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# After This

*Survivors of the Holocaust speak*

ALICE NELSON

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## *Foreword*

These life-stories are extraordinary. The telling is straightforward. There is no artifice, no embroidery. Each narrative is a recounting of specific events set in specific places, told matter-of-factly. The facts speak for themselves. The cumulative effect is riveting. It is a mitzvah these eyewitness accounts have been assembled and put between the covers. Made solid. The darkness made visible.

I am of the second generation. As a child I heard anecdotes, fragments of family stories, gazed at photos of grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, scenes of my parents' home-city of Bialystok and its surrounding towns and villages. The prewar photos were haunting, as are the prewar photos that accompany the stories in this anthology. The images are rescued from oblivion.

They add immeasurably to the telling. It was a wise decision to publish them.

My parents, and many of their generation, split their lives between two periods: before the war and after the war. So it is with these accounts. Each tale unfolds as a three-act drama. Act one is set in the time before: Once upon a time I had a home, a family. A mother, a father, brothers and sisters, a circle of friends, extended family. Once I had a life, a community, and a sense of belonging.

Then all is overturned. Ruptured. For some, the second act is a drawn-out process of accumulating horrors. It may include years of slave labour, incarceration in a succession of ghettos, concentration camps, countless acts of cruelty. For others the second act begins abruptly with a knock on the door, a herding into the streets, a trek to the railway station, deportation to death camps. For all, it is a descent into hell.

Act two ends at the moment of liberation. But the impact endures. Prewar life has been shattered. Freedom is coupled with a sense of devastation. Emptiness. Accompanied by confirmation of the death of loved ones. Survivors return to homes occupied by others, to decimated communities. Hence, act three begins in uncertainty, a state of limbo, with time spent in displaced persons camps, journeys to new worlds, to the ends of the earth, to Perth, distant Melbourne. It encompasses years of rebuilding, creating new lives, raising families.

New photos appear, family portraits snapped at gatherings and weddings. Images of rebirth, new links in severed family chains forged through hard work and a ferocious determination. The memories and trauma, however, cannot be suppressed. The survivors' stories invariably emerge after years of silence, maintained to protect their children from the horrors, or because

their experiences seem so out of place in the bright light of the new world. In many cases, it is only the urgent request of children grown to adulthood that prises open the Pandora's box.

In time, the reluctant narrators begin to see a deeper purpose. They embody history. They are eyewitnesses. And they bear witness. Some begin to address schools, the public, and become guides into the Kingdom of Darkness. The Holocaust Institute of Western Australia, its scribes and volunteer interviewers, and Alice Nelson, act as midwives, facilitating the rebirth of suppressed memory.

These accounts, when read in total, represent collective wisdom. They have much to say about love, hatred, trauma, betrayal, endurance, the randomness of fate, the pain of separation, the extremes of human brutality and perversion. And, in some instances, they touch upon unexpected kindnesses, enacted by those who risked their lives to save a fellow human being. As one writer says, in response to a life-saving act by a stranger: 'It was the first time I had experienced that there were good people in the world.'

These accounts, however, do not offer an easy way out. The trauma, the tragedy and the brutality are not diminished, not sanitised. The horrors are named and documented. They are not made more palatable. We are compelled to listen.

I leave the final word to one of the narrators. It is typically direct and prosaic: 'The Holocaust is a monumental part of history, so please do not forget what I am saying. I won't be here forever to tell the story. It is in your hands and the hands of your generation and generations to come – to always remember.'

Arnold Zable



## *Introductory essay*

On the front page of my husband's family photograph album is the black-and-white image of an old Polish rabbi. This man, with his dark eyes, his full beard and his extraordinary prescience, saved my husband's grandfather from a terrible fate by convincing him to leave Poland and arranging passage out of the country before it was too late to leave. All of those who came after in my husband's family owe their lives to this scholarly rabbi – all the Australian and Israeli and American descendants, my own husband, the two strapping boys who clomp down the hallways of our home on the quiet shores of Australia, and the children that they themselves might one day have.

Jewish history is threaded with peril and deliverance, persecution and survival, miracles and catastrophes.

