

CHAPTER 1

My family lived in Amsterdam, in the Jewish quarter. It never used to be a Jewish quarter, as the Dutch people did not know the word 'segregation', and everybody could live wherever they wanted. Religion and belief were not considered an issue. Then, in 1941, during the German occupation of Holland, the Germans decided to concentrate the Jewish population in Amsterdam East.

In February 1941 the Germans raided the city market of Amsterdam in retaliation for the killing of a Dutch Nazi officer in a fight the previous day. Four hundred men were picked up and herded into trucks. Unfortunately, my father's favourite cousin, Mauritz, was one of the men. Although we heard rumours, we had no idea where the men were taken. In May 1941 my father received a postcard marked Mauthausen. Mauritz wrote:

Dear Maurice and family

I am in Mauthausen and the work is not bad. I hope that everything is good with all of you. Please give my regards to Dozeman, and is Spitty still alive?

Mauritz

As we knew the card had to pass through the German censor, there must be a hidden message. After two days, my

father had decoded the message. He came to me in the kitchen and said, 'I know what Mauritz wants to tell us. Dozeman is the name of the baker around the corner; Spitty is the name of our dog. So, what he is really trying to say is that he is very hungry and that it is a dog's life in Mauthausen.'

We realised then that the Germans would be without mercy in their plans to eradicate the Jewish population in Holland. My father looked at me with worried eyes and said, 'I must do everything in my power to prevent us being sent to Germany.'

There were many raids in the Jewish quarter during the summer of 1942. We saw families dragged from their homes, never to be heard of again. Some of these people were crying when they were taken away, others were relieved that the suspense of waiting was over. We watched through the curtains as the Germans marched long columns of people down the street to the station, where the trains would take them far away from the things they loved and lived for. My family used to feel very sad after each of these raids, as our friends and relatives disappeared, and God only knew what was happening to them.

Until now we had been very lucky. My father was a well-to-do textile merchant. When the raids started, someone told my father that we could buy our freedom from the German SS Commander, Aus der Funten, in the form of a work deportation exemption. We could then be exchanged for prisoners of war via Portugal.

My father did not hesitate. He sold most of his valuables and my mother's jewels and managed to get about five hundred thousand guilders together. He did not know whether this was enough money, but after talking it over with Mum, he decided to give it a try. The question was, who was going to approach Aus der Funten? The person would have to go to SS headquarters. This was dangerous

— many people had gone there and not returned. After a long discussion, Mum persuaded Dad to let her go. She reasoned that a woman might have a better chance of being admitted to see Funten.

On the sunny morning of 22 September 1942, my mother set out to walk the eight miles to try to save her family, as Jews were not permitted to travel on buses or trams. All day we lived a nightmare, trying not to think of all the things that might happen to our mother. The day dragged on, until at five o'clock that afternoon the telephone rang. After some hesitation my father picked up the receiver, afraid of what he might hear, but then his face transformed into a smile. Mum was all right and on her way back home. Imagine our happiness when Mum arrived tired but safe a few hours later. Dad said that he would never permit her to do a thing like that again, as he had died a thousand times during the day. Mum smiled happily, her mission completed. She had spoken to Aus der Funten, and was told to come back with the money and our passports the next week. She was also instructed to have suitcases prepared with clothes for all of us so that we could be ready at a moment's notice for our trip to freedom. How wonderful! Our spirits lifted. Soon we might live in freedom again, as human beings, without being shunned or hunted.

The next day we all had our pictures taken and our fingerprints were put on our passports. The week passed and Mum set out once more for the SS headquarters. Another unbearable day loomed ahead of us, but this time Mum came home earlier, with photocopies of our precious passports, stamped by order of Aus der Funten, 'The holder of this passport is exempt from work deportation'. The work deportation exemption protected us from being taken away during the raids which went on night after night. We desperately wanted to believe the Aus der Funten's verbal promises that we would be exchanged for prisoners of war.

My grandfather was already in a camp in Groningen, put to work there by the Germans. He had been a merchant in the meat industry when, early in 1941, the Germans forbade the Jews to enter abattoirs. My grandfather had to make a living somehow and, with the help of his non-Jewish colleagues, he was able to slaughter some cattle and sheep on a farm near Amsterdam. I was living with my grandparents at the time and had to vacate my bedroom for the work. My room was transformed into a sausage-making factory at night, while during the day it looked like my bedroom again. At times the dining room table was used to bone the meat. A gate in the fence gave the men who helped my grandfather a chance to get away if there was a raid.

