

Elizabeth Hawes MBE (?-1966)

With a private education, Elizabeth Hawes gained fluency in several languages. This was to be one of the many talents that assisted her in her International Soroptimist work. Her great interest was singing, entailing her visiting both Paris and Brussels. Elizabeth studied Optics and was awarded a diploma in the subject, and so as a 'dispensing optician' joined the 'family firm' of Alfred Hawes and Son, Manufacturing Opticians.

Elizabeth was a Founder Member of the Greater London Club founded in 1923 and chartered on 14 February 1924. She went on to be President of the Club twice, in 1934 and in 1942. Elizabeth served as President of SIGBI in 1937-1938.

Hawes was responsible for the organisation and formation of many new Soroptimist clubs. She worked with Dr Margaret Adams to form the Federation of Soroptimist International of Great Britain and Ireland in 1928, splitting away from the Federation of Europe. She also worked with Edith Glanville to expand Soroptimist International into Australia, where the Sydney Club was formed in 1937.



The 1938 Atlantic City Convention, held in New Jersey, USA, took place during Elizabeth's SIGBI Presidency. By the time of the Convention there were 11,389 members in 191 clubs in 13 countries. An important step was taken to draw the Federations closer together. The Constitution was amended to provide for an International Liaison Secretary and Elizabeth Hawes was appointed. She built avenues of friendship that were to be of great value in the war-shadowed years ahead. There would not be another Convention for a decade.

World peace must have occupied the minds of many members at this Convention. In her report, Elizabeth presented a resolution which received the unanimous approval of all delegates: "The Soroptimist International Association condemns war as an instrument of policy between nations and urges governments to seek other means of settling disputes. The meeting of the Soroptimist International Association affirms its belief that freedom can only be assured and peace maintained by upholding the democratic rights of the individual." This was the first of many future Policy Statements. As International Liaison Officer, Elizabeth reminded British Soroptimists that it was essential to keep faithfully to the policy laid down in the International Constitution of maintaining strict neutrality in all national affairs and of avoiding all discussions on political, sectarian-religious and racial questions.

As the storm clouds gathered in 1939, the British Federation of Soroptimists embarked on rescuing members of the Vienna Club and their families, who were threatened by the Nazi regime. Negotiations took place with the Home Office and since each refugee had to be sponsored by someone in England, Elizabeth Hawes did much of the work. Eventually over 30 refugees arrived in England. Under Elizabeth's leadership Soroptimists made themselves responsible for the refugees and subsequently arranged their safe passage to the United States where these brave women were helped by American Soroptimists.

Elizabeth Hawes was personally responsible for shipping parcels of aid, including money and clothing, from Soroptimists in the UK and the USA to stricken cities throughout Europe. How Elizabeth managed to maintain contacts with Soroptimists in occupied Europe no-one will ever know for certain, but it is certain that she had her own "underground network" of brave women throughout Europe during those dark and dangerous days.

Elizabeth recounted that Dr. Madeleine Garot, President of the European Federation, said that she had to hide all papers and Minutes of the Soroptimist Federation under the coal. Elizabeth sent Dr.Garot a Red Cross telegram saying only "Working hard and hopeful". Madeleine told Hawes later that she wept tears of joy when she received the telegram. It reassured her that European Soroptimists were not forgotten and it inspired them to hold on.

Due to war-time restrictions the 1944 SIGBI Conference had to be cancelled. However on 7 July 1944 Elizabeth was able to broadcast a message over the BBC to members of the SI of the Americas Federation, then holding its convention in St Louis, Missouri. She mentioned active expansion of clubs in the UK, with many new members from the defence services. She also talked about the formation of groups in towns, representing women's interests, and the need to plan post-war availability of housing, education and vocational guidance.

In November 1946 SIGBI held its conference in London and visitors included members from both SIA and SIE. Elizabeth Hawes was able to give her report (and her thanks) in the presence of American Soroptimists. She introduced the idea of Friendship Links, still active today. She challenged those attending Conference: "...interchange of visits possibly on a Club basis, correspondence, conference meetings – these are some of the immediate possibilities before us at the international level, and they have a direct bearing on the work of the United Nations, to which many of us have pledged ourselves to give life service." The UN was in its infancy, a year old at the time.

Both SIGBI and SIA were working on the establishment of a 'Children's Year' and Elizabeth foresaw an appeal by UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and the UN along these lines.

In 1948 in her role of International Liaison Officer, Hawes presented SI Cambridge in England with its charter. The next year, 1949, marked the 25th anniversary of the Greater London club's receiving its charter. Elizabeth was guest of honour at her own club's celebrations. Of Elizabeth it was said: "...she is the best known and most beloved Soroptimist throughout the world, but is indeed the living embodiment of our Charter."



Harrogate, Yorkshire was the venue for the first post-war international convention in 1948, providing opportunities for many reunions after years of enforced separation. 1500 Soroptimists attended and for the first time the flags of the 15 countries present were carried ceremoniously into the hall, received by Elizabeth, who then placed them on display at the front of the hall. This has become the practice at all Soroptimist Conventions and Conferences since that day.

Honorary Membership of the Federation of Great Britain and Ireland was bestowed on Elizabeth in 1948 when she retired from the post of International Liaison Officer and was succeeded by Madeleine Garot. As a token of appreciation of her work in this post during the war, Elizabeth was asked to exercise her personal taste in the decoration and furnishing of one of the rooms of the Soroptimist Residential Club, Number 63 Bayswater Road.

In 1952 the Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, in conjunction with the Save the Children Fund, opened a play centre for underprivileged children in Hurlock Street, Islington, North London and named it Elizabeth House in recognition of the moving spirit that Elizabeth Hawes had given to the project.

Kathleen Halpin (SIGBI President 1959-60) reminisced: "Elizabeth Hawes was like a fairy godmother to younger Soroptimists. We would be invited to her cottage for weekends which could include a concert, a party and a trip to Brighton."

Elizabeth loved London, children and her cottage garden at Penfield near Haywards Heath where trees were planted by Soroptimists from each Federation.

She died in 1966, having given 42 years of devoted service to Soroptimist International. A photograph of Elizabeth Hawes standing in her lovely garden continues to hang on the wall in the entrance hallway at Number 63.