

Finally I'm who I'm meant to be

Though practically a national treasure, Magda Szubanski has always felt she was an imposter, here “on others’ good graces”... until now. In her explosive, award-winning memoir, she shows the world “the real Magda” for the first time and the response has been overwhelming, she tells **Juliet Rieden**.

THERE WAS A moment back in her Sydney hotel room after the best night of her life, a night when Magda Szubanski, aka Sharon Strzelecki, won Book of the Year and Biography of the Year at the prestigious Australian Book Industry Awards in front of a crowd that included rock star authors Jeanette Winterson, Gloria Steinem and Tim Winton, when Magda said to herself: “I must remember to tell Dad ... and then I thought, ‘Oh, he’s dead.’”

It’s 10 years since cancer claimed Zbigniew Szubanski at the age of 82. “I’ve never forgotten that he was dead before, but it was like for a moment he was so present,” says Magda.

Actually it’s no surprise that Magda conjured her father at this peak of celebration, for the memoir, titled *Reckoning*, is not just about Magda, it’s all about her dad. And what ties Magda to her father more than DNA is that both have lived dark, painful double lives.

In the book, Magda talks about her father’s legacy; it’s a smooth stone that she has seen in a 15th century painting. “They would cut a hole in the patient’s skull and then remove what they called the ‘stone of madness,’”

she writes. “I swear sometimes I can feel that stone in my head. A palpable presence, an unwelcome thing that I want to squeeze out of my skull like a plum pip.”

The stone, she says is made of “calcified guilt and shame”.

We are sitting in a room flanked on three sides by books in Magda’s Melbourne publishing house, drinking tea; and although she’s talking about difficult, harrowing times – her father’s dark past as a brutal assassin in Poland, slaying collaborators in cold blood, and her own journey from suicidal closet lesbian staring at Melbourne’s train tracks trying not to jump – Magda has never seemed happier or more invigorated.

We last spoke barely a year after she came out on national TV and though she was certainly relieved to have unmasked herself, there was still a rabbit in the headlights nervousness. A ‘yikes, what have I done now’ anxiety. But this Magda is very different: confident, in control and somehow radiant.

“I don’t want to sound evangelical and born again, but it really has been an amazing thing for me at this point in my life to do such a 180-degree turn,” explains Magda. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAMIAN BENNETT
STYLING BY MATTIE CRONAN





Clockwise from top left: Zbigniew in 1947, Magda takes a selfie with mum Margaret, and writing the book in her study. Opposite: Magda with her research books.

of the greatest revelatory memoirs that I've ever read by an Australian."

As well as a memoir, what the book evolved into is a courageous and very personal study of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – firstly Magda's father's and then Magda's. The two

are intrinsically linked and while one may be about war and the other about sexuality, both are about acceptance. It is this powerful self-examination that makes the book so compelling.

Reckoning begins with Magda's dad.

At the age of 15, fervently Catholic Zbigniew became self-appointed "judge, jury and executioner" in his own "private army" in Warsaw, Poland. As Hitler's troops stormed the city, Zbigniew and his gang of childhood friends would roam the streets "doing whatever damage they could, especially killing Germans".

At 19, he was chosen as a non-commissioned officer in the Polish execution squad, a top secret unit in an underground army that would assassinate agents of the Gestapo and Polish traitors. No one was exempt from their "ruthless vengeance", says Magda, not even friends.

Zbigniew shot many in a cruel and angry war and though it feels as if he was one of the good guys, it's a past that weighed heavily on the suave tennis-loving family man, and a trauma Magda feels she imbibed and carries with her.

"He said he got no thrill out of it, but it's a similar kind of thing with young men in the IRA or now joining Al Qaeda or ISIS. That was the thing he wanted to caution against; what that deadly Molotov cocktail of testosterone and injustice and a brain that hasn't even stopped growing can do. He was 15. Your moral compass isn't fully formed then." >

“When you take a life, it's never that clear-cut, even if you are on the right side. That's what *Reckoning* is about – the people he killed.”



THIS PAGE: FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION. OPPOSITE: MAGDA WEARS MELA PURDIE TOP AND DINOSAUR DESIGNS NECKLACE AND RING.

"Someone said the other day, it was like discovering a whole other room in your house, and that's exactly how I feel. It's a really exciting time and a really uncertain time, but I feel far less afraid of death than I used to.

