United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Pieter Adriaan Meerburg
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Pieter Adriaan Meerburg, conducted by Adina Conn on October 12, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held jointly by Adina Conn and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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PIETER ADRIAAN MEERBURG
October 12, 1990

Q: Please tell me your full name.

A: Pieter Adriaan Meerburg.

Q: Where and when were you born?

A: I was born the 1st of September, 1919 in Holland, De Bilt.

Q: Could you tell me about your childhood?

A: Uh, I had a quite normal childhood. I went to high school in Utrecht and after, ...I finished my high school in Bussum which is a little town near Amsterdam. Then I started for one year, uh, at the University of Utrecht for Chemistry. My father was a chemist...I don't know what the English word is for a chemist ... and after one year I quit... I didn't like it and then I went for two years I studied Greek and Latin because I had to. I wanted to to study law. At that time in Holland, you had to have the gymnasium, which is high school, plus Greek and Latin. So I, I did my, uh...for two years I studied Greek and Latin and I got my...uh, I passed my examination and I...in 1940 I started to study law at the University of Amsterdam.

Q: Did you have brothers, sisters?

A: I had one sister.

Q: And her name?

A: Anna Wilhelmina.

Q: And the name of your parents?

A: Pieter Adriaan, like me, and my mother was Anna Maria Megeete.

Q: In the community in which you lived did you have any aunts, uncles, cousins living nearby?

A: Yes. Yes. Some in The Hague, some in Amsterdam. Ya.

Q: What was the city like in which you lived?

A: I don't understand what you mean...where I lived?

Q: What was the community like?

A: The community where I lived? Well, my father was head of the central laboratory, which is an official state institution and he had a rather high, uh, ya...he was a doctor in chemistry and he was head of that institution.

Q: Was there a Jewish community in the town?

A: Uh, not in Utrecht, but as soon as I was in Amsterdam, of course, I had a lot of Jewish friends and students who were Jews, who studied at the same time.

Q: The small Jewish community that was in Utrecht...was there any antisemitism in the town?

A: No. I, I think that as long as I stayed...till my sixteenth, I stayed in Utrecht. I hardly knew the difference between Jewish and not-Jewish. It didn't exist at, at that time anyway. Of course, in, in Amsterdam it's different. I mean Amsterdam before the war was real...was a rather Jewish town. I mean there were so many, so many Jews in important jobs and important situations there--ya? So...but I think that the whole question of antisemitism was just brought up after in the war.

Q: What is the fondest memory you have from your childhood?

A: That's a difficult question. I, uh, was...in the holidays and we had a "hoog,"[1] where we...all the families, mostly families with each other, had a wooden house and we loved to, to, to go there on holidays. There were always forty or fifty kids. It is, at that age, fantastic, so I had a wonderful youth because of that.

Q: What was the typical day like for you when you were growing up?

A: Typical?

Q: Typical day, an average day?

A: No...I can't say...I never had an average day. Every day was different. I mean, when you study you, you have so many...no...I, I cannot say that. I think it...there's no...you can't say there was a usual day.

Q: Can you tell me about your friends when you were growing up?

A: If you mean from, from, from Amsterdam...because I have only two friends left from my Utrecht situation, when I lived in Utrect, and I still have them, but I think that, that my best friends I, uh, had in Amsterdam when I started, uh, started studying and I, I've lived now for fifty years in Amsterdam, so I really I'm really Amsterdam!

[1] Hoog, a home of several levels; a high-rise single-family residence.

Q: What happened when you were--you weren't yet in Amsterdam, I guess)--before the war started? What was the climate like? What was the community like in 1938 and '39?

A: Well, I think that the intellectual environment where I lived, the whole, uh, situation with Germany...most of us were quite aware of it. We were aware of the danger. We were afraid of what would happen, although no one of course expected what afterwards happened, but I must say that in, in, in my, my people with whom I, uh, talked and, and worked--they were absolutely aware of the bad situation in in Germany, the bad situation of the Jews and of course don't forget that in, in Amsterdam in the years from from '35 on, we had so many refugees, Jewish refugees from Germany and from Poland. We...in Amsterdam you really were...you...you couldn't, uh, not, not notice it. It was there. The, the people lived there in the south, especially in the south of Amsterdam, and some of them stayed there. Some of them went to, to the States, part of them. One thing I, I always remember...you know, I'm, I'm, I'm interested in the theater. And even....as a, as a student I was interested in theater, and just before the war...ya, just before the war, many artists from the cabaret, from the state, from the film, fled to Holland and as I said, some, some went afterwards to the States, but some of them stayed here and I, I've seen all the big names of the...of the actors and the Cabaretiers from Berlin, in Amsterdam, which is...which I would never have seen in my life and it was unbelievable because they were really top people, and I remember that they had the theater where every fortnight they brought a new program. It was absolutely unbelievable!

Q: Were there any plays in particular or musicals?

A: No. I think it, it was just more intimate revues; most of them. Most of them were in intimate revues in Berlin. But apart from that, they were well-known actors in German films. And as you know, German films completely collapsed when Hitler came.

Q: When you were talking about your circle of friends and the people you had worked with who were aware of the situation in Germany, what type of people were they? Could you describe their profession?

A: The friends with whom I talked? Well, mostly student friends, of course, and there was a organization, uh, which was called Eenheid Door Democratie, "Unity by Democracy," and that was a, a all the parties or the political parties were, uh, represented there. Of course, not the fascist ones but all the other, all the democratic parties. And that was an organization that had a lot of meetings and and tried to to show to everyone the danger of, of, of the fascism, of the National Socialism.

Q: And so your friends who were students were also members of this party?

A: Yes, I think that most of them were were interested in that. Not all of them, but most of them. And they had many Jewish friends, so they they, they were, of course, interested in it.

Q: Uh, is there is a memory of any friend, any one friend or any several friends in particular, in Amsterdam?