The Holocaust – colossal in scale and recent in memory – is so charged with horror and so obsessively represented that it has become almost legendary. It is a history that sometimes feels too overwhelming to be contemplated. In our family the photograph of the long-dead rabbi has become a way to make the distant miracle of escape something more concrete and tangible. It is a small antidote to the abstractions of history. Another future – which most likely would have been no future – was frighteningly possible. The photograph of the rabbi, sitting as it does alongside images of family weddings, laughing children, beach picnics and bar mitzvahs, is a solemn reminder of this.

We seek them out, these tangible mementoes that help us to touch up against the memory of the Holocaust, to relate to it as something more than an historical allegory of inhumanity. Perhaps it's the same impulse that draws so many people to the sites of the death camps and to Holocaust museums all over the world to see for ourselves the piles of abandoned shoes, the shorn hair, the cases full of spectacles, the relics and remnants of destruction. It's also what makes us listen to the stories of those who survived the conflagration. For the most part, I believe that this is more than a voyeuristic impulse or a desire for tangible proof of the compressed cargo of terror that is the legacy of the Holocaust. We listen to and read the testimonies of the survivors because we know that it is important to understand – as far as understanding is possible – the lived human reality of the Holocaust, and to bear witness in some way for those who emerged from its crucible.

We are fast approaching the juncture at which living memory of the Holocaust must be relinquished. Those

survivors still among us are reaching the end of their natural life spans and soon our human conduit to the events of seventy years ago will be erased. How do we think about the Shoah from this lengthening distance? How do we contemplate its terrible lessons in a time when there will no longer be survivors among us? For too many, the Holocaust has already attained the status of a mythical phenomenon; something at once too known and completely unknowable, too incomprehensible in its dimensions, in its sheer numbers. Of course there are the atrocious photographs, the appalling statistics, the Holocaust museums and memorials, the huge amassing of documentary testimony, the endless texts and films and representations. But is it too easy for the stretch of years between now and then to insulate us from those anonymous victims, for a numinous remoteness to settle irrevocably over the events.

There is a hefty body of theory about the ethics and aesthetics of remembrance, a ceaseless fraught philosophical debate about the impossibility of true communication of the singular horror of the Shoah. In a passionate condemnation of the manipulations and perversions of memory, Holocaust survivor and unparalleled chronicler Elie Wiesel cautions about the transformation of memory into a more palatable reality. The accounts of the survivors, he has argued – the diaries and narratives and recordings – are the best way to ensure faithfulness to memory. ‘Listen to the survivors and respect their wounded sensibility,’ he implores us. ‘Open yourselves to their scarred memory, and mingle your tears with theirs.’

The fourteen narratives included in this collection have been wrested from those scarred memories. Beneath

the words on the pages here, so painfully translated, is the quivering presence of that undiminished trauma. In many ways the narratives are disastrously alike. Recollections of round-ups and cattle wagons, beatings and starvation, camps and ovens, run through the testimonies like dark leitmotifs. These people were subject to unspeakable brutality. They were starved, humiliated, tortured, tattooed and stripped of everything that defined them. They watched their friends and family members being whipped, clubbed, shot, herded into gas chambers. Concussed by what they had endured and by the uneasy miracle of their own survival, they returned to home towns empty of their Jewish communities, to a world that they could never again look upon with the same eyes.

These personal depositions help to refract the overwhelming statistics and abstractions of history into the specific details of one little Dutch boy stripped of his family, his home and his name and forced into hiding, one terrified Polish girl hidden in the stifling crawlspace of a hayloft, one Lithuanian man who was branded with not one but two tattooed numbers because the initial one was not deemed clear enough. The fourteen survivors whose stories are included here are not abstractions, they are not anonymous faces to be flicked past in the all too familiar black-and-white photographs of the history books. They are daughters and sons and brothers and mothers and aunts and cousins – people who live out their lives in the peaceful suburbs of Australia.

For many of the survivors whose stories are included in this collection, the telling only came late in life. In the years after the war their energies were focused on

the present – the further displacements of emigration, the challenges of transposing their lives into a new language and a new culture, the raising of children, the creation of homes and businesses. Their new lives demanded that they remain silent, that they not trouble the still waters of their adopted Australian communities with their unwelcome tales of the abyss. Even those who tried to tell their stories faltered in the face of the sheer incomprehensibility of their experience, the inchoate nature of the knowledge they bore. What they had endured was too awful to be assimilated into narratives, too unbelievable to be understood by anyone who had not also been there. How could any words penetrate the circle of flames from which they had stepped, miraculously alive? How could they ever adequately describe the forbidding terrain in which they had dwelt for so long?

