

Background

A talent is formed in stillness; a character, in the world's torrent.—Goethe

Most of Holland's nine million citizens were bystanders to the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Though millions wanted to do something, and hundreds of thousands gave assistance to those who were doing something, only about fifty to sixty thousand—less than one percent—stood up to the Nazi injustices through active resistance.¹ Of that number, only a small fraction—perhaps a tenth—dared to actually rescue Jews. So that's less than one-tenth-of-one percent of the population shouldering the task of saving 140,000 innocent people.

How did the rescuers come to make the choices they did? What choices were available to them, and to the Jews, during the Nazi occupation? Though the narratives of the rescuers directly engage these questions, it's helpful to know more about the circumstances that were the backdrop for the rescuers' choices. By surveying that vanished historical and cultural landscape, it becomes easier to understand why so many sympathetic Dutch citizens did nothing, and it also puts the heroic actions of the rescuers into sharper relief.

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The night before Germany attacked the Netherlands, Adolf Hitler came on the radio and gave his solemn pledge that Dutch neutrality would be honored. Twenty-five years earlier, the Dutch had managed to stay out of the First World War; many hoped that they would be able to stay out of this one, as well. On May 10, 1940, however, people all over the country were awakened in the early morning hours by the drone of fighter planes, punctuated by the sounds of anti-aircraft flak. The Dutch army fought desperately with heavy losses, but their defenses were easily overrun by the panzer divisions of the invading Wehrmacht. Through the use of paratroopers, the Germans were able to seize every important airfield and most of the strategic bridges by dawn.²

Three days later, when the Nazis announced that they were planning to bomb Rotterdam by air, the Dutch command stationed there expressed willingness to surrender the city. The offer was ignored. Hours later, a formation of Stuka dive bombers set out on an air strike that left one of Holland's oldest cities in charred ruins. The firebombing of Rotterdam, the first large-scale airborne attack in history, is remembered firsthand by survivor Ralph Boucher:

I saw the planes still diving and releasing hundreds of bombs. Flames and black smoke were now visible over the center of the city The fires grew steadily worse and by evening the whole center of town was one vast sea of flames, so huge that young trees in front of our house were bent by the strong winds sucked in by the fire. This continued into the night and all of the next day.³

¹ That millions wanted to do something can be deduced from the prevalence and wide readership of resistance newspapers. The other estimates come from Louis de Jong, *The Netherlands and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 47. See also Bob de Graaff, "Collaboratie en Verzet" in: J.P.B. Jonker et al. *Vijftig jaar na de inval* (Amsterdam: SDU, 1985), 95.

² Gordon Craig, *Europe Since 1815* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), 721.

³ Ralph Boucher, *Miracle of Survival* (Berkeley: J. L. Magnes Museum, 1997), 45.

Closer to ground zero, the firestorm reached hurricane velocities, ripping doors and windows from their frames, flinging burning rafters into the air, and razing buildings and factories. Amid the fiery chaos, hundreds of civilians were killed, thousands more wounded, and tens of thousands were left homeless.⁴

Within five days, the Dutch High Command officially capitulated, and Queen Wilhelmina and most of her cabinet fled to England. Many Dutch felt betrayed by her departure as hundreds of German troops goose-stepped into the Netherlands, their jackboots, equipped with steel taps, making a thunderous clicking as they approached. As days stretched into weeks, however, it became clear that the Queen was better off in exile than imprisoned in her own castle, as King Leopold of Belgium was in his. During her hasty escape, Wilhelmina had also had enough presence of mind to take the entire national treasury with her. Safe in her London headquarters, she began to issue stirring addresses on the BBC-broadcast Radio Orange, urging the Dutch people to stand strong.

