Lessons from past provide future hope

By Samantha Schofield
Vice President

I had the privilege recently to meet with Hetty Verolme, a survivor of the Holocaust, now living in Perth.

Hetty (pictured right) is now 91 years of age and having spent 18 years visiting schools and colleges to share her story of her experiences as a child in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Hetty will soon retire.

Hetty reached out to the SSTUWA in the hope that we might be able to assist her in promoting the documentary of her experiences as a child in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp during World War II, to schools and teachers.

Hetty was born in Belgium in 1930 and moved with her family to Amsterdam the following year. In 1943 she and her family were sent to concentration camps by the Nazis. In 1954, Hetty emigrated to Australia.

After attempting to write her biography when her daughter was a teenager, Hetty found it too distressing.

It wasn't until her grandchildren were born that Hetty was able to write her story, which is now published in two books: The Children's House of Belsen and Hetty: A True Story (the version which is written for school children).

When Hetty was liberated on 15 April 1945, along with her brothers and the other children, Hetty was interviewed by the BBC correspondent Patrick Gordon Walker. This interview is still held in the archives of the BBC in London.

In her letter to the SSTUWA, Hetty wrote: "Who is going to tell the students now and in the future what happened during WWII about the Holocaust, where 11,000,000 Jewish people from different countries had a horrific death through gas and cremation, and in addition 1,000,000 children?

"No one can tell what happened exactly, except (those who) were there.

"So, I had an idea. Why not make a film where I still can tell the students my story and they can see me at the same time (when I will not be here anymore)."

I was warmly invited into Hetty's home and spent time with her, listening to her stories during the Holocaust as well as her life in the many decades since.

I was humbled to experience Hetty's warmth and kindness, as well as her strong spirit, and it was clearly visible how Hetty was given the name "little mother" when she cared and protected the children, as recounted in The Children's House of Belsen.

As we sat together in her home and watched the documentary, I saw and could feel the trauma of her experiences, still so raw to this day, of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the inter-generational trauma that has been, and will continue to be, felt.

While there is great pain and suffering in her story and many tears shed, Hetty left me with a sense that there is hope and that tomorrow will be better.

Towards the end of our time together, I told Hetty that I would reach out to teacher networks across the country.

She asked me: "Do you think they will listen?"

I told her: "I hope so Hetty, I hope so."

There are so few remaining survivors of the Holocaust and I believe it is incumbent on us, as teachers to ensure that the voices of Holocaust survivors and their testimonials reach far into the future and are not lost to time or forgotten.

Since meeting Hetty, I have written to the History and English Teachers Associations across the country, to the presidents of all our AEU branches, AISWA and the IEUWA.

I am now seeking your support to share this information to the teachers and schools in your networks, so that stories like Hetty's are remembered, and that by remembering and learning about the past, students can make great positive change for the future.

To access Hetty's documentary for use in schools, please contact Hetty directly.

I would also encourage you, your school, networks and friends to read Hetty's books, to learn more about the Holocaust and consider a donation to Hetty's charity.

For more on Hetty Verolme

To contact Hetty or purchase her books visit hetty.com.au The BBC interview can be found here: bit.ly/2YaHCN8 and the ABC interview here: https://ab.co/3bvDzhl Children of Belsen and the Holocaust Trust: holocausttrust.com.au

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