

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

Special Educational Excerpt
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Chapter 3 Rut Matthijsen: Chemistry of Compassion

It is more difficult to crack a prejudice than an atom.—Albert Einstein

The Resistance did not consist only of big personalities, nor were all of its members stationed on the front lines. Rut Matthijsen is a serene, soft-spoken man, long accustomed to the hush of laboratories through his work as a biochemist. His measured words and studied answers to my questions revealed a lifelong habit of precision and reserve, even as his brown eyes beamed affably behind the powerful lenses of his glasses.

During the war, Rut usually worked behind the scenes, applying his emerging scientific skill to a variety of technical problems that beset the Utrecht Kindercomité, and the Resistance in general. His quiet confidence, combined with a detail-oriented, analytical mind, made him especially suited to tackle these challenging tasks. His business acumen also came in handy, as he attempted to raise money to literally “save the children.”

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The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

In 1942, I was a college student taking summer courses in chemistry at the University of Utrecht when a fellow student asked me if I would allow the room where I slept to be used during the day. “There are people coming from Amsterdam,” he explained, “and they need a stopping-off place that’s close to the station.” Sensing that he might be referring to *onderduikers*, I said yes. Curious to meet my transient guests, I went home the next day and found members of the Utrecht Kindercomité with some Jewish children in tow. These people were inspiring—unlike some chem students.

Soon I was spending most of my time helping them transport Jewish children to safe addresses. Once the fall semester started, the group got smaller, even as the number of children who needed to be hidden was increasing rapidly. Many of our fellow students said, “Sorry, I have to study.” But a core of ten or fifteen stayed on. A sense of group responsibility arose quite spontaneously between us, and a tremendous bond formed. I trusted them with my life, and they trusted me with their lives as well. You wouldn’t do anything without thinking about how it might affect the others.

Meanwhile, the Nazis were trying to make over the universities, just as they had made over the government. When they suspended the Jewish professors, there were protests, and the students in Leiden and Delft organized a strike. The Germans then closed both universities, though Delft was later reopened. But in Utrecht we didn’t have a strike—we thought we weren’t ready for that yet. And so, a few months later, all Jewish students were suspended. Still no protest. But by then I had withdrawn from the university to devote myself to rescue work full-time. I wasn’t able to concentrate on my studies, anyway.

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

At first I did what Hetty and Gisela were doing—delivering children, distributing ration coupons—but such work was more dangerous when done by a young man, and I'm not sure I possessed the requisite sangfroid. For instance, once when I was on my way to an address in South Amsterdam to bring food to some families that were hiding Jewish children, I was stopped by an officer who was interested in what I had in my suitcase.¹ When he found it was full of cheese and sausage, I was arrested on the minor charge of being a black market profiteer. I might have tried to talk my way out of it, but I hadn't prepared a story in advance. Then I panicked at the thought that when they found the identification cards in the suitcase, they would turn me over to the SS. To prevent this, I jumped out the window.

That landed me in the hospital with a concussion, and an armed guard outside my door. A resistance friend arrived, and with his help we were able to persuade the police to drop the charges against me. But I still had to spend an additional five weeks in the hospital to recover.

I found a more valuable direction for my energies when I teamed up with another group member to do falsification work, which led—surprisingly—to a source of income for the children in hiding. You see, the foster families were, of course, taking on a big responsibility, but besides the danger of it, many of them had very limited resources. We realized we needed to assist them with the children's upkeep, but we were all students, and none of us had much money. We gave what we could—for instance, my stamp collection brought in 300 guilders²—but it wasn't enough. So that was an ongoing problem.

We got a big boost when the Archbishop Johannes de Jong of Utrecht gave us ten thousand guilders from his "special needs" fund. So by the fall of '42 we

could say to the prospective foster parents, “If you take a child, yes, there will be risks, but we can provide support: fifty guilders a month if necessary.” That was about how much university students would pay to rent a room in a nice house, so it certainly helped to make it more feasible. However, considering the number of children we were trying to support, our coffers were soon empty again.

One evening, Geert Lubberhuizen and I got together to try our hand at forging some identification cards. Geert was an older chemistry student who had also been the editor of *Vox Studiosorum*, the Utrecht student newsweekly. He stuck his neck out in '41 by writing a scathing critique of an anti-Semitic movie the Nazis were showing. The SD immediately came after him, and shut down the paper for good measure. When he joined us in the Kindercomité, he was keeping a low profile, but he thought he could work with me on forgery and falsification.



IDs were a big problem in those days. Beginning in 1941, everyone had to go to the municipal building with two photos. One photo went into a central card file in the Hague, along with your fingerprint and signature.³ The other was attached to a preprinted card, and your fingerprint and signature were put on that as well. If you were Jewish, they would stamp your card with a big black J. An officer would

then sign it, and finally he would stamp it again with a special stamp. The fingerprint was covered by a transparent seal, and that also was stamped.