The Germans, even before having arrived on land, had airdropped leaflets declaring: WE THE GERMAN PEOPLE HAVE COME TO LIBERATE YOU.⁵ Most Dutch were offended by such propaganda, but the Germans hoped to win them over with a show of civility and by appeals to a shared “Aryan blood.” The prospect of the Dutch being among the winners, through the very real possibility of a German victory, and according to their high ranking in the Nazi racial hierarchy, did draw a small number of them into the Nazi fold. Most, however, wanted nothing to do with their occupiers, though they also wanted to avoid

⁴ This is based on the unforgettable description by Sebald of a similar, albeit larger, firebombing perpetrated later in the war by the Allies, combined with the statistics for Rotterdam provided by Shirer. See W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2003), 27; William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 722.

⁵ Recalled by survivor Jack van der Geest, *Was God on Vacation?: A World War II Autobiography*, written with

antagonizing them. There were some among the Jews, of course, especially the recently arrived German-Jewish émigrés, who guessed correctly where all this was leading.

Two extreme Jewish responses were therefore seen early on. In Amsterdam, where the Jewish population was concentrated, over a hundred Jewish people committed suicide during the first weeks of the occupation, putting their heads in gas ovens, or jumping out of windows rather than be subjected to what they imagined the Nazis had in store for them.⁶ There were also some Jews who, either alone or in gangs, directly fought the Germans with whatever weapons they could get their hands on. This was tantamount to suicide, considering the tens of thousands of heavily-armed German combatants.

The majority of Holland's 140,000 Jews adopted a wait-and-see attitude, however, as did the rest of the Dutch populace. The easiest option was to go about one's life as before, keep a low profile, and hope that the Germans had the sense to realize that there was no point in arresting quiet, law-abiding Dutch citizens. The Germans were quick to exploit such hopes; their deceptive policies led Jews to believe that decent treatment was possible for those who acted with the utmost restraint and compliance.⁷ Still, Dr. Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the forty-eight-year-old Reichskommissar put in charge of the Netherlands by Adolf Hitler, stated the Nazi position quite clearly in an early public address: "We shall hit the Jews wherever we find them and those who side with them will bear the consequences."⁸

Less than five months into the occupation, the Germans required all government employees to fill out an "Aryan attestation." This form called for detailed information about

Carol J. Ordemann. (Arvada, Colo: Van der Geest, 1995), 2.

⁶ See Werner Warmbrunn, *The Dutch under German Occupation 1940-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 166; Mark Klempner, "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma," *Oral History Review* 2000 Summer/Fall 27 (2) 67-83.

⁷ See Gordon A. Craig, "Schreibt un Farschreibt!" *New York Review of Books* (10 April, 1986).

the applicant's family background, especially any Jewish ancestry. Though there was some protest, not just from the government employees, but also from several churches and universities, in the end, all but 20 of the 240,000 Dutch civil servants dutifully signed and returned the form.⁹ Dutch historian Peter Romijn reports:

From the German point of view, the registration went as planned. Anyone who was of two minds about signing the attestation, and who sought guidance from their superiors, found none. The Supreme Court refused to sanction refusal to sign, most members arguing that in view of the state of war the Germans had the right to take such measures. Because of the position taken by the Secretaries-General and the Supreme Court, any chance of making a collective protest was lost.¹⁰

Soon after demanding the Aryan attestations, the Germans began to issue the first of hundreds of regulations aimed at denying Dutch Jews their civil liberties. In the beginning, the devil was in the details, sometimes ridiculous details: "Jews cannot walk on the sunny side of the street." Hardly worth fighting against, but greater restrictions followed: "Jews cannot go to the park." "Jews cannot attend the cinema." "Jews cannot play sports." By the time the deportations started two years later, Jews could not travel, or change their place of residence. They were prohibited from marrying non-Jews; they could not even visit non-Jews. They could not drive cars, or make telephone calls. Many of them could no longer practice their professions. As they became increasingly stigmatized and desperate, they also became increasingly isolated from non-Jews. Through such means, the Nazis sought to establish the Jewish people as a sub-human species, repellant and deserving of persecution.

⁸ B. A. Sijes, *De Februaristaking, 25-26 Februari 1941* (The Hague, 1954), 179-180.

⁹ See Dick van Galen Last, "The Netherlands," in *Resistance in Western Europe*, Bob Moore, ed. (New York: Berg, 2000), 195; B. A. Sijes, "Several Observations Concerning the Position of the Jews in Occupied Holland during World War II," in *Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Efraim Zuroff (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977), 535.

