

Hetty: A True Story Hetty Verolme

ISBN: 9781 921 361 333

PUBLICATION DATE: FEBRUARY 2010

About the author

Hetty Verolme was born in Belgium in 1930. In 1931 her family moved to Amsterdam, in the Netherlands. World War II broke out in 1939 and the Germans occupied the Netherlands in May 1940. In 1943 Hetty and her family were sent to the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen.

After surviving the war and working for a time in the fashion industry, she emigrated to Australia in 1954. She worked in many jobs, from waitress to bus conductress, from door-to-door retailing to selling real estate. Hetty eventually established herself as a successful shopping centre developer.

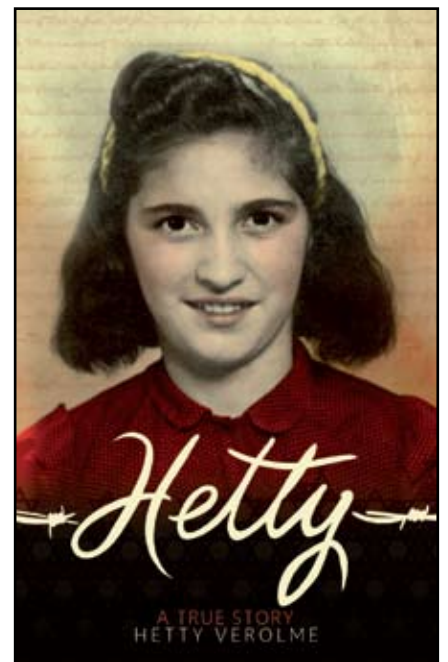
In 1972, Hetty was presented with the 'Most Successful Migrant' award. In 1977 she was appointed to the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council, and for many years she has been actively involved in a wide range of community and charity organisations.

About the novel

Hetty was just twelve years old when her family was captured by the Nazis and taken from their home in the Netherlands. After a brief time at Westerbork, they were moved to the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. After eleven months together, Hetty and her two brothers were suddenly separated from their parents. She and her brothers found themselves with a group of children, some just babies, who had been torn apart from their parents. Scared and alone, they were transported to a different part of Belsen and eventually moved into Barrack 211 — the Children's House.

Seemingly forgotten, the children were saved by Sister Luba, a Polish prisoner who took responsibility for the group. Although a year too old for the Children's House, Hetty was allowed special permission to stay with the group. She had quickly become a Little Mother for the children, who relied on her for comfort and survival.

For a time, enough food was obtained for the children through Sister Luba's charm and persistence. However, as time dragged on it became increasingly difficult to keep everyone fed. Conditions in the barrack were very poor, as heating and water were almost as scarce as food. Hetty relied on the eldest of the children for support as they worked out how to



survive and keep their spirits up. Although several women were now helping Sister Luba to protect the children, conditions in the whole camp were deteriorating. The dead bodies were piling up near the Children's House.

A typhus epidemic spread through the camp, and reached the Children's House. Hetty became sick, and for days was oblivious to the world outside. News that the English troops were getting closer had reached the barrack. By the time Hetty was getting better, there had been an inspection by the English army. By the middle of April 1945 most of the SS had left the camp, and soon afterwards the camp was surrendered to the English liberators.

After liberation, and the war's end, the surviving children were moved to better accommodation and cared for by the Red Cross. After being evacuated back to Holland, Hetty and her brothers were finally reunited with their parents, overjoyed that their family had survived intact.

Study notes

Geography

Take a map of Western Europe and locate Germany. Which countries surround it?

Locate the Netherlands. Which countries surround it?

Draw a map of the Netherlands and locate major cities. Find out where the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam was.

Describe the terrain of Germany, and the annual climate.

Draw/trace a map of Germany. Find out the names and locations of all the concentration camps that were set up in Germany during World War II. Mark these on the map. Circle Bergen-Belsen. It is situated on the Lüneburger Heide (English: Luneburg Heath), between the small towns of Bergen and Belsen, ten kilometres from the town of Celle, and fifty kilometres from the city of Hanover.

History

Research the Netherlands. What is it also known as? What language is spoken there? Is it a republic or monarchy? What is the capital city? Where is the parliament situated? Which Dutch city has the largest port in Europe? What ethnicities lived in the Netherlands pre-World War II? How has that changed in the last sixty years?