A: Yeah. Well...I mean in '42--nay, in '41 I was studying with a friend, Jewish friend, uh, and we had lessons for, for law. You, you did that. And, uh, we were sitting together in, in a...what do you call it? ...Not a restaurant, but, uh, a meeting place for students. And then he was called on the telephone and he was asked by his parents to come immediately home. They didn't say why. So he said, "Well, I have to go home," and, and he left and went home. And, uh, when he came home he was arrested and taken. And that was the first group of young Jewish boys...it was in '41 before the general, uh, pick-up of all the, all the, all the Jewish people, in '41, and they were all young, young people...young, uh, boys and they sent them to a camp somewhere north of Holland, just...they said a labor camp. But of course we all knew it was just a a transit camp, and no one has every heard of the whole group. I'm sure they had been sent to a concentration camp.

Q: Let's back up for a minute. What happened after the invasion, the German invasion in May 1940?

A: Yeah. I, I remember one thing...that we were very angry about the Queen--that the Queen left the country. We...everyone was very, very upset about it, which was not right. I mean, she was right to, to, to go out of the country. But at that moment, we felt very much that we were left alone. And in the beginning of the '40's, the Germans kept a very low profile. They, they, they didn't do...the first half year they were very, uh, careful not to to to take measures to offend the public.

Q: Was your life affected by the invasion?

A: Well, of course everyone's life was affected...I mean if you're occupied, you're occupied, and I'm no different...I was no different from the other ones in the beginning.

Q: What happened to you after the invasion?

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION - PAUSE

Q: What happened to you after the invasion?

A: I finished my, uh, my Greek and Latin studies. And I started studying law at the university.

Q: In Amsterdam?

A: Ya, in Amsterdam.

Q: What were the effects of, uh, the anti-Jewish laws on the people of Amsterdam?

A: Would you repeat that question?

Q: Do you remember or can you describe any of the effects of the anti-Jewish laws that were passed in Amsterdam when the Germans came in?

A: Ya, but you... mustn't forget that...the passing of the anti-Jewish laws was gradually. They, they didn't immediately, uh, pass laws, for instance, that the Jews couldn't, uh, go into shops or couldn't go to the cinema or couldn't go by train. That came gradually during the years, so they they, they, they ...every month they made a new move towards the, the isolation of the Jews and of course that, that...I think that the the...and of course we had the February thing, which you remember, was the strike which was absolutely an illogical strike about, about, about the Jews, and afterwards I think that from '42, from the summer of '42 when the real razzias started, then the feelings really went very high against the Germans.

Q: Did you or your family members or any close friends try to leave Europe at the time?

A: No.

Q: After you finished your studies, then what did you do?

A: I didn't finish my studies. Uh, I..the, the law...law studies in two separate parts. One is for two years and the other is three years. First is two years and then you get what we call Kandidaatsexam. And in '42, I, I did, uh, Kandidaats-exam, so I had finished my first part of of my studies and then I stopped, because at that time the, the, the...in July...June and July of '42, the razzias, uh, uh, razzias were all over the town. So that moment I, I stopped studying.

Q: And then what happened?

A: And then I, I with the Utrecht students, we had, uh, an organization to, to save as many Jewish children as we could. We specialized only on, on children, not on adults. That had a reason too, because, uh, we we thought we could better, uh, stay, uh, stay only with the children because if we had...of course you have many, many many times that you have to look for hiding place for adults, but we gave them to other kinds of organizations. Everyone had his own field. I think that that's very important.

Q: A resistance organization?

A: To a sister organization, or a organization who specialized in in hiding adults.

Q: Did your group have a name?

A: No. Because...well, we say the "Utrecht Group" and the "Amsterdam Group"--"Student Group."[2] We didn't have...why should we have a name? Uh, it was not necessary. And the less you...we all lived under another name. My name in the oorlog[3] was Piet van Doorn, and I lived under that name. I didn't ...I couldn't live under my own name because that was too dangerous. We all had another name, and we, we didn't want to have too much contact with other groups because the more contacts you had, the more vulnerable you were.

Q: Can you tell me about your work when you first began in the group?

A: Well, we, we, we really began to...because the the Utrecht students...they were before us. They, they, they, they were, uh, trying to get, uh, children from the Creche[4] and as they were living in, in Utrecht, it was fast. They always had to travel from Utrecht to Amsterdam. It's not so far, but anyway...they weren't living here, so they contacted us and they said, if, if, uh, we should collaborate..."You, you look for the children in Amsterdam. You know the families," and because we didn't only have children from the Creche. We had children right from the, from the parents too of course and that goes mouth by mouth. I mean someone knew that we were taking care of children and, uh, they informed the parents and we got...contacted. It was not only the Creche. But they asked us and that's why, why we we started. They couldn't handle it. It was too much, and they asked us to, to uh, fetch the children from the Creche and fetch other children. So, sometimes we hided the children ourselves or we gave them to Utrecht organization--independent who, who had places, but in...let's say a year later we were completely independent and they had their own organization. We worked together but we, we looked for hiding place ourselves.

Q: So you were immediately thrown into this work when you joined the group?

A: Yes.

Q: You said that the group separated. About how many people did you work with?

A: Uh, there were only two men, my partner and I, and all the others one were girls, and that was logical because, uh, we couldn't travel with children at our age. We were about twenty. And at that age, it was very suspicious to sit in a train with a child. I mean...of course as a Jew it was very dangerous, but in that, that period, all men about twenty years of age were very afraid to go by train because the, the Groen Politie,[5] the German police, trapped all the

[2] Pieter Meerburg's group was known as the Amsterdam Students Group.

[3] War.

[4] The day-care center, the place in Amsterdam where infants and children were brought and cared for while awaiting deportation.