¹⁰ P. Romijn, "The War, 1940-1945," in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*. J.C.H. Blom, R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, I. Schöffner, Eds. (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002), 302.

Who was enforcing these regulations, and carrying out the Nazi agenda? When the rescuers recount roundups—known as *razzias*—and other operations, there was no single generic Nazi group that carried them out, but rather a startling array of NSB storm troopers (“Black Police”), German common police (“Green Police”), Waffen-SS (Schutzstaffel, meaning, “Defense Echelon”), Gestapo (“Secret State” police), SD (German intelligence officers), Sipo (German security officers), Kripo (German criminal police), Wehrmacht (German soldiers), and still others such as detectives, espionage agents, and the Dutch police, who were all taking their orders from the German authorities. Holocaust scholar Christopher R. Browning has remarked that in the Netherlands the bewildering assemblage of Nazi groups essentially competed with each other to see which could do away with the Jews most quickly.¹¹

The NSB storm troopers require special explanation for they were not Germans at all, but rather Dutch. The Nationaal Socialistische Beweging was a Dutch fascist party, founded in 1931, dedicated to establishing a powerful central government with emphasis on order and discipline.¹² During the occupation, NSB members often proved to be more dangerous than the Germans because they spoke the language, knew the neighborhoods, and served as eyes and ears for the Gestapo. Many a fledging rescue attempt ended in tragedy due to an NSB informer—such people would sometimes take the Gestapo up on its offer of a reward (typically seven-and-a-half guilders—equivalent to about twenty dollars today) for each Jew whose whereabouts they betrayed.

¹¹ Christopher R. Browning, conversation with the author, 5 April 2002.

¹² *The Nationaal Socialistische Beweging* See Albert Van der Mey, *When A Neighbor Comes Calling* (Ontario: Paideia Press, 1985), 40.

Before the war, the NSB had been able to capture only about 8 percent of the vote; after the Nazis arrived, however, their leader, Anton Mussert, formed an alliance with the German occupiers, and suddenly became extremely powerful. He and his followers enthusiastically assisted the Nazis in all of their operations, especially the rounding up and deportation of Jews. Within a couple of years, the Nazis had made the NSB the only legal political party, and declared Mussert the leader of the Dutch people.¹³

In January 1941, the Germans announced that all Dutch citizens over the age of fifteen had to register and be issued identification cards. This request was, as Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg points out, “the first step to ensnare the Jews in a tight network of identification and movement controls.”¹⁴ Dutch historian B. A. Sijes estimates that out of a Jewish population of 140,000, only about fifty Jews refused to register.¹⁵

By this time, Jews were increasingly being taunted and beaten up in the streets, not yet by the Germans themselves (who were covert and methodical about carrying out their plans), but by NSBers. On February 11, a gang of NSB vigilantes entered the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam and proceeded to break the windows of storefronts, and attack people at random. This time, however, a Jewish *knokploeg*—the Dutch word for a kind of paramilitary gang—attacked the attackers, and one Dutch Nazi by the name of Hendrik Koot was severely wounded.

¹³ Dick van Galen Last, “The Netherlands,” in *Resistance in Western Europe* Bob Moore, ed. (New York: Berg, 2000), 198.

¹⁴ Raul Hilberg. *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 371

¹⁵ B. A. Sijes, “Several Observations Concerning the Position of the Jews in Occupied Holland during World War II,” in *Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Efraim Zuroff (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977), 536.

The following day, the Nazis ordered the establishment of a Jewish Council to act as an intermediary between themselves and the Jews. They appointed the chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi community, as well as its president Abraham Asscher, to lead the Council, along with one of the rabbis from the Sephardic community. When both rabbis declined, Asscher suggested Dr. David Cohen, an influential, though not widely liked, secular leader in the Jewish community who was already presiding over an agency that assisted Jewish refugees. (Cohen had snubbed the rabbinate by hardly including any rabbis on the board of this and another major Jewish organization that he had founded.¹⁶) And so, Asscher and Cohen chaired the Council, which immediately began to issue announcements to the Jewish community based on orders from the Nazis, the first being that all Jews must surrender their weapons.

