their other tanks. Oh, you can't fight the tanks. We were wiped out. My best friend was shot dead. It was pitiful. Our commanders said, "Drop everything, bury the weapons and pretend to be civilians." I changed out of my uniform and joined my mother and father as civilians. We were arrested by the Gestapo (which means Secret Security Police). The Germans rounded up all the civilians and those they didn't execute immediately were put into labour camps or concentration camps.

The terror of the camps

Between 1933 and 1945 Nazi Germany established more than 44,000 camps and ghettos. One of these was a concentration camp to the east of Lublin, with the purpose to kill targeted groups including Jews and members of the Resistance and to provide Germany with slave labourers.

My father and I were taken to the Mittel-Dora concentration camp five miles from Nordhausen, Germany and then to Gross-Rosen, which was south west of Wroclaw (it is now part of the Polish territories that were recovered from the Germans after the war).

We were transported by an overloaded cargo train for six days and five nights. The train came to a stop well after sunset. We waited a long time listening to outside sounds until a man peeked out and said "We've arrived. Guards are lined up with dogs. Place is called Gross-Rosen." The doors of the carriages slid open, letting in the light and the sight and sound of the screaming guards. The filth and stink of the journey was replaced with cold air. It was a relief! Our legs were quivering from lack of use.

"Raus! Schnell! Aussteigen!" (Out! Quickly! Exit!)

The madness of the SS

The SS guards lined us up under arc lights, five per row, a long line of scarecrows in the weird illumination. My father and I had been in the carriage that was emptied first, so we ended up at the head of the marching column.

The hamlets we went through were really charming: neat houses, neat orchards, neat fields, neat pastures. Along the road every person living there was lined up to watch the spectacle of scarecrows trudging along to their destination, the concentration camp was already visible as a glow in the distance.

It was Saturday evening, party time in Germany, we could hear music. Silent watchers in holiday finery relaxed in front of their houses, lights full on, no blackout or smell of burning people and buildings, no rattle of gunfire. There were girls in pretty dresses, and a sprinkle of military uniforms, soldiers on leave, all wearing side-arms. Oh yes, all was well in German territories in August of 1944.

Naked and cruel

The Gross-Rosen Konzentrationslager brimmed with lights. The gate was built of stones, arched, with a machine gun nest on top, and the infamous sign Arbeit Macht Frei (Work Sets You Free). Two SS officers, one each side of the column of men, counted and recorded each line of five people on chalk blackboards. The Nazis kept records. The dead who hadn't survived the train trip were brought in by wheelbarrows and counted too. There were five rows of barbed wire fences, one electrified. Anyone approaching them was shot without warning.

Right past the gate was Appellplatz, the Muster Square where 30,000 men lined up twice a day for a roll call, rain, snow or shine. The dead were also brought in for the count in wheelbarrows.

The 1200 men from the notorious Gestapo prison Pawiak in Warsaw stood for six hours being processed by so-called Camp Administrators (prisoners appointed by the SS, mostly German, and mostly thieves or murderers).

I followed the man in front of me to a rapidly growing pile of clothing, where everyone stripped naked. Five piles: haberdashery, shoes, coats, trousers, underwear.

Shivering in the buff I faced tables with stacks of forms to be filled. An SS man looked in my mouth and rectum to check for valuables. He stole a gold medallion given to me by mother for my First Communion when I was 9 years old which had an image of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa carved in solid gold with my name on the reverse and the date of the ceremony. The processing clerk was middle aged, tall and spoke perfect Polish. "Look," he said, "I'll try to get this medallion back to you later. Can't promise anything though."

Usually gold was melted down. The medallion was never returned.

I was given my number 11711, a strip of white cloth, 12cm X 5cm imprinted with the number in black and a colour triangle, red for a political prisoner. My father was 11712. Yellow triangles were for Jews, green for criminals, black for saboteurs, pink for homosexuals.

There were ten tables, so two rows of five prisoners could be handled at once. With nine others, I ran to another control point where my body was again scrutinized. Next came a hangar-like building with benches in ten rows. SS men and dogs lined the corridor we were running along, but now we sat down to have a haircut and then stood up for removal of all body hair.

The man with the razor had the lilting accent of eastern Poland and the gnarled hands of a farm labourer, but he was deft with the straight razor. He said, "Is your number 11711? That is a 'dead number' as someone had it before you". He continued, "I knew him. He was from Ukraine. Died quite a while ago. Kapos (prisoners who worked for the Nazis) beat him to death for stealing bread."

I sat down again while another barber shaved a wide strip down the centre of my skull from forehead to the back of my neck. The barber explained this is called the louse highway. I just knew the hair would grow back uneven. I thought if I ever get out of this bloody place it will take eight months to regain normal appearance.

My father and I walked to a tent marked Bad (Bath). Inside was a waist-deep 20-foot wide ice-cold pool of cream-white liquid stinking of concentrated disinfectant. You had to wade across while SS men waited at the edge with sticks, to push your head under.



Warsaw Insurrection
www.warshainnations.com/ghetto-overhead.html

Great River's Cotton Mill in Chicago

Great River's Cotton Mill in Chicago
-before the war just to build the

Warsaw Insurrection Map

My grandfather, Rafael Podolski, moved with the Polish resistance during World War II.

He was taken prisoner by the Germans and spent time in several concentration camps before being liberated from Bergen Belsen by the British in 1945.

Podolski, who lived through the tough period, has experienced street life and hardships and witnessed things which have remained with him forever.

There is his story in my grandpa's eyes. These images should be viewed in conjunction with the video file.



Dynamit Nobel Chemical Factory
After a period, Rafael was moved from
Great River to Dabrowski's old camp.

He was put to work producing shells.
This was in the chemical factory.

Resistance in Poland, 1945

While being transported to Bergen Belsen
Concentration Camp in a cattle truck,
Rafael had a nose-bleed, eye pain.



"The Germans knew that
Yehuda was in the
camp. Rafael is dead."

Bergen Belsen
Concentration Camp

"The group shows the
Hole's escape tunnel
built here in Bergen Belsen."

An Interview with Rafael Podolski

Resistance Fighter and Prisoner of War



Nov. 2004 - First Video Series - Vol. 1

An interview with Ralph by his grandson Nino. It won first place in his school and was also given the Anzac Award by the local RSL Club.

WAR IN POLAND



WHEN WAR BROKE OUT IN POLAND, NINO'S GRANDFATHER WAS 12 YEARS OLD

AT 15, HE JOINED THE NEWLY FORMED ARMED BRIGADES - THE POLISH UNDERGROUND

HE SPENT FIVE IN THE FOLLOWING CAMPS

Pawlak	Prison in Warsaw, Poland	1 month
Gross-Rosen	German concentration camp	6 weeks
Dyhernfurth	Gross-Rosen sub-camp	7 months
	Here he was put to work manufacturing a 'nerve gas' called Tabun.	

Nordhausen-Oera	Buchenwald sub-camp	2 months
	Here he was put to work in a tunnel within a mountain, manufacturing V2 rockets.	
Bergen Belsen	German concentration camp in which an estimated 50,000 lost their lives.	
	Here he was liberated by the British Eighth Army	



NINO

29

LOBINZAT

A school project on the war in Poland by his Grandson Nino. It also won first place in his school and was also given the Anzac Award by the local RSL Club.

Finally, clothes were issued: jacket, trousers, round visorless cap and wooden clogs like the Dutch wear. All clothing was from the same material, a mix of rough cloth and paper in stripes of blue and white. It would burn like paper when set alight.

Next came the barrack. Our numbers were checked again, then we were ordered to lie down in tight rows on straw spread on the floor. Hundreds of men hunched down, drying our wet clothes with our body heat. And we were the lucky ones. By chance we were inside, with nearly a whole night to rest. There were nearly 1100 men to be processed after us and they were standing out in the cold in their rows of five.

Slave labour and V weapons

Over the next 11 months, between 1944 and 1945, I was in seven different concentration camps. Part of the time I was in the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp, five miles from the town centre of Nordhausen, where I was forced to work on the construction of V2 bombs.

The V1 flying bombs, also known as doodlebugs or buzzbombs, because of the sound they made in flight, were winged bombs powered by jet engines. The Nazis unleashed them on London between June 1944 and March 1945 in revenge for the Allies' D-Day invasion of German-occupied France (the V stands for 'vengeance' or 'retaliation').

The V2 rocket, which stood as tall as a four-storey building, blasted its way to the edge of space before falling back to earth at supersonic speed. Its targets were random and the silence of its final fall made it terrifying to the ordinary people below. The V2 rockets caused more than 30,000 English civilian deaths and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

V2 rockets were put together by tens of thousands of slave labourers from occupied Europe. Conditions were so brutal that it is said 20,000 slave labourers died making the V weapons. The Central Works, where I was forced to work, was a vast underground production plant, dug into the side of a mountain, near Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains in northern Germany. In fact, for a concentration camp it was a "good" job for those of us working in underground tunnels, because we got just enough food to stop us from starving as we wouldn't have been able to work.

Determine to survive

As the British were coming closer, we prisoners were forced to move from camp to camp, by rail cars, sometimes open, or on foot through mud and snow (the so-called death marches) as the Nazis tried to hide evidence of mass killings by moving prisoners from place to place away from advancing troops. About 250,000 prisoners from concentration camps died on the death marches.