Woken by the activities during the night, I volunteered to help. My grandfather showed me how to cut the last remaining meat from the bones with a razor-sharp knife, and he was proud when I proved to be an apt student. But one night the loudly ringing doorbell sounded disaster. I could hear my grandfather helping his two friends escape through the fence before my grandmother opened the door to two Dutch detectives, who entered without permission. There had been no time to disguise the equipment and the sausage meat, so my grandfather was caught red-handed. While one detective questioned my grandfather, the second one leaned against the doorframe, his eyes wandering over the room before coming to rest on a quantity of first-class fat my grandfather had laid out to dry on top of my wardrobe. Everything was covered hygienically in white fat-free tissue paper. When the detective brought the attention of his partner to his find, my grandfather was so disappointed. The detectives made up a report and confiscated all the meat, sausages, salamis, fat and the sausage-making equipment. About an hour later, a truck arrived to take it away. However, the Dutch detectives did leave my grandparents six salamis and a large piece of fat for their own consumption.

In May 1942 my grandfather was summonsed to the Court in Amsterdam and given a choice of the four-month gaol sentence or going to a work camp. One Saturday afternoon my grandfather told me he was going on a vacation for four months. My grandmother's sadness gave away what was really happening and I told my grandfather I knew he had to go to gaol. I will never forget the look of shame on his face. The thought of going to gaol as a God-fearing man who had never done a criminal thing was nearly unbearable. He then told us of his decision to go to the work camp. Now, all these years later, I know that if he had chosen to go to gaol, he probably would have survived the war.

After my grandfather had gone to the work camp, my grandmother always came to our house, as she lived just down the street from us. She was my mother's mother, and the most wonderful person. She would not hurt a fly, and was loved by the entire neighbourhood. Everyone called her Oma (Grandma) Judy. My wonderful grandmother, she looked after us like no one else. When we finished our delicious dinner each night, she would ask, 'What would you like to eat tomorrow?' With full tummies, we did not have much of an appetite to think about tomorrow's dinner.

On Friday 2 October 1942, my Oma cooked a sweet pear cake for us, a dish which took hours of patient preparation. When she served it at dinner, we told her how tasty it was.

'Eat well, my children, and may God bless you all. I am sure it is the last time Oma will cook it for you,' Oma said.

'But Oma,' I said, 'this is nonsense. What are you talking about? You will be with us for a long time yet.'

'No, my darling,' was Oma's reply, 'I know. I can feel it, tonight they will come to get me.'

'Please Oma, don't talk like that.' I was in tears. 'If you do feel like this, stay with us tonight. Don't go home — and if you do go, I am coming with you.'

'No.' Oma was firm. 'Tonight you sleep in your parents' home.'

Sometimes I slept at Oma's place so she would not be so lonely at night, although it was forbidden by the Germans to stay the night in someone else's home. (The Germans had declared a curfew from eight o'clock at night until six o'clock in the morning for the entire Dutch population.)

Before eight o'clock, Oma prepared to go home. She kissed us all with tears in her eyes and said, 'Be good, my children. I love you all very much.' With those words she left.

From that moment Mum stationed herself in front of the bedroom window where she could see Oma's street. The Germans started to arrive at about quarter past eight. The raid was on. Through the curtains we could see them going from door to door to bring the people out of their homes. This time they took the people to the station in trucks because it was quicker. My brothers and I were in the lounge when my father called out, 'Quick children, run to the bedroom, they have got Oma. Be quick and you can say goodbye to her.'

From the bedroom window we could see Oma with her bags, waving and calling to us. Mum opened a window, despite strict orders from the Germans not to do this.

'Mother, Mother,' she screamed, 'God, don't let them take my mother.'

She was waving frantically, and the next minute she was halfway out the first-floor window. My father grabbed her and pulled her inside. In the meantime, the Germans motioned Oma to move on.

'Goodbye my children,' she called while she walked on. 'Goodbye, goodbye.'