[5] Green Police, so named because of the color of their uniforms.

time all kinds of young boys from my age and took them, and sent them to Germany for work, so it was already dangerous just to sit into a train. So that was one of the reasons why we had...the girls, they were never picked up. I mean they, they left the girls alone. So all the, all the transport of the children had to be done by, by the girls. Sometimes I went with them to get them, but that's, that's different. Then they were there and it was their child and what we...my partner and I did...we were looking...we went to Friesland, to the north, and looking for contacts, and to look for hiding places. We went to the south. We were organizers, you see, but the actual transport was done by the, by the girls.

Q: Were these all Christians, or was it a mix of Jews and Christians working together?

A: There were no Jews. There's only one Jewish, uh, couple with whom I worked and they were looking...it was...it was really...the the the woman is still alive, and and they really were looking so Jewish and they worked all the time. They, they...I never understood. They, they walked around the street. They were many times picked up. They had very good papers. And that was the only Jewish couple which I knew which was, uh, working. Uh, that's of course the people from the Creche, from the Joodse Raad,[6] and from the Schouwburg,[7]. That I don't mean...I mean in our group, there couldn't be any Jews because it was too dangerous. It would be too dangerous..

Q: You were able to travel freely by yourself?

A: I was able to be, uh, to, to travel by myself because I had wonderful papers. I was an inspector of the, of the train, of the--of the signal system of the train. This was, of course, completely falsified, but it, it gave me the opportunity to sit into the train, because if the Groen Politie--they thought I was working for the railways. They thought anyway, so I, I...they didn't bother me. It was...they were very good papers. They were completely false, but they were good.

Q: Was it difficult for other members of your group to travel back and forth?

A: No, for the girls it was not. No. It was no problem. And my partner had the same kind of, uh, papers.

Q: Did you work with the Joodse Raad as well?

A: With the...?

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[6] Jewish Council.

[7] The Hollandse Schouwburg, the Dutch State Theatre, which was converted into a detention center for the Jews of Holland, where they were forced to report and held prior to deportation.

Q: Joodse Raad?

A: To a certain extent. In my opinion the Jewish Council consists of, of, of the two managing directors, Asscher and Cohen,[8] and a whole staff of people. Most of them were relatives or friends of these people. The Jewish Council had the responsibility for the Hollandse Schouwburg--the theater where the Jews were brought to be sent to the camp of Westerbork. They were assembled there. Now, in in the Jewish Council, in my opinion, there were two kinds of people. One people were just obeying all the orders of the Germans, trying to save their own lives as much possible, and another part which realized that being a member of the Jewish Council, they had to sabotage as much as possible and to, to use the the, the power they had, given them by the Germans, to, to free as many children and adults as they could. Well, it was with these people I worked. Not with Asscher and Cohen. And for instance, you know, Walter Süßkind,[9] Felix Halverstad[10]...they were Jews who worked for the Auswanderung[11] or Ausstellung. That was a a part of the Jewish Council supervised by the Germans, by aus der Fünten,[12] and, uh, they were the right people. They were very brave, and they looked after...they sent their children to the Creche, and they took care that we...they asked us to take the children from the Creche. But at the same time they let a lot of adults free by, by falsifying papers and letting them suddenly out of the theatre. They, they they did marvelous work. They were absolutely fabulous, because in, in that position to do that, is is risking your neck every second.

Q: So you had no major contacts then with Asscher and Cohen with your work?

A: No. I had no contacts with Asscher and Cohen. I was once threatened by Cohen. I had, uh, I'm very unhappy about that. He he threatened me that if I wouldn't bring back a child which I hid, he would announce...denounce me, and I brought the child back. I had to. That was my only contact with Cohen. And I never had any contact anymore. I never wanted to have any contact with him.

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[8] Abraham Asscher and Professor David Cohen, the two leaders of the Dutch Jewish Council located in Amsterdam.

[9] One of the Jewish Council's administrative staff who helped save some Jewish lives, particularly children, by removing papers from German files documenting the Jewish population.

[10] A Jewish Council worker, who, together with Walter Süßkind, helped Jews escape from the Schouwburg and the Creche.

[11] Die Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung--the Central Bureau for Jewish Emigration.

[12] Ferdinand aus der Fünten, the commander of the German Security Police, who oversaw most of the Jewish Council's activities. Aus der Fünten was responsible for all deportations from the Netherlands.

Q: Why did he threaten to do that?

A: I don't know. He was a dictator.

Q: Was there something about that one child? Did it belong to...?

A: He, he, he didn't agree that...it, it was a child which we...which the Council itself had asked us...a member of the Council...to hide. And it...I think it's...there was an internal fight. The woman who had asked us...was not...he didn't agree that she she asked us that, so when the child...when I hid the child, he was so furious and he said to the woman, "You tell Piet van Doorn if he doesn't bring back the child, I, I, I'll denounce him."

Q: And then what would happen if you were denounced?

A: Well, that would mean all my, my, my people...it was not so much for myself, but the danger of being caught was always that you would be tortured and you would talk and would give away everything you know, so the whole organization was, was in danger at that time--if one of us would have been caught.

Q: If he denounced you, in other words, would you have been turned over to the Germans?

A: To the Germans, yes. That was his intention.

Q: I know that your work was very dangerous. Were there any moments in particular that were more dangerous than others?

A: No. I, I, I think that if you live with danger for three years, you don't realize it anymore. I mean you know it in the back of your head, but you, you, you can't live with that when when you...every every...when you realize every minute that you're in danger. Of course, I, I, I had one or two very narrow escapes, but we all had. It's eighty percent luck that you come through.

Q: Can you tell me about the narrow escapes?

