

Remembering the ruin



It has taken almost a decade to collect about a million buttons. Photo by Jessica Seignarack

By Jessica Seignarack

The babies were not supposed to be there on that particular day, but they were.

Vivianne Spiegel was only six at the time, and more than 70 years have passed, but she can describe that day with impressive detail: the arrest, the bus ride, the dark corridor, the doors swinging open into a vision from hell.

The Vel' d'Hiv.

The Winter Stadium.

Thirteen thousand people have found themselves on a concrete floor with no water, no toilets, and no way out – the air is thick with stench, and the sound of babies screaming. In her mother's arms is her 14 month-old sister, with them her younger brother, and from nearby a woman who walks over and says something that saves their lives that day, "You should not be here."

Unknown to them, any family with a child under two should not have been in the stadium that day.

To another officer this information may have amounted to nothing. But the young French policeman her mother spoke to agreed and let them leave.

"A miracle," Vivianne recalls. And it was.

What awaited thousands of others who entered the stadium that day? Children ripped away from their mothers, deported and murdered. Elderly people, pregnant women, whole families, murdered. Nobody was safe. Nobody had expected it.

And across 22 different countries it was the same: an accumulation of broken hearts and broken bones smashed together. When it ended more than 6 million Jewish people lost their lives. Of those were 1.5 million children. It is a story of tragedy that too few lived to tell.

The Shoah

The Holocaust.

Today, the population of those who survived has dwindled to about 500 000 – among them Vivianne. Orphaned by the end of the war, she and her siblings were sent to Australia, where she grew to be a mother, a grandmother, an old lady. Now on Wednesdays she volunteers as a guide at the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Elsternwick.

This is where she first hears of the button project. It began at the Bialik College in suburban Hawthorn East in 2007 and would help prevent a story from long ago fading.

For children and grandchildren who bear their ancestors names, and for people everywhere, remembering the ruin is important. The reality is, soon there will be no one alive to tell these stories in first person – and then what proof will remain of all this human existence outside numbers and textbooks? How else do you acknowledge an entire population beyond a history lesson?

A grade four class decided to do something: they would gather up 1.5 million buttons. Each one would symbolise the lives of all those children who were wiped out like dust. It wasn't an easy project, and it isn't finished, but it has had a kind of rippling, raw effect.



Grade five student Mia Rom counts some of the buttons collected. Photo by Jessica Seignarack

Dalia Gurfinkel, a teacher with the project, is in awe when she listens in on the little ones' conversations. At first they were just counting buttons, she says, but very quickly that changed.

"This one is a very special, special little child," she hears them say.

"Be careful! You're passing on the children, you've lost one there."

Buttons, the students feel, are like children: they come in different shapes, sizes, colours – they hold things together. At the holocaust museum where Vivianne works, 15 000 of them are displayed in a long tube. "To see them," she says, "is much more impressive on young minds instead of just being quoted numbers." And then she says what most people say when they talk about it, "I mean one point five million." "One. Point. Five. Million!"

"That's fifteen MCGs."

It's an impossible thing to grasp; perhaps even harder when confronted with a visual sight. Each button as tiny as fingertips, stacked one on top of another in piles that seem to multiply. One, two, three, four, one thousand, ten thousand, one million – buckets of buttons spilling out like stars in a dark sky.

Soon, when half a million more have been collected, they will be placed in twenty two cylindrical sculptures, each representing a country the children came from. And there they will stay for future generations of students, who will one day walk the corridors, and talk about friends, and grades, and tomorrows, and buttons.