I remember one of these trips by rail car where my very survival was tested. I was the first into the rail car and was pushed to the corner while far too many other prisoners were crammed in. At the door was a German guard with plenty of room, it was night time and the door was partly open. I was not well and being in the corner of the railcar, it felt as though I was suffocating. I can remember having a conversation with myself as if I was two people. One said to the other "do you want to die?", the other replied "no!". The first said "if you stay in the corner you will die". Determined to survive, I threw myself flat on the heads of those next to me and crawled over them to the door.

I was sworn at, punched and kicked, but I knew I had to get to the door. As I approached, I was grabbed by the neck by someone who started to strangle me. I said "stop, stop let me go". He said, "You are Polish where are you from?" I said Saska Kepa (a suburb of Warsaw). With that he pulled me over towards him near the door and he told me to sit on the body of a Frenchman who had been beaten to death by the guard for stealing a piece of bread! Finally, I could breath and I survived – many in that railcar didn't.

Search for my father

My father was left in Nordhausen while I was moved from camp to camp. I ended up in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northern Germany. There were 120,000 prisoners there, with no food, water or sanitation. More than 70,000 died, about half of those from starvation, typhus, tuberculosis, typhoid fever or dysentery. Anne Frank died of typhus at age 15, two weeks before Bergen-Belsen was liberated. The other half of the 70,000 were killed by the Nazis. People were so sick that even after liberation another 14,000 died.

I never saw my father again. For decades I tried to find out what had happened to him. The Germans were very good at keeping records, but I could not find any trace of him. It was many decades later and the extraordinary power of the Internet that enabled me to search for him. By chance I found a video clip from a film taken of the liberation of Nordhausen by the American 7th Armored Division. As they entered the camp several bodies were filmed, one was clearly that of my father. He must have died literally just hours before the camp was liberated. He was 56 years old and most likely died of dysentery.

His death was not recorded by the Germans because they were given days to withdraw to minimise casualties.

I also learned that had I not left Nordhausen to go to the work camps, I too would have died because the blockhouse where I slept was bombed by the Americans and everyone inside died. My father was buried in a mass grave in Nordhausen; I have never been to see it. I couldn't go back while Poland had a communist government since I'd been in a unit of the Underground which was opposed to Russia. Poland came under communist control and my name was on a list that meant I was sentenced in absentia to 12 years hard labour.

Still alive - barely

In the Bergen Belsen concentration camp all the prisoners poured into the British area. Recognising the inevitable outcome, the Germans consented to let the British release all the prisoners. When the British were about 8kms from the camp, the Nazis offered to withdraw 18kms back to let the British deal with the thousands of dying prisoners. There was no food, nothing. I weighed 29 kilos, I could only walk by leaning against a wall, I was nearly comatose. That night I was on a wooden bed, lying head to toe with an officer from Yugoslavia. He died that night. He was dead in the morning. Not malnutrition alone, not dysentery alone. He was exhausted. He just died. I was still alive, but I was pretty close to death. I was 18 years old.

It was my artwork that helped me survive in the concentration camp at Gross-Rosen. I made drawings of people in the camps for the prisoners, who sold them to the Germans. The currency for the sale was bread.

An orderly (one of the less-sick prisoners) came and said, "Oh yes, you're free." I said, "It's too late, it's too late." He said, "no no". Two people took me under my arms to the window of the first floor of the building I was in and I saw my first two soldiers. They had little pom poms on their berets so I knew they were Scottish. I remember it all. I retain images. I have always been very visual.

They put me in the sick bay and slowly gave me milk and sugar, which was the right thing. Initially the British had started giving normal food to the prisoners, who died in terrible pain, their stomachs could not cope after all those years of starvation.

After 10 days in the military hospital I was transferred to a camp in Hanover that had held Polish prisoners of war. The camp was split in two: one section for military personnel, the other for civilians. The food and accommodation were better in the military camp. I was measured for a British uniform and joined the 2nd Armoured Division of Poland. The emblem for this division was the Polska Kotwica meaning 'Poland Fights'. This emblem was painted on walls throughout the country - *punished by death if caught*.

Young people would often use the successful tactic of painting the emblem on the wall behind a couple "necking" so that they weren't caught.



Ralph wearing a Beret with the Poska Kotwica (anchor) emblem signifying *Poland Fights* and was also the emblem for the 1st Armoured Division.

Chapter 3: Post War

I could not go back to Poland, so with the help of friends, I made a successful application for a scholarship to the Polish government-in-exile to study drawing and painting at Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. In 1945 I was given leave of absence from my unit and went to Brussels and attended the Académie from 1945–1948.

Académie des Beaux-Arts

When I arrived at the Académie, I presented my drawings to the Head of the Department for assessment. He said I would be wasting my time starting as a 1st year student because my drawings were already well above the standard required, so I started in the 2nd year. I won three drawing and composition awards while there and received medals for coming first in each year I attended the Académie. I still have one of the medals with the coat of arms of Brussels.



Medal awarded for first place in the year at Académie des Beaux-Arts.

The scholarship was for 2,000 Belgian francs a month. Things were extremely tight. I lived in a tiny little attic room and was doing well. Unfortunately I lost the scholarship when the New Communist Polish Government was recognised by all the other countries.



One of Ralph's sketches, 1942.

In 1939, all the Polish money had been taken by cruise ship to England and deposited in the British Treasury. After the war, when the Communists were in charge, they demanded the money back. The British returned it and, in that moment, the scholarship ended. The Communist Government offered to continue the scholarship and increase the grant by 50 percent on the condition that when the scholarship ended I would go back to Poland and swear allegiance to the Communist Government. They did not mention I would be subject to 12 years hard labour!

Soviets in control

At this time, the Soviets were in control in Poland. After the official end of the Second World War in 1945, the Soviets established more than 200 new concentration camps, as well as using the existing ones. They ruthlessly hunted and killed members of the Resistance as well as "difficult civilians".

It is estimated they killed 200,000 people. With my background, I could not risk going home. New Polish Resistance groups formed, in fact more than during the Nazi occupation. It was not until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the People's Republic of Poland was free of the communists.

When the Communists took over Poland, the government-in-exile in London no longer had any authority so by default I was discharged from the army.

After the army

I had started the 4th and final year at Académie, but without the grant I couldn't continue my studies and graduate. I then had a pretty hard time. I had no money and could not get a job because Belgium had too many people, not enough jobs and, as a foreign student, I was not allowed to work. I slept at railway stations, but because you can't sleep on the same one for more than one night, I moved from station to station.

Intermittently, I found work in Paris, designing cinema posters for the movies. I hitch-hiked back and forth between Brussels and Paris because I could not afford the train. During one of my stays in Paris I went to the Louvre and beheld a magnificent, Muslim tapestry designed to convey the beauty of 'Islam Paradise'. I was very impressed and made some sketches. Years later I used my sketches to include the pattern in one of my paintings called Meditating Islam Paradise (a photograph of the painting is included in my collection chapter at the end of this book).

Some of my friends earned good money on the black market. They would go to Germany and buy commodities very cheaply and sell them in other parts of Europe for huge profits. This was made possible because we were still part of the armed forces and wore a military uniform. In retrospect, I should have joined them so that I could have afforded to complete my degree at the Académie.

Migration

Living in such poor conditions, there was no future in Europe. I decided to move to another country and start a new life. Australia was seeking migrants. All I knew about Australia was it was on the other side of the world, English is the main language (which I could speak) and it was a long way from the post-war turmoil in Europe. I applied for migration but had to return to Germany to a Displaced Persons (DP) camp to be selected.

After the war, the Western Allies established DP camps all through the Allied-occupied areas of Germany, Austria and Italy. The first inhabitants were the survivors of concentration camps. Many of the DP camps were in the grounds of former concentration camps or German army camps. Many of the DPs had survived the horrors and deprivation of the concentration camps.

We were once again behind barbed wire, still existing on inadequate food and suffering from shortages of clothing and medical supplies. Thankfully my application was accepted.

I left from the port city of Bremerhaven, the largest city on the German north-east coast. During the war the Royal Air Force had almost bombed it out of existence.

I left on the Migrant Ship Fairsea with 1200 other people escaping Europe. We sailed via Port Said and Colombo (Sri Lanka). We were not allowed to leave the ship while in transit to Australia.

We were supposed to be learning English but the teachers weren't very experienced and they used only the 'chorus method' with everyone repeating the same phrase at the same time. The journey took about 4 weeks and even though it's not like the modern luxury cruise ships of today, it was enjoyable and relaxing, and we were well fed.



Immigration at Bremerhaven, Germany en-route to Australia.



On-board the Fairsea on the way to Australia.



Ralph on arrival in Melbourne in March 1950. The Fairsea that we sailed on is in the background.

Melbourne, Australia

I arrived in Melbourne, Australia in March 1950 and went by train to Bonegilla Migrant Camp, east of Wodonga in north-east Victoria. It had been an old army camp that was transformed to house new arrivals while they were processed and allocated jobs. It had its own cinema, banks, churches, sporting fields, hospital, police station and railway platform. Most of the migrants (there were 300,000 by 1971) were from non-English speaking backgrounds, a complete novelty for Australia. Migrants had to work in Australia for a minimum of two years in jobs approved by the Government.



Ralph in his first well paid job as an artist in Melbourne; He was also accepted into the PKI Union – an important and necessary step to work in the printing industry at that time.



Ralph working as a freelance artist hand painting silk ties.