Choose one of the following topics to research:

- The Nazi Party
- Anti-Semitism
- The Allies in WWII
- The Holocaust

Write a summary of key points from your research and present it to a group.

European History

When did World War I begin and end?

Which countries were involved?

What was the political situation in Germany after 1918?

What was the economy like in Germany after 1918?

In 1933 the Nazi regime took over Germany. How did they do this? What changed in Germany after the Nazi party came to power?

World War II

How did World War II begin?

Which countries were involved? How was each a part of the war?

Draw a timeline of key events from 1933-1945.

Research several key figures in World War II, such as Nazi-German military leaders, English political leaders. What was the influence of each person?

Research the Resistance movements of World War II. What does the word 'resistance' mean? What did it mean in the particular context of World War II?

The Holocaust

Define the term 'holocaust'.

Find out about another holocaust in history. What made it a 'holocaust'?

Why did the Holocaust of World War II happen?

- Which parties were the perpetrators?
- Who was targeted?
- Could it have been prevented? How?

What does it mean to be Jewish, in a historical sense?

What is a ghetto? Were there any ghettos in Holland in World War II? Why not?

Write down the different groups of people involved in the Holocaust. Draw up a piece of paper with four categories: victims; perpetrators; rescuers; bystanders. Think about where different people might fit and why.

What is the difference between prejudice and discrimination?

What kinds of different camps were there? What was the purpose of having these different camps?

When did the Dutch Resistance begin?

The story of Henny, who tries to help Hetty's family, is an example of resistance against the Nazis. Find another example of resistance. When and where did it take place? What were the risks to the individual/s? How much Nazi influence was there at the time? How difficult was it to find a hiding place?

Discuss the line between human integrity and barbarism. Think about situations where people have experienced trauma, in Australia or elsewhere.

- Do you think you would be able to help someone who has suffered mental torture?
- How would you make friends with someone who has experienced trauma?

Think about the context and what factors might complicate your decisions.

The memoir

During reading:

Write down how you feel at different points in the story, such as:

- Arriving at Westerbork (p.31)
- Uncle Max and Clara's hoarding of food (p.64)
- The children being separated from their parents (pp.100-103)
- Receiving the potato soup (p.120)
- When Phillipje dies (p.165)
- Hetty stealing the bread (p.200)
- The English soldier's arrival at Bergen-Belsen (p.217)
- Iesy and Yiddele running toward the English liberators (p.223)
- When the children leave each other to go home (p. 263)
- Being reunited with her parents (Postscript)

After reading:

Draw a timeline of events in the novel.

Find a map of Bergen-Belsen (on the official website) and try to locate different parts of the camp described in Hetty.

How different would the story of the Children's House be if it was told in the style of a report, instead of as a memoir?

What causes the disease typhus? How does it spread?

Return to the photos scattered throughout the book. What kind of extra information did they give you?

Turn to the following photos:

'The Children's House, Barrack 211' (p.158)

'Leni, the day after liberation ...' (p.226)

'The mass grave in front of the Children's House' (p.232)

'Jacky, Hetty and Max, 1950' (p.270)

Write down how each photo makes you feel.

What does its inclusion in the book add to the story?

Interview a grandparent or older relative or neighbour about a historical event they remember, or were involved in. If they remember World War II ask questions about that. Record your conversation, then transcribe the interview.

Have you read any other accounts of the Holocaust? If so, how do they compare to Hetty?

The book *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* is a particularly famous story of the Holocaust. If you have read this book, or know about it, write down

- a) how it is different
- b) how it is similar

Hetty: A True Story is about love and compassion for other people. Describe how people in the book were able to help each other to survive in very difficult circumstances.

Other resources

BOOKS

Inherit the Truth: A Memoir of Survival and the Holocaust, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch (2000)

Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp, Joanne Reilly (1998)

The Survivors: The Story of the Belsen Remnant, by Cecily Goodman and Leslie Hardman (2009)

Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives, Susan Bardgett and David Cesarani (eds) (2007)

Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, Anne Frank (1953)

FILMS

The Relief of Belsen (2007)

Memorandum (1965)

WEBSITES

www.ushmm.org

www.bergenbelsen.de/en/

An interview with Hetty Verolme

FP: *The Children's House of Belsen* was first published by Fremantle Press in 2000. When you first wrote the book, was it difficult to remember the events?