They were the last words we heard from Oma. My lovely sweet grandmother! We had heard people calling goodbye many times before, but this time the Germans had hit hard at our home and family. That terrible Friday night I will never forget as long as I live.

Months passed but the Germans did not let up on the raids.

Our neighbourhood became very quiet. The houses were empty because the Germans picked up people and, a few days later, Puls, a carrier contracted by the Germans, would come and take all their furniture and belongings. All the goods from Jewish homes were sent to Germany. Since then, the Dutch language has derived the word 'gepulst' — 'to take away'.

Our school in the President Brandt Straat also emptied. Most of the students had been deported to Germany and Jewish teachers replaced all the gentile teachers. It was a sad day when our headmaster, Mr Douwes, and our favourite teacher, Mr Tettelaar, were replaced. Both were loved and respected by all the students. After Mr Tettelaar had to leave, about twenty of us, including my girlfriends Sonia and Blondy, had a photograph taken by the photographer on the President Steyn Plantsoen. When it was finished we took it to Mr Tettelaar's home. Although it was forbidden to have Jews to visit, Mr Tettelaar invited all of us in and we spent a lovely afternoon with him and his wife. Our photograph was given a place of honour on the living room wall.

28 February 1943

Many older Jewish people had been hiding in hospitals with pretended illnesses to avoid being sent away to a camp in Germany or Poland. By now we had some inkling that the Germans did not have much good in mind for us, as we never heard a word from those who had gone away after they had received an order to go to work in Germany. The families or loved ones of those people who had been removed from their homes during the raids of the past terrible month also had not received any news.

My father's father was in hospital as he had been very ill with a life-threatening infection for some weeks. Now he was on the way to recovery, but every day huge bandages were required to clean out the painful wound on his bottom.

My grandmother (Oma Hetty) was also in the hospital, not because she was sick, but because it was too dangerous for her to stay in her lovely home.

Rumours had circulated for days that the Germans were going to evacuate the hospitals. My parents were so concerned that they decided to bring my grandparents home. They managed to hire a pushcart from some good Dutchmen in the market, who also offered to bring my grandparents home safely. My parents accompanied the men to the Jewish hospital and they managed to put my still-very-sick grandfather on his mattress and onto the pushcart, with Oma Hetty sitting beside him. After a walk of about two hours, my grandfather was put to bed in our home where he could rest. The hospital had supplied my mother with lots of bandages and medicines, and the nurses had explained to her how to keep the wound clean. After some embarrassing moments when my mother had to touch my grandfather's bottom for the first time, she turned out to be such a good nurse that my grandfather was fully recovered before two weeks had passed. My grandmother could not thank my mother enough as she had been unable to do this unpleasant task herself.

All Jewish hospitals were raided on 1 March 1943. The Germans had no mercy and filled the trucks with the very sick.

Our gymnastic club, Bato, organised a competition with the other clubs still operating to take place on Sunday 20 June 1943. I had trained for weeks on the rings and parallel bars at the playgrounds close to our school, determined to have a good chance of winning. The night before the competition, I laid out my training suit and all the things I needed.

I was awake early on Sunday morning, a brilliant summer's day. All of a sudden I heard announcements from cars with loudspeakers being driven through the streets ordering Jews to get ready for immediate transportation. I

ran to the window and could see lots of German police assisted (as we later found out) by security police of the transition camp, Westerbork, and many Dutch Nazis, who were being paid five guilders per head. The whole neighbourhood was surrounded and sealed by the SS so no one could escape. The rest of the residents were told to stay indoors. Heavily armed police went from door to door checking passports and other documents. They drove the people out of their homes to an area right across from our street. The people were forced into an enormous queue on the corner of Hofmyerstraat and President Steynstraat and guarded by German soldiers with drawn bayonets. Through the curtains we could see the people in deep shock and trauma trying to keep their dignity. A man approached a German soldier. In his hand he held a document, which I supposed was a deportation exemption. Gesticulating with his hands, he tried to persuade the soldier to let him and his family go. But the soldier took one look at the precious document and tore it into small pieces. Defeated, the man returned to his family in the queue, realising that no one could help him. For five hours the people, young and old, stood huddled together without food or water, until they were ordered to start walking to Amstel Station, where they would board a train for Westerbork. The whole city of Amsterdam was raided that day and only a few families were allowed to stay. Our family was one of them.