On February 14, even as the death of Hendrik Koot was receiving wide coverage in the Nazi-controlled newspapers, another incident happened, this time in an affluent neighborhood in South Amsterdam. Some members of the Green (German) Police surrounded *Koco's*, a popular Jewish-owned ice cream shop believed by the Germans to be a base for a Jewish *knokploeg*. The previous week, after the shop had had its windows smashed, its owners rigged up a contraption to spray ammonia at any unwelcome intruders. When they used the device against the entering German police, the owners and others present were arrested. But this was just the first step in the Germans' exponential formula of retribution.

¹⁶The Committee for Jewish Special Interests (1933), and the Jewish Coordination Committee (1940). See Jozeph Michman, "Historiography of the Jews in the Netherlands," in *Dutch Jewish History: Proceedings of the Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands, November 28 – December 3, 1982*. Jozeph Michman and Tirtsah Levie, eds. (Jerusalem: Tel-Aviv University, 1984), 26-27.

On Saturday, February 22, when many Jews were quietly observing the Sabbath, hordes of Green Police cordoned off the Jewish Quarter and arrested hundreds of Jewish men, dragging them off the street or pulling them from home and synagogue. After being marched in columns to Jonas Daniël Meyerplein, a public square, the men were forced to run the gantlet through rows of policemen swinging their truncheons, and then ordered to squat down for hours with their arms outstretched.¹⁷ The next day, the *Aktion* was repeated, bringing the total number of arrests to over four hundred.

This first brutal roundup sent shock waves throughout the entire country. English historian Bob Moore writes, “For the first time, the Germans had shown their hand: the tactics of the oppressor, which had been so evident in Germany since 1933, were now being applied in the Netherlands.¹⁸ The Communist party called for a protest strike, an idea that spread in a great flurry of whisperings to other groups and workers of all kinds—not only in Amsterdam, but in Utrecht and elsewhere. Though the Communists had initiated several previous strikes in opposition to Nazi policies, this was the first time that a strike had been called specifically to protest the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews. Thousands of workers walked off the job, bringing shipping, unloading, transportation, and other services to a standstill.

The Nazis responded with a crackdown that resulted in at least seven deaths and the arrest of more than one hundred strikers. The next day, however, the strike grew bigger. Thousands of longshoremen, metal workers and others refused to go to work, severely crippling the economic and industrial infrastructure that the Nazis were so vigorously exploiting. In the armament industries alone, over 18,000 workers were absent from the

¹⁷ Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940-1945* (London: Arnold, 1997), 71-72.

factories and assembly lines.¹⁹ However, when the Nazi authorities claimed that the strike was being instigated by the Jews, and threatened to arrest and possibly shoot five hundred additional Jews the next day, the strike's leaders, heeding advice from the Jewish Council, called it to an end.

The February Strike was the only mass protest over the plight of the Jews to be carried out in all of occupied Europe, and perhaps the only strike in history on behalf of a persecuted minority. For many Jews, it was the most cherished moment of the war, providing a tangible sense of solidarity with their Dutch co-citizens that cut through the isolation and denigration in which the Nazis sought to envelop them.²⁰ Still, it was ultimately ineffectual.

During this winter of 1941, the Jews in the Netherlands must have been desperately weighing their options. Clearly "fight" was futile, what about "flight"? Many Jews were thinking about leaving the country or going into hiding, but both possibilities were fraught with difficulties. All legal means to emigrate had been cut off by the Nazis, and those who tried to make a run for it found danger in every direction.

Holland is flanked by Germany to the east and the north. To the south lie France and Belgium, both of which had been invaded at the same time, and were also under German occupation. To pass through these lands, money would be needed to pay off the right people, and even then, there would be no guarantees. Nevertheless, about 1,400 Jews escaped to Switzerland via Belgium and France, and another 1,300 managed to get to Spain

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 373.

