

To be eligible volunteers must be aged 17 years or over, with no age limit as long as they can physically do the work.

"The oldest volunteer I met was a 94-year-old American lady who was fit and healthy and was given a sitting job."

Since 1983 more than 160,000 volunteers from around the world have paid their own way to come to Israel to work on Israeli military bases through the Sar-el program.

Werner kept detailed diaries from all his trips to Israel which provided the basis for his books.

"I started keeping diaries from my first trip. At the end of the day we would be tired from the

manual labour and activities, but I would stay up for an hour or two so that I could write my notes," he recalled.

"When I got back home I typed them up and sent them to the volunteers that I had served with, who thought it was great and suggested that I compile them into a book.

"The greatest source of satisfaction I derived from my first book was the number of people who contacted me to say that reading it had motivated them to become Sar-el volunteers."

A Passion For Israel was printed in Israel and published by Gefen.

Taking volunteering to the next level

IT was during a trip to Israel last year to volunteer for manual labour on a military base – organised by Sar-el – that Tammy Graeve heard about a vacancy in the organisation's Australian office.

After returning home to Melbourne in May she made some enquiries and last November became an Australian ambassador for the organisation, sharing the role with Rabbi Pesach Steinberg.

"Sar-el is a heartfelt program which allows people to help Israel in a meaningful way, giving back more than money," said Graeve.

Since Sar-el was established in 1983 it has had more than 160,000 volunteers from the Diaspora. In the past decade this total has included more than 60 people a year from Australia.

Graeve spent two weeks volunteering on a medical supply base near Tel Aviv. Leaving her family at home and travelling solo, she joined about 30 volunteers from countries including Britain, America, Canada and South Africa.

"It was a wonderful opportunity to make memories and friendships that last a lifetime," she said.

"There's no vigorous army training and no physical fitness is required, but it is not a five-star experience. Your day starts at 6am and each morning the Israeli flag was raised and everyone sang the *Hatikvah*.

"It was such a special and empowering moment to be standing in army fatigues,



Tammy Graeve starting her day on an Israeli base with a flag-raising ceremony.

singing together. I forgot about the lack of amenities and focused on the sense of fulfilment and gratitude of donating our time and effort to Israel.

"All of us volunteers keep in touch on Facebook and talk about a reunion in a year or two when we can all meet in Israel."

On the base the volunteers were responsible for sorting and packing medical products for Israeli soldiers.

"It was an easy task but we were reminded of the seriousness of our job. Imagine a soldier working, and desperately needing a syringe or gloves, reaches into his backpack and finds it missing," she explained.

"We made sure the packs were all packed correctly. They needed to be checked and rechecked as there was no room for error."

For more information visit www.sarelaustralia.com

LIVE ZOOM SHOWS

Lockdown entertainment for kids

DANNY GOCS

WHEN stage four COVID-19 restrictions started in Melbourne, mother of two young children Em Lewin came up with an idea to help parents keep their kids entertained during lockdown.

She set up Skits & Giggles, a one-stop shop with live Zoom shows ranging from puppet shows and magic to storytime and science, that are free or at low cost, presented by some of Melbourne's top kids' entertainers.

The shows cater for kids aged from one-and-a-half years to 12 and are designed to help working parents and home-schooling parents get through lockdown.

"It took me two days to set up and within two weeks there were more than 700 families booking from Melbourne, country regions, interstate and even a family in Hong Kong," said Lewin, who has worked in retail marketing for the past 15 years and is currently between jobs.

"Parents know that there are some live entertainment options and solutions available to them during lockdown."

The former Beth Rivkah Ladies College graduate is also the administrator of a Facebook page for Jewish babysitters and nannies.

"When stage four hit, every-



Enjoying live entertainment with Skits & Giggles.

one in the babysitters and nannies group freaked out about getting help and that's when I came up with the idea for Skits & Giggles," said Lewin.

"I ran some polls of parents asking them what they wanted and they came back with ideas that were educational and entertaining. Then I looked for suitable performers.

"Skits & Giggles is a one-stop shop with a full day's worth of shows that are suitable for their kids' age group."

Among the most popular shows are those by Alex the Magician, musician Jonathan Skovron and Morah Robin's Shabbat party live from New York.

"The entertainers have learned how to use Zoom really well and make their shows interactive, so kids get a personalised experience. It's very different to watching a Netflix show," said Lewin.

"I'm doing this voluntarily as a response to stage four to help get everyone through it while kids are stuck at home.

"I love doing it, but I also have young kids at home and can't continue it full time."

Once stage four restrictions are eased, Lewin plans to return to work as a marketing manager.

For more information and bookings on Skits & Giggles, visit trybooking.com/BKVEE

BOOKS

Exposing the role of 'ordinary' Nazis



NICOLAS BRASCH

AMONG the many books that recently landed on my desk at the Melbourne Jewish Book Week (MJBW) is *The SS Officer's Armchair* by Daniel Lee. Lee came upon the subject of his book quite by accident. He had never heard of Robert Griesinger, an SS officer, but then nor had almost anyone else, other than Griesinger's family. And that's the point of this story.

In tracking down what he could about Griesinger and his prewar and wartime activities, Lee became obsessed with the role of 'ordi-

nary' Nazis during this time. We follow Lee's trail of detection over several years and become familiar with Griesinger's descendants, just as Lee does.

We learn about the minutiae of an ordinary Nazi officer's life, both at work and at home. Yet the scale of what was happening outside the windows is never far from our minds. Lee's persistence, extensive research and master storytelling make *The SS Officer's Armchair* a standout read.

Melbourne writer Leon Silver's admiration and affection for his father-in-law, Tolek (Ted) Klings permeates in his book *The Miracle Typist* and it's clear Tolek would not have entrusted his remarkable life story to anyone else.

Tolek joins the Polish Army to fight the Nazis, then traverses much of Europe and the Middle East. We share Tolek's curiosity (and ignorance) about the political and military events of the time, and as Tolek wonders about the fate of his family, so do we.

I have three copies of Anne Freedman's *Holding On and Holding Out* to give away, which I will be doing at MJBW's next online event – Paul Valent in conversation with Rachael Kohn on Tuesday, September 8. It's free but you need to register at www.melbournejewishbookweek.com.au.

Nicolas Brasch is festival director of the Melbourne Jewish Book Week. His column appears monthly.



'We love to talk books in a city that loves to read them'

Melbourne Jewish Book Week brings the literary world to you, all year round

Live virtual interviews with Q&A

Curated literary events

Book club discussions and live interviews with local and international authors, playwrights and more

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