A: Well, the narrowest escape I had was, uh, we had a contact in the head of the, the underground in Friesland. He was the big boss in Friesland, and I...he was...he was a very good friend of mine. My, my son is still called, is named after him, and he, uh...suddenly there was a very, uh, uh, someone was caught and he was, he was talking, and he knew too much. So the whole group in Friesland had to, to hide and had to change addresses and go out of Friesland because at first in fact, he knew everything, the man, and he, he betrayed the whole thing, so, so he went to, to Amersfoort, which is near Utrecht, and he let me know that he was there and he asked me to come. And I had an appointment with him in Amersfoort,

on the street not in a house. And he said, "Well, would you, I, I need a new persoonbewijs, identity card." And he gave me his photo and he said, "Uh, please take care of it, and give me a very good one." And of course we had our contacts in Amsterdam, people who were printing...who had original identity cards, but only for the top people in the Resistance. So I went there and I, I made his, uh...I got his new identity card, and I had, uh, a rendezvous with him at six o'clock on a certain day in, uh, in Amersfoort. Only, only on a address, but I was very, uh, upset about it because it was so...he was...he was the most man the Germans looked for in the whole country. So I had to be very careful. And I asked the girls whom I lived with at the time, "Go with me and and take the identity card, because if I'm caught with that"...I could have been caught just as, as a twenty-year old boy. That had nothing to do with my...and then I would have...then there would have been the possibility that the identity card would be lost and I would be sent to a concentration camp or something, but that was not the question. The question was I wanted him to have that identity card and I, I had the feeling that it was very dangerous, so I said to her, "Take...you go with me and let's go together, and you, you carry the, the identity card." And just before the station, she broke the shoe...the, the, the lace of her shoe, and I was mad. And we missed the train because of that. Now what happened actually in Amersfoort was that at one o'clock the whole house was, uh, complete...completely circled...uh, how do you call it?... circled...by, by very, uh, well-armed German troops because he was so...that important, and, uh, they, they, they, uh, they rang the bell and they said he got...and the man who, who, who did it said, "I have a message from Esme," which is one of the... which was a good way to, to, to go into the house. Because he didn't suspect anything at that moment. At that moment he, he came in and, uh, two minutes later he knew he was trapped. So he took...he tried to take his revolver and, uh....

Q: What happened when he approached the house?

A: When he approached the house he was let in and after two minutes, uh, Krijn, which was his name--Krijn van den Helm, realized that he was trapped and he tried to, to, to...he had this revolver in back the of his trousers and he, and he reached for it and he got it on the wrong...the wrong side and the man who was sitting in front of him shot him [**NB:** Krijn] dead immediately.

Q: In other words, who shot who? Just to clarify the situation with the two people involved? Who was shot and who had the revolver?

A: Yeah. But the the the strange thing is that normally when, when things like that happened, the Germans stayed at the house for twenty-four hours at least, to see what, what people came and they were caught there. That, that happened all the time. That was the biggest risk you had, that you walked to an address where the Germans had arrested someone, where they were still staying to look who was, who was coming. Now the funny...you know, the funny...the strange thing is, that they left at six o'clock and I arrived at, let's say, seven because of the fact that I had missed my train, and then when I, when I, uh, rang the doorbell, she said, "Get out!" so I knew the whole thing was wrong. Well, that, that was just a lucky

escape and, and you know, you never know how, why...if it hadn't been the lace of the shoe, I wouldn't have survived.

Q: You mentioned there was another narrow escape.

A: The other narrow escape was with my partner who was, uh, caught at the station with all kinds of identity cards and, uh, and, uh, material which was absolutely very dangerous, but he was just caught as I tell you as a, as man, a boy of thirty years, twenty years, to be sent to to Germany for work. But we didn't know if they had discovered all, all the material, so then the same man from from Friesland, Krijn van den Helm, where I was just talking about...that was before he was killed...I called him and said, What are we going to do? He's in...my partner Wouter's in jail and I'm afraid. I don't know what he had, what he had with him." And he [**NB**: Krijn] came immediately to Amsterdam, and he went to the university. And by time in '43 the Germans had a very strange law. All the students had to, uh, sign a loyal, uh, statement that they would be loyal to the German occu...occupation and German people or something like that, which was completely idiotic, because it was, it was a forced statement. But they they were very tough on that because they said, "If you don't sign it, either you can't study on, and your parents, especially your father, is responsible," and a lot of students signed because they didn't want their father to be responsible for, uh, what, what, what they did. It didn't occur to us because we were not studying anymore in '43, so there were, uh, there were student cards of of people who had signed and I went with the...with Krijn van Helm to the university, and he went to the office where they they gave away this...where they had the, uh, this, this...what do you call it?...college identification card, and he threatened him that he would kill him if he didn't give him a book of these, uh, identity cards, and he gave them. He immediately gave them. So what we did, we, uh, put a photo of my partner on it. It was signed in his name, and his sister went to the jail and he was immediately freed. So that was a narrow escape, not for me personally but anyway for the whole group.

Q: But in '43, the situation for Jews...there were no Jews at the university then, were there?

A: No, no, no, no. No Jews at the university.

Q: Why did you decide to get involved with the movement to begin with?

A: You don't decide that. It happens. It happens. I think for me, uh, sheer honesty,...it was when, when my friend was, uh, called home and disappeared forever, and then you say, "What are you doing here? You are studying law. This is ridiculous. There are so many other things which are much more important." I think that was the turning point for me. And then, then it goes on. Don't forget, we saw razzias in, in Amsterdam. It's a terrible sight. I mean it's unbelievable.

Q: Can you describe one?

A: Yes. It, it's...a whole block of houses is, is, is cut off by, by, by police and and army and they are going from every house, looking for everyone. Everyone has to, to...had, had a persoonbewijs, and all Jews had a persoonbewijs with a J on it, so if you had not a persoonbewijs without a J, or if you had no persoonbewijs, you are taken, uh, with them, but they, they went from one house to the other. They didn't have the, the, the addresses of the Jewish people themselves. No, they...that was the typical way they operated. They took a whole block and looked for the Jews...in it. And, and then they brought them out, with children and everything. It was a terrible thing to see.

Q: Do you know why there was no list?

A: There was a list. They, they they operated different. Sometimes..but a real razzia, in my opinion, is a, uh, search of all the houses, and not on a certain address. Of course, they they, they, they, uh, took, uh, Jews from addresses, but that was individually. They went to a house with three or four people, and they... and they rang the door, and they saw they were at home and then they took them. But that's not the same as a razzia. A razzia is...they wanted to, to, to...because there were a lot of people already hiding in, in, in, in the houses, so they, they found that too, of course. If you had no identification, no persoonbewijs, they took you.