A silence may have surrounded the war years, but it was a fraught and densely populated silence. Though the survivors could not always speak coherently about what they had endured, the haunting revenants of that experience escaped in whispers, in fragments, in the screams of nightmares and in the emanations of fear that filtered through to their children. Deep, quivering threads of anxiety stretched beneath the everydayness of their lives. After what they had been through, they could not fully believe in the existence of a benign world and they clung to their children fiercely. How could they ever communicate to them the most profound parts of their history? In the Jewish tradition, to remember is a holy act, a conduit between generations, but all the old rituals and familiar observances had been torn away from the survivors. The weight of the dead pressed

too heavily on them to be shared with their Australian children.

The writer Leah Kaminsky, daughter of a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, has written powerfully about the burden carried by the children of survivors, the deeply embedded fears and chaos of emotion that formed an often unspoken legacy, and the struggle of the next generation to excavate their own stories, their own identities, from underneath the layers of trauma within their families. In a poem entitled ‘My daughter goes on camp’, Kaminsky writes about the haunting resonances that certain words take on even decades later, in quiet countries far from Europe.

*when will I know quiet joy?  
when will school camp be school camp  
a train just a train, an oven just an oven?  
when will I let them go  
knowing they will come back?*

The Israeli writer David Grossman, who grew up among Holocaust survivors in Jerusalem in the years after the war, tells the story of a family member – a survivor of Treblinka – who arrived at his wedding with a bandage on her forearm covering her tattooed number. She did not want to cast a shadow over the celebration with this bleak souvenir of the camps, this dark amulet of the Shoah. Throughout the ceremony, Grossman found himself unable to take his eyes away from the bandage. ‘I understood then, very sharply,’ he wrote, ‘how much all of us here in Israel are walking on a surface as thin as that bandage, under which lies a void that threatens, every moment, to drag down our daily lives, our illusion of routine.’

The survivors had made a profound and extraordinary effort, in the face of everything they knew about humanity, to continue to choose life, to live on and raise families and start businesses and grow vegetables and bake cakes and attend shule. They forged new and outwardly successful lives and tried as best they could not to dwell on the chasm from which they had emerged.

It has been said that history is a race between education and catastrophe. In 1990, when most of the survivors were already in their sixties and seventies, the Holocaust Institute of Western Australia was founded by Dr Ben Korman OAM and a small group of volunteers. They were compelled to preserve the memory of the Holocaust in an effort to ensure that its dark legacy was not lost and that we would continue to ponder the particular knowledge that the Holocaust has bequeathed us. The Institute was not designed to be a static museum, but a place of encounter where Holocaust survivors would recount their experience to visitors and answer their questions, where Western Australians could gain a profound living sense of the human realities of that particular history.

Volunteers from the fledgling Holocaust Institute met with those survivors who were willing to participate in the endeavour and interviewed them about their wartime experiences. For many, it was the first time they had transposed their stories into any sort of coherent narrative, the first time they had shared their stories beyond the circle of their families. Some had not told their own children the terrible details they shared with the scribes from the Holocaust Institute.

When the Holocaust Institute opened its public

program, which was particularly targeted at school students, the survivors formed a roster, signing on week after week, month after month, to read their testimony and answer questions. They had not been able to bury their dead, to say Kaddish or sit shiva for them, and, for many of the survivors, recounting their stories became a kind of commemoration that had not been available to them before. No redemption could ever be possible and to speak of healing or catharsis belies the horrifying enormity of their experiences, but all the survivors who volunteered at the Holocaust Institute felt that their work was important and necessary. They all firmly held the belief that sharing their experiences, no matter how painful for them, was a way to counteract apathy as well as forgetfulness. After all the years of silence, the survivors took comfort in the thought that their memories were being placed in the hands of another generation.

The narratives included here are extended versions of the testimonies shared by the survivors at the Holocaust Institute. They have been presented as narrated by the survivors themselves; they are not intended to be pieces of literature, but unadorned recountings of experience.

Levie Lever, the father of Dutch survivor Betty Niesten whose story is included in this collection, scrawled a few words on a postcard and tossed it from the window of the cattle train that was transporting his family across the country towards Auschwitz. *Dear Family*, he wrote. *We are on transport. Tell it to others. We hope to come back.*

The stories in this collection are, in their own way, a series of letters scrawled from the haunting traces of memory. Letters tossed from the window of a sealed

train to an unknowing and neglectful world where people kept on sowing their fields and mending their fences as the cattle cars lumbered by full of their desperate human cargo. These are letters written with terror, with desperation and, ultimately, with the hope that they might be read and understood.

