

Vale – Kenneth Ray – 27 January 2023 aged 91 years Leader of U3A Stonnington’s Chess Partners

Ken Ray was the long-term and respected leader of U3A Stonnington’s “Chess Partners” for 27 years from 1994, building up a loyal group of chess players who enjoyed the social as well as competitive aspects of the game. Over this time, Ken mentored players who needed encouragement and this was much appreciated. Once the Covid pandemic hit, Ken was not to be discouraged – Chess Partners moved online for two years. The group were happy when they were able to play in-person once again. In fact, Ken’s last game of chess at U3A was on Tuesday 24 January and he was in good spirits.

Ken was passionate about chess and, as a child, was taught by his father who was a champion chess player. Ken said of chess “It’s good to play; it’s my game of choice. The rest are games of chance. With chess if you don’t play well, it’s your issue. I enjoy playing chess and it exercises my brain at the same time. I don’t like learning chess moves. People say: ‘learn the openings from the masters’. I prefer to do my own thinking. In my view the ‘chess master’ model is like rote learning – though I don’t necessarily win my way.”

As one of the Chess Partners said, Ken was “Such a fine, gentle person. Ken will be sorely missed” and “Ken’s involvement with U3A Stonnington covers just a small part of a truly remarkable life, as few of us glimpsed when we chatted with him, alongside a chess board.”

Besides chess, in earlier times, Ken also attended U3A current affairs discussion groups as well as music and film group discussions.



Ken was a person of integrity and honour and was dearly loved by his family and his partner's family. He lived through tumultuous times in Europe and had a creative life that encompassed floor managing at Channel 9, secondary teaching and university lecturing.

Ken was also a music lover – “I have a lot of CDs. I listen to some while I'm reading. I love the Viennese Valzer – Johann Strauss. I was born in Vienna so I'm a bit biased. The music is melodious”. Ken also enjoyed travelling in Europe and Australia and reading.

Foremost, Ken was a family man - always supportive, kind and caring for his family.

Ken was the youngest of three. His birth name was Kurt Reich. When he was about two years old his family moved to Slovakia which was, at that time, a part of Czechoslovakia.

Ken's father, Artur, was an electrical engineer and inventor. He also happened to be skilled at gymnastics, playing the violin and was a championship chess player. His inventions included the tele-typewriter, a fire hose that was stitched to prevent water escaping, a piece involved in the television and a pilot free plane and machinery to be used in war times. When it was clear that war was about to break out, the British government planned to smuggle Artur, his wife and their three children out of Slovakia to London because of his war time inventions. Artur decided against going because he couldn't bear to leave his extended family behind. Sadly, almost the entire family lost their lives in the holocaust.

Ken's war time experiences were of horror and suffering. At age 11 he was sent to a labour camp where he was made to carry concrete on his back. In the second labour camp he was part of a bomb disposal unit where, at around 12 years old, he carefully carried unexploded bombs dropped by the allies, to unpopulated areas to detonate them. Ken ended up in Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he was one of many who were forced onto the Death March.

The only thing that kept him alive throughout these years was his determination to fulfil his promise to his father – to meet him back at home after the war. As it turned out, his father did not survive but his sisters did and were waiting for him.

Ken was a survivor but he had lost all faith in humanity and in religion. His love for his sisters and his family remained.

Ken was a hard worker, having run a clothing business with his sister Vera over a number of years early in their time in Australia, and working up to three different jobs at times. He later gained employment at Channel 9 where he became floor manager for the Graham Kennedy Show, Homicide, Division 4 and the Tarax Show.

As a middle-aged man Ken gained a place at Latrobe University where achieved a Bachelor of Education. He loved teaching film and television to high school students and later went on to teach at Hawthorn Teachers' College and Deakin University.

More recently, one of Ken's delights was to meet with his partner and family for lunch at various local cafes where politics, history, life, etc. would be discussed.

U3A Stonnington was very fortunate to have Ken as a member and leader of Chess Partners for so many years and it was a true privilege to have known him.