



AUTHORING JUSTICE

Capstone Project

Machteld Vonk

The thing about children

Machteld Vonk

"In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict" (UN CRC art. 38(4))

I had been thinking about my mother's story for some time. My mind had been travelling to her experiences of war as a girl, in a women's internment camp in Indonesia – where she, her mother and her four siblings, spend some two years of their lives. I know snippets of their story. I know my grandmother was on the brink of death at some point but miraculously recovered, I know they had little food, and I know they were afraid each day that their brother would be taken to a men's camp. I also know my mother played and found ways to be a child despite their imprisonment.

The thing about children is that they are immensely resourceful and think of ways to play however dire the circumstances.

Last month, students at my university placed a long line of children's shoes trailing all the way from their anti-war encampment to the building that houses the university board. The shoes represented children injured and killed in the war Israel was waging against Palestine after the 7 October attacks by Hamas on Israel. When I talked to the students in the encampment, they told me they wanted the university to show that it did not condone the killing of children. The encampment was removed by the police shortly afterwards.

But the line of shoes remained. Walking past this long line of children's shoes in the early morning on the silenced campus on my way to work, was an experience that is hard to describe. I followed the zigzagging line to the end and tried to take in each pair. The small red and blue sandals for a toddler that has just learned to walk, the pink princess shoes of a ten-year old girl, the worn-out soccer shoes of a boy on the brink of puberty, and the trainers of a well-known brand that would have been the pride of any 15-year-old. I imagined the children who died during armed conflict and then the children who survived, and the burden they would carry with them into the future.

The thing about children is that they find joy in the smallest places.

I imagined children running around campus in the bright yellow rain boots and purple ballerina's, playing, screaming, laughing, inspecting the trees in the small forest alongside the road to the university board building and swinging in the newly installed swing chairs on the grass.

The thing about children is that they play no part in the wars they survive, but war will play a part in their lives long after it is over, whatever side those responsible for their wellbeing were on.

And I thought of my mother, and how she played with whatever she could find in a Japanese internment camp World War II. After liberation of their camp in August 1945, my mother's family stayed in Indonesia until the summer of 1947, before returning to the Netherlands on leave. Both my mother's four siblings and her parents survived the camps, my mother's maternal grandparents did not. My mother's father was a missionary, sent to Indonesia by the church in the early 1930's. Before leaving he married my grandmother who had been born and raised in Indonesia as the daughter of a missionary. Their work did not end with the end of the war with Japan, so they returned to their church on Java and continued their work until they were due for leave in 1947.

In those years after the war with Japan, an independence war raged in Indonesia, which finally led to the recognition by the Netherlands of the independence that Indonesia had proclaimed in 1945, on 27 December 1947.

This is a complex part of my family history, because it involves the colonialization of Indonesia by the Netherlands and the fact that my family lived there for an extended period during the 20th Century.

During the Japanese occupation my mother and her siblings were imprisoned by the aggressor, but now they were involved in a war in which their motherland was the oppressor. This switch in perspective probably went unnoticed by my mother at the time, there was a war going on and they were afraid either way. She was 6 years old when the war with Japan ended in 1945 and 8 years old when here family returned to the Netherlands on leave in the Summer of 1947. This switch in perspective did, of course, influence how their experiences were perceived afterwards.

My mother remembers her father sitting just inside the door of their home at night with a gun, while gunshots were fired outside. Their house was built adjacent to the hospital that was part of the missionary project, and in the morning my mum and her sister would look at the injured from both sides arriving at the hospital. They helped looking after babies and small children, so the nurses had their hands free to look after the wounded. No surprise they both took up medical professions later in life.

My mother's family does not talk (much) about their experiences. My mother told me her parents never discussed their experiences during the Japanese occupation with their children, so they have no idea what happened to their father during his imprisonment. By the time they arrived in the Netherlands, there was no interest in their stories. The country was recovering from the German occupation and the terrible blight of the Holocaust.

Zooming out, we all know that the Dutch were on the wrong side of history with the colonization of Indonesia. But my mother and her siblings were children. The thing about children is that they play no part in the wars they survive, but war will play a part in their lives long after it is over.

Almost all the world's nations are party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and have committed themselves to safeguarding children's rights. We know that children are affected by war in many more ways than adults simply because they are children.

Armed conflicts impact their right to care, security, freedom of violence and abuse, education, protection, food and housing, medical treatment, play and so on. I know the Convention urges State Parties to take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict, and this includes the children on the other side of the conflict, something which is easily forgotten. But I think it would make much more sense to urge State Parties to accept that war in and of itself is a violation of children's rights.

A couple of weeks ago my mother's elder brother passed away. An old friend of my uncle led the service. He told us he had been instructed by my uncle not to talk about my uncle and his experiences as a child during the war. The service was about his faith and not his life.

During the reception afterwards my cousins (all in their 50s and 60s) all had the same questions: does your mother talk about the war and the internment camps? What do you know about what happened to them? We all knew it had influenced their lives and ours and possibly our children's lives as well, but we did not really know what our parents had been through as children – just that it was rough and that it was always there and was part of our history as well. My uncle was the eldest child and the keeper of the family history, but he and his stories are gone now.

Last week I discovered the line of children's shoes was no longer there. I found them in a big, messy pile close to the former encampment site. Next week they will probably be gone just like my uncle's stories of his and my mother's childhood during WW II. It worries me that we forget. Maybe only the grief for the children killed and the stories of the children who survived war that can prevent us from starting new ones. We need to keep telling their stories over and over again, until we no longer forget that war destroys the lives of children.

The thing about children is that they are the future. If we jeopardize their lives, we jeopardize the future.

This year, the Global Campus of Human Rights debuted an exciting new online course called "Authoring Justice." The course focuses on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about issues of human rights and social justice – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers, affecting change around the world. This first iteration included lessons from award-winning authors and human rights leaders, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Justice Albie Sachs, Casey Gerald, Kao Kalia Yang, Jemma Neville, and Joel Rickett.

The inaugural cohort of students are human rights advocates, lawyers, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from peace mediation in Ukraine to equitable access to technology in Nepal and beyond. The previous pages feature one selected example of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.



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