*Tell it to others*, a doomed man wrote. With their precise details of human lives bent out of shape by a horrifying history, these narratives are at once a bulwark against forgetting, a warning and an inheritance. *I am here. I endured*, they whisper to us.

As the Holocaust recedes in time, as the last living witnesses to its terrible memory pass from the world, it becomes ever more important to listen to the stories of survivors. To listen and attend and remember.



## *Betty Niesten*

I was born in Amsterdam in the Netherlands on the third of April 1913. My sister Judith Lever was born on 22 January 1912 and was only fourteen months older than me. She was named after my grandmother on my mother's side. My parents had hoped for a boy and had planned to name him Benjamin after my grandfather on my mother's side. Instead they called me Betty. My sister and I were nicknamed Jetje and Betje, but for the most part I was 'Bep'.

Two years later, my brother Hartog Levie Lever was born on 4 September 1915. He was named after my grandfather on my father's side. We used to call him Harry.

I adored my little brother. He should have been a girl and I should have been a boy, because I always fought for him, even if it got me into trouble.



*Betty and her younger brother Hartog*

My father Levie Hartog Lever was born in Utrecht on the ninth of October 1874. He had six brothers and one sister. He moved to Amsterdam at age fourteen to work in the diamond industry as a cutter and polisher. He lived with an aunt and worked long hours. My father changed professions several times before eventually turning his hand to business and establishing two successful shops in Utrecht, which sold electrical goods.

My mother Floortje Lever-Woudhuijsen was born on the sixth of December 1885. She had three sisters and one brother. Her father died when she was quite young, and when her mother remarried she could not afford to look after her children. The three youngest children, including Floortje, were placed in a Jewish orphanage in Amsterdam. She remained there until age eighteen.

When I was a year old, we moved to Utrecht from Amsterdam. My father's family was quite orthodox,

but we didn't attend synagogue very often. My father's shops on the Biltstraat and the Amsterdamsestraatweg were open on Saturdays.

Even if we didn't practise our faith, we *knew* we were Jewish. At Passover, for example, my mother would give us matzas with butter and brown sugar. She used to say they were '*boter dieven*' or 'butter thieves', because it took a lot of butter to make them palatable.

My father was a staunch Democratic Socialist and politically left-wing. He was very well read and our home was always full of books. He adored classical music and he fostered that appreciation in me. We used to attend concerts together.

My mother worked in the shop alongside my father, so we had a servant who would help with basic domestic duties. My sister and I also worked in one of our father's shops behind the counter. The shop was named *Het Lampenkappenhuis*, which means 'the lampshade shop'. I would have liked to go to university but at that time women were expected to just get married and have children.

My father and brother were both very active in the Jewish National Fund. Before the war, Harry had completed an agricultural course and planned to move to Palestine. He even had a ticket to go there, but it was a dangerous journey at that time and my mother couldn't bear to have her only son leave. On the day of his departure, she had a nervous breakdown and he didn't go.

I met Jacob Israel Fresco, or Jacques as he was known, in 1931, when I was eighteen years old. He was born in Utrecht on the twenty-fifth of August 1909 and was twenty-two years old when we met. I have always been

very small and Jacques was much taller than I was, so my mother referred to him as the *langen*, or the ‘tall one’.

The Fresco family lived nearby on the Voorstraat and also owned an electrical goods store. I was very fond of Jacques’s father Abraham who was a business acquaintance of my father’s. Although Jacques came from a merchant family, both he and his sister were very musical. In addition to working in the family business, he also played the piano at recitals.

His sister Esther, whom we all called Ellie, was a brilliant singer. She was born on the twenty-second of April 1916 in Utrecht. She was visually impaired and when she was a child the best eye doctor in Holland had given her an operation, which restored some of her sight, but she could not see very well.

We had a long courtship, which wasn’t uncommon in those days, as it cost a lot of money to get married. My sister Jetje was engaged for ten years. I married Jacques on the eighteenth of August 1937 and we had a brief honeymoon in Belgium. When we returned to Utrecht, I moved to the Fresco home in the nearby Voorstraat.