From Bonegilla, the Commonwealth Employment Office sent me first to work at Geelong Grammar School (where Prince Charles later was a student) as a labourer, working in the kitchen. After a year I got a better job in Melbourne doing labourers' work in a place that made pottery.

I was then lucky to find almost 'normal' employment as a freight clerk with Ansett Airways in Melbourne, but I had a big advantage over most other migrants because I could speak English. I was there until my two years ended and then was able to start looking for work as a commercial artist.

I worked for a printer in Latrobe Street, Melbourne. It was skilled work and well paid. I was automatically accepted as a member of the Printing and Kindred Industries Union (PKIU). I worked my way up to become as close to a commercial artist as I could. I also had a part-time job hand painting silk ties. I still have 12 ties, each with a different design and one for each month of the year.

After two years, I declared my intention of becoming an Australian citizen. After three years it was official and after five years I was sworn in.

I continued to work as a graphic artist in the printing business in Melbourne for a long time. It was a very well-paid job and I settled down in Melbourne to a comfortable existence, first living in a tower block and then in a little flat in Toorak.

Ralph modelling one of the silk hand painted ties from 1952. Ralph has kept 12 different ties that he had painted.



My mother

My mother had been interned at Ravensbrück, the largest concentration camp for women in northern Germany, 60 miles north of Berlin. In January 1945, there were more than 50,000 women in Ravensbrück. By April, when the camp was liberated by the Red Army, there were fewer than 3,500 malnourished, sickly and brutalised women remaining.

My mother was one of them. She returned to Poland, first to Lublin, then Warsaw. As our house had been ripped apart, she went to the coast on the Baltic Sea, where she worked in the shipping industry in a secretarial role.

Once I was granted Australian citizenship, I tried to get my mother out of Poland to join me. I was almost through the process with the paperwork nearly finalised that would allow her to migrate to Australia, when the Petrov affair ended diplomatic relations between Australia and Russia/Poland. In April 1954 Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, Soviet spies who were masquerading as diplomats in Canberra, defected to Australia.

It was a very messy affair, but the result was that the Petrovs were granted political asylum in Australia and the opportunity for my mother to migrate to Australia ended abruptly. My mother never left Poland and it was many years before I could go back to see her.



Maria, Ralph's mother in 1947.

Ontario College of Arts

Meanwhile I met Rhonda Coogan, an Xray technician. The Coogan family was a very famous furniture manufacturer, with a chain of department stores in Tasmania. Rhonda and I became friends and eventually married in a church in Launceston. We were married by her brother who was a Vicar in Launceston (he went on to become the arch-deacon in Hampstead, London).

In 1959 we went to Canada so I could study at the prestigious Ontario College of Art. I took part in several exhibitions while there. I really enjoyed my time at the Ontario College of Art, but I felt that I should be earning money rather than Rhonda being the only wage earner.



Ralph and Rhonda's wedding with Rhonda's brother, a vicar in Launceston, who performed the wedding ceremony.

I had achieved outstanding results at the end of the academic year – an average of 97.5 percent over eleven subjects, which was an all-time record for any student at that time. The College tried to persuade me to stay and finish the course, offering a permanent position as a full-time lecturer in the college once I finished. As attractive as this was, I left since I had an offer as a freelance Art Director for an art studio in Toronto and in Vancouver.

I travelled to many of the major cities in the United States as a consultant. I had a very good job offered to me in San Francisco, but it came with the restriction that Rhonda could not work since she did not have a work visa. I had to turn it down. Rhonda announced she was pregnant.



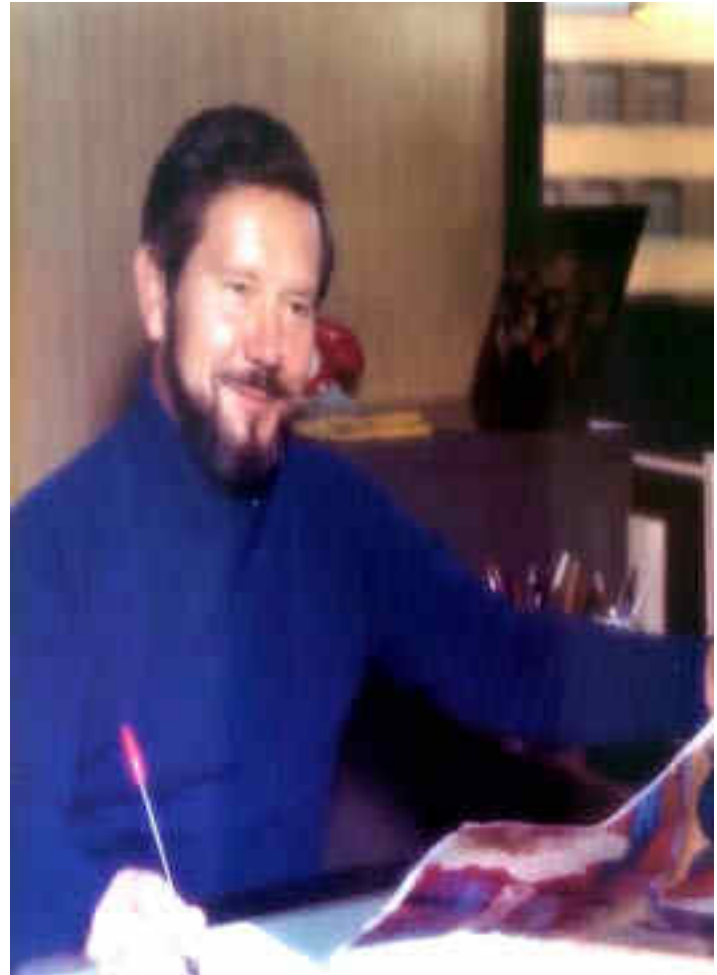
Ralph and Rhonda's Wedding in Launceston, Tasmania 1959.

Return to Australia

We decided to return to Australia in 1964 for the birth of our daughter Yolanda. On the way back we stopped in Vancouver, which is where the ship for our return trip to Sydney was departing, so that we could explore the area. We liked Vancouver.

Once in Sydney I started to apply for suitable employment. There were lots of positions available. I started with a printing company in a free-lance position, but found this difficult because I was in competition with other companies. I noticed a very attractive job with the Institute of Technology Sydney (now UTS) in the position of Visual Aids Officer. There were many applicants but I was offered the position and started in 1964.

My role was to provide each of the seven faculties visual aids support. I reported to the Registrar of the Institute and provided commercial art advice and art services to each of the Deans of the seven faculties. I enjoyed the work and remained there until I retired in 1982.



Retirement

When I retired, we moved to Queensland at Flagstone Creek near Toowoomba. It was a beautiful environment. Ronda and I enjoyed it tremendously. I was a long way from Sydney, so we rarely saw Yolanda, Roni and Nino. We decided to move back closer to Sydney.

in 1994, we moved to Killcare Heights on the Central Coast of NSW about 85km north of Sydney,

Ralph in his office (above) at the Institute of Technology 1964. In his new office at the Institute, 1978 (left).

My daughter

Our daughter Yolanda was born in Sydney. She was always musical. At fourteen Yolanda was organising and performing in school productions in Forestville, where we lived. It was obvious that Yolanda would have a career in music. After completing the HSC, she studied and graduated at the Conservatorium of Music.

She joined Opera Australia as a permanent member of the opera cast and went on to further training and singing as a mezzo soprano. She also graduated with a degree in education. She married Ronnie Lorenzato and in 2007 their son (my grandson) Nino was born. The COVID pandemic closed Opera Australia in 2020.

Nearly one thousand performances were cancelled and 80 percent of performers, including Yolanda, were stood down on part wages. Post-pandemic, they were re-hired, although 25 percent were made redundant as part of the company re-structuring and cost cutting programme, including Yolanda.

She continues to work for Opera Australia on a casual, part time basis. She also provides singing tuition to private students, and works part time as a relief school music teacher.

Yolanda and Ronnie's son Nino is now (in 2023) 16 years old. I am so thankful that Nino is not, as I was at 16, having to fight for his homeland's existence.



Ralph escorting Yolanda to the altar for her marriage to Roni Lorenzato.

Chapter 4: A Life Long Love of Art

I have been drawing since I was five years old when I sketched on the wall of our family home in indelible pencil. My creative efforts were not appreciated! Most of my early art I used charcoal or pencil until after the war. I was always drawing images of things around me or after reading a book, I wanted to draw the picture that I created in my mind. I was a prolific reader from a very young age and I had a great imagination. I couldn't stop adding adornments to trouser belts, guns and holsters, in the characters I read in many books or adding anything that I thought was missing in the illustrations. It was a compulsion to draw and improve the scene.

An obsession

My parents accepted my drawing "obsession" as they thought it would pass as I got older. It didn't! When we moved to Warsaw my mother thought they should get an opinion from the head of the school of art. He was well known in art circles, studied art in Paris and knew many of the well-known artists there. They made an appointment with him, and he asked that I bring examples of my drawings. He took time to study my art, then looked at me and asked, "What is your family's financial situation?" "It is wartime now, but after the war I think we will be quite well off," I replied. He stated, "That is very fortunate because you have come to me like a sick person goes to the doctor". He continued, "I must tell you that you are ill, you are hopelessly sick on art and you won't recover, and without money you are going to have a very difficult life".