Q: When you would watch a razzia occurring, what would happen to the people that they would bring out of the homes?

A: They, they, they, they were brought together and, and they went with them in, in army cars to the station. And mostly they were taken immediately from the station to Westerbork.

Q: Did you see... were there torturings during the razzias?

A: No. I, I don't think they were tortured at that moment. And unfortunately it's not only the Germans. The Dutch people, the Dutch police helped too. It's unbelievable--but they did.

Q: The Dutch police helped who...??

A: The Germans. They, they did it together with the Germans, part of the police--not all. There are, of course, people who refused to do that. But part of them--they did it.

Q: So you worked in your capacity then with the underground from 1942...?

A: Yes. 'Til the end.

Q: Until when?

A: 'Til May '45.

Q: And did the situation change at all as far as the...?

A: The situation changed because in September of '44, the south was liberated and the north where I lived, was not liberated. And then we had the toughest time for the population, because then we got what we called the "hongeren."[13] There was no food, no transport. We couldn't reach the children anymore because they were in the south, and they were liberated. In the north they were still there, but there were no trains. The trains...all the trains...uh, people who worked on trains...striked, so you were completely insulated in Amsterdam. You couldn't move out of Amsterdam.

Q: And that year was 19....

A: From September '44 'til May '45.

Q: Is there one or two, or even several incidents that stick out in your mind the most, about one of the children, or of your experiences helping the children?

A: There was one experience which I'll never forget in my life. That I, I went to, to Joure which is a small town in Friesland. It was in the beginning. It was...and there was a man with a laundry, and I heard that the man had a lot of addresses for adults, but for children too. And he went...every Saturday he went to, to Amsterdam with a, with a truck and he came back in Joure with, let's say, twenty or thirty adults. And he hided them in different places, so I knew, and I wanted to talk to him, that he would give us addresses for children too. So I went with with one of the girls to, to Joure and we had two children with us which we wanted to hide, and he had agreed to, to, to, to help us, and okay...we arrived and we gave the children to him and he looked after them, but as it was already late, we couldn't go back to, to Amsterdam. It was...after twelve you're not allowed to, to be on the streets, so we couldn't make it with the train. So we had to stay there, so we got...we stayed there and we got a very decent meal. For us it was very important to get "heel" [**NB:** Dutch word for "very"] good food, and he was very nice. After...after... dinner, I sat with him and we talked and then he suddenly said, "Yes." He told me that he hated the Jews on religious ground. They had killed Christians and by his faith, the Jews were his enemies. But, it is stated in the Bible, "You have to love your enemies." So that's why he did everything to save them. Now if I am telling it just now...it looks like a wierd story but at that moment it was a terrible story because I didn't know. I wondered what he was doing...if he was betraying...a traitor and sending all the the adults to the Germans and the children too. I was absolutely frightened. I didn't sleep the whole night and neither did the girl. And we got out as soon as possible, and we went to, to, to the head of the resistance in Friesland, to Leeuwarden. And we said, My God, what do you know? Do you know that man? Is he all right?" We informed him. And it turned out finally he was all right, and after the war I, I spoke to him. I said, "Do you

[13] Famine or "hongersnood."

remember what you said to me? You have scared the hell out of me because of, of what?" And he meant it. He meant it, absolutely! He said, "Yes, but I, I...." Afterwards, he said, "I changed completely. I watched these Jews, the whole, uh, during the whole war and they are just like us, and I completely...it was a completely wrong belief."

Q: Did the women travel with you on the same train?

A: Yeah. If we were...sometimes I was going alone or if I...if we were with children, then the girl...the girl and I always together. There was no problem about that.

Q: Did you also help secure false documentation for the children?

A: Yes. Well...no. No, nay. That's not right, I think. The children didn't get any identification because the children were hidden. They don't...didn't need, uh, identification. Some of them, however, got them. I remember a case of a baby which was just born and one of my girls went to, to, to the registration office and told the officer that she had had a child and, uh, so the child was actually saved. He had an official non-Jewish mother and the name of the mother, so we didn't have to hide the child. We, we sent it to, to a family where she was brought up and she survived. So that happened.

Q: Then what happened to the child?

A: That's a very strange story because the girl who had adopted her or, or recognized it as, it as her as her son was one...was visiting the, the parents every...every month to give all kinds of things: coupons, uh, bread coupons, meat coupons....

Q: This was the child's natural mother visited the foster parents?

A: Yes. Yeah. The, the foster parents. And one day when she was there, the, the Gestapo, they came in, and there was another Jewish, uh, boy living there with the parents and, uh, well, uh, the, the Jewish boy was taken and the parents were taken and she said, "It's my child." She would prove it was her child, so they didn't take the child. And the, the, the, the Gestapo said, "How can...how can you put your child with such a terrible, bad family who hides Jews and things like this?" She says, "I didn't know." So she took the, the boy with her, and the boy survived. Funny thing is that after the war, it took her two years to get rid of the child. The, the, the legal, uh, the courts didn't believe it.

Q: Would you visit the children at all once they were placed?

A: The girls did, but once in a while--not every month. That would be too much. And for instance, we had a center in, in in Limburg, in the South, in Tienray where we had 120 children and where there was a Jewish student and some others who stayed there and took care of all the children, so there you didn't have to, to go. We just brought the the children

there.

Q: And what kind of families were the children placed with?

A: Never in wealthy families. Always poor families. That's the strange thing. Very...down to earth people, very nice people, very good people. Sometimes religious people. But... never in, in a family where there was money.

Q: How did you find these people?

A: Ya. Well, through the...through the ministers, through the pastors, through all kind of contacts.

Q: And the ministers and the pastors in the south in Limburg and in Friesland.... Were they willing to cooperate?