The property had been in the Fresco family since 1903. It was a relatively large apartment. At first, there were five of us residing there, namely Jacques and I, his parents and his sister. Jacques’s father Abraham died in 1938, and his mother died in 1941.

In August 1939, Jacques and I went on holiday to Scheveningen, which is a seaside resort not too far from Utrecht. By September, when war broke out, I had fallen pregnant.

On the seventeenth of April 1940 my only child, Abraham Jacques Fresco, was born. We affectionately referred to him as ‘Appie’. It was three weeks before the

Nazis invaded Holland. When he was born, he weighed four pounds. The doctor held him up and laughed, saying, ‘A good chicken weighs more.’ He was so small that for the first few months of his life, I had to dress him in dolls’ clothes.

It was a difficult time in the first years of my son’s life. The Dutch army capitulated and the Nazis took control over Holland. In early 1942, all civilians were required to have an identity card. The Jews registered with the Joodse Raad (the Jewish Council) and identity cards labelled with a ‘J’ were issued.

We didn’t think we had anything to hide. It didn’t occur to us that we were being officially separated from the rest of the population. We never would have thought that the Nazis would want to murder us, just for being Jewish.

As the anti-Jewish laws were implemented gradually, we hardly noticed it. But then when a year passed, we began to see just how much life had changed. We were forbidden from riding bikes or using the tram. We also had a curfew.

My father used to take Appie in his pram to the park nearby and one day he came back looking exceptionally sad. He said that it was now forbidden for Jews to go to the park or sit on the bench.

We couldn’t shop at non-Jewish stores, and there wasn’t a great deal of food left in Jewish shops. Eventually they confiscated our businesses: my father’s shops and the Fresco family shop. Officially, the Nazis ‘paid’ compensation, but this was a tiny percentage of their actual worth.

At first, it was only Jewish men who were called up for forced labour in the east, but then the elderly,



*Appie in 1942*

women and children were also required to report for forced labour. We suspected that something terrible was happening because once people left, they were never heard from again. Of course, we had no idea about the scale of the atrocities occurring in the concentration camps.

In August 1942, we went into hiding. Jacques, Appie and I went together, and Ellie went to a separate hiding place. She was caught and imprisoned before being sent to Auschwitz. She was murdered in the gas chambers on 22 October 1943, aged twenty-seven.

December 1942 was the last time I saw my father and my brother. They were hiding nearby where I was. Harry was looking after our father, as he was in his late sixties by then. I can't really recall how that meeting was arranged. I went to their hiding place, which was with a very kind family by the name of Haring. There were around six or seven Jews hiding there. My father



*Betty and her son Appie in 1942*

gave me a green and yellow scarf because I was cold.

When my father and brother were picked up, Harry had the address of where I was staying in his pocket. After that, Jacques and I separated because our hiding place had been compromised. We didn't have any money. We had been required to deposit our money into the Lippmann-Rosenthal bank, without having any chance to retrieve it. The Nazis had confiscated our possessions and the Fresco family shop, so it was very difficult to convince someone to hide me, especially with my two-year-old son.

Although the underground helped us secure another hiding place, it wasn't long before it was impossible to keep Appie with me. One time, the Nazis were near and he started to cry. I almost smothered him. I thought he would give us away, and then we'd have all been arrested.

In the end, the underground arranged for him to stay with an elderly couple who were devout Catholics. The

couple believed that nobody would harm a child, but not too long after he arrived, somebody reported that there was a small child staying there and he was taken away by the Nazis and put into a crèche for Jewish children.

In the Netherlands, all the Jews were rounded up and processed at the Hollandsche Schouwburg, a theatre on the Plantage Middenlaan in Amsterdam. It was never designed to accommodate such large numbers of people. The conditions there were terrible, so in order to maintain order, the Nazis put all children under the age of twelve years in a crèche on the opposite side of the street. That's where they put Appie too.

A cousin of mine, Veronica Woudhuijsen, was born in Amsterdam on 29 March 1905. Her father Hijman was the only brother of my mother. She was employed by the Jewish Council as a social worker and additionally was a teacher at the Joodse Centrale voor Beroepsopleiding (JCB). She was working in the crèche and had connections to the resistance. Her objective was to save as many Jewish children as possible.

