

Ruth Brass



Ruth Christa Witte was born 3rd March 1923, in Brück, a town in the centre of the shire of Potsdam-Mittelmark in Brandenburg. Her father was a teacher.

Her own education was limited by the politics of the times and by the outbreak of war. She completed her Mittlere Reife in March 1939, with high marks, but was then enrolled in the nearby Landfrauenschule where her studies covered what could broadly be described as home economics, together with “Deutsches Bauerntum” and sport. Again, she gained high marks. From there, like many of her contemporaries, she probably went into the Women’s Land Army; certainly by October 1944, she was a member.

In late 1945 or early 1946, she escaped with her mother and younger sister to the west; she worked for the NAFI (the British Army canteen service) in Köln and it was there that she met Alan Brass, who was a radar fitter with the RAF. They married in 1952 and lived for a time in England, where their first three children, Charles and the twins Frank and Christina, were born. Alan later became a Methodist minister.

After the family moved to Australia in 1957, the fourth child, Stephen, was born. Ruth worked for a time at Yallourn Hospital and then, from 1964 to 1966, taught at Yallourn High School, although she was not a qualified teacher – a situation that was common at the time. Despite this, Ruth was a member of the committee that set the German Matriculation examination. As pressure grew in the mid-60s for unqualified teachers to gain qualifications, she matriculated in 1966 in English Literature and German, for which she, not surprisingly, gained First Class Honours!

In 1967 and 1968 she taught at Williamstown High School; in 1969 she moved to Niddrie High School where she taught German until her retirement from the Education Department in 1979. It was in these ten years that her reputation for enthusiasm and hard work in promoting German in the school spread in the Western Metropolitan Region; she not only ran lively classes where her students engaged in interesting activities such as singing, cooking and making traditional seasonal decorations, but she ran “German Days” which involved the whole school and was active in encouraging her students to take part in interschool events which developed into the Bunter Nachmittage run by the Association of German Teachers in Victoria, as well as Goethe Society Poetry competitions. It was because of her leadership that Niddrie and two other schools in Western Melbourne were able to share the services of a German teaching assistant in the late 70s and that she was offered a scholarship by the Goethe-Institut to attend a Fortbildungskurs in Munich and Berlin in early 1978 – her first trip back to Germany.

Ruth’s health began to deteriorate, and she retired from secondary teaching in 1979. However, she continued teaching at the Goethe-Institut until August 1986, just before Alan’s death. In 1985 she had made her second return trip to Germany. After her retirement from the Goethe-Institut, she taught German to executives of Hoechst, until her declining health made this impossible. She died on 3rd March 1990.