During 1943 my father's parents went into hiding, and a man from the Dutch Resistance came occasionally to tell us how they were making out. He would bring us letters and news about the war, about the movements of the Allies, about how they had defeated General Rommel in Africa. It would cheer us up, and hope would flare that we would soon see the end of the war.

Through a strange quirk of fate, my father was still allowed to trade during all this upheaval. Shortly after the

German occupation, every Jew who was in business was ordered to register the business and apply for a licence to operate. By that time my father was a well-established textile wholesaler, and his large stalls with magnificent fabrics were well known in the markets of Amsterdam. He had applied for two different licences, one for the markets and the other for the wholesale business. Both licences were granted after an accountant and the Germans had checked the books for days on end. The Germans were very meticulous in these matters and every detail was recorded. For a while everything seemed all right; it was business as usual. But then came the order that everyone with two licences had to return one. Mum and Dad argued for days over which one of the licences they should return. Dad wanted to keep the wholesale licence and Mum wanted to keep the markets. In the end Mum won: Dad surrendered the wholesale licence and sent in the market licence for renewal. About a month later the market licence was renewed, and my father continued to trade.

The people who had kept their wholesale licence were not so lucky. Their businesses were confiscated by the Germans, whose agents, Lippmann-Rosenthal & Co, took over the businesses and capital, giving the luckless owners thirty minutes' notice to leave the premises. Those people were left with nothing. They had no money to buy food for their families as they had no income. Many of those once very wealthy people suddenly had a lot of time on their hands. They came to visit our home in the afternoons and soon devised a plan: my father would buy more goods than he needed for his own business and allow those poor people to sell the surplus to their own contacts, so they could make some money in order to eat. Of course, we had to do this very carefully as traitors were not asleep and they would report to the SS. The other problem was that textile stamps were needed so my father could buy the extra fabrics from the distributors. That is where the man from the Resistance

came in. During the past months, members of the Resistance had raided the Office of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Amsterdam and acquired a lot of textile stamps. My father bought the stamps from the Resistance, which desperately needed the funds. For many months my father bought extra goods with his own money.

Our attic soon became a warehouse where many rolls of fabric were neatly stacked on shelves. It was there that I escaped to do my homework very early in the mornings, as I was sitting for my final exam to enter secondary school. One of these mornings at about five o'clock, as I was climbing the stairs to the attic, I met a man carrying down rolls of material. I asked him what he was doing. He said he had to make an early delivery. I did not like something in his manner and I asked him for his name. 'Jan,' he told me as he raced down the stairs. Suspicious, I ran up the stairs to the attic. The locks on the door were broken and only a few rolls of material were lying on the floor. The room that had been chock-a-block full was empty. I ran downstairs and into my parents' bedroom to wake my father. When I blurted out that we had been robbed, my father ran down to the street in his pyjamas in an effort to catch the thief, but to no avail. My father and I went up to the attic to view the damaged locks and the now-empty room. He was furious, as most of the goods had arrived only two days before. After a while he calmed down and we both went downstairs where my mother was waiting, wanting to know what had happened. Without giving an explanation, my father went to the telephone and rang the police. My mother became very worried and said, 'Don't do this, Maurice. It can be very dangerous to bring attention to us as Jews. Better forget about it.'

But my father was so furious that he did not want to think about the consequences. He told my mother to be quiet while he reported the theft to the police.

Two Dutch policemen arrived about half an hour later at

our home. One was an elderly man and the other was a very tall young man with blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes called Henny. Henny asked me questions about what the man looked like, what he had said to me, how tall I thought he was and other details about what had happened. He was such a nice policeman that, by the time he finished questioning me, I adored him as only a young girl can. Mum reminded me that it was time for school. After a quick breakfast in the kitchen, I said goodbye to Henny and the other policeman and went to school. When I came home again at about four-thirty that afternoon, my father told me that they had caught the thief in the morning, with the help of my description and his knowledge of the market helpers. Most of the goods had been recovered and returned already. Now my father could keep on helping those poor Jewish people without an income.

