



Secrets agent

Anita Jacoby spent 35 years telling other people's stories all over the world – before she used her investigative journalist skills to uncover the many long-held secrets buried deeply within her own family.

Story by **Rosamund Burton**

Life Stories

One morning in 2013, award-winning television producer Anita Jacoby got out of Bilgola Beach ocean pool after her morning swim to find a gilt-edge notebook and a handwritten note from a local resident, Alf Lindberg, on her beach towel.

"In this book you can jot down your thoughts and observations on Places, People, Happenings and Adventures. I feel one day you will write a book about it all."

It had never crossed Anita's mind to write a book, but several months later, her husband John Cary and she were at a family dinner party. Anita had just been appointed managing director of the Australian operations of Britain's ITV Studios, one of few women to be appointed to such a senior role in media.

"I so wish Dad was still around to see me in charge of a company as big as ITV. He would have been so proud," Anita said. She had been very close to her father, Phillip Jacoby, and had an unshakeable bond with him. The table fell silent and

then someone asked Anita if she knew about the infamous court case in the early 1950s involving her father.

Anita knew nothing about it, and the question was a turning point for her. She had been a producer on many popular programs including *60 Minutes*, *Sunday* and *Today*. More recently she had worked with Andrew Denton as executive producer on *Enough Rope* and *The Gruen Transfer*. She had told stories about Sir David Attenborough, Bill Clinton, Jane Fonda and Princess Mary, to name a few. But now, having spent 35 years telling other people's stories, she used her investigative journalist skills to find out about her own family history. It was the start of a nine-year project and the publication of her page-turning book, *'Secrets Beyond the Screen'*.

She knew her father was a German political refugee, and because of his part-Jewish ancestry, he was forced to flee Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s. He had arrived alone and penniless in Australia, before becoming a pioneer in Australia's

communications industry and an extremely successful businessman.

Anita's mother Josephine Horak was a Russian-Czech born in Manchuria and also a political refugee. They married in 1954; Anita and her younger brother Karl were brought up by parents who focused on looking forward and seizing opportunities, rather than dwelling on their turbulent pasts. The family lived at Killara on Sydney's North Shore, but always had strong ties to Pittwater.

Anita was only 18 months old when the Jacoby's first stayed in prominent artist Sali Herman's son Ted's home on three acres in Chisholm Avenue at Avalon Beach. Phillip and Josephine Jacoby were enchanted by Pittwater and in 1964 they bought an old cottage overlooking Paradise Beach. From then on, the family spent their holidays and most weekends there. At every opportunity, Anita was in the ocean either swimming, bodysurfing or riding a surfboard.

She was the apple of her father's eye,

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JULY 2022

and the two of them spent hours most weekends in his study.

"He would challenge my opinions and stimulate my intellect and encourage me to believe that anything in life was possible." He encouraged her to question the status quo, and instilled in her the belief that as a young woman she could do anything she dreamt of.

Anita's first job was for Paul Hamlyn publishers before she moved to *The Australian Women's Weekly* (working under editor Ita Buttrose), before she landed her first role in television as a researcher on *Simon Townsend's Wonder World!*

Aged 19, Anita moved into the holiday house at Paradise Beach, and Avalon has been her home ever since.

In the mid-'80s she bought a captain's cottage where she lived for more than 30 years, until four years ago when she and husband John moved into their current home overlooking Pittwater.

"I've travelled all over the world and made multiple trips every year for work, and every time I return and go around Bilgola Bends I feel a sense of calm. I have never found anywhere as beautiful as this area," she says, "and there is such a

strong community here."

This vivacious woman has had a stellar career in television. In 1987 Anita was headhunted from TEN's *Good Morning Australia* to work on the *Today Show*, Nine's breakfast program. At the time the station was very much a 'boys club'. She worked on *Today* for nearly three years as the 2IC and to her frustration three times had been passed over for the top role of executive producer, despite essentially doing that job.

Her father mentored her through her disappointment, advising her not to put up with the entrenched misogyny she was encountering, or be afraid of taking a risk, so she resigned. Two days later she was offered a position as associate producer on *60 Minutes*, which in the late '80s was Australia's highest-rating television show. It was an opportunity she could not turn down.

In 1990, a horrific motorbike accident almost ended Anita's career.