He agreed to admit me as a casual student and stated that all he wanted from me was to return every two or three weeks with new drawings. He said he would bring along his best students so that we could discuss and compare our drawings. Quite honestly, I thought the work done by his other students wasn't anywhere as good as mine.

Achieving excellence

The art I particularly like is not necessarily because of its composition, but because it displays exceptional artistry in some way. For instance, the painting *La maja desnuda* by Goya in the Prado gallery in Madrid is such a perfect painting of a nude that I had to see it. I sat for over an hour admiring it and absorbing its beauty. I also love the perfection and beauty of Michael Angelo's work especially the statue of David. I admire the colours used by Titian and the painting of the four apostles by Dura.

I can't say there is any particular artist that I try to emulate, but I do try to follow their lead in seeking excellence in my work. Rembrandt, van Dyck, van Gogh, and people of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo have had some influence on my work in different ways. When I paint, I paint what I imagine. It's very personal. I always strive to achieve excellence. I don't paint because I like to paint, I paint because I have to and the result is in the lap of the Gods. The idea is mental, the execution is physical. Painting is an effortless experience. I don't know what I am going to paint, it's like something is controlling my hands and a painting takes shape.

When I retired, I planned a 3-month trip around Europe using a Europass which allowed me to travel by train to anywhere within the time period that it was active. I went to many of the galleries throughout Europe which were often selected because they had a particular painting that I wanted to see.

A photographic reproduction doesn't do justice to any paintings of excellence, you must see the original for yourself.

My life has truly been one of 'Time and Chance'

In 1971, I spent a year painting a portrait of Mr. John McMillan, the Registrar of the NSW Institute of Technology (now UTS). I was surprised when a classical style portrait was named as a finalist in the Archibald Prize because the art style in Australia is very different to mine, but I was not surprised when it didn't win. I also took part in several exhibitions, including a very successful retrospective at the Journalists' Club of NSW.



Ralph in front of his portrait of JW MacMillan that was a finalist in the Archibald prize in 1973.

In 1994, we moved to Killcare Heights, on the Central Coast of NSW to be closer to my daughter and family. I continued painting until a few years ago when my eyesight deteriorated.

It is very sad I can no longer paint, but my house is like my private art gallery displaying a lifetime of my work. I am also surrounded by lovely people in my neighbourhood.

I was very happy to be visited by Dr Gordon Reid, Federal MP for Robertson and I showed him and explained my paintings. After his visit, I was quite overwhelmed when he gave a speech in Parliament in recognition of my life and my art.

I am pleased that my latest exhibition, a retrospective of my work, is being held at the Gosford Regional Gallery in NSW in January – February 2024.

My life has truly been one of 'Time and Chance'.



Dr Gordon Reid (r), Federal Member for Robertson visiting Ralph in Killcare Heights. Speech to Australian Parliament in Hansard (above).

OPENING 5.30PM
FRI 12 JANUARY

13 JANUARY –
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RALPH PODOLSKI

A LIFE OF TIME AND CHANCE

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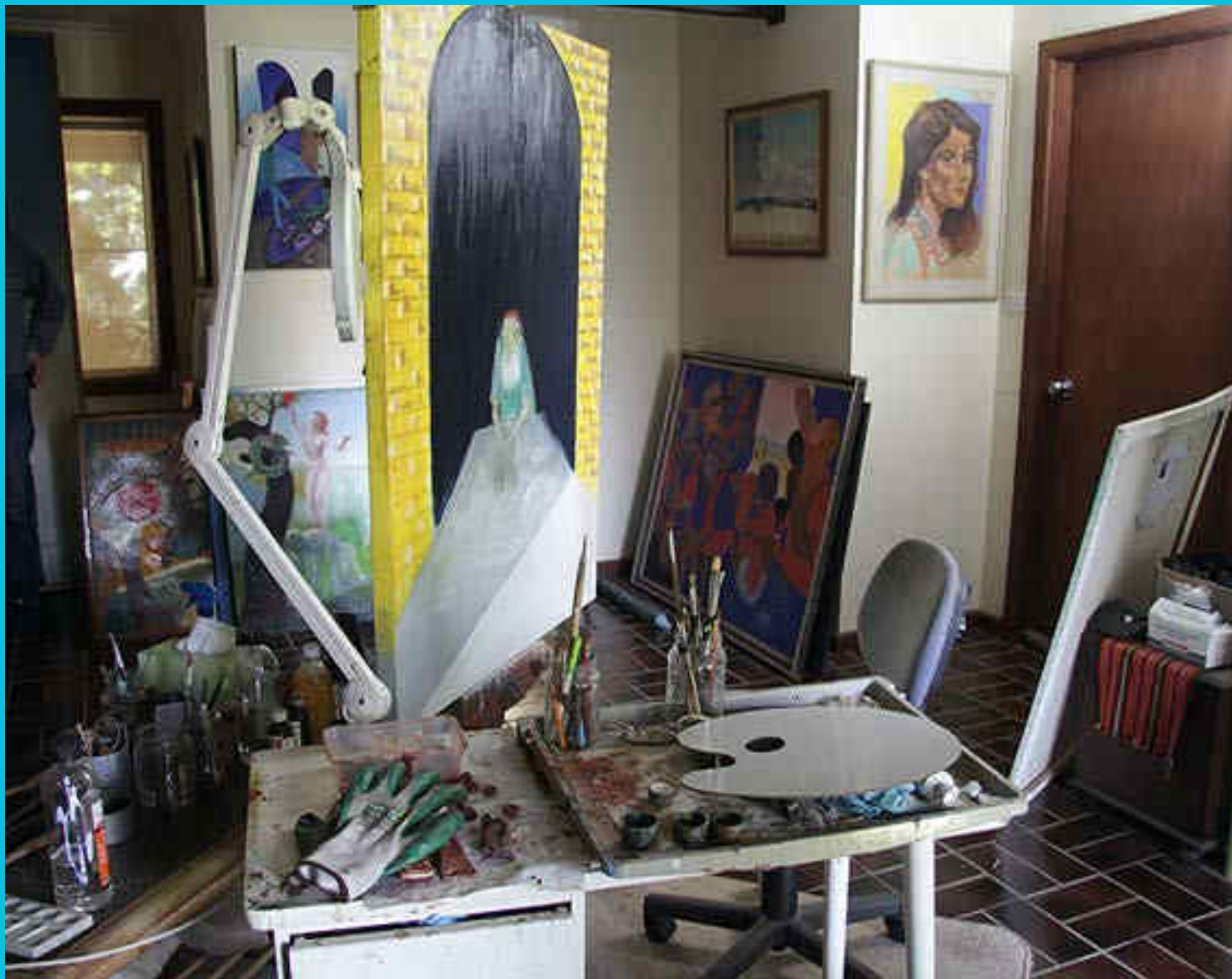
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Invitation to Ralph's exhibition at the Gosford Regional Gallery.

Chapter 4: A Selection of My Paintings



My studio, Killcare Heights, NSW.



SELF PORTRAIT AS A TOTEM POLE

This painting is not a conventional self-portrait, but more a visual biography of Ralph's life. He uses a totem pole as a medium to tell his story. The coat of arms of Poland is at the top of the totem, followed by the Mermaid coat of arms of Warsaw where he grew up. The monsters in the centre of the totem symbolise the horror of the German occupation in the Second World War, and near the bottom of the painting can be seen a huge stream of polish refugees fleeing their homeland. Lower down the totem, Ralph shows himself as an artist with pallet and brush, but at the bottom he is in a reverse, reclining position inferring his failure to achieve recognition for his work.

2360x900 oil on canvas
2007-2010 Killcare Heights, NSW

INFANT YOLANDA

Ralph witnessed his 3-year-old daughter dragging her rag doll by the neck across the floor, giving the impression of being in total control. The contrast of the limp doll with this tiny girl was irresistible and he felt the need to capture the scene; he completed it quickly in the form of this sketch. The features of Yolanda against a neutral background and the doll, dressed in red and blue clothes that adds a central splash of colour, makes a very evocative and cute composition. Ralph never intended this to be a painting for exhibition, but a record for him of the scene of his beautiful child showing an uninhibited gesture in recreation.



Roni and Nino1

RONI AND SON NINO

This is a triptych portrait of Roni (son-in-law) and Nino (Ralph's grandson) showing the sequence of time and Nino's early life. In this triptych, the progression of time from the left hand to right is not in sequence; this is often the case with triptychs, with the wing paintings being more dynamic and the central one static.

The painting above shows Nino sleeping on Roni's shoulder, completely oblivious to the world around him and Roni's expression showing both the concern and love of a parent. The background to the right is light and neutral highlighting Roni's face and expression while the left background, also neutral but darker adding to the impression that Nino is in deep slumber. The combination of Roni's hand and face emphasises the dependency and vulnerability of Nino as a baby.

915x910 oil on canvas 2018 Killcare Heights, NSW



Roni and Nino2

Nino, now a confident and self-aware boy. Ralph chose to show Nino's face floating against a darker, neutral background to reinforce the idea that he has reached a level of independence.



Roni and Nino3

Nino as a toddler, with the ability to move, play and learn by himself, but Roni is there making sure he is safe. Nino is shown darker in colour so that he is dominant in the painting, while Roni is lighter, blending into the background, but ever present.

FAMILY

In this family portrait, Ralph has achieved a very good likeness of all three subjects. He uses a complex palette working from dark to light, predominantly in one plane. His wife Rhonda and daughter Yolanda are lighter in the foreground while he is darker subtly receding into the background. He uses this technique to highlight their importance in his life. In the background is a skull and a skeletal hand on his shoulder emphasising the transitory nature of his life.



