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Across time and space, a child's memories become man's mission

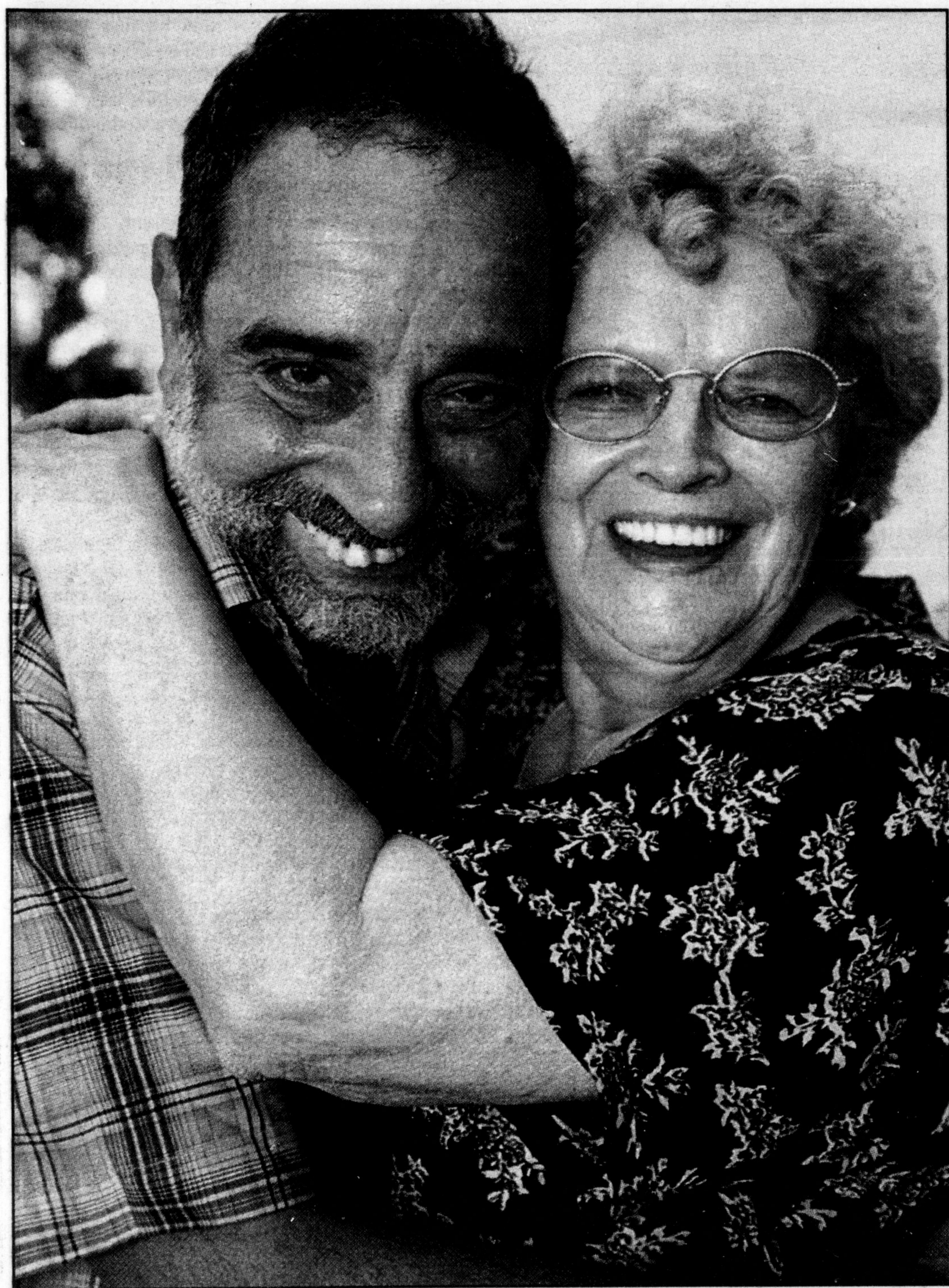


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

The warm smiles of a reunited Phillip Plas and Betty Vanderende overlay the sometimes sad memories of their first meeting as children in occupied Holland during the Second World War.

By IRENE GENTLE

The Champion

The biggest triumphs can be wrapped in the unlikeliest packages.

Like when Phillip Plas entered the gracious Sixth Line home of Betty and Gerry Vanderende last weekend, he used the front door.

It was a jubilant arrival for the man who once huddled in hidey-holes as a Jewish child in occupied Holland during the Second World War.

Lice and loss seemed to be little Phillip's only allies when he came to Ms Vanderende's parents, Theresa and Hendrik Veenstra in 1943.

He was five years old.

"During the war you had problems with lice," said Ms Vanderende, who was 10 when the small boy with the dark complexion, hair and eyes arrived in her childhood home.

"He wore a knitted sweater and it was so full of lice my mother had to throw it in the stove."

The loss of a sweater was no small thing in tightly rationed wartime.

But deprivation was second nature to Phillip.

Separated from his parents at age three, the child was captured by the Germans, then whisked away in a dramatic escape by Holland's flourishing underground movement.

"There were many, many moves," recalled Mr. Plas, now a plump man of 60 with gentle eyes and a smile warm enough to melt butter during a deep freeze. "When I came to the family I had a little history in hiding."

So did the Veenstras.

As a member of the underground, Mr. Veenstra was constantly on the move while his wife raised their four children.

So when he pulled his motorbike up to the family home with Phillip perched on the pillion, Ms Veenstra took the child in without hesitation.

For a woman with her strong religious faith, it was just the right thing to do.

Doing the right thing was also what compelled Mr. Plas to fly in from Holland more than 55 years later to reunite with the surviving members of the Veenstra family.

For the past two years, he has been petitioning the Holocaust Institute in Israel to award them a recognition reserved for holocaust heroes and martyrs.

"After he thought about it, he realized what a big risk my mother was taking," said Ms Vanderende.

His petitioning bore fruit — the ceremony took place last Sunday at the Adas Israel Synagogue in Hamilton.

The honour came too late for Ms

• see HIDING on page 2

NEWSLINES

Heater blamed

A faulty heater was the cause of Monday morning's raging barn blaze at a No. 5 Sideroad chicken farm, say fire officials.

Preparing to receive a load of 23,000 chicks, an operator of the Opsteen family farm turned on portable heaters, one of which caught fire.

The blaze was called in shortly after 7:30 a.m. after farm workers smelled smoke.

The flames spread rapidly throughout the barn, burning for hours as firefighters battled to knock the fire down. No animals were in the barn and no one was hurt.

The loss is estimated at \$300,000 said Mark Cross of the Milton Fire Department.

Firefighters from two local stations and Halton Hills responded to the blaze.

WEEKEND INSERTS

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