Henny became a good friend of our family's and he would often drop in after his afternoon shifts. If I happened to be home, he would give me one of his beautiful smiles and look down at me from his 1.9-metre height and say, 'How is little Hetty today? Did you do your best at school?'

He was such a wonderful person — his smile, the open look of his eyes. Everybody loved him. One day I came home from school and found my father and Henny in serious conversation. I heard him say:

'No, Maurice, not this time. First we will see if they arrive safely. I tell you what we will do. Tear a one hundred guilder banknote in two and I'll give one half to the doctor who is going with his family and ask him to post it back to Amsterdam when they arrive in Switzerland. When the half of the banknote arrives, we'll join it with your half and if it fits then we'll know they have arrived safely and you and your family can go on the next trip.'

Reluctantly my father agreed. He took out his wallet, pulled out a one hundred guilder note and tore it into two,

creating a zigzag pattern. He handed one half to Henny and carefully put the remaining half back in his wallet. Henny got up to leave when he noticed me for the first time. He did not smile at me. He looked strained and tense. I remained silent.

‘Good luck, Henny. Be careful,’ my father said, and extended his hand.

When Henny had gone, my father confided in me what it was all about. The Underground, of which Henny was a member, believed they had found an escape route. A Rhine barge would take thirty people up the river Rhine to Switzerland. The people would be hidden below the deck. The barge would leave from the Zuider Zee and travel through Germany to Switzerland.

‘I wanted us to be on the barge,’ Dad said, ‘but Henny wants us to wait for the next trip.’

I was glad Henny did not want us to go, and I told my father so.

‘It’s much too dangerous. The idea of going through Germany scares me. The other way to England I think is a much better idea.’

‘Yes,’ Dad said. ‘I understand that, but a Rhine barge is not built to go on the sea.’ He let out a deep sigh. ‘We now have to wait to see if that doctor sends the banknote from Switzerland. I do hope so, for the doctor’s sake.’

‘When is the boat going?’ I asked.

‘In two days,’ Dad said.

We both were silent, each busy with our own thoughts. Four days went by. We had expected Henny to come but he did not. Dad was nervous and we were worried as well. On the fifth day, Dirk, the elderly policeman who had accompanied Henny when our attic was robbed, came to see us. He told us that he had heard at the police station that Henny had been arrested by the SS two days previously and taken to the Euterpastraat SS headquarters. We were appalled; we knew about the atrocities committed by the SS

there. Dirk told us that as far as he had been able to find out, thirty people (about five families) had boarded the barge. They had paid large amounts of money to the crew, and the barge had left safely early in the night. When the barge was in the middle of the Zuider Zee, at about midnight, the crew started to throw the families overboard. Their screams of terror were so loud that a German patrol boat came to investigate and, of course, everyone was rounded up, with disastrous results for our Henny. Dirk told us that Henny was now in a very bad state in the Wilhelmina Hospital and under SS guard.

'My God,' Mum wailed. 'How they must have tortured him.'

I was still sitting frozen in my chair, my mind would not accept the truth. Our beautiful, wonderful friend. Twenty-one years old, he had risked his life to help desperate people.

'My family owes their lives to Henny. He advised me not to go on this trip but to wait,' my father said, his face ashen. 'How can I thank him enough for stopping me from doing something foolish. Oh God! Let him get better!' He banged his fist on the table. 'Yes, please,' he repeated, 'let him get better.'

At that moment my father's niece Sonja walked in with her friend Johnny. We were a bit scared of Johnny as we did not know if he was 'safe'. He claimed he was a detective from the Dutch police, but Dirk had investigated this and could not find his name on the register. Johnny was madly in love with Sonja, and when he was around we were very careful about what we said. Therefore, all that we told Sonja and Johnny was that Henny was in the Wilhelmina Hospital after a serious accident and that a police guard was sitting at his door.

'I'll go and have a look at him tomorrow,' Johnny said.

Dirk got up and said goodbye. 'Let me know if you have some news from Johnny tomorrow,' he said to Mum as she

escorted him to the door.

Later in the kitchen Mum related the horrible story to Sonja, after which Sonja told Johnny that they were leaving. We were glad that they had gone. In our depressed condition we did not feel right about entertaining anybody.