Riding as a pillion passenger on the family farm in Boggabri in north-western NSW, Anita lost her balance while travelling over an uneven cattle grid. Her right leg became entangled in the back wheel,

causing traumatic life-threatening injuries and a critical loss of blood.

At Tamworth Hospital, doctors had to amputate her leg below the knee.

Now this fit young woman faced the reality that for the rest of her life she would not only be in constant pain, but forced to live with a prosthetic leg.

Her father was devastated.

Anita was determined that her life and all that she would achieve was not going to be defined by her disability.

She has seldom shared the story of what happened to her, and only included it in the book because she believes it was a contributor to her father's Alzheimer's disease.

"To write about it I had to re-live what happened, which I had never done. I found that very confronting."

After the accident she had to learn to walk again... and much more.

Avalon locals Mike and Nola Kadwell owned the old squash courts close to the Fire Station and encouraged her to get back on the court.

"Nola, who had both her knees reconstructed, taught me how to stand in the

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Anita's new book; with Mum Josephine and brother Karl at Killara; Carla Zampatti with Anita's Dad Phillip; on location in London with John Laws; one of Anita's last visits to the family farm near Boggabri; with husband John; with 60 Minutes colleague Jennifer Byrne (pic courtesy Foxtel); a precious moment with Phillip during his struggle with Alzheimer's disease; Anita in surfie mode with her much-loved kneeboard.



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T and dominate the squash court, forcing the other player do the running.” Anita went on to play competition squash. She is also a keen skier, a SCUBA diver, and swims every day.

Alzheimer’s disease saw Phillip’s health and wellbeing go downhill over a six-year period. He died in 1996 aged 85. Seventeen years after his death, Anita’s research revealed far more about the father she adored and thought she knew so well.

She learned about Phillip’s matrimonial relationships... a complicated and astonishing history involving several women before her mother Josephine, two tragedies and even suicides.

“I’d always considered Dad to be steadfast and loyal,” writes Anita, and it was a great shock to discover that her father had fallen in and out of love with disastrous consequences.

With the outbreak of World War II Phillip was considered an “enemy alien” and interned, despite having fled persecution

in Nazi Germany. But after convincing authorities he was not a danger to national security, in 1947 he was recruited by Britain, at the recommendation of the Australian Government, to conduct an industrial espionage mission in Germany. His mission was for a month, but he was away six months. Anita surmises he was establishing work contacts, but reflects: “Half a year was a long time to be away from his young family.”

Less than two months after his return, Phillip went to work as usual one day; that afternoon his then wife was found dead in their kitchen, having taken her own life.

Anita finds it difficult to reconcile that her father, who was so aware of her feelings, had been unaware of the inner turmoil of the women in his life. “It’s hard,” she writes, “but I have to accept there was another side to Dad.”

A further surprise was her father’s brief third marriage to Bonnie Snellgrove, a sexy, heavy-drinking brunette... a relationship that ended in tears and a messy divorce. It



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was learning about this court case at the family dinner party in 2013 which first led Anita to start researching her father's life.

"I never anticipated all the extraordinary things I would find out about my father," says Anita. Although much of what she discovered has been confronting it has also given her a greater understanding of this man, who had been a friend and mentor to fashion icon Carla Zampatti, given 22-year-old Dick Smith his first sales job, and had John Howard as his commercial lawyer before he went into federal politics. Anita says she feels a profound sadness she'll never be able to talk to her father about her findings. She hopes that 'Secrets Beyond the Screen' will provoke readers to think about talking to their parents and loved ones about their lives whilst they can.

"Writing this book is the hardest thing I've ever done," says Anita. "As a journalist, it's all about telling other people's stories, never your own. I stubbornly danced around 'finding my voice', remain-

ing fixated on telling Dad's story with no intention of ever revealing anything of a deeply personal nature. Yet here we are nine years later... and of course I did."

For the past eight years Anita has been an Associate Member of the Australian Communications and Media Authority; she is on the boards of Chief Executive Women, Documentary Australia and Women in Media; and recently she was appointed Chair of the ABC's Advisory Council. In 2019 she was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for significant services to broadcasting and print media and to community mental health groups.

Her next project is to track down other relatives who were in Germany before WWII, and their descendants, who are now probably scattered all over the world, and to learn about their stories.

But first, with the world opening again after COVID lockdowns, she is keen to travel again.

"Secrets Beyond the Screen" is published by Ventura Press.

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