1630x1000 oil on canvas
1999 Killcare Heights, NSW



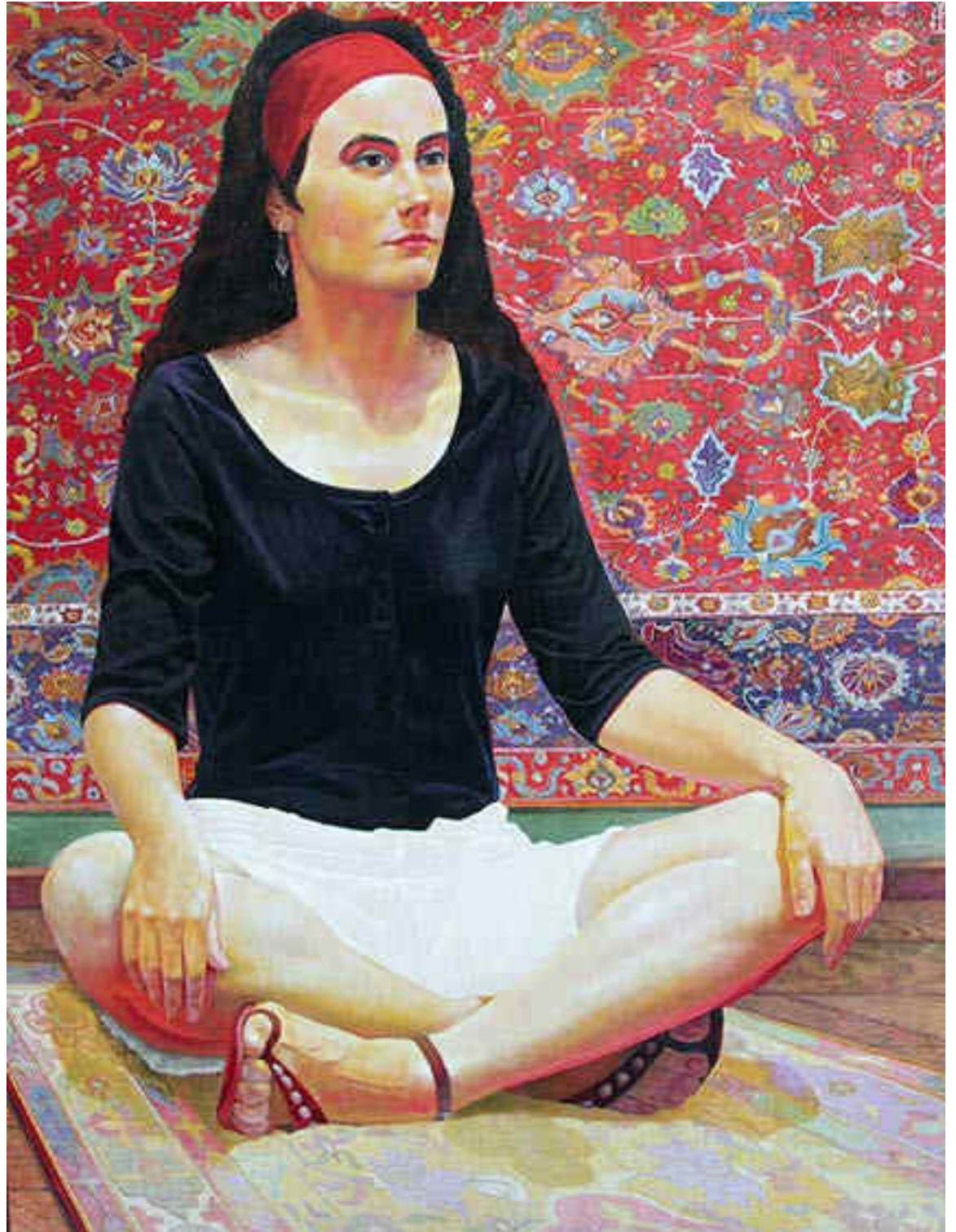
RHONDA

Ralph originally intended to enter this painting into the Archibald Prize, but decided against because most of the entries were celebrities or well-known personalities. A question he often poses to observers "Is Rhonda getting up or sitting down?" He uses a dark background to create focus on the subject as well as the complex fabric pattern on the chair. The cat is placed on the top of the chair to provide a degree of balance to the scene but specifically to provide an accent above the elaborate furniture pattern, similar to a full stop or an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence.

1260x920 oil on canvas
1999 Flagstone Creek, QLD

MEDITATING ISLAM PARADISE

Completed in 1988 after Ralph moved to Queensland and Yolanda had completed her B.Ed at UNSW. It shows her sitting in a yoga position, meditating in front of a large tapestry. The main feature is the Persian Islamic tapestry in the background. Its design is sacred, representing Islamic vision or *Jannah* and was unknown in the West until the mid 18th century. The original carpet is in the Louvre, is very large and spectacular. There is no repetitive pattern and the designers used hashish to help develop their Islamic vision.



1160x900 oil on canvas
1988 Flagstone, QLD



DOMINANCE

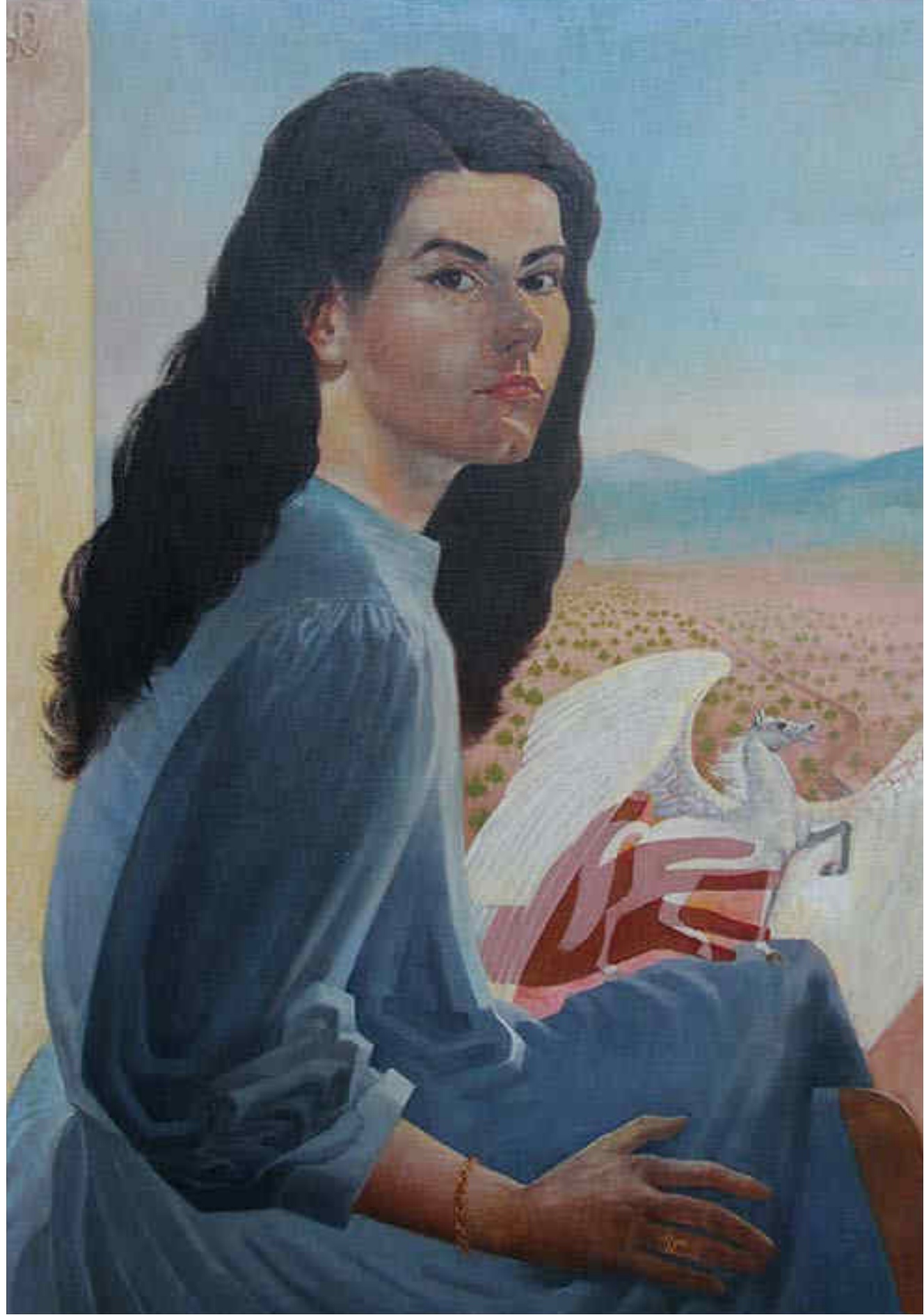
This composition is about dominance especially in a relationship between male and female. In this work, the female is clearly dominant with her high heel on the male's head, while the male is submissive and is protecting his genitals in fear of what is next. Ralph chose to show the female as dominant though, more often, it is the other way around with domestic violence perpetrated by the male. A neutral background is used to add focus to the theme of relationship dominance and submission.