The next night Dad told me that Johnny had gone to see Henny in hospital. Henny was in a very bad condition. The SS had beaten his head into a bloodied mess and whipped him until his kidneys had ruptured. Mercifully our wonderful, courageous Henny passed away the next day.

The Germans had checked our passports a few times, but left after seeing the exemption stamps on them. Until now we had not heard anything about our trip to Portugal, but our suitcases remained packed under our beds in case the summons came. On 29 September 1943 at four o'clock in the morning, the doorbell began ringing urgently, accompanied by loud banging on the front door. The banging woke everyone in the house. I heard my parents moving about in their bedroom, my mother saying, 'They are here, we better open the door.' From my bedroom I could see into the hall. I saw my mother open the door and there stood an SS officer and a German soldier with a drawn bayonet.

'Jews?' the officer asked.

My mother nodded.

'Passport,' he snapped, 'quick.'

By that time my father had already come with the passports, sure that the stamp would do its magic work again. He confidently handed over the passports to the SS officer, who examined them carefully and ordered all five of us to line up in the hall. There we stood in our pyjamas, my mother holding her pink dressing-gown tightly around her to stop herself from shaking. The SS officer told the soldier to keep watch over us while he had a look around to see if there was anyone else in the house. 'Oh dear God,' we silently prayed. In the confusion we had forgotten that my

mother's cousin, Morris, and my father's niece, Sonja, were in the house. To top it off, Morris had been hiding for a year and had come for a short visit only the day before. He had no passport or papers. Sonja had been born from a Jewish mother and a gentile father, and had papers to prove it. While the SS officer searched the house, we held our breath. We could hear him opening doors and banging them closed again. All this time, the soldier stood in front of us with his drawn bayonet. The officer returned with Sonja. He had found her in the lounge. We were all wondering what had happened to Morris. Where was he? Why hadn't the SS officer found him? Our family tried to talk to each other with our eyes, wanting to know the answer to this unbelievable thing, but we weren't left with much time to ponder over it.

'Your papers?' the SS officer asked Sonja.

She handed them to the officer.

'So you are half-Jew. And may I ask what you are doing in this house? I suppose you know it is forbidden to stay overnight in someone else's quarters?' By this time, he had worked himself into a temper. 'Answer me!' he shouted.

We all froze, looking at Sonja and the officer. Sonja was very pale, but proudly held her head up high and looked the officer straight in the face. Softly she said that during the day she had paid us a visit, and by the time the curfew came around she had a migraine headache, and it had been impossible for her to get home safely.

'You're lying!' the officer screamed. 'I'll keep your passport and you will come with the rest of them to the station. There someone else higher than me will deal with you.'

The officer turned to us and said, 'Jews, I'll give you one hour to get ready.' He ordered the German soldier to watch us carefully until he returned to take us to the station.

My mother told us all to get dressed. 'We don't know where we are going, so to keep warm is a good idea. Come

on boys, I'll help you get dressed.' She pushed Max and Jacky in front of her towards their room.

Of course, I thought, she's going to find out what happened to Morris, and I motioned Sonja and my father not to follow them. My father looked dejected.

'Dad, you had better get dressed or you'll catch cold, and we have to go soon,' I said.

'Yes,' Dad said, 'I had better go and get dressed. I hope they have made a mistake. Maybe we will be home again tomorrow morning. I can't understand it, they promised me we would be going to Portugal.'

Sonja and I said nothing. Mum came back down the hall, and in her eyes, we could see that Morris was okay. She drew us all into the main bedroom. Whispering, she told us that when the Germans banged on the door, Morris had hidden himself under the bed among the suitcases. He had a bad moment when the officer searched the room, but he did not look under the bed.

'Good,' Dad said. 'For a minute I thought he had jumped out of the window again like he did the last time they came to pick him up.'

'What's he going to do now?' Max asked Mum.

'I told him to stay where he is until after we are gone, and to give our neighbours any valuables that are left. It's better that they have it than Puls,' Mum said.

'I suppose we'd better get ready. Hetty, after you get dressed, I would like to talk to you and the boys before we go,' Dad said.

After I got dressed I went to find Max and Jacky, and the three of us went to my parents' room. In the hall, we had to pass the German soldier, who by that time was tired of holding his bayonet. He had placed it against the wall, and was leaning beside it. Dad was sitting on the side of the bed. He looked very upset.