HV: No, I have a very good memory, so I just went back to that place in my mind and wrote it down. Sometimes people ask me, do I remember everything correctly? I do — but once I did doubt my memory. It was in 1995, the first time I went back to visit Belsen. I went to the place where Leni was buried, to find her grave again, and I found it easily from my memory. In the book I wrote that when we first went to find Leni's grave, a man came out of a shed and spoke to us in Polish. We gave him a piece of paper with Leni's name written on it and he showed us where she was buried. But when I went back in 1995 there was no little shed. Then I wondered whether I had imagined that man. Later at Belsen I saw two men come out of a door. They were Chassidic Jews, dressed

immaculately in black. I am a very curious person, so I said, excuse me, where are you from? They said, from Brooklyn, New York. One of them said, my grandfather was here at the liberation and he did the Jewish death rites. When I got back to Australia I emailed Belsen and asked for their contact details. I got in touch with one of the men, and found out that he had the Death Book of Bergen-Belsen from his grandfather. It was a little book with the names of people and where they are buried in that graveyard. I now have it on loan for the Belsen museum for ten years. And in the book I found Leni's name and it says where she is buried. So I realised then that I didn't imagine that Polish man who came out of the shed!

FP: How is *Hetty: A True Story* different to the original edition?

HV: Hetty is a new edition mainly for high school students. It is not a new book, it is abridged — a few little family stories were taken out from the beginning. It is in an easy to read format, with a very nice cover. I think it is funny that my photo on the front looks a little bit like Anne Frank; all the girls had that kind of hair cut in those days. But of course, even though Anne was in Bergen-Belsen too (she was only two barracks away from me), her diary was from when she was in hiding. Mine is the story of living in the camp itself, so it is different.

FP: Why would you say it is important for young people to read this story?

HV: I think it is very important that this story is told because it is part of our history. If we grandmothers don't tell our grandchildren what happened, they forget. It is up to the grandparents to tell their children and grandchildren.

And not only what happened in the camps during the Nazi regime, but also what can happen with indoctrination of children. Children betrayed their parents to the Nazis — that is a fact! It is because children have such open minds, and they are so impressionable. So with a book like mine, we can teach them how to think good thoughts, not only about the terrible things that happened, but also about hope and compassion.

FP: What can we learn about freedom from your book?

HV: I always talk about freedom. When I speak in schools and see the students in front of me, I say: You are all beautiful young people, and you are the future of Australia. But I want you to know that life is not always easy. So when things are difficult, I want you to think of me. Because even when I was in a horrendous situation — my eyes saw terrible things, and I was cold and very hungry — I always believed that tomorrow would be a better day. I want you to believe that there is hope, and then you will survive whatever situation you are in.

My book is a book of hope. Even in those horrible camps, people looked after each other. We stuck together, because otherwise we were lost. You can't survive on your own. You need at least one other person for mental support.

FP: The children became quite different at Bergen-Belsen. In what ways have you felt

yourself change?

HV: People who were in the camps have great compassion for those who suffer. They are very soft-hearted people, because they know what it is like to suffer.

It is also a hard life for the children and grandchildren of survivors, because we are afraid to let our children out of our sight. Very overprotective. And whenever somebody comes into my house I say, have you eaten already? I am always asking my grandchildren, have you eaten?

FP: Was it hard to keep in touch with the Children from Belsen after the war?

HV: With some children, yes, but with others, no. The Dutch were the first ex-prisoners to be evacuated back to Holland. So I lost contact totally with many of the children who were from other countries. But Iesy was always there, he came back to Holland. I was such close friends with him all our lives.

I see Maurice and Louky and Helen and others whenever I go back to Europe. And Robby when I'm in Holland. This year I am going back to Belsen again, for the fourth time since 1995, and I am going to see little Yiddele! I have not seen Yiddele since the war, and only recently he found me on the internet and we have emailed. It will be wonderful to see him again – he won't be so little anymore!

These people are more than friends, they are like family because of the bond we have.

FP: You write on the opening page that you like to be on the side of love. How have you maintained that attitude after the atrocities that were committed?

HV: I do write that, because I think that if you start hating it is a poison that eats you inside. Instead, we must help each other. We say to the Germans, we forgave you a long time ago – but we never forget. So there is no hate there. Yes, I am on the side of love.