

# Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper: teacher, poet, mother, survivor

*Hannah Ruth Elliott*

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## **Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper – 1937-2019**

Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper had a precarious start to life. She was born two months premature into a Jewish family in Amsterdam in 1937 at a time when life was becoming increasingly dangerous for Jews.



Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper.

When her mother, Hanna, was forced to wear the Star of David, she ingeniously sewed it to the inside of her lapel, only displaying it when necessary. Hanna would also adopt a new identity and join the Dutch Resistance. This resourcefulness would ultimately ensure Marietta's survival where so many others, including members of her own extended family, perished in concentration camps.

With Holland under German occupation, Marietta and her sister, Elisabeth, were hidden with Christian foster families in Zeist, a small town near Utrecht. Only years later did she realise the enormous sacrifice her mother had made to keep her family safe. When Nazi soldiers marched through the town, Marietta would be shut in a cellar. These traumatic experiences would later emerge as powerful images in her poetry.

At the end of the war, the family was reunited and Marietta's father received an offer to settle in Australia. They leapt at the chance to make a new start, departing Europe in December 1948. On the long sea voyage, Marietta would start to become conversant in English, which she would later go on to teach both in mainstream curricula and as a second language.

In the late 1950s, Marietta completed a bachelor of arts degree with honours in French at Melbourne University, and then attained a diploma of education. In the early 1960s, she balanced a career as a teacher of English and foreign languages with marriage and parenting her children, Hannah and David. She continued her higher education, gaining her master's in Germanic languages at Melbourne University in 1972.

In 1974, Marietta's family moved to Berkeley, California, while her then husband, Ian, undertook a year's sabbatical. For Marietta, it was a time of discovery, of new frontiers and ideas, professional connections and friendships. She was particularly inspired by Dr Caleb Gattegno's "Silent Way" of language teaching which gave students greater autonomy in the learning process.

In the early 1980s, Marietta spent many months in New Hampshire learning about the language theories of Donald Graves and upon returning to Melbourne, she went on to teach English as a second language (ESL). In 1984, Marietta published *Students Can Write in their Second Language*, a handbook to help teachers to use the methods she had developed through her practice and studies.

She spent time teaching in regional Australia, taking up a position in teacher education at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga. Marietta would later complete her doctorate at La Trobe University in 1991 and became one of the first people to do so in the field of ESL education.

Poetry had been one of Marietta's lifelong passions. She published various anthologies, founded a poetry magazine, was president of the Melbourne Poets Union and mentored many up-and-comers in the Melbourne poetry community. She won various prizes, including the Victorian Cancer Council's Daffodil Day Award in 2004.

Marietta had also been instrumental in staging the inaugural annual bilingual poetry event for the Melbourne Poets Union in 2001, allowing people of all languages and cultures to come together and share poetry that was welcoming, inclusive and interactive.

In 2003, Marietta learnt she had breast cancer. She had surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, and went into remission. In 2006, Marietta published *Island of Wakefulness*, an anthology of Dutch and English poetry that drew on her experiences as a survivor of war and cancer. In the same year, she also co-edited *Heirloom, second anthology of the Melbourne Child Survivors of the Holocaust*. Marietta had also encouraged her mother to publish her own memoirs in 2005, ensuring her mother's story of persecution and survival would be preserved.

In 2015, after 10 cancer-free years, she learnt that the cancer had metastasised to her spine. For the following three years she had various treatments, and continued living her life as much as her illness would permit. Even as her illness began to take its toll, she continued with her freelance work, editing, tutoring and translating.

It was also in 2015 that Marietta published *A perfect distortion*, her second bilingual book of poetry. The book combined her poetry and photography that was inspired by walks through Darebin Parklands in Fairfield, Victoria. In 2017, she brought these works to life in an exhibition at the Olivia Newton-John Centre for Cancer Research, now permanently on display.

Marietta spent the last six months of her life in palliative care, showing an extraordinary resilience in the face of her debilitating illness and increasing frailty. She died on April 12, 2019, having spent her final months, defeating doctors' predictions, surrounded by people who loved her. She is survived by her two children, Hannah and David, sister Elisabeth, four grandchildren, cousins and extended family in Israel.

Marietta will be remembered for her sharp intellect, passion for language, and also for her warmth, creativity and ability to draw from even her darkest experiences. Reflecting on her life in a recent article, she said: "And, the cellar? I carry it within myself. The cellar is a dark place, but it's also a place of inspiration."

*Cellar*

*Since I was five*

*I have been writing the cellar*

*How the light beam  
from the grille at street level  
Struck the dust motes  
the way they danced  
How the shadow of the grille  
created a pattern on the stone floor  
How the intensity of the light  
made the darkness darker  
How if I stood in the light  
it illuminated my hand  
And darkness became an absence*

Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper, from *island of wakefulness*.

**Hannah Ruth Elliott is Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper's daughter.**