

I did not have a carefree childhood. I spent years of my childhood in Belsen concentration camp in Germany, deported there by the Germans during World War II with my father and mother, and my two brothers.

If I were to tell you of the experiences of all our family this book would never come to an end, so I will confine myself to telling you the true story of my experiences in the Children's House of Belsen.



Hetty with her brothers, Max and Jack, 1941.

Chapter 1

My family lived in Amsterdam, in the Jewish quarter. It never used to be a Jewish quarter. 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



Hetty's shadow falls over children from her street as she photographs them. All of the children were sent to Auschwitz where they died in the gas chamber, 1942.

*From left, back row: Iesy Gerritse, unknown.
Front row: Siena Soep, Nathan Smeer, Betty Smeer.*

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 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 felt very sad after each raid. No one

knew what was happening to our friends and relatives.

We had been very lucky. My father was a well-to-do textile merchant. When the raids started, someone told him 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 German prisoners of war via Portugal.

My father did not hesitate. He sold most of our valuables and managed to get about five hundred thousand guilders together. The question was, who was going to approach Commander Aus der Funten at 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.

On the sunny morning of 22 September 1942, my mother set out to walk the eight miles to try to save her family. 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 the telephone rang. After some hesitation my father picked up the receiver, afraid of what he might hear, but his face transformed into a smile. Mum was all right and on her way home. She had spoken to Commander Aus der Funten, and was told to come back with the money and our passports the next week. Our spirits lifted. Soon we might live in freedom again,

without being shunned or hunted down.

The week passed and Mum set out once more for SS headquarters, but this time she came home earlier, with photocopies of our precious passports, stamped by order of Commander 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. And we desperately wanted to believe the verbal promise that we would be exchanged for prisoners of war.

My mother's mother lived just down the street from us. She was the most wonderful person, loved by the entire neighbourhood. Everyone called her Oma (Grandma) Judy. My wonderful grandmother; she looked after us like no one else.

On Friday, 2 October 1942, Oma cooked a sweet pear cake. 'Eat well, my children, and may God bless you all. I am sure it is the last time I will cook for you,' Oma said. '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 — if you do go, I'm coming with you.'

'No.' Oma was firm. 'Tonight you sleep at home.'

Sometimes I slept at Oma's place so she would not be so lonely at night, even though 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 in the morning for the entire Dutch population.)

Before eight o'clock, Oma 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 people out of their homes. I was in the living room when my father called out, 'Run to the bedroom, they've got Oma! Be quick and you can say goodbye.'

From the bedroom window we could see Oma with her bags, waving and calling to us.

'Mother, Mother!' Mum screamed. She opened the window, although that was strictly forbidden, and leant out, waving frantically. 'God, don't let them take my mother.'

My father grabbed her and pulled her back inside. The Germans motioned Oma to move on.

'Goodbye my children,' Oma called while she walked. '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 our 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 when the Germans picked up people, a few days later Puls, a carrier company contracted by the Germans, would come and take their furniture and belongings. All the goods from Jewish homes were sent to Germany.

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.

On Sunday, 20 June 1943, I was awake early. Suddenly I heard announcements from cars with loudspeakers, ordering Jews to get ready for immediate transportation. The whole neighbourhood was sealed off 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 home. The people were forced into an enormous queue and guarded by German soldiers with drawn bayonets. 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. He would bring us letters and news about the War.

As a textile merchant, 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. My father was well-established — his large stalls with magnificent fabrics were well known in the markets of Amsterdam. He held two different licences, one for the markets and the other for wholesale business. For a while everything seemed all right; it was business as usual. Then came the order that everyone with two licences had to surrender one. Mum and Dad debated for days and finally decided to send the market licence for renewal and surrender the wholesale licence.

It was a lucky choice. The people who had kept their wholesale licences were not so lucky. Their businesses were confiscated by the Germans, and they were left with nothing. Once-wealthy people had no money to buy food for their families. 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 them to sell the surplus so they could make some money in order to eat. Of course, we had to do this very carefully in case traitors reported us to the SS.

Our attic soon became a warehouse where rolls of fabric were neatly stacked on shelves. It was there that I escaped early in the mornings to do my homework. One morning at about five o'clock, as I was climbing the stairs to the attic, I met a man carrying down rolls of material. I didn't like something in his manner and asked him his name. 'Jan,' he told me as he raced down the stairs. Suspicious, I ran up to the attic. The locks on the door were broken and only a few rolls of material were left lying on the floor. The room that had been chock-a-block full was empty. I ran into my parents' bedroom and blurted out that we had been robbed.