A: Absolutely. Both the Catholics and the Reformed Church helped enormously.

Q: Together?

A: In one case together, but that didn't last long.

Q: The children placed in the south...were they placed predominantly in Catholic homes, Protestant homes, religious homes, non-religious homes?

A: Uh, yeah...that's a question that you can only ask after the war. In the war you never asked what they were. If you had a hiding place, you had a hiding place. You didn't ask what they were. We didn't care. We didn't care where...we were too happy to have an address. If they were Hindostaans[14]...it didn't matter. The only thing which we took care of especially, because our south connection...we had to deal with the Bishop of Utrecht, that the children were not to be, uh, bap...baptized. Yeah? Is that right? Baptized. Of course, the children had to go to church with the other children. Otherwise it would be too suspicious, and the children loved the Catholic church. It's, it's really a great show, you know (laughter). So there was always the danger that they, they, they wanted to be baptized and and some of the the, the pastors would have loved to do that, but from, from the Bishop there was absolutely a, a, uh...it was forbidden to, to do that and in, in, in Tienray where we had these...all these children, there was not one baptism. There have been cases, of course, that pastors disobeyed the orders of the Bishop and there there will be some baptized, but it was absolutely minimum.

Q: Why did you decide first to work with helping to save the children rather than adults?

[14] Hindus.

A: No...it didn't happen that way. We were approached by the Utrecht people about the children. So we have from the beginning in, in, in... we were working with the children and we knew that we, we couldn't do both. That would be absolutely impossible and we realized that if we had...there were...there were so many children. If, if, if I give you an example...I think that all the groups together...three or four groups, had 1200 children, which is peanuts compared to how many children there were. We couldn't do more. I mean it was...it was such a short time and you...so you have to concentrate on, on, on, on the children. If, if we didn't do it, we could...you would have done the work for children half and the work for adults half, so we decide very soon with the Utrecht group to...that we'd in principle only take care of children and let the adults be, uh, uh, hided by, by other other people.

Q: Was it harder working with the Utrecht group, since the NSB[15] was headquartered there?

A: No. That didn't matter. I lived in front of the headquarters of the SD Gestapo in Amsterdam. It was wonderful. It was even more better because (laughter)...yeah...just...when I looked out of my window I could see the, the, the where the jail, now, the Gerrit van de Veenstraat, then, the Erteupestraat, and it was the most safest place I could could be, so that doesn't matter.

Q: Were you ever suspected?

A: I don't know. I...after the war, records of the Germans--and there has been exhibition about it--gave a complete diagram of all the groups, with our names on it. So they knew. They absolutely knew...they only didn't know where we were living. That, that was the good thing, but I think that the, the Germans were very well informed about it.

Q: Were you or your girls ever personally suspected by them?

A: Yeah, but they knew, uh, uh, Piet van Doorn, but they didn't know that, that it was me. I think it worked that way.

Q: What was the way in which, in other words, the procedure for you to get the children from the Schouwburg and then give them to the women?

A: I don't understand what you mean.

Q: How did you.... In other words, how were the children taken from the Schouwburg then to the homes? I know they were taken...

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[15] The Nationaal Socialistische Beweging (National Socialist Movement), organized by Anton Adriaan Mussert in 1931, functioned as the Dutch Nazi Party.

A: Now the, the the children were...

Q: From the Creche, rather?

A: The children were...when, when the family was picked up, adults went to the Schouwburg and the children went immediately to, to the Creche. They didn't...the children didn't stay at the Schouwburg.

Q: I realize that...

A: They were not really allowed to be in the Schouwburg.

Q: But how were the children taken from the Creche...

A: From all kinds of...by all kinds of methods.

Q: Such as?

A: In the morning there was a back door through the garden and we took the, the, the, the, the children from...by the back door. And we went away. Sometimes the, the, the nurses, like Virrie Cohen, and so on, took the children on walk and we took them when they were walking, took two or three, and they came back with two or three less or four less, let's say. There were all kinds of methods to to get them out of the, the, the Creche.

Q: After your work with the Creche when there were no more children, the children were hidden, did you work with the adults then, helping adults?

A: No. Because the, the, the, the...it's a mis...a misunderstanding that...that the Creche was the most important, uh, source of getting children. That's not true. I mean it was "A" source and some of the groups had more children from the Creche than the other ones. There were always, uh, parents who wanted to, who who were hiding, who were not hid...hiding and who wanted to hide...it was very difficult to hide with your children so then they they contacted us and we took the child one or two, and, and, and took it away, so it's, it's not only the Creche. It's, it's...you took it right from the parents. That was one of the reasons why I think we could do the job, because we were young and it's, it's a...if you think about it now, today, as a father or a grandfather, it was absolutely inhuman to, to, to separate the child from the parents, and I think we, we could do it because we were not parents ourselves. We...although we were very upset about it and we found it very difficult, we didn't quite realize how, how, how terrible it was, in my opinion.

Q: What happened to brothers and sisters or, I should say, siblings? Were they usually kept together, or were they placed with different families?

A: It depended. I mean sometimes if, if it would be possible to put two boys, or let's say, brother and sister or two sisters at the same address, but most of the addresses didn't want to have two. It was too risky. So...and we didn't make a principle out of it. Just if it happened and we could find, uh, an address where they wanted two, uh, uh, two children, then, then, then of course we, we gave them a sister or two brothers. But it didn't happen many times. Because...it...one child was danger; two children were even more dangerous.

Q: What was the climate like at this time amongst the community in Amsterdam?

A: Very bitter. I, I think that the population of Amsterdam more than the rest of the population of Holland realized how, how bad it was and how inhuman the Dutch people--the German people were. I think they realized it. I, I can tell you a story which always sticks to my mind. Just in, in, in, in '42 when the first razzias were, uh, happening, I went to Friesland to look for addresses for the children. And, now Friesland is about a hundred and fifty kilometers from Amsterdam. And people didn't want to believe my story about razzias. They really didn't want to...I didn't succeed at all. It, it's, it's...and it's a hundred and fifty kilometers from, from Amsterdam. And only after half a year they accepted it, and ...they knew that it was true, but it took at least half the year for a hundred and fifty kilometer further... people realized what was happening.