²⁰ Ibid, 56.

or Portugal.²¹ To the west of Holland is the open sea, and by crossing it, one could reach England. Some Dutch tried to do this in small boats and canoes, but only about two hundred were able to make it without being intercepted by German patrol boats.

To go underground posed a different set of difficulties. The Netherlands is only 12,900 square miles—about the size of Maryland—and in the 1940s it was already densely packed with a population of nearly nine million people.²² The Dutch pride themselves on saying that God made the world, but that they made Holland, because their ambitious system of dikes reclaimed large tracts of land that were once underwater—including what is now Amsterdam. It is an exceedingly flat country, with no mountains and very little forest. Its excellent network of roads, stretched across the level countryside, enable anyone with a vehicle to be anywhere within its borders within a few hours. However, an environment so meticulously planned and developed does not lend itself to hiding. On the contrary, it may be seen as a natural trap.²³ In the 1940s, only the rural areas provided some open space where one could walk around without great risk of being observed.

It has often been noted that the Jews were well integrated into Dutch society, having lived harmoniously in the Netherlands since the seventeenth century. That is true, but not in the sense that the term “integrated” is often used. Though Jews enjoyed full Dutch citizenship and encountered little anti-Semitism, they, like other religious groups in Holland, had their own separate political representation, and functioned parallel to other groups

²¹ Louis de Jong, *The Netherlands and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 20.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

²³ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Vol. 2 (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 570

without necessarily having much contact with them.²⁴ As a result, many Jews didn't know many non-Jews. This made going underground extremely difficult.

The best bet for would-be *onderduikers*—that is, people who wanted to “dive under”—was to find some shelter on the property of a sympathetic farmer. Unfortunately, this required contacts that most city dwellers, especially those Jews who lived in the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam, simply didn't have. This left only the option of finding a hiding place somewhere in the city, where the houses were built close together. Such proximity to one's neighbors reflected the close-knit nature of Dutch life, but made it difficult for someone to remain undetected for long. What's more, curtains were typically left open, leaving the common living areas of the home in plain view.

To hide under such conditions required a high level of secrecy. Some special situation—an attic, a basement, a crawl space—would probably be necessary. But of course one could not live in such a space self-sufficiently; hiding would require the cooperation and assistance of other people. Possible helpers had to be approached very cautiously due to the possibility of betrayal. After all that, there was still no assurance that even the most sympathetic person would be willing to take the risk.

On January 20, 1942, the Wannsee Conference convened in Berlin and Reinhardt Heydrich, designer of the Nazis' mechanism for mass murder, presented his strategy for the deportation and extermination of every remaining Jew in Europe— *eleven million* was the

²⁴ In the uniquely pillared Dutch system of *verzuiling* or “vertical integration,” religious groups choose to remain apart with separate but equal status, while maintaining their own political representation. Out of this, “integrated subcultures (*zuilen*) emerged which cut across class lines, uniting disparate economic and social groups on the basis of their religious affiliation.” See Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940-1945* (London: Arnold, 1997), 23, 161.

targeted number! Within an hour-and-a-half, consensus was reached by the enthusiastic quorum of fifteen high-level Nazis (eight of whom held Ph.D. degrees).²⁵ The Holocaust was officially underway.

It's difficult for us to imagine today that there was a time when names such as Auschwitz held no particular resonance. Before the Holocaust, however, the horrors of high-tech genocide were, as Dutch historian Louis de Jong states, "beyond the belief and the comprehension of almost all people living at the time, Jews included."²⁶ The Final Solution was a massive undertaking, requiring multiple layers of administration and the varied skills of many professionals. Yet, despite the complexity of this "apparatus of total destruction,"²⁷ the basic formula behind it can be stated in four words: denigrate, isolate, deport, and kill.