My son remained at the crèche for several months, and I believe that it was thanks to Veronica that he was later smuggled out by the resistance. Veronica was deported to Westerbork in late June 1943, and remained there for two months. She had a certificate to go to Palestine but as the validity of this could not be verified, she was sent to Auschwitz and gassed on 3 September 1943.

The Germans were waiting for me to give myself up, in order to send my son and me to our deaths. Children were not taken on transports unless they were with their parents so that the whole family could be processed together. By then, Jacques had already been rounded up and sent on transport to Westerbork. This was the place

where Jews were held until they went on transport to the concentration camps in the east. I found out much later that he jumped from the train to Westerbork. These were ex-commuter trains rather than the cattle cars destined for the death camps, so it was relatively easy to escape. Jacques spent the remainder of the war hiding on a farm.

I wanted to be closer to Appie while he was held in the crèche, so I found a place to hide in the red-light district of Amsterdam. I remained there for around four months, until the resistance managed to smuggle him out and return him to me. It was very close to the Gestapo headquarters, and frequented by Nazi officers.

In order to blend in with the population, I bleached my hair and wore a small crucifix around my neck. I had obtained a false identity card from the underground and my name was Margriet van Loon. But as I officially didn't exist anymore, I no longer had a ration card.

The brothel where I was hiding was situated above a restaurant where there was a kind of cold storeroom built in. We used to prise up the floorboards and, using a hook, we would steal food. I remember we stole whole chickens, which was something because at that time meat was scarce. They never knew how the thieves went unnoticed, as the room was locked from the outside and heavily guarded. They didn't realise we were stealing the food from above.

I met Charles Niesten in Amsterdam. He was born in Haarlem on the thirty-first of August 1905. He worked as a furniture salesman. He later became involved in the Dutch resistance.

As I was in possession of false papers, I often went for walks in Amsterdam, passing where Appie was in

the crèche on the Plantage Middenlaan and secretly visiting my aunt Grietje, who was living nearby. I also attended a series of Beethoven concerts conducted by Willem Mengelberg with Charles at the Concertgebouw. I often sat next to Nazi officers, which was dangerous considering I was Jewish, but my need to hear music was greater than my fear. Music was a temporary release from the terrible situation of the war.

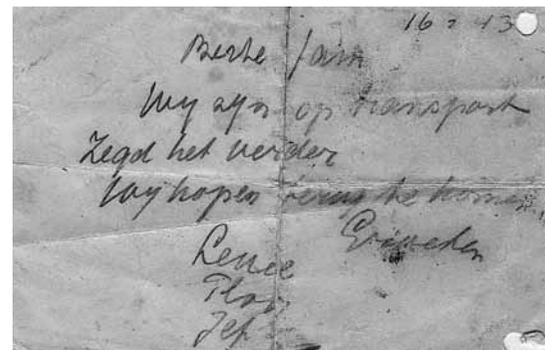
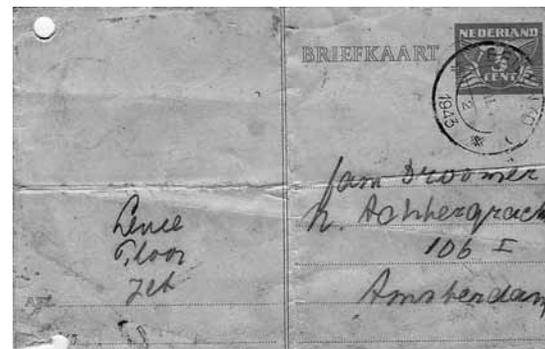
By 1943, my parents, brother and sister had all been caught. My mother and Jetje had entrusted our household possessions to a maid who worked for us. She later turned them in to the Gestapo, in order to keep everything. My family were sent to Westerbork, and then on to different concentration camps. My parents and sister were sent on to Auschwitz.

My mother's younger sister Grietje Wouhuijsen-Droomer lived in Amsterdam with her husband Nathan and her youngest daughter Mary Rachel. Uncle Nathan worked as a shop assistant in a store that produced suits for Nazi officers. As his services were needed, the family was not called up until mid-1943. They were murdered at Sobibor on 28 May 1943.

My father wrote a postcard addressed to the Droomer family and threw it from the train to Auschwitz. It read: *Dear family, we are on transport. Tell it to others. We hope to come back. Levie, Floor and Jet.*

On the nineteenth of February 1943 they arrived at Auschwitz and were sent directly to the gas chambers.