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

Once the photo was attached, it was very difficult to remove it without tearing the paper. So you had to scrape off the front while leaving the backing, and then attach the new photo. Sometimes there would be a photo that was built up in layers. Then it could simply be peeled off. But often it was all in one piece, and then you had to scratch it very patiently—it could take a whole day to clear it away. After that, of course, you needed the right stamp.

To do that, we made a photographic enlargement, and then it had to be drawn exactly using a draftsman's pen. We would then reduce it and have a die made from it out of zinc and India rubber. After that, we would attach it to a block mount and test it out. We had certain tricks to get a better image, but that was usually good enough.

We also worked on special projects, such as official letters for some of our hidden children verifying that they had been bombed out of Rotterdam. This was a good cover for them as well as their foster parents because many non-Jewish children were left homeless after the bombing, and had been sent away to live with relatives. All the streets in the center of Rotterdam had been destroyed, so it was easy to invent plausible former addresses.

So as the Germans came up with their identification cards, distribution cards, food ration coupons, and other official documents that were required for this or that, we would try to match them. Mostly it was a matter of removing the ink that was there, and printing something new over it—easier said than done. I always kept a magnifying glass in my pocket to be able examine documents that needed to be forged. The Germans would insert tiny markings on the originals to distinguish them from forgeries, so I had to be sure not to miss any of those details. Some documents couldn't be forged, such as the IDs, which were printed

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

on paper with changing colors. In that case, we would use brand new ones stolen from the stock in the town hall, and fill them out as needed.

Geert and I often worked late into the night, and I remember him saying at one point, “I think it’s very awkward for us to always be begging for money—why don’t we make something that we can then sell for a decent price? People would be glad to pay for it, and afterwards they could say, ‘This I bought for the cause.’” Well, that was the beginning of his printing press idea.

One of Geert’s codenames in the Resistance was “Bas.” We sometimes had a hard time finding him, for he was going all over trying to buy things to set up a printing operation. One day Anne Maclaine Pont, another member of our group, left a note on his door that said, “Where is Bas?” When he got back, he scribbled, “Bas is busy, ” and then went out again. She returned later, and added, “Bas is as busy as a bee.” When he came back that night, he chuckled at the note and decided to call the press *De Bezige Bij*, meaning “the busy bee.” Later he moved to Amsterdam, and had many people helping him, but at the beginning he had no one but me. You could say that *De Bezige Bij* was born in Utrecht, and I spent those first months rocking the cradle.

The first thing we published was a poster containing the poem *De Achttien Dooden*, The Eighteen Dead, by Jan Campert. He wrote it as an elegy for fifteen members of a Dutch Resistance group who had been shot by a firing squad along with three of the February strikers. It gives you a glimpse into the mind of a man who has been captured, and knows that his time left on earth is very short. Campert wrote it when he, too, was in prison, after he’d been arrested for helping to hide Jewish children.

A cell is just two meters long

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

And scarce two meters wide
But smaller is the little space
In which I shall be laid.
Though I have not yet seen it,
There, nameless, I shall lie,
And eighteen more beside me,
Tomorrow all will die.

I knew the task that I began
Would be awash with pains.
But yet the heart could not resist:
It never shuns whatever risk.
It knows that in this land
Proud freedom once prevailed,
Until his cursed hand
Decreed it otherwise.

The vermin-catcher of Berlin
Piping his evil tune
Hunts down a generation free
Till all of us are gone.
No more I'll see my loved one,
Or share with her my bed,
Why then this fight for freedom?
What difference to the dead?

I watch the early morning rays
Sift through the window high
Lord, now let Thy will be done,
May death come easily.
And if it be that I have sinned,
Forgive me, as I pray
To face, unbowed, the firing squad
That ends my life this day.⁴

Someone managed to sneak it out of the prison, and copies were being passed around in the Resistance from hand to hand. Anne Maclaine Pont took it to Geert and said, "Can't you do something with this?" By the time we printed it in March '43, Campert had already been killed. But the poem quickly became the anthem of the Dutch Resistance, and it's still read widely in the Netherlands today.

Our initial run was fifteen thousand copies and we sold them for a donation of five guilders or more. Within six months we had raised 75,000

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

guilders. Geert went on to publish books by some of our best Dutch writers and poets—all the ones who refused to become members of the *Kultuurkamer*, the Nazi-controlled organization of approved “culture workers”—plus some powerful foreign works by such authors as John Steinbeck, who was a newcomer at that time.

But he published some lighter things too. We put out several books of political cartoons, making fun of Hitler and Nazism. For instance, one cartoon depicted German soldiers overrunning the Netherlands. The caption read, “They’ve returned to show their appreciation.” You see, some of those same children who had received food and shelter here in the Netherlands following the Great War came back in their Nazi uniforms twenty-five years later to terrorize us. Another cartoon showed Hitler’s mother at the time of his birth, looking shocked at her loudmouthed, mustached baby.

It wasn’t difficult to sell that book, or any of the other things. People didn’t have much to buy during the German occupation, so, in that way, at least, it was an opportune time to ask them to open their wallets. All along, we distributed the money to the families who were hiding Jewish children, not only to our own contacts, but those of the Amsterdam Student Group as well. We also gave some money to other groups, such as a theater troupe that had also defied the *Kultuurkamer*. They had their families to feed and were banned from working, so it was really difficult for them.