Seyss-Inquart already knew the routine (albeit on a small scale) from his experience as Commissioner of Security and Police in Austria after Hitler forcibly annexed it to Germany in 1938. Under his orders, Jews in the Netherlands began to be rounded up in the summer of 1941—first to be detained in Amsterdam, and then sent off to Westerbork, a transit camp located almost one hundred miles northwest near the Dutch town of Hooghalen. Of the many officials below Seyss-Inquart, only one warrants our special attention: Ferdinand Hugo Aus der Fünten, who was principally responsible for coordinating and implementing Seyss-Inquart's plans for the Jews in Holland. We will hear more about Aus der Fünten in chapter nine from rescuer Piet Meerburg, who helped to free captive Jewish children right from under his nose.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Bantam, 1965).

²⁶ Louis de Jong, *The Netherlands and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 6-7.

²⁷ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985).

All the Nazi officials were part of a well-defined hierarchy that maintained an unusually strong presence in the Netherlands. In France and Belgium, the Germans were content to rule through a puppet government with the army as the ultimate authority. But in the Netherlands, the elite SS and Nazi party representatives were involved in every aspect of the transformation that they envisioned. One indication of this is that 5,000 German police were stationed in the Netherlands, and only 3,000 were stationed in France, despite the fact that the former is a much smaller country and contained only half as many Jews.²⁸ Browning believes that the Nazis exercised tighter control there than in any Western European country because they saw the Dutch as a kind of Nordic-Germanic people to be absorbed into their inner realm.²⁹

Despite their large numbers, however, the Nazis could not have done it alone. They relied on Dutch government employees and numerous public agencies and utilities to carry out their objectives. They used the entire governmental infrastructure as a platform from which to pursue their master vision for the Netherlands, which involved not only the extermination of the Jews but the Nazification of Dutch society and the full exploitation of all Dutch resources. Despite their misgivings, all but a few Dutch officials cooperated with the wishes of their Nazi occupiers. Dutch civil servants supplied Jewish addresses; Dutch policemen forcibly removed Jews from their homes; Dutch tram conductors transported Jews to the train stations, and Dutch railway workers operated the trains to Westerbork.³⁰ Though there were some who tried covertly to resist—for instance, in Amsterdam, Police

²⁸ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 407.

²⁹ Christopher R. Browning, conversation with the author, 5 April 2002.

³⁰ Paraphrased from Elma Verhey, “Anne Frank and the Dutch Myth.” In *Anne Frank in Historical Perspective*, Alex Grobman and Joel Fishman, eds. (Los Angeles: Martyrs Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust of the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, 1995), 24.

Inspector Schreuder organized a team of his men to inform Jewish people of upcoming raids that the police themselves had to conduct³¹—others performed their jobs with zeal.

In the spring of 1942, Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star of David. There were scattered protests from the non-Jewish community: some non-Jews donned homemade stars that said “Protestant” or “Catholic.”³² Leaflets protesting the policy were distributed in the tens of thousands. Such responses were not unusual in Holland—statements of protest in regard to the Nazis’ treatments of the Jews were plentiful throughout the war, and petitions and protest letters were sent to everyone from Seyss-Inquart on down. De Jong informs us that the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation houses over 70,000 different issues of more than 1,200 underground papers.³³ In such newspapers we find human rights and decency preserved on an ideological level, and, certainly, they served as morale boosters. However, these “paper tigers” did not do much more than that, at least as far as the Jews were concerned. They may even have inadvertently misled the bewildered Jewish public by reinforcing the notion that in a civilized society, in solidarity with their non-Jewish co-citizens, such injustices could not long continue.

Most Jews, instead of realizing that they had better scramble to save their lives, underestimated how long the war would continue, and how much damage the Germans would be able to do before it ended. They also misjudged the Allied forces in thinking that they would take action against egregious human rights violations, when actually their objectives remained strictly military, and, as has often been noted with bitter regret, they

³¹ This information was provided by Dr. Maurice van der Pol of Newton, MA, who was saved by one of Police Inspector Schreuder’s tip-offs.

³² Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 283.