"I'm 55 now, so I'm not young, but you see people either contract and start to tell themselves stories about being old and it's all over, or you open up into it. And I absolutely feel like I'm the latter, opening up."

That opening up is as much about her leap into the world of biographer and autobiographer as it is about declaring her sexuality and kicking into touch her precarious role as a weight-loss ambassador for Jenny Craig.

Reckoning went on sale in hardback in October last year, brandishing a bold, brave and unembellished photograph of Magda. The cover shouted, this is a book about the woman behind the slapstick and funny faces; a woman to date the public had only glimpsed. This is the real Magda telling her complete story for the first time.

"I felt that we had to have an image which was about the unadorned person," says Magda's publisher, Michael Heyward, who was blown away when he first devoured Magda's manuscript over a weekend in 2014. "She wasn't going to be made up for

the camera; it wasn't going to be an image where she was in character in one of her many roles. We were going to see the whole woman. That was more important than dolly up the cover. That's what Magda wanted, too."

Magda had been working on the book for close to eight years and at first it was never intended as a full-blown memoir.

"It had two geneses," she says. "I filmed my father in 1997 with the very clear intention of either making a film or writing a book about his story. Then immediately after Dad died, I did start writing. Then, I thought I would write a book about weight loss and conflate the two; and then the whole weight loss thing – it's not just that I put the weight back on – but really that just fell away, because it became not so interesting to me. The other story just took over. It became really apparent after I came out what the kind of frame of the book was."

Magda originally turned in more than 250,000 words, but Heyward wasn't daunted. "There was clearly a magnificent book inside those pages and I wasn't the only one. My wife, Penny read it, too, and a couple of other people at Text Publishing, and we were all instantly head over heels in love with the book ... this was one

Eventually Zbigniew was caught and spent the last years of the war escaping from prisoner of war camps and ultimately fleeing to Scotland. He never saw his parents again and later emigrated to Australia, and though to the outsider Magda's Dad was a warm and loving man, she always knew inside he was bleeding.

"That's what I think PTSD is, partly. It's a kind of a moral trauma that a lot of people who go to war or who are involved in any way with violent acts experience," says Magda.

"A lot of people say to me: 'God, he was a hero, he was on the right side' – but he would never, ever, have described himself as a hero.

"He was deeply aware of the moral ambiguity, the grey areas of life, and when you take a life, it's never that clear-cut, even if you're on the right side. I could feel this in my father, and that's what *Reckoning* is about. It's about the people he killed.

"He went from being a young man who was very judgemental in the way that young people are, who saw the world only in black and white terms, to someone when he was older who understood the humanity and the weakness and the human frailty of those people."

There's a moment in the book when Zbigniew takes his daughter hunting for rabbits. From hours of target practice, teenage Magda thinks she is a dab hand with the .22 rifle that her father gave her as a gift. But her execution is flawed and the rabbit is wounded, not dead. "You have to finish it off," Zbigniew insists.

"I couldn't do it. I was horrified. I can't eat rabbit to this day," she says.

Magda failed her Dad that day. "I thought I was like him and there was that real sense of 'if I'm not like him,

what am I?' That provoked yet another identity crisis," she says, rolling her eyes.

Identity has been at the heart of Magda's struggle, largely because even though she was aware of her sexuality as young as 12, as a Catholic raised in suburban Victoria, she was isolated, terrified and alone. Ashamed and confused, Magda's teenage years were scarred with self-loathing and fear.

"If I could have known when I was 12

that obvious catharsis that people think, but a slow process. It's like a green, growing thing, it's like giving water to a plant," she explains. "I was really, really clinically depressed in my teen years, I was in a terrible state, and that was horrible to go back to."

Says Heyward: "Magda's memoir was about an endless journey, peeling the layers off the onion, thin skin by thin skin, to find out who she is. It

had to do with trying to understand family and history and sexuality.

"It's a book of immense courage, I think. She's also an extremely good writer. When she decided to tell her family that she was gay, there was a sentence there which said, 'it wasn't that I had butterflies in my stomach, I had Bogong moths in my stomach'. She's terrific at that stuff."

When she finally told her parents, Magda was in her 30s, fearful that a magazine story was about to out her – it didn't, but the result nevertheless was positive, especially from her beloved dad.

"I read his reaction with a tear in my eye," Heyward says. "He says, 'You know we love you just as much'. That was absolutely wonderful."

