

Heidi Meyerson



1



2

While learning about the Holocaust in 2007, Bialik College's Year 4G bilingual Hebrew-English class was profoundly affected by the documentary *Paper Clips*. The students felt that as descendants of Holocaust survivors, they should be honouring their family members who had been murdered during the Shoah. The way they decided to do this was to create their own memorial to commemorate the one and a half million children who were victims of the Nazis. Their teachers, Soni Levinson and Dalia Gurfinkel, embraced their idea and, after a lengthy debate about what item would best represent the murdered children, they settled on buttons – one for each life that was lost. Their rationale was that buttons, like children, come in many different shapes, sizes and colours, and hold a garment together as children hold a family together.

The College supported their project and helped promote the button collection drive to the Bialik community. Collection points were established at the school and at the Jewish Holocaust Centre (JHC). News of Bialik's button collection drive spread and buttons began to arrive at the school, together with special stories and visits from Holocaust survivors who shared their experiences with the students.

By 2011, approximately 500,000 buttons had been collected. Two Year 4 students, Ben Aizenstros and Benji Krongold, proposed using Perspex cylinders to house the buttons and serve as a memorial to the 1.5 million children. They consulted with staff members at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Israel, who suggested that 21 cylinders be used to represent the 21 pre-Second World War European countries from where the 1.5 million children came. Yad Vashem estimated the number of children murdered in each country, based on a quarter of the total number from these countries. It is a sad but inescapable fact that the numbers cannot be more exact. Bialik therefore decided to add an additional 22nd cylinder to 'the lost child', to represent the unknown children, those who were born and died in ghettos... those about whom we wish we knew.

In 2012, the Year 6 Maths Extension Class devised a method

of calculating the size of the cylinders needed, based on the volume of each cylinder and ratio of buttons to centimetres cubed using an estimated average for the size of a button. After many trials, they settled on an average ratio of 1 button = 1cm³ which would also account for random sizes and spaces between buttons. The cylinders had to be large enough to make sure they could hold the correct number of buttons and, most importantly, each child who had lost their life had to be represented by a button.

By May 2016, the collection numbered 700,000. In a renewed push to reach its goal, Bialik approached the broader community for support. In addition to the button collection box at the JHC, collection boxes were placed in community businesses, community centres and private homes. A number of schools across Australia had button collection days in support of Bialik and with the added help of publicity and social media, buttons once again poured into the school. This time they came from all over Australia and beyond. We received buttons from New Zealand, America, Israel, France and even Minsk in Belarus!

Many dedications and letters of support were posted with the buttons and a book was created to display the letters. A button counting day was held at Bialik in December 2016. By then the collection had surpassed 1.3 million. Thanks to the help of the broader community and the continued efforts of Bialik students, staff and parents, the goal of 1.5 million buttons was finally achieved soon after.

Bialik's Button Project installation was formally opened on 17 February 2017.

Heidi Meyerson is Communications and Development Manager at Bialik College.

1 Helen Mahemoff, Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, the Hon Michael Danby MP, the Hon David Southwick MP, the Hon Josh Frydenberg MP and the Hon John Pesuto MP

*2 Nathaniel Leighton
Photographer: Joseph Feil*