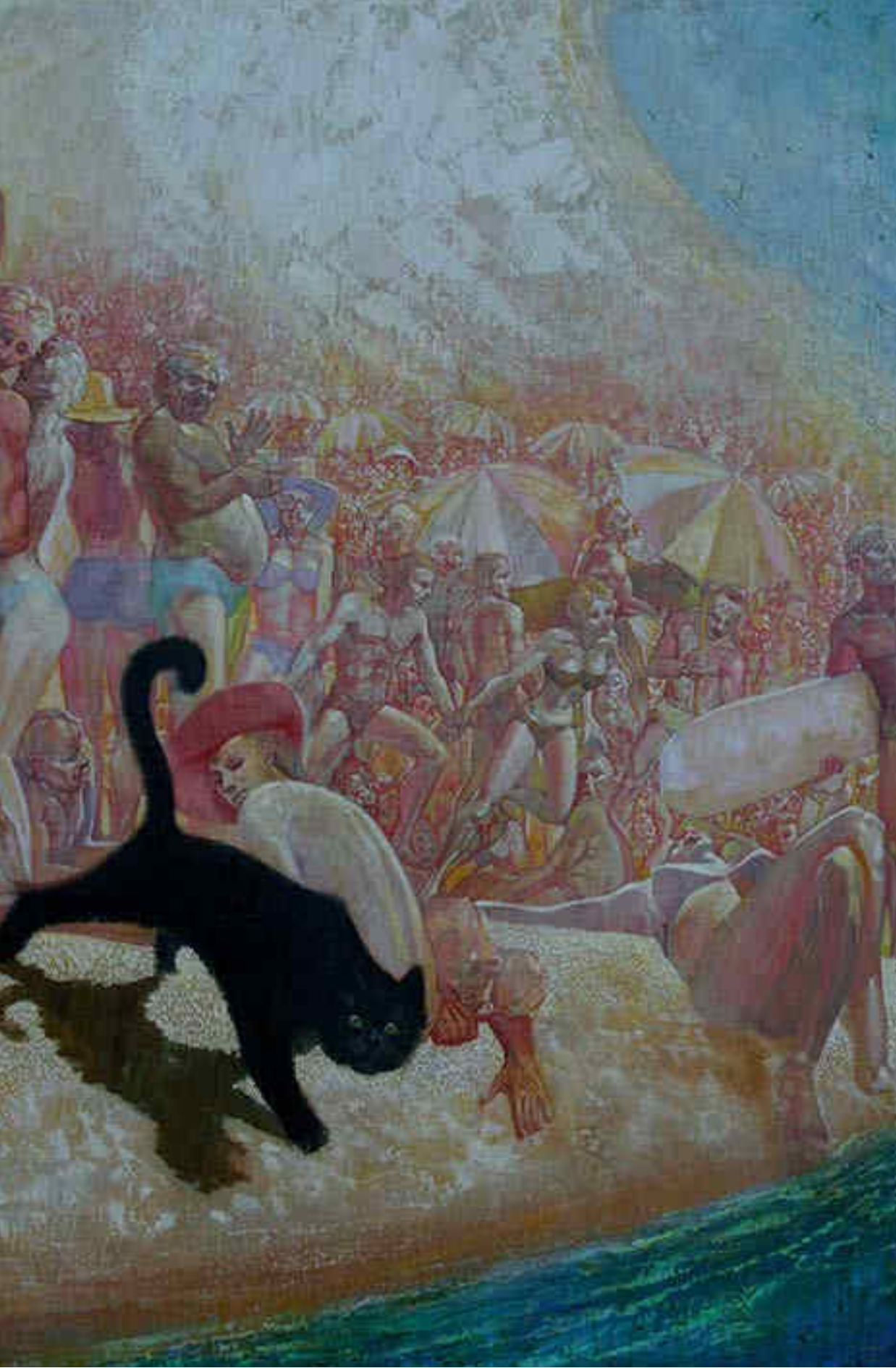
940x625 oil on canvas
2012 Killcare Heights, NSW

YOLANDA WITH PEGASUS

Yolanda at 19. She had just completed her training as a mezzo soprano at the Conservatorium of Music, Sydney and was about to begin a career with Opera Australia - enter the Pegasus. Yolanda is riding Pegasus, the winged horse in Greek mythology that gives inspiration to poets and musicians. Yolanda soars against the lighter backdrop of the Australian outback, which not only emphasises her presence, but also added depth to the scene. The symbol in the top left corner is an 'R' for Ralph.

1000x740 oil on canvas
1984 Forestville, Sydney





THE OUTSIDER

In this painting, Ralph captures the sentiment that we have felt at sometime the sense of not quite fitting in. He uses a visual metaphor featuring a solitary black cat. Against a backdrop of families and friends enjoying beach activities and laughter, the black cat stands apart – out of place, beyond its comfort zone, and unnoticed, embodying the concept of an outsider. Ralph employs warm and vibrant hues in the beach scene to accentuate the visual contrast between the revellers and the black cat who is clearly out of place on a beach, treading carefully, looking for a way out. This portrayal prompts viewers to reflect on the relatable experience of feeling like an outsider. According to Ralph, the image of a black cat on a beach epitomises the extreme sense of being out of sync with one's surroundings.

920x630 oil on canvas
2005 Killcare Heights, NSW



OVER INDULGENCE

This is a contemporary still life painting, or so it seems, which is an unusual subject for Ralph. It looks like there is an abundance of food and drink, but this interpretation is left very much to the viewer. The table is brightly lit and dominates the scene, yet poking out below the table in the darkness and shadows is the head of a person. Are they sleeping, drunk, unwell or suffering from self-inflicted over indulgence?

900x1200 oil on canvas
1993 Flackstone Creek, QLD



SELF PORTRAIT, INSPIRED BY INGMAR BERGMAN

This self-portrait is a gesture of appreciation of the famous film *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman. In the film, a medieval knight returns from the crusades during the Black Death plague and plays chess with the Grim Reaper seeking answers about life, death and the existence of God. There is a total of 32 pieces in the game of chess, and there are 32 scenes of conflict in the freeze behind his portrait that represent the many wars that mankind has created over the centuries. Ralph's dog also features in the work because, according to legend, dogs can see death. The 3 chess pieces on the board represent Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism, perhaps to raise the question of what role religion plays in conflict. The background pattern on the wall is reminiscent of the cracked clay in the Australian Outback.

1580x1300 oil on canvas
1982 Forestville, Sydney



ALADDIN'S LAMP

This work is a reference to the book *1001 Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales. At the time of painting, it was Ralph's belief that *1001 Nights* was the only book aside from the *Quran* that was available for reading in Islamic countries. The painting depicts tourists who are naïve, overweight and Anglo-Saxon, being shown Aladdin's lamp in a large cave but, in reality, are being lured to their death by middle eastern, heavily armed fanatics. The light changes as they enter the cave and the different light and dark pallets define the change in mood, gives depth and a 3D illusion of the vast cave. The addition of a real brass lamp reinforces the reference to the story of Aladdin's Lamp.

920x1340 oil on canvas

1994 Forestville, Sydney



SUMMER HEAT

In the scorching summer of 1969, Ralph aimed to convey the intense heat of this work through hues of red, yellow and white. Depicting female nudes leisurely lounging in the sweltering warmth amplifies the sensation of the summer heat. The central figure, notably flushed with red, appears as if the heat is embracing her entire body, intensifying the overall impression of the blistering atmosphere.

603x895 oil on canvas

1969 Forestville, Sydney



AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This is a self-portrait that records Ralph's life from birth to death. In the top right corner is the family home and estate in Poland where he was born. His father is standing in the doorway. On the left side of the roof is a wheel, a tradition in Poland to encourage storks to nest. His early childhood is shown with his mother, drawn from a photo taken when he was 3 years old. He starts school and he is wearing the school uniform up to when the war starts and when he joins the Polish resistance at the age of 15. He wasn't captured otherwise he would have been executed, but he and his family were rounded up, like many others, and sent to various concentration camps. The blue striped clothes with his concentration camp number is visible. In 1950, he migrated to Australia where he finally settled and started to work, paint, marry his wife Rhonda and have a daughter Yolanda. The final portrait is of Ralph at the end of his life. Interestingly, the painting was completed when he was in his early 40s (shown wearing a red jumper) and is a remarkable likeness to how he now looks at age 96.

900x1530 oil on canvas

1978 Forestville, Sydney

DON QUIXOTE

Don Quixote, written by Miguel de Cervantes, was one of the first books read by Ralph at the age of 5, and remains one of his favourites. In this painting, Don Quixote is wearing a brass barber's shaving bowl that he stole from a barber who was using it to cover his head in the rain (Don Quixote thought it was the mythical Mambrino's enchanted helmet that would make him invulnerable). Ralph uses blue and yellow hues to create strong facial features which contrast beautifully with the orange of his brass helmet and scarf. He portrays Don Quixote as sombre but determined in his mission to protect the helpless and defeat the wicked. His striking, penetrating blue eyes suggest an underlying kindness, but also his distorted perception of reality.

700x440 oil on canvas
1974 Forestville, Sydney





WORSHIP

The silhouetted figure represents all humanity. Ralph depicts religions through images of human religious practice. Starting with “the religion of the head”, a practitioner deep in meditation followed by two “religions of the heart”- a Buddhist and a Christian in worship. The final figure is in devout mortification to demonstrate their sincerity and worthiness to join God. The hands of the silhouetted figure are positioned to form the Mudra, a symbolic gesture of greeting and respect in Tibet and other Hindu and Buddhist countries. Ralph uses it to represent the transition from Earth to Heaven.