My brother was sent to Kamp Vught in Hertogenbosch. He was able to send some letters from the camp to my aunt Grietje's family, and she passed them on to me. I kept them in my possession, even though it was quite dangerous.



*The postcard that Betty's father tossed from the window of the cattle train transporting him, his wife and his daughter to Auschwitz*

My brother wanted vitamins, sugar, bread and condiments, and even sausage and liver. Before he was in the concentration camp he was a vegetarian. He also asked for warm clothing, towels and soap, saying that they had made him 'happier than these sort of possessions have ever meant to me.'

On the nineteenth of March 1943, he wrote that he was in good health: *Pass this message to all the family, also to Bep, from whom I received a package yesterday.*

Zeder Koffeling darf wöchentlich  
 Lieftste Eliza, je beide brieven ontving ik in  
 de afgelopen week: de eerste Dinsdag  
 en gisteren de tweede. Je bezorgt me blij-  
 ik ben met fort en je kunt ook perust wat  
 veelvuldiger schrijven, ook anders. Nemen  
 dat het jullie goed pasten dat de kleine the-  
 slubben, nu beter is. Blijft allen gezond? Montre  
 bespelen in die ene week heb ik alle ontvan-  
 gen en met de duim en het handdoek, zeep etc.  
 We o ik heb de goeder dan ooit de jacht ben ik vrag-  
 heeft hetekend. Deze week ontving ik van klein pelje  
 ransonde, door de J.R. te M. In de 5/2 veel concentratie-  
 kamp is dit het tweede, terwijl ik de ransonde

A letter written by Harry Lever while imprisoned at Kamp Vught

With your help surely I will hold on ... My dearest, sending you loving kisses. Think positively as I am.

Not long after that, Harry was transferred to Sobibor, where he was murdered on the ninth of April 1943, at the age of twenty-seven.

In September 1943, Charles managed to find Appie and me a place to hide in the south of Holland, in the village of Lieshout in Brabant. We became part of a resistance group, and we stayed in a holiday home, which was owned by the Phillips electrical company. It was a summer home and not suited for the cold weather. The food in the countryside was better than in Amsterdam and we were able to get an egg or two from a farmer, and some milk.

On the grounds of the house where we were staying, our resistance group was hiding armaments and petrol for the cars they had stolen. We sheltered pilots who were shot down over Holland. There were British, Americans, and even Australian pilots. At night, we stole ration cards from the post office in Brabant. That meant there was extra food for the pilots, but some only stayed for a day or two, and we received their rations for the whole month. Some pilots remained with us for longer, depending on the state of their health. Before they left, we gave them civilian clothes. There was a little café there at the border: the back of the café was in Holland and the front was in Belgium. That's how they were smuggled across the border and on to safety.

I was in the village nearby where we were staying, running an errand. A German soldier stopped me and wanted to see my identity papers. I knew my identity card was false. He looked at me, then looked at my



*Charles Niesten with Betty and Appie with bleached hair*

photo on the paper and then looked at me again. My knees were like jelly because I thought he was about to arrest me. Then he smiled at me and asked, 'Have you got another photo like that? I'll send it to my mother and say you're my girlfriend.'

In August 1944, some members of our resistance group were captured by the Nazis. They had been found with armaments in their car. They were beaten until they informed the Germans where our group was based. A forester had seen them being arrested, and came to warn us that our hiding place had been compromised.

As the Germans came to the front of the building, I went out the back, with my son on the back of my bike. They were shouting for me to stop, and I heard gunshots, but I knew the surroundings there better than they did, and managed to escape.

The next month, in September 1944, the south of Holland was liberated. I always remember the sound of

the Scottish pipers of the Canadian army playing, and knowing that at that moment, we were free.

Charles, who had been working with the Allied forces as an interpreter, returned to Brabant. When the German army capitulated, Charles was near Arnhem, where the peace treaty was signed. For his part in assisting the Allied pilots, he was honoured by the Air Chief Marshal of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, as well as by the General of the American army, Dwight Eisenhower.

After the liberation, the underground found two young German soldiers in the woods nearby and brought them to me. I had a small revolver given to me by the resistance, so that I could have shot myself if I was caught. I didn't want to be tortured and sent to a camp.