'Children, I'm very sorry this has happened,' he said. 'I've done everything I could so we didn't have to go to

Germany. I have worked very hard for all of you, to give you a lot of things I didn't have when I was a boy. I gave nearly all of my money to the SS to save you. I'm very, very sorry.'

By now Dad was crying and we all tried to tell him it was not his fault.

He hushed us and said, 'We don't know what is going to happen, but you must promise me faithfully that if you are alive when this terrible war is over, no matter where you are, you must try your utmost to come back to Amsterdam, to the Pomstra family, who live around the corner. They have some shares and some jewels that I gave them to keep until after the war. Even if your mother or I do not return, they promised that they will look after you, because the money, the shares and the jewels will be enough to pay for your upbringing and education. Now children, did you all understand that?'

The three of us nodded our heads.

'Come here,' Dad said. He held us close as if he wanted to warn of the things to come. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he kept on repeating.

Mum walked into the room with Sonja. They had been looking after the luggage. Mum put her hand on Dad's shoulder, trying to reassure him. 'Come on,' she said. 'The SS officer will be back any minute now. Come on!' Sonja had just made some coffee. Reluctantly, Dad let us go, and we all followed Mum into the kitchen.

It was half-past six when the SS officer returned. The hour had become two-and-a-half.

'Are you ready?' he shouted.

'Yes,' my father said.

'You lead the way, the rest of us will follow!' the SS officer barked at the German soldier.

My mother was the last one to leave our apartment, with the SS officer. She locked the front door firmly. Nobody spoke as we descended the stairs to the street. When we were all

down, the SS officer told us to wait in the porch. He said that he had to collect some more people from around the corner. Again he left the soldier to guard us. It was a beautiful morning, the sun was shining and the square was deserted — except for the trucks waiting to take us to the station.

‘Psst.’

My mother and I heard the soft sound, and we turned to see where it was coming from. The door next to our apartment was opened to a slit and our neighbour was peering through it. Mum and I moved closer to the door.

‘What’s going on?’ the neighbour asked. ‘Did the bastards come to take you away?’

Mum nodded and rummaged in her handbag. She took out the keys to our house and handed them to the neighbour.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘After we’ve gone, go inside and help Morris who is hiding upstairs. Also take whatever you want.’

‘Of course,’ our neighbour said. ‘Leave it to me. In the meantime, look after yourselves, and all the best to you all. Let’s hope that this lousy war will soon be over. Good luck.’ Silently, he closed the door.

The SS officer returned with another family.

‘Start walking!’ he ordered, and we all set out towards the trucks.

How strange the square looks, I thought, as we were crossing the road. This could not be the same square I had crossed a thousand times on my way to school. But then, would anything be the same again? We arrived at the parked trucks and were ordered to get in quickly. All of us scrambled on board. We were standing up in the back with the guard where we could hear the SS officer laughing and joking in the front cabin with the driver. Yes, they could laugh! The two small children from the other family were crying. The mother was trying to hush them. Apologetically, she told us they had been awoken from their sleep.

The truck arrived at the station and we were told to alight. One by one we filed into the station. The SS officer marched Sonja away from us towards a counter where high-ranking SS officers were standing together. Our family was ordered to stand with a group of people. Although there were about a thousand people altogether, an unnatural hush lay over the hall. We made conversation only in whispers. It looked like all the remaining Jews in Amsterdam had been picked up in the raid. We soon found out that even the Jewish Council President, Abraham Asscher, and Councillor Abraham Soep and their families had also been picked up. Soon we saw some of our friends in other groups. More and more people were being brought to the station. By eight o'clock, the hall looked like an anthill. People, young and old, babies and children were all huddled together. Some had walked over towards family standing with another group. Rumours started to circulate. Some said we were going to Portugal, others that Hitler had sent orders that all the Jews left in Amsterdam were to be liquidated. We did not know what to believe, so we were torn between hope and despair.

The time moved on. By nine o'clock we were still in the station hall, but no one was standing with their appointed groups. The only SS guards were standing outside the station. Near the counter, we could see Sonja standing with her hands behind her back and her face to the wall. We did not go near her because we were afraid that it might make it worse for her, so we waved from a distance. The same thought was in everyone's mind: When would the train come?