When Geert moved the operation to Amsterdam, I remained in Utrecht but we kept in contact. I used to warn him not to attend meetings of the Resistance there, because the Gestapo was very active in Amsterdam. Later he joked, “That

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

boy saved my life again and again, because whenever I was invited to a big Resistance meeting, I'd say 'Sorry—Rut tells me not to go.'

After the war, Geert added up all the wartime revenues of *De Bezige Bij*, and the figure was close to 800,000 guilders. He continued to run *De Bezige Bij* for nearly forty years, and it is still thriving today. As for me, when the war ended I returned to school to finish my chemistry studies, and then went to work in the lab of Organon, a pharmaceutical company. It was a good time to jump on the science train, and I learned on the job under the tutelage of some fine biochemists. I was fortunate to be part of the research team that discovered how to isolate, and later to synthesize, heparin, the anticoagulant drug.

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What do you make of Germany's use of highly advanced technology to do such terrible things during the Holocaust?

Following the liberation, I was shocked to learn that the stories about the gas chambers were true, and that industrial giants such as I.G. Farben—which was later broken up into Bayer, Agfa, and BASF—had been directly involved. My uncle was a chemist, and we also worried a lot about the atomic bombs that had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There you saw how the latest technology had brought the war to an end. But to a terrible end.

My uncle said, "We should join the group of scientists that refuse to do atomic research." I think this was in 1950 or something. But it occurred to us that if certain ethically-minded scientists refused to do the research, then other scientists would take it up. How would our refusal improve the outcome?

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

I believe that science, ultimately, is neutral. The same physics that makes nuclear weapons possible also makes nuclear medicine possible. The Zyklon B that was poured into the gas chambers was a fumigant, very handy for killing bugs and rodents. The problem was not with the Zyklon B, but with the use that was made of it.

The same holds true for most science and technology. Consider a factory that manufactures guns. If those guns are used by the police to protect citizens, then you say, “Well, that's OK.” But if they get into the hands of criminals? To prevent this, you don't talk to the scientists and engineers—you go to the lawmakers and the government agencies.

In 1962 there was a drug that worked very well as a sleeping pill for elders. Then some marketing people thought, “We can sell it to pregnant women, for they don't sleep well either.” It was marketed that way, but the research had not been done, and it caused terrible birth defects. So we need clinical trials, and regulations, and so on, because scientists can't imagine all the possible uses that might be made of their research. The people who apply the science have to come up with uses that will benefit humanity. And if they don't, we need laws to stop them, or at least to ensure that the public won't be harmed.

Of course, I'm not saying that the scientists themselves bear no responsibility. In 1941, when the Germans wanted an identification card that would be impossible to counterfeit, the design was actually the work of a Dutch technician named Jacob Lentz. The odd thing is that this fellow was not a Nazi, he was not a member of the NSB—he was an overly ambitious civil servant. This was a case where he should have been thinking about the implications of what he was doing, but instead he was trying to rise to a higher position by impressing the

The Heart Has Reasons: Holocaust Rescuers and Their Stories of Courage

Germans. We'll never know how many lives were lost as a result of his "perfect" ID.

How can we educate our children about the Holocaust?

Children must be taught in stages, because at different ages you need to give them different arguments. And you must do it very carefully, or else it will go awry. Let's say a teacher shows pictures from the concentration camps to the students in her fifth-grade class in order to teach them about the Holocaust. The children ask, "Who has done that?" The teacher says, "The Germans." And then, for years afterwards, the children think negatively about the Germans. That is not preventing racism: it is propagating it.

I hear teenagers—*three* generations removed from the war—making anti-German remarks. That's crazy. Germany is the strongest member of the European Union economically, and from a moral point of view they are doing their very best at the moment. So I wonder how these young people, including my own grandchildren, became anti-German. Could it have something to do with well-intentioned adults trying to be sure they will not forget the past?

The same thing can happen when Jewish children are taught the history of anti-Semitism. What good will it do them if they learn to hate Christians and Muslims? You know, before the war, we didn't give much thought to what religion someone followed. We were all just people, Dutch people. Then the Germans came and made a strict division between Jewish and non-Jewish. Years later, when I went to Israel to receive the Yad Vashem award, I was asked, "Why did you help the Jewish people?" The emphasis being on the word *Jewish*. But

that was Adolf Hitler's emphasis. I helped them because they were people.

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Rut today

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To read an additional excerpt, and to be notified when the book is available, visit:
<http://www.hearthasreasons.com>

Endnotes

¹ I have relied in part on Flim's account of this incident. Bert Jan Flim, *Saving the Children: History of the Organized Effort to Rescue Jewish Children in the Netherlands 1942–1945*. (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), 40.

² Ibid, 26.

³ This matter of the purpose of the second photo was clarified by Flim. Ibid, 6.

⁴ The poem contains seven stanzas, but I have included only four. This free translation is based on the more literal one of Rena Minkoff, which I then modified.