They told me I could shoot these soldiers as retribution for what the Germans had done to my family during the war. They were just boys, around seventeen or eighteen years old, and I thought of the fact that they had mothers too. It simply wasn't in my nature to take away someone's life. They were arrested and taken into custody.

We were very fortunate to be in the liberated part of Holland during the *Hongerwinter* (the 'hunger winter') in 1944–45. There was a blockade on supplies and millions of people were starving.

After the war, Charles found a place for us to live in the Hague. I desperately tried to locate my family and the Red Cross was of little help. As the months passed, I began to learn that my immediate family – my parents, sister and brother – as well as many uncles, aunts and cousins, had all been murdered. I didn't know it then,

but Holland had the highest Jewish death toll of any western European country.

The shock of the tragedy had turned my hair white overnight. I was only thirty-two years old and completely alone in the world, except for my son. If I hadn't had Appie to look after, I don't think I could have gone on.

I saw Jacques after the war, but we had been separated for several years by this stage. He had met another woman and I had Charles, so we decided to divorce and marry our respective partners. I married Charles on 29 October 1947.

Jacques married Elisabeth Leeuwin on 29 July 1947, and they had two children: Isidore (Ido) born on 27 March 1949, and Margaretha Rachel (Marion) born on 13 May 1953.

Life in Holland after the war was very difficult. There had been extensive damage to infrastructure and housing was in shortage. My parents had a home in Bilthoven, but during the war there had been tenants in the property, and after the war they did not want to leave. When the tenants vacated the property in Bilthoven, we moved there, in 1947. It was a very nice neighbourhood and had conditions been better, we would have stayed. Unemployment was high and Charles found it difficult to obtain work. Some of our neighbours were emigrating to Australia and we decided to leave Holland too.

Originally I wanted to go to Israel, but there was a great deal of demand at that time as there were so many displaced Jews still in camps in Europe. As Charles was not Jewish, I thought it better to go to either Canada or Australia. I wasn't so keen on the cold weather, so when he tossed a coin in order to make the decision, I was

happy to move to Australia. We applied to move there and were accepted in 1950.

We arrived at the port in Fremantle, Western Australia, on 21 March 1951. Perth was such a primitive city in those days that if I could have crawled back to Holland I would have done so. As building supplies were scarce at that time, we took a prefabricated house and a caravan with us on the ship. Within a year, however, the combination of the hot climate and the white ants destroyed both the house and the caravan. We also brought a car with us, but it was ruined after driving on the country roads, which were like corrugated iron.

Charles began to work at the Midland brick factory not long after we arrived in Australia. In the 1960s he worked as a taxi driver but eventually I became the breadwinner. I worked as a receptionist in a physiotherapy clinic on St Georges Terrace in Perth. I was employed full-time for the next twelve years, and I never took a single day off work.



*Betty and Charles Niesten in Perth*

When we came to Australia, Appie became known as Albert and took his stepfather's surname. As we spoke Dutch at home, he only learnt English when he went to school. The first time I heard him speaking English was in a school play.

My son worked a variety of jobs, including as an ambulance driver for St John Ambulance and as an orderly in a hospital. He spent many years travelling. In 1966 he moved to New Zealand and worked for the post office and from 1973–74 he lived on a kibbutz in Israel.

In 1974 he met Robyn Finley at a Jewish singles night in Perth and they both made aliyah to Israel the following year. They decided to come back to Australia to start their family and were married on 14 November 1976.

My first grandchild, Rafael Hartog, was born on 27 May 1978. His middle name was to honour the memory of my brother Hartog. Two years later, Leon David came along on 19 May 1980. My only granddaughter, Jessica Hilda Fleur, was born on 1 June 1982. The name Fleur was in honour of my mother Floortje.

Having grandchildren has been a wonderful experience for me, because it was the first time in almost forty years that I had family again. As such, I have always been exceptionally close to them. My grandchildren visit me every week and we telephone each other regularly.

The Nazis wanted to murder all the Jews in Europe. I have never forgotten the terrible years of the war and all that we endured, but I have survived. I have made it my mission to tell my story to as many people as possible, so that the innocent lives which were taken were not in vain. If we can educate the next generation,

then we may prevent such atrocities from taking place again in the future.

*This text was written by Betty's granddaughter Jessica Niesten, based on extensive interviews. Betty passed away in May 2014, aged 101 years.*



*Portrait of Betty's family painted by her granddaughter Jessica Niesten, reconstructed from surviving photographs*