Q: Why do you think that was?

A: I think that's, that's the way it is. People don't believe even things which are very near to them.

Q: What was happening to your family during this entire time?

A: My father died in '40 so I had no father anymore and my mother lived alone and she hided, uh, adults...adults. She had many adults in her house, but she was never caught.

Q: Never?

A: Never. She survived the war.

Q: Were you aware that she was hiding Jews?

A: Yes. She got...she got some of the, of the adults from me, so I knew. And she was willing to take the risk.

Q: And your brother?

A: I had no brother--my sister.

Q: Sister.

A: My sister was like a...as a nurse at the, at the hospital and she did a lot of, uh, illegal work too.

Q: Obviously you were in terrible danger, it goes without saying. Did you ever stop and think about how dangerous the situation was? What it meant for you to be involved in that kind of work?

A: I think that, as I, as I told you, I think...you don't want to do that. It's very dangerous to, to, uh...because, I think, if you realize the danger...of course you know it...but if you realize, you think of it, you can't work anymore. I think you, you, you would stop. You, you, you, you push it back. You, you don't want to be...you know, and that was in our case, of course, a very important thing. The responsibility toward the children. If anything happened to us...if you got tortured, uh, you could, you could give addresses or you could...you never know. That's why we were very cautious with the...for instance, the parents never knew where a child was hidden. That was one one absolute rule we never changed. And sometimes, the parents found out where the children were hidden and we moved them away because it was too dangerous. Dangerous for the child, dangerous for the, for the parents. On the other hand, I didn't know all the addresses. I only knew part of the addresses. And we had three separate lists and only a few...all the lists, all the three lists were together, you could find the children, so I could never betray the children. Neither could the girls or my partner. And I think that was the most essential thing where we were afraid of--that something would happen...that you would betray, had to betray the children.... I mean, no one is a hero. With torture you can can...you never...you, you can't blame someone being tortured...betraying. There was a rule in, in the resistance that if someone was caught, within twenty-four hours, you had to, to, to, to, uh...not to say anything, betray anything within twenty-four hours; and after twenty-four hours you were allowed to betray because then everyone who was connected with you would have changed the address. And I think that's right.

Q: Were any of the people you worked with ever in close encounters?

A: You want the record?

Q: In the dangerous situation...

A: Yes. Two girls...two girls went to Ravensbrück. They were caught.

Q: How were they caught?

A: One on the station in Utrecht. And the other one...I, I don't remember where she was caught. Anyway, both girls were caught.

Q: Were the children with them?

A: No. Fortunately, without children.

Q: How did the Germans and the Dutch police know to capture them there?

A: They, they went into a trap. They...the one...I think the other one went into a house which...where the Germans were sitting and, uh, they caught her. Maybe this was identity or persoonbewijs material which was, uh, bad for them. But fortunately, our group was very lucky. I mean only two of all of them, and they survived, both. They survived Ravensbrück. The girls... they are still living.

Q: What did they do after the war?

A: Oh, they studied. One...one of the...one girl was studying with me law. We finished together law school and then she married and had children.

Q: I know there was no typical day for you, especially during the war, but what would it be like when you were to leave the house in the morning?

INTERRUPTION - TECHNICAL CONVERSATION - PAUSE

Q: I realize with all the work you did that there was no typical day, but can you describe what it was like, for instance, in the mornings and the evenings? Did you come home? Did you stay in other parts of the country during, uh, the time that you helped with the children?

A: It, it, it's difficult to say what a typical day was, because every day was different. I mean...uh, it, it's, uh, it depended, uh, how many, many appointments you had, where you had to go, if you had to go out of Amsterdam, had to go to, to Friesland or to Limburg. And, uh, I think it's very difficult to say typical day because there was never a typical day. Every day was, was, was, was...other than, than, than, the day before, but we, we cycled a lot through through Amsterdam. I've never cycled so much as in during these years. And, uh, don't forget, if, if you had to go to to Limburg and Friesland, it took you one day; the transportation was not that fast. There were no cars. We had to go by train, and then, then by bus and then we had to walk. I mean everything took long to to achieve. The whole, uh...that, that was the...one of the feelings which...that you have not enough time and that, uh, there was not enough hiding places and there were too many children to, to, to, to hide. That was a very bad feeling that, that we were so limited. And on the, on the other hand, you couldn't enlarge your, your, your group because it, it was dangerous. I mean, to enlarge it...I've seen one of the other groups who, who had the policy of, of taking all kinds of extra people, and they paid very, very much for that. They had a lot of casualties, because of that. We wanted to to have a very small but very first rule, our group, and the more people you, you took with you, the, the danger became much more.

Q: You mentioned that you had a bicycle. How was that-- that you were allowed a bike at the time?

A: Well, Germans tried to, to, to fetch the bikes, but they took another one--there were always bikes. There was no problem. The, the Germans were very keen on bikes. I know they, they, they steal them, but you always got another one.

Q: Were you stopped on bikes by the Germans?

A: I never was. But some people were, some of my, uh, girls were. I never...never happened to me (laughter). I was lucky.

Q: Did you have access to radios?

A: No. Once...two times I have sent a message to, to London through, uh, people whom I know that the special...again specialization of, of these people. They, they had the contacts with, with the government in London. But...I mean, they only did that, and nothing else.

Q: What did the message entail?

A: It was about something which, uh, I don't remember exactly what...I, I remember that it was on the radio. It was in code and I remember that we, we, we...they said it. I, I, I don't remember exactly what it was all about. I'm sorry, I don't know anymore.

Q: Do you remember liberation?

A: Yes. Liberation in, in Amsterdam was very strange. Because there was a liberation, and then a day later there was a lot of shooting in Amsterdam near the Dam, and things like that. We were liberated...we are not liberated. Next day we were not liberated because there were still Germans fighting near the Dam. There were a lot of casualties the second day.