920x730 oil on canvas

1987 Forestville, Sydney



MICHAEL KLIM DUALITY

Polish born, multi-awarded Australian swimmer Michael Klim OAM. This painting aims to accentuate his duality i.e. the “swimming warrior” and the dress-conscious dandy, as out of the pool he gained a reputation for always being well dressed and debonair. Ralph is contrasting the two sides of Michael Klim: he shows the “swimming warrior” as light and bright, against the “dress-conscious dandy” as dark, looking intently.

1470x850 oil on canvas

2000 Killcare Heights, NSW



RED CENTRE

After a 3-month trip around Australia with his wife Rhonda, Ralph was inspired by the enormity of the Red Centre, with its horizon stretching out over the flat, harsh land dissected by the long, straight Sturt Highway. The land seems mostly empty of life with only sparse vegetation visible, yet life is there, hidden from sight and protecting itself from the harsh sun bearing down. In contrast, two Aborigines survey the land seeming oblivious to the harsh environment.

720x1200 oil on hardboard

2008 Killcare Heights, NSW



CONCERN

Ralph attended the Melbourne Technical College to take the opportunity to paint a portrait of a reclining nude using a live model. He decided to use the portrait in an Egyptian scene in a later painting in which a female is shown as seriously ill, maybe on her death bed. She is painted in dark, bold colours on red and blue bedding against a light, misty background. In the mist, there are two concerned people in attendance: one who is deeply distressed with head bent praying to the gods, while the other is likely to be a priest or *hem-netjar*, praying for her return to good health, or her safe transition to the afterlife. In the background are the Pyramids – perhaps she is of royal lineage and the Pyramids are waiting for her? Ralph doesn't see this work as one of his best paintings, but it is one of his early Australian works and shows his considerable artistic skill and imagination.

1040x1030 oil on canvas

1958 Toorak, VIC, completed 1968, Forestville, NSW



DEATH OF A MIGRANT

Ralph is fascinated by ancient Greek religion and mythology. In this painting, he shows Thanatos, the God of death, helping a migrant die peacefully. The migrant's arms are extended out as if he is welcoming death. Thanatos is carrying a large scythe inferring that he has the power to decide on the form of death, whether it is to be peaceful or violent. In the background are scenes of the migrant's life. On the left is the country, probably in Europe, from where he came, with a cooler climate and green grass. On the right is the country to where he migrated, a dry, hot climate, perhaps Australia, with his native wife and family. The dead migrant is also shown, but just his bare feet, while the dog is looking intently. It is said that dogs can see death.



ESSENCE AND PERSONALITY

A favourite painting of Ralph's it is based on his idea that all humans are born with 'essence', like that of a small child.: friendliness, openness, trusting, sincerity, and kindness. These traits remain with us all our life, however from early childhood we start to develop a personality that is formed from our life experiences and our environment. This is true during our formative years and can start as a type of self-defence. Personality examples are: suspicion, hostility, ego, arrogance and dominance. This painting shows the duality of the human psyche with images of children playing blissfully together (essence), which is in stark contrast to the fierce and fighting adults (personality).

1200x1000 oil on canvas 2012 Killcare Heights, NSW



IDEAL - IDOL WORSHIP

The idolisation of pop stars reached a crescendo in the 1960s when mass teenage female hysteria was so loud that the music couldn't be heard! In this painting, Ralph represents this extreme and futile adoration, even worship, by showing just one fan throwing herself at the feet of the pop star. The inspiration stemmed from watching a Mick Jagger concert on television. While not a fan of that genre of music, Ralph found the sight of the predominantly female audience confronting. The guitarist is giving an animated performance silhouetted against the bright lights of the stage. The energy and music emanate, a female fan, depicted nude, kisses the pop star's leg, illustrating his influence and her vulnerable surrender.

980x800 oil on canvas 1996 Killcare Heights, NSW



ADAM AND EVE AT THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

In this semi-abstract painting, the inspiration came from biblical teachings about the tree of knowledge. The revelation that God initially intended humans to live for eternity, only to be forfeited due to Adam and Eve's disobedience, deeply affected Ralph. Eve is depicted standing atop Adam's back, her hand reaching for the forbidden fruit. The snake, embodying the Devil, coils around the tree of life, urging Eve to partake in disobedience. Adam is shown as an unwilling participant, suggesting Eve's dominance.

1000x765 oil on canvas
1959 Toorak, VIC, completed 1960, Toronto, Canada



TEMPTATION OF EVE

This work is a slightly facetious slant on the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The Devil, in the guise of a serpent, persuades Adam and Eve to try the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. So, Eve climbs on to Adam's back to reach the fruit that God had forbidden them to eat. Ralph is fascinated by the female form and thinks this is an interesting representation of the female body. He did not intend there to be any hidden meaning in this work, it is just a bit of play on the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

900x600 oil on canvas
2008 Killcare Heights, NSW



IF

Ralph explains that this painting was an experiment in absurdity. The subject of the painting is a female crucifixion, unusual, but the inclusion of Bing Crosby, a fashion model and two nuns in the audience makes the scene absurd. He emphasises that the content is artistic humour, a joke and it is not intended to be taken seriously or cause offence. Moving past the subject matter and humour, the scene is dramatic with a dark and angry sky background. The female and the cross are light against the dark background to give them prominence. They are angled across the scene to create movement against the static sky.

1220x580 oil on hardboard
1998 Killcare Heights, NSW



CRUCIFIXION

During the Second World War, Ralph and his family were interned in the concentration camps. Life was indescribably harrowing and cruel. In this painting, he relates the misery of crucifixion to the life in the camp and, more importantly, the role religion played in offering hope to the prisoners. The blue striped pattern with a yellow star, denotes Jewish prisoners, rising up to the condemned person on the cross. Amongst the pain and misery, there is a gleam of light wafting from his right hand offering the faithful a 'ray of hope'. The cross is leaning to the right while the blue coloured shafts in the background are leaning to the left which adds a dynamic dimension to an otherwise dystopian image.

990x1220 oil on canvas

1998 Killcare Heights, NSW



RACISM

Ralph wanted to create a painting that contrasts the resentment of the black, under-privileged society against that of the white and privileged. He shows a black face with minimal detail except for a glaring eye directed at a white man, who is immaculately dressed, large nose pointed in the air, eyes closed and hands clasping his jacket in a stance that displays his superior, uncaring demeanour that was a characteristic of white, upper-class snobbery.

450x590 oil on hardboard

2003 Killcare Heights, NSW

BLACK AND WHITE

Ralph explores the intriguing interplay of black and white in a composition that seeks to amplify their contrast, merging them seamlessly as if they are an indivisible entity.

The stark disparity between these diametrically opposed colours is evident – black, stemming from the absence of light, and white, emanating from the fusion of all colours. With a penchant for controversy, Ralph deliberately creates a dramatic juxtaposition of black and white figures. The composition suggests a dominance of the white figure, yet it is not intended as a provocative assertion. Instead, it subtly prompts viewers to pose subliminal questions and engage in contemplation.



1100x860 oil on canvas
2003 Killcare Heights, NSW



SADNESS

Ralph had been living with considerable sadness at this time of his life which he expresses in this work. Sadness is immediately felt from the symbolic lowering of the head in submission, the red tear from the eye and the hand cradling the head. The sadness is further accentuated by the light, almost white background above the fraught, broken figure. The scene doesn't only express the individual's dire melancholy, but the painting has an aura of sadness and grief. It is the simple design of this composition that increases the effectiveness of the concept of sadness.

910x810 oil on canvas
2011 Killcare Heights, NSW

FAMILY OF MIGRANTS

Ralph came to Australia as a migrant refugee in 1950 after the second world war. Australia has one of the highest migrant populations by percentage in the world. In this painting, he uses a cubist style to depict a family arriving in Australia as part of the family reunion programme. The eldest son, an ex-Australian Army veteran, has sponsored his mother, father and young sister. He is carrying their luggage, and his army background is inferred from the camouflage colours used. The mother and father are shown inclined forward suggesting their gratitude to be reunited with their son and starting their new life in Australia, while the infant sister is looking around with young innocence at her new surroundings. Ralph had considered doing a series of paintings of migrants from different parts of the world, but it didn't eventuate.

910x610 oil on hardboard
1985 Forestville, Sydney





TEMPTATION OF JESUS

The idea for this painting came from Titian called *The Temptation of Christ* in which Jesus was being tempted by the devil while in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. The setting is in a concentration camp, where the currency was bread. Jesus is being tempted by fellow inmates. Incidentally, the number on Jesus' clothing is part of Ralph's concentration camp number, the bread struck to the painting is over 35 years old, and the black and white colour plus the barbed wire add a brutal reality to the scene.

1000x750 charcoal in oil on hardboard
1987 Flagstone Creek, QLD

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

This painting is an exercise in absurdity where Ralph lets his imagination go wild. He shows a criminal who has been caught by a strange creature that is half tiger, half human with wings, and acts as the captor, judge, jury, and executioner all in one. At the bottom of the painting is another participant who is on a swing seeming to be enjoying the spectacle of the hanging. The strange creature also has its tail on the rope and hand pulling on the criminal's leg. As ludicrous and strange as this may seem, public executions were common in Europe in by-gone centuries and were often seen as an entertainment (public executions still continue in other parts of the world). It was also true that relatives of the condemned would pull on their legs to help give a quick death.



