

# Hetty

A TRUE STORY BY  
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*I dedicate this book  
to my grandchildren  
Jacleen Sarah Ray  
and Adam Maurice Passman  
with love from their Oma*

## Foreword

In 2024, we lost Hetty, whose absence leaves an enormous void in our lives. Soon, we will have lost all direct witnesses to the Holocaust's atrocities and without dedicated effort, their memories risk fading. Among so many achievements, Hetty worked tirelessly to ensure that we 'Never Forget' the Holocaust. More than that, she hoped her story would promote and inspire strength and resilience in the next generation. Hetty wanted us all to know that even in our darkest times, 'tomorrow will be a better day'. Though she is no longer with us, her message must endure. We, her family, have pledged to carry forward this important work. By reading this book, you help to continue her legacy. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for joining us in this effort and contributing to a brighter future.

With love,  
Julia, Jackie and Adam



*Hetty with her brothers, Max and Jack, 1941.*

# Prologue

I did not have a carefree childhood. I spent years of my childhood in Belsen concentration camp in Germany, deported there by the Germans during World War II with my father and mother, and my two brothers.

If I were to tell you of the experiences of all our family this book would never come to an end, so I will confine myself to telling you the true story of my experiences in the Children's House of Belsen.

# Chapter 1

My family lived in Amsterdam, in the Jewish quarter. It never used to be a Jewish quarter. The Dutch people did not know the word 'segregation', and everybody could live wherever they wanted. Religion and belief were not considered an issue. Then, in 1941, during the German occupation of Holland, the Germans decided to concentrate the Jewish population in Amsterdam East.

In February 1941 the Germans raided the city market of Amsterdam in retaliation for the killing of a Dutch Nazi officer in a fight the previous day. Four hundred men were picked up and herded into trucks. Unfortunately, my father's favourite cousin, Simon, was one of the men. Although we heard rumours, we had no idea where the men were taken. In May 1941 my father received a postcard marked Mauthausen. Simon wrote:

*Dear Maurice and family*

*I am in Mauthausen and the work is not bad. I hope*



*Hetty's shadow falls over children from her street as she photographs them. All of the children were sent to Auschwitz where they died in the gas chamber, 1942.*

*From left, back row: Iesy Gerritse, unknown.  
Front row: Siena Soep, Nathan Smeer, Betty Smeer.*



*that everything is good with all of you. Please give my regards to Dozeman, and is Spitty still alive?*

*Simon*

As we knew the card had to pass through the German censor, there must be a hidden message. For two days my father walked through the house in his pyjamas with the card in his hand trying to decode the message. On the second day he came to me in the kitchen and said, 'I know what Simon wants to tell us. Dozeman is the name of the baker around the corner; Spitty is the name of our dog. So, what he is really trying to say is that he is very hungry and that it is a dog's life in Mauthausen.'

We realised then that the Germans would be without mercy in their plans to eradicate the Jewish population in Holland. My father looked at me with worried eyes and said, 'I must do everything in my power to prevent us being sent to Germany.'

There were many raids in the Jewish quarter during the summer of 1942. We saw families dragged from their homes, never to be heard of again. Some of these people were crying when they were taken away; others were relieved that the waiting was over. We watched through the curtains as the Germans marched long columns of people down the street to the station, where the trains would take them far away from the things they loved and lived for. My family felt very sad after each raid. No one

knew what was happening to our friends and relatives.

We had been very lucky. My father was a well-to-do textile merchant. When the raids started, someone told him that we could buy our freedom from the German SS Commander Aus der Funten in the form of a work deportation exemption. We could then be exchanged for German prisoners of war via Portugal.

My father did not hesitate. He sold most of our valuables and managed to get about five hundred thousand guilders together. The question was, who was going to approach Commander Aus der Funten at SS headquarters? This was dangerous — many people had gone there and not returned. After a long discussion, Mum persuaded Dad to let her go. She reasoned that a woman might have a better chance of being admitted.

On the sunny morning of 22 September 1942, my mother set out to walk the eight miles to try to save her family. Jews were not permitted to travel on buses or trams. All day we lived a nightmare, trying not to think of all the things that might happen to our mother. The day dragged on, until at five o'clock the telephone rang. After some hesitation my father picked up the receiver, afraid of what he might hear, but his face transformed into a smile. Mum was all right and on her way home. She had spoken to Commander Aus der Funten, and was told to come back with the money and our passports the next week. Our spirits lifted. Soon we might live in freedom again,

without being shunned or hunted down.

The week passed and Mum set out once more for SS headquarters, but this time she came home earlier, with photocopies of our precious passports, stamped by order of Commander Aus der Funten: *The holder of this passport is exempt from work deportation.* The work deportation exemption protected us from being taken away during the raids which went on night after night. And we desperately wanted to believe the verbal promise that we would be exchanged for prisoners of war.

My mother's mother lived just down the street from us. She was the most wonderful person, loved by the entire neighbourhood. Everyone called her Oma (Grandma) Judy. My wonderful grandmother; she looked after us like no one else.

On Friday, 2 October 1942, Oma cooked a sweet pear cake. 'Eat well, my children, and may God bless you all. I am sure it is the last time I will cook for you,' Oma said. 'I can feel it. Tonight they will come to get me.'

'Please Oma, don't talk like that.' I was in tears. 'If you do feel like this, stay with us tonight. Don't go home — if you do go, I'm coming with you.'

'No.' Oma was firm. 'Tonight you sleep at home.'

Sometimes I slept at Oma's place so she would not be so lonely at night, even though it was forbidden by the Germans to stay the night in someone else's home. (The

Germans had declared a curfew from eight o'clock at night until six in the morning for the entire Dutch population.)

Before eight o'clock, Oma kissed us all with tears in her eyes and said, 'Be good, my children. I love you all very much.' With those words she left.

From that moment Mum stationed herself in front of the bedroom window where she could see Oma's street. The Germans started to arrive at about quarter past eight. The raid was on. Through the curtains we could see them going from door to door to bring people out of their homes. I was in the living room when my father called out, 'Run to the bedroom, they've got Oma! Be quick and you can say goodbye.'

From the bedroom window we could see Oma with her bags, waving and calling to us.

'Mother, Mother!' Mum screamed. She opened the window, although that was strictly forbidden, and leant out, waving frantically. 'God, don't let them take my mother.'

My father grabbed her and pulled her back inside. The Germans motioned Oma to move on.

'Goodbye my children,' Oma called while she walked. 'Goodbye, goodbye.'

They were the last words we heard from Oma. My lovely sweet grandmother. We had heard people calling goodbye many times before, but this time the Germans

had hit our family. That terrible Friday night I will never forget as long as I live.

Months passed but the Germans did not let up on the raids. Our neighbourhood became very quiet. The houses were empty because when the Germans picked up people, a few days later Puls, a carrier company contracted by the Germans, would come and take their furniture and belongings. All the goods from Jewish homes were sent to Germany.

Our school in the President Brandt Straat also emptied. Most of the students had been deported to Germany and Jewish teachers replaced all the gentile teachers.

On Sunday, 20 June 1943, I was awake early. Suddenly I heard announcements from cars with loudspeakers, ordering Jews to get ready for immediate transportation. The whole neighbourhood was sealed off by the SS so no one could escape. The rest of the residents were told to stay indoors. Heavily armed police went from door to door checking passports and other documents. They drove the people out of their homes to an area right across from our home. The people were forced into an enormous queue and guarded by German soldiers with drawn bayonets. For five hours the people, young and old, stood huddled together without food or water, until they were ordered to start walking to Amstel Station, where