³³ Louis de Jong, *The Netherlands and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 46.

could not even be persuaded to bomb the railway tracks to Auschwitz. In the words of Elie Wiesel, “The blindness of the Jews was equaled only by the indifference of the Allied leaders to their plight.”³⁴

And so, Jews put on their stars and “set off for the streets, embarrassed, proud, ill at ease, or indifferent.”³⁵ Most felt that since they had already registered as Jews, they might as well wear the star, although the stars unmistakably marked them for discrimination, deportation, and, when the time came, death. None of the scribbled letters of protest, or the noble, measured phrases of the petitions, or the rough-and-ready prose of the underground newspapers could save them then. On July 14, 1942, a major *razzia* took place in Amsterdam, and the next day, to make room for the new arrivals, the first trainload of Jews left Westerbork for Auschwitz. Death trains, filled to capacity, were soon leaving Westerbork regularly. To expedite turnover, the Nazis requested additional train service from Amsterdam to Westerbork, and the Dutch Railways complied by adding train number 11537, departing Amsterdam 2:16 a.m.; arriving in Hooghalen 5:58 a.m.³⁶

Even as the Jews were being called up to work in “labor camps,” able-bodied Dutch men were being conscripted to work in Germany, mostly in factories, so that the Germans they replaced could be drafted. Failing to get an adequate response from their call-up notices, the Germans started rounding up Dutch men by the tens of thousands—a two-day

³⁴ Elie Wiesel and Philippe-Mich el de Saint-Cheron, *Evil and Exile*, Jon Rothschild, trans. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

³⁵ P. Romijn, “The War, 1940-1945,” in *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*. J.C.H. Blom, R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, I. Sch ffer, Eds. (Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002), 314.

³⁶ Elma Verhey, “Anne Frank and the Dutch Myth.” In *Anne Frank in Historical Perspective*, Alex Grobman and Joel Fishman, eds. (Los Angeles: Martyrs’ Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust of the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, 1995), 24.

raid on Rotterdam alone yielded over 50,000 deportees.³⁷ Before the war had ended, over ten times that many had been used to provide manpower for the Nazi war effort.³⁸ It turned out that these men, unlike their Jewish co-citizens, were made to do purposeful work.

For the Jews, the requirement that Dutch men provide labor, and the roundups of Dutch men that followed, added to their confusion. They had already seen how everyone had to register, but it was the Jews who were singled out for discrimination. Now, all Dutch men had to provide labor, and so did all Jewish men and women. But how would their treatment be different?

Most Jews did not learn what was in store for them at their “labor camps” until they were already there. And then they were forced to write letters to their family members on the outside, saying that everything was fine. The following is one example, a letter written in December '42 by an inmate at Auschwitz III, the I.G. Farben factory where two out of every three prisoners perished:

I have now been here four weeks, and I am well. I am in good health. Work is not particularly heavy. We start at seven in the morning and we work till four in the afternoon. Food is good: at noon we have a warm meal and in the evening we get bread with butter, sausages, cheese, or marmalade. We have central heating here and we sleep under two covers. We have magnificent showers with warm and cold water.³⁹

³⁷ Dick van Galen Last, "The Netherlands," in *Resistance in Western Europe*, Bob Moore, ed. (New York: Berg, 2000), 205.

³⁸ B. A. Sijes, "Several Observations Concerning the Position of the Jews in Occupied Holland during World War II," in *Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Efraim Zuroff (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977), 547. See also Henri A. van der Zee, *The Hunger Winter* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 305.

³⁹ Louis de Jong, *The Netherlands and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 16.

In Amsterdam, those same relatives were encouraged by the German authorities to write back. De Jong reports: “Tens of thousands of such letters were handed to the Germans. Of course, not a single one was ever delivered.”⁴⁰

To understand how such deceptive tactics could have been official, albeit secret, German policy, one need look no further than Hitler himself:

When you lie, tell big lies. . . . [The masses] more readily fall victim to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters, but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.⁴¹

And so, the air in Amsterdam was thick with propaganda and deception, along with rumors, and guesses, warnings, assurances, and second-hand reports. Most Jews, facing a gaping uncertainty each day, and trying their best to cope with the mind-splitting worries, simply muddled through, hoping for the best.