It was certainly far from a done deal. Throughout her childhood and adult years, countless comments and casual homophobic

asides had kept Magda firmly in the closet, paralysed and suicidal.

"You don't know how deep that runs and being on the receiving end of someone's disgust is really unpleasant. It doesn't make you feel good about yourself," she says.

"There was a period of time when people were absolutely sickened by homosexuality and they couldn't control that response. It was just uncomfortable for everyone, horrible." ►



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what would happen, it would have changed me utterly,” Magda says today. “I want to say to young people now: hang in there and hang tough because it does get better, it really does, and you need to draw on whatever support you can find to get you through any of those tough times.”

At 55, Magda finally seems to be in a good place with her struggle, but it hasn't been easy. “This book has been enormously healing, but it's not

“That sense of belonging and having a right to be in the world, I never felt I had that. I always felt I was here on other people’s good graces and I don’t feel that now at all. I don’t feel shy about talking about my sexuality. Especially since coming out, it just gets easier and easier.”

It’s been a whirlwind 10 months for Magda. She has travelled from Launceston to Noosa, Perth to Wagga Wagga and everywhere in between and talked at more than 100 events to the thousands of fans who have flocked to see her.

“There were people who loved Magda because they loved *Kath & Kim* or they loved *Big Girl’s Blouse*, and there were people who loved Magda because she’s such an important person in the gay community,” says Heyward. “There were mums and dads, there were young people. There was a guy in Sydney who had her face tattooed on his arm, he loved her so much, and Magda signed his tattoo. Then there were people who were the readers, the book buyers of Australia, who weren’t buying the book because it was by a famous Australian, they were buying the book because they’d heard it was such a fantastic book to read.”

Reckoning is now heading for sales of 100,000 with the paperback version due out in August. And if Magda is going to take one thing from the past year, surely it’s that she is now loved for who she really is.

“Yes,” she agrees with a slight wobble in her voice. “To have emerged from behind the mask and still feel that affection and acceptance has actually been really moving.”

So is this finally Magda’s time for happiness?

“I think this insistence on always being happy, I find it really boring. It can lack soul. Not that you court

unhappiness but life is complex and life can be tough,” she explains.

“I feel I’ve been getting closer and closer to the right path. For a while there I was running parallel and now I feel like I’ve stepped on to it. I am who I’m meant to be. I felt for a long time that I was an impersonation of myself, not quite me.”

“I was never the girl who was interested in marriage, but I should have the right.”



Magda poses as the Statue of Liberty with her book and 2016 Book of the Year Award.

Magda is now a fervent campaigner for marriage equality and is both exasperated and saddened that Australian politicians aren’t more proactive. “It constantly sends the message that my love and my relationships are inferior and somehow pose a threat to humanity, to the wellbeing of the family,” she says. “Don’t get me started on the Catholic Church. When [Pope] Benedict was saying that one of the great threats to humanity is homosexuality and gay marriage, I think: ‘Do you want to talk a little bit about the Catholic Church and

what it’s done to humanity, and paedophilia?’. I feel quite cross with the Catholic Church, as a lapsed Catholic, the power they have and how they use it just to protect their own privilege and to hide their own sinfulness.”

Magda is currently single and confesses a big white wedding has never been high on her agenda. “I was never, ever the girl who was interested in marriage, which is why it’s interesting that I’m this big advocate for marriage equality, because frankly, I don’t even know if I’m capable of it. But God-dammit, I should have the right.”

As for kids, Magda admits that, at 55, that ship has probably sailed. “There are times when I really [think about it] and other times when I go, I am just too plain selfish, and the occasional candid friend will say, don’t do it.

“I’ve got nieces and nephews and grand-nephews and a beautiful god-daughter [TV presenter David Campbell’s 18-month-old daughter Betty]. So I just put it all on them, poor buggers.”

We wanted to have Magda’s 91-year-old mum Margaret at our photo shoot, but when I talk to her on the phone, she says much as she would have loved to have come, she is

not feeling up to it. Margaret was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer nine years ago. She’s had no treatment and is still as sharp as a tack mentally, although her energy is waning. She is concerned she’s letting her “beautiful daughter” down. The tables have certainly turned.

Magda herself is busy renovating and enjoying her moment in the sun. “I honestly don’t know where I’m going or what I’m going to do next,” she says. “I’ve never felt quite this rudderless, but in a really great way. I just feel like all bets are off. It’s an incredibly exciting time of life.” ■