940x625 oil on canvas
2008 Killcare Heights, NSW



LAW OF THE JUNGLE

In this work, Ralph comments on the merciless brutality of man to man. This behaviour is often accompanied by the charade of legality, but it is pure terrorism. Known as the necklace, this form of brutal assassination has been used indiscriminately in African conflicts as a means of creating fear and subjugation in the local population.

1070x850 oil on canvas
1987 Forestville, Sydney



ECOLOGY - FOOD CHAIN

In this work, Ralph is illustrating the continuity of, and connections between, what we eat, as well as the exchange of energy between species - known as the food chain. It also reflects on the transition of our world from the beginning, represented by the serene, pure and biblical garden of Eden, to the present, showing overpopulation, industry, billions of cars and pollution. The North Star and the Southern Cross are visible in the night sky meaning this is happening across the world.

1140x1170 oil on canvas

2009 Killcare Heights, NSW



HAPPY HOUR

This painting was submitted in the Sulman Prize in 2017. We think of happy hour as the time after work when people can relax and enjoy themselves. However, it probably derives from the time of the '6 o'clock swill' when licensing laws prohibited the sale of alcohol after 6pm. Ralph shows workers crowded into a pub and drinking as much as they can before closing-time. He has used dark colours for the inside of the pub and the drinker's clothes are similarly dark and seem to merge together creating a sombre, tense atmosphere. In contrast, outside it is bright, sunny, overlooking a beach and leaves an impression of family and happiness. At the doorway is an Aboriginal peeking in, knowing he is not welcome. Ralph is alluding to racial discrimination that still persists today.

1100x1300 oil on canvas

2017 Killcare Heights, NSW

CLOWN AND BALLERINA

The idea for this work first came from Hans Christian Anderson who used paper cuts to entertain guests at dinner. The clown and ballerina idea continued to be used by others in fairy stories, songs, paintings and even choral works. Ralph shows a dominant, almost larger than life, clown face with highly exaggerated make-up that he used to emphasize the importance of the face. In the background is a ballerina with minimal colour and luminosity that gives the composition a strong contrast from dark to the light foreground. His daughter was studying at the Conservatorium of Music at the time and he used her image as the Ballerina.



900x600 oil on hardboard
2016 Kiillcare Heights, NSW



SURGEON FROM WARSAW

Ralph's good friend Maciek in his surgeon's gear. They grew up together in Poland and fought in the underground resistance during the Second World War. The bear in the left-hand below corner represents Russia while the other images have personal meaning for the two friends. Maciek became a surgeon in Warsaw and died at the age of 90. Ralph has used bright colours to create focus on him and depth against the background. His face conveys kindness and confidence and his surgeon's hands are prominent. This painting was actually painted for Maciek, but before he could send it to him, it was sold by the Mosman Gallery, much to his displeasure. Incidentally, it was sold to a lady from Balmoral who was a secretary to Winston Churchill. When she died, the painting came up for sale and was bought by Yolanda, Ralph's daughter, and given back to him as a surprise Christmas present.

1000x750 oil on canvas
1997 Killcare Heights, NSW



REGISTRAR AT UTS

This painting was a finalist in the Archibald Prize in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1973. Mr J W McMillan, BSc, BA, MEngSc, MA was the registrar at the Institute of Technology, Ralph's employer. He was well qualified, very capable and he managed the day to day running of the University. He was involved in the expansion of the Institute which became the University of Technology in 1990. Ralph compares Mr McMillan to the butler, in a French household, who takes overall responsibility for its smooth operation. He alludes to this in the French butler motif in the top right hand corner. This portrait captures McMillan's inner strength, composure and confidence. His oversized hands denotes his capacity for hard work. The background is in shades of blue, representing the blue print for the three towers, which was part of his vision for the future of the University. The background is flat, without depth or shadows because it represents his ideas. Only one tower was built at that time because the University did not have the funds to purchase the additional land required.



PORTRAIT OF A SCIENTIST

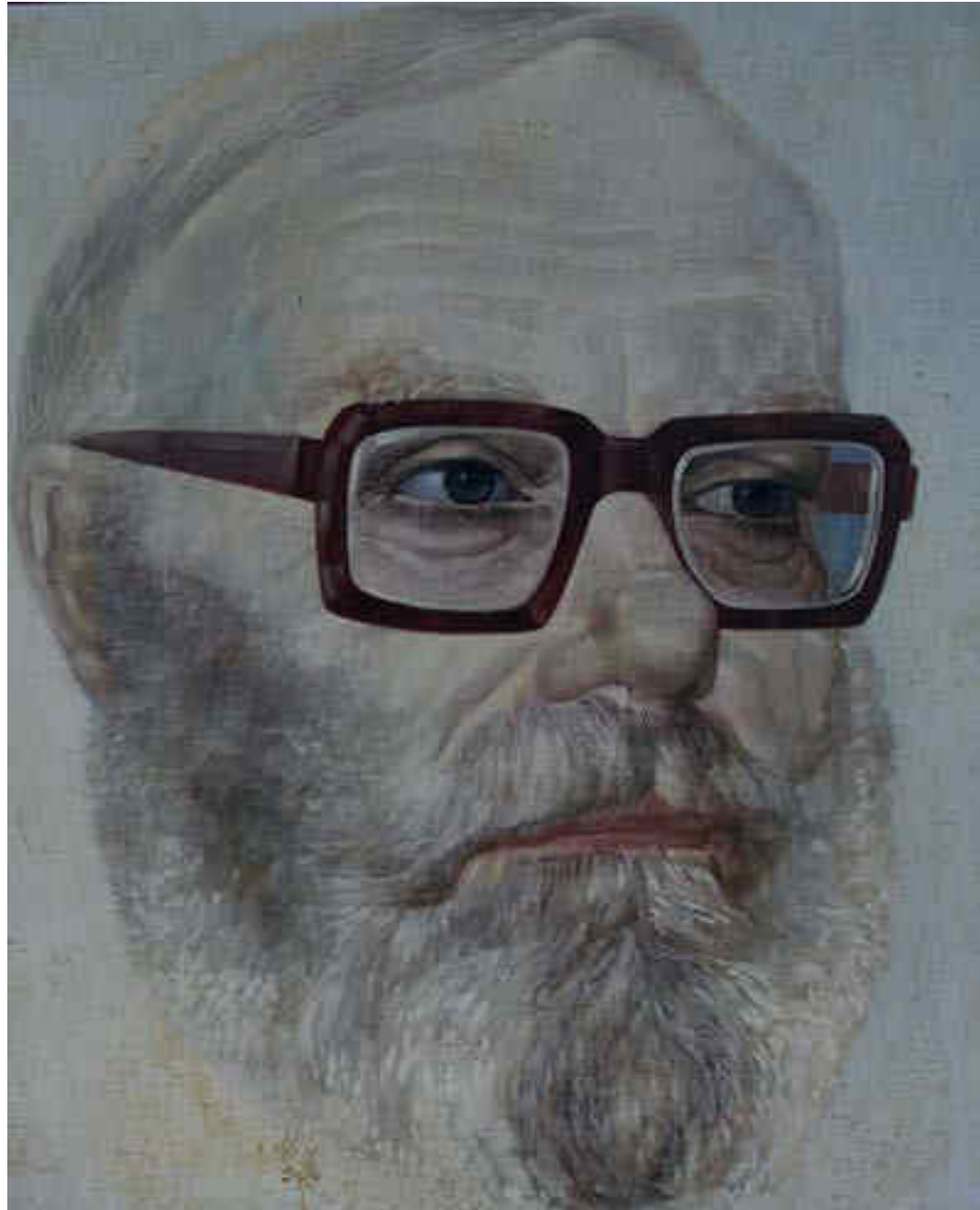
This impressive portrait of the Chancellor of the Institute of Technology (now UTS) was painted during the time that Ralph worked there. The Chancellor is in full formal University regalia and he is a PhD in chemistry. Ralph refers to his chemistry background by showing a spectral pattern, the output from a spectrophotometer, between his hands. A spectrophotometer is an instrument used in chemical analysis. To further accentuate the importance of the Chancellor and the Institute, Ralph paints the spectrum powerfully emanating from his hands. It was Ralph's intention to enter it in the Archibald Prize, however permission was not granted.

1500x900 oil on canvas
1980 Forestville, Sydney

MAYOR OF SYDNEY

Ralph submitted this painting as part of a tryptic entry into the Archibald Prize, although it didn't secure a spot as a finalist. Despite this, Ralph takes satisfaction in the portrait, particularly emphasising the face within the composition.

The subject was the interim Mayor of Sydney, depicted by Ralph in a meditative pose. The Mayor is characterised by kindness and intrigue and occupies the entire canvas, inviting viewers to be captivated by the painting.



910x760 oil on canvas
Killcare Heights, NSW



DREAMLAND

Tn interesting experiment in semi-abstract art where Ralph shows the withdrawal from reality when sleeping as we drift into dreamland. Reality has no place in this composition. It is strictly an arrangement of light and dark where the viewer is free to give it meaning. This work invites us to contemplate what happens to us when we enter dreamland. Look carefully and you might discover what she is dreaming about.

890x590 oil on hardboard
1996 Killcare Heights, NSW

*“My life has truly
been one of
Time and Chance”.*
Ralph Podolski