'Hetty,' I heard a voice calling. I turned around to see my very special boyfriend.

'Herman, what are you doing here? Did they get you too?' I had gone to school with Herman for years. He used to carry my school case, and at the local gym we were always teamed up together as we were the youngest.

'Yes,' Herman said. 'They came at two o'clock last night

and we have been here since three o'clock.'

'How's your mother? Is she all right?' I asked.

'Mum's all right,' Herman said, 'but Dad is taking it pretty rough. I'll tell you something funny. There's a man down there who's telling everybody that the train is not coming because it's got a flat tyre.'

We laughed. It was good to laugh in the midst of all this misery.

'Do you know where we're going, Herman?' I asked.

'Your guess is as good as mine, but I think we're going to Westerbork. Listen Hetty, if you have a chance in the train, ask your mother to cut your hair short, because when we arrive in Westerbork you have to pass a health test by a German doctor. If he thinks that your hair is not clean enough, they shave it all off.'

'Oh no, Herman, that's not true.'

'Yes, my dear,' he said. 'It's a pity to cut it, but you'd better not take any chances.'

I was heartbroken. My hair! My shoulder-long hair had to be cut off. Before I could reply a whistle started blowing, and a voice came over the address system asking for silence. The hall became very quiet, and no one moved. This was the moment. You could feel the tension rising. Then the voice said, 'Jews, we want you to pick up your luggage and proceed to platform three, where the train will take you to Westerbork. Group A will come forward first. Group B will follow.'

It was chaos in the big hall. People were running everywhere to return to their groups. Mothers were looking for their children who had wandered off, fathers struggled with the luggage from whole families. Already groups A and B had passed through the turnstiles, and C and D were following. We were with group W, so we were not so pressed for time. When group S went by, Herman called out, 'Hetty, see you in Westerbork. Remember what I told you.'

Then Mum asked for my attention. 'When we go, Hetty,

you hold Jacky by the hand so that we don't lose him in the crush. We must try and keep close together and not lose one another.'

'Sure,' I said, taking Jacky by the hand.

'That's it,' Dad said, 'they've just called out our letter. Let's go, and God be with us.'

There was a tremendous crush at the turnstiles, but we managed to reach the platform together. It was the longest train I had ever seen. The locomotive was already a long way out of the station. As each carriage filled up, it moved further out of the station. We were lucky, it was a passenger train, not the cattle wagons used to transport most of the people. (Westerbork was what the Germans called *Durchgangslager*, which means a repatriation camp. From there, you were sent to different camps in Germany — Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, Dachau, Neuengamme, Mauthausen and Oranienburg. In Poland it was Auschwitz, Birkenau, Sobibor, Blechhammer, Gleiwitz and Monowitz.) The Germans had told the Jewish population in Holland that we would be put to work there with plenty of food and family accommodation. So now we were on our way. Slowly, the train left the Amstel Station. In our compartment there were only about thirty people. We were lucky. They must have put a lot more people in the first carriages, as some of them had to stand. At least we all had a seat. Silently we watched the passing scenery, the fields with the cows and the orchards. 'What now, what now?' sang the wheels of the train.

CHAPTER 2

Suddenly the train came to a halt. Our first glimpse of Westerbork was a long platform with barracks next to it. Everybody alighted from the train and we were met by a group of nurses. They guided us to a barrack where a team of doctors, Dutch and German, was going to give us a medical check-up. First of all we had to be registered, and we also had to declare if we had any precious jewels, gold or money with us. This was our first encounter with the efficient registration system the Germans maintained. Hours and hours passed. One thousand six hundred people had to be checked in and we were some of the last. It was eleven o'clock at night and we were very tired as it was long past our bedtime. We had not had much sleep the night before. At last it was all over and we were taken to barrack seventy. Our luggage was already in the entrance hall. The left side of the barrack housed the women and children and the right side was the men's dormitory. The beds were very close together and the bunks were three beds high. My mother and I each occupied a third bunk, Jacky had the bed under mine, and Max was with Dad on the other side of the barrack. We were given some coffee and sandwiches, as we had missed the six o'clock meal. We ate quickly so we could get some sleep. There were no sheets on the beds, but we had a grey blanket and a straw mattress. Exhausted, we slept.