For those who had still not decided what to do, receiving a deportation slip brought matters to a head. Some reported as required while entrusting their children to others. Some families tried to dive under together, or, failing in that, tried to split up and secure separate hiding places. In any case, finding “safe addresses” was very difficult.

It must be remembered that in 1942, the German forces appeared invincible. Not until the battle of Stalingrad a year later did Hitler suffer his first major defeat. As Browning points out, “This is not a point that one can say the Allies will win the war, or even that the war is going to be over soon. Those who hid Jews in the Netherlands in July ’42 were

⁴⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁴¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*; James Murphy, trans. (London, 1939), 198-199.

making a very extraordinary decision considering that there was no timetable and no guarantee of liberation.”

Who were these people, willing to help their Jewish co-citizens, despite the risk and uncertainty? They were people who could not cut their consciences according to Nazi specifications; who could not accept the mountain of newly enacted Nazi laws. They were people who were unafraid—or, at least, undeterred—by the threat of torture and death. Some of them acted alone, but often they managed to find others who shared their feelings and convictions. And, in some cases, they organized into groups.

The largest general resistance network involved in helping people to hide was the Landelijk Organisatie voor Hulp aan Onderduikers (LO), which was started in December 1942 by Reverend Clomp of the Orthodox Calvinist Church. His aim was not specifically to aid the Jews, but to assist Dutch men trying to evade the Nazi summons to forced labor assignments.

In terms of sheer numbers, it assisted more Jewish people to hide than any other organization. However, hiding Jewish people was more involved and dangerous than hiding those who were trying to evade forced labor. People willing to take in Jews were hard to come by, and security issues became much more complicated. And so, since assisting the Jews “was thought to present special problems which a mass organization could not handle,” the LO often referred Jewish onderduikers to specialty groups.⁴²

⁴² Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940-1945* (London: Arnold, 1997), 171.

These humanitarian cells had begun their rescue activities earlier, and some of them concentrated on saving Jewish children. In sharp contrast to the Nazi regime they would attempt to outwit, they were grassroots, informal, and non-hierarchical. There were only a handful of them, none with more than fifteen or twenty members. Three of the main groups of this type were the Utrecht Kindercomité; the Amsterdam Student Group; and the Naamloze Vennootschap (NV).

Among the rescuers profiled in this book, Hetty Voûte, Gisela Söhnlein, and Rut Matthijsen were part of the Utrecht Kindercomité; Piet Meerburg was the cofounder of the Amsterdam Student Group; and Mieke Vermeer was part of the Naamloze Vennootschap (NV).

Because of the secrecy required in the running of such groups, especially the need to avoid keeping written records, there were no doubt other groups that have escaped the attention of historians. For instance, in chapter six, Kees Veenstra, who had never been interviewed before, speaks about a nature study group for young people that became a rescue group, and yet I have found no mention in the historical literature about the group's secret function.

Whether the rescuers acted independently or as part of a group, they had to play many roles. Hetty Voûte, Gisela Söhnlein, and Kees Veenstra were primarily involved in helping to find safe addresses for the young people, and then transporting them to those addresses. Clara Dijkstra, Heiltje Kooistra, and Janet Kalff all took Jewish children into their own homes, thus providing three such safe addresses. Mieke Vermeer made regular visits to the houses where the children were hiding, bringing the host families food ration coupons and money. Rut Matthijsen helped to raise that money, and Ted Leenders stole

large supplies of ration coupons from government offices. Piet Meerburg, as organizer of the Amsterdam Student Group, developed intricate security measures to ensure that the whereabouts of the Jewish children would not be found out, even if he or other members of the group were arrested.

Hilberg writes, “Few Jews survived in Holland, but those few were saved as a result of the most strenuous efforts, for Holland was the one territory of the occupied West in which the Jews did not have an even chance to live.”⁴³ The people profiled in this book were the ones who made those strenuous efforts. All together, they and the other children’s rescuers throughout Holland were able to save more than 1,000 young lives.⁴⁴

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⁴³ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 365.

⁴⁴ Bert Jan Flim, *Saving the Children: History of the Organized Effort to Rescue Jewish Children in the Netherlands 1942 – 1945* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), 163.