My father rushed into the street in his pyjamas in an effort to catch the thief, to no avail. Dad was furious and went to ring 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 mad he did not want to think about the consequences. Two Dutch policemen arrived about half an hour later. Dirk was elderly, but Henny was a very tall young man with blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. Henny asked me questions about what the man

looked like, what he had said to me, and other details about what had happened. He was such a nice policeman that by the time he had finished questioning me, I adored him as only a young girl can.

When I returned home from school that afternoon, my father told me that they had caught the thief. Most of the goods had been recovered and returned.

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 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 Henny say, 'No, Maurice, not this time. First we'll see if they arrive safely. I tell you what we'll do. Tear a 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 know they've 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 in two.

He handed one half to Henny and carefully put the remaining half back in his wallet.

Henny got up to leave, then noticed me for the first time. He didn't smile. 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 Dutch Resistance, of which Henny was a member, believed they had found an escape route. A barge would take thirty people up the river Rhine through Germany to Switzerland. The people would be hidden below the deck.

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

I was glad Henny didn't want us to go, and I told my father so. 'It's much too dangerous. The idea of going through Germany scares me.'

'Yes,' Dad said. 'I understand that.' He let out a deep sigh. 'We must wait to see if that doctor sends the banknote from Switzerland. I do hope so, for his sake.'

'When is the boat going?' I asked.

'In two days,' Dad said.

Four days went by. We had expected Henny to come but he didn't. Dad was nervous and we were worried as well. On the fifth day, Dirk, the elderly policeman, came to see

us. He told us that he had heard Henny had been arrested by the SS two days previously and taken to the SS headquarters. We were appalled; we knew about the atrocities committed there by the SS. Dirk told us that as far as he had been able to find out, thirty people had boarded the barge. They had paid large amounts of money to the crew, and the barge had left early in the night. 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 everyone was rounded up, with disastrous results for Henny. Dirk told us that Henny was in hospital under SS guard.

‘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. ‘Please,’ he repeated, ‘let him get better.’

But 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 by now, but left our house after seeing the exemption stamps on them. We had heard no more 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're here, they're here.' 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.

'Passports,' he snapped, 'quick.'

My father had already appeared with the passports, sure that the stamp would do its magic work again. Confidently he 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 herself. The SS officer told the soldier to keep watch over us while he had a look around to see if there was anyone else.

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; he had arrived only the day before. He had no passport or papers. Sonja had 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. The soldier stayed in front of us with his drawn bayonet.

The officer returned with Sonja. He had found her in the sitting room. We were all wondering what had happened to Morris. Why hadn't the SS officer found him? We 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. What are you doing in this house? 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 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're going, so dress warmly.' She pushed Max and Jacky in front of her towards their room.

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 didn't look under the bed.

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

'I told him to stay where he is until after we're gone, and to give our neighbours any valuables that are left. It's better that they have it than Puls,' Mum 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'd 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 gave nearly all our 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's 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, 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 don't return, they've promised they will look after you. Now, children, do you all understand that?'

The three of us nodded our heads.

'Come here,' Dad said. He held us close. 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' he kept repeating.

Mum put her hand on Dad's shoulder. 'Come on,' she said. 'The SS officer will be back any minute.' Reluctantly, Dad let us go, and we followed Mum into the kitchen.

It was half-past six when the SS officer returned.

My mother was the last one to leave our apartment. 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. 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.

'Pssst.'

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 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.’

‘Leave it to me,’ our neighbour said. ‘In the meantime, look after yourselves. 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. We all scrambled on board and stood up in the back with the guard. We could hear the SS officer laughing and joking in the front cabin with the driver. Yes, they could laugh!

The truck arrived at the station and we filed inside. The SS officer marched Sonja away. 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 been picked up. More and more people were being brought to the station. By eight o'clock the hall looked like an ant hill. People — young and old, babies and children — were all huddled together. 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 killed. We didn't know what to believe. We were torn between hope and despair.

Time moved on. By nine o'clock we were still in the station hall. The only SS guards were outside the station. 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 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 special boyfriend. I had been at school with Herman for years. He had carried my school case, and at the local gym we always teamed up together.

'Herman! Did they get you too?'

'Yes,' he said. 'We've been here since three o'clock.'

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

'Mum's all right,' Herman said, 'but Dad's taking it pretty rough. I'll tell you something funny. There's a man

down there who's telling everybody that the train isn't 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?' I asked.

'I think we're going to Westerbork. Listen, Hetty, if you have a chance on 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 your hair isn't clean enough, they shave it all off.'

I was heartbroken. My hair! But before I could reply a whistle started blowing, and a voice came over the address system asking for silence. The hall became very quiet. 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, and so on.'

It was chaos in the big hall. People were running everywhere to return to their groups. Mothers were looking for their children, and fathers struggled with the luggage for whole families. Already groups A and B were passing 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.'