Q: Were you in Amsterdam during liberation?

A: Yes. But I was not there at the Dam. Fortunately I was not there.

Q: And who liberated the city?

A: I think the Canadians...what I remember, it was the Canadians.

Q: Where were you at the time of liberation?

A: I was living, uh, in a house with a lot of, uh, students and a lot of...of because, the last, uh,

period...what I told you...Amsterdam was completely shut off from from from the country. We could go by bike but there were no...no trains and no transportation, so we lived with a lot of people in, in one house with a lot of students. And some some Jewish, uh, students and people too. They were hidden. Actually, there was one girl, a Jewish girl, who studied, uh, medicine at the university before she, uh, before she was, uh, not allowed to do that anymore. And she did all her examinations at our house. And the professors came to the house to take her examination, and she, uh...she, uh, worked the whole day in all kinds of, uh...there was no heating, so she she took everything, blankets and things around her and she studied the whole day and the, the... when she, when she was ready, her examinations were taken at, at the house. After the war she, she graduated and became a doctor.

Q: Can you describe or do you remember how you felt when you were liberated, what the feelings were?

A: I think it's the most wonderful feeling we ever had. I think that we'll never forget it. And on the other hand, it's very unrealistic. Uh, you you won't believe it. It's too good to be true, to, to believe.

Q: And what did you do that day when the city was liberated?

A: I think...I think..everyone was on the street that day--the first day. Second day when the shooting was...the, the people...there were only a few people on the street. But the first day I think everyone was out in the streets.

Q: Let me backtrack for a moment. I know there was a terrible famine going on in the north at the time. How did you and your group find food?

A: Where was the famine? Not in the north...in, in Amsterdam, in the key cities, in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. I I don't remember. I, I, I remember eating a lot of bulbs. It was good food, the bulbs. Anyway, we survived on it. We always had bulbs. Yeah, I remember, and sugar beets. Uh, that, that was a mixture of bulbs because...there was no bread. But we survived. A lot of people, uh, old and and sick people, of course, died but if you are young, you, you...that's not the most dramatic thing, I think. It's good to realize that you have hunger--that you have real hunger. I think it's, it's very good. I can never throw bread away, even now. It's very difficult for me.

Q: And what did you do, what happened to you after liberation?

A: After liberation, there was an office called the Office of the Oorloogpleegkinderen[16] and, uh, I stayed for two months at the Office and, uh, because I had to, to, to, to look after our children that they were, uh, given to the parents and things like that. But I didn't want to do

[16] The office that helped place hidden children with parents who had survived the war.

that very long for two reasons - because I knew it would be a terrible fight between foster parents, and not, not the, the parents because if the parents returned, there was no question about it. They went to the parents. But we knew that ...that the...there would be all kinds of, of problems when, let's say, an uncle of sixty years of age came back, and, and, uh, a girl of ten had to go to that uncle. And then the poor foster parents would say, "Now, we think the child should stay here," and I didn't want to get involved with these kind of problems. I had enough, I thought the children are, are safe. I didn't want...I didn't want to, to, to continue; I wanted to finish my studies. I was really three years out of my studies. And I, I was married already at the time. I wanted to finish my studies, so I quit after two months. And I, I was right because there was a terrible fight after that.

Q: You mentioned you were married. How did you meet your wife?

A: She was one of the girls.

Q: One of your girls?

A: Yeah.

Q: And then what happened to you...in other words, after the war, as far as your life was concerned? What did you do?

A: Well, what I really...what I did, right after the war, a lot of the students who had had been completely independent...we were not dependent on our parents anymore...and we didn't want to...there were no scholarships at the time, in Holland. And we wanted to be free and to...not to ask our parents for, for, for a, uh, an amount of money and a month's to stay. We didn't like that anymore, so that's why I came into the show business, because with a lot of the students from, from, from our...not from our group, but from all kinds of groups. We, uh, took, we...had a idea to, to establish a cinema, an art-house cinema, which we did. We opened it in November 1944. And all the students worked there, and earned their way of living. It still exists. Forty-five years.

Q: When you say cinema, were you talking about film or...?

A: Film. Yeah. It's called the Kritierion, and it's still there. It's still run by the students.

Q: And you had mentioned the theater before. Did you pursue the theater?

A: Afterwards I went into the cinema, the theatre business, but it was ten years later.

Q: About '55.

A: Yeah, about '55.

Q: And you did...or you do what?

A: I, I was managing director of the Cinema House...the theatre. And I produced musicals, plays, and things like that.

Q: Is there anything that you'd like to add?

A: I hope I've said enough for you. It's up to you.

Q: I'd like to ask if there's anything that you'd like to mention after the story.

A: Yeah. I, I wanted to say one thing which I think is, is very important. There has been many times that people attacked the Jews that they didn't resist enough. And I think that's very unfair because it's not true. As I told you, I worked with many Jewish people who risked their life for, for the other ones. And I think...I mean the position was that bad that for a Jew it was...the risk was so enormous, was ten times more than, than for us, and if you compare it to the people of the Dutch, uh, population who, who, who were really active in the resistance, it's only maybe one or two percent, and I think the same and maybe better if you take the, the Jewish population...there were at least two percent Jews who resisted, so I think this is a very unfair criticism, and it's not true. They were not different from, from...they were not, not, not less active as the non-Jews.

Q: Now that you've had the time to think about it and years have passed, if you had it to do all over again, would you?

A: I don't know. I, I can't answer that. It...it's not...I think it will never happen again. There's not the same, same situation. There will never be a sit...we all hope there will never be the same situation. It's such an extreme, uh, uh, situation and hopefully there will never be anything like that. No. But I can't say how I would react. You...no...the only thing is that that I'm always astonished...still astonished that it happened. It's unbelievable. For me it's still unbelievable.

Q: Anything else?

A: No.