OUR GREAT ESCAPE

The Story of a Dutch Family's Flight From Persecution 1942 – 1943

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Durham, NC, 2020

To the memory of my parents

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PREFACE

In 1941 approximately nine million Jews lived in German-occupied Europe. By 1945 six million had been murdered. How did the other three million survive?

There must be three million stories to answer this question. This is my story. It is not about the horrors of the Holocaust, but about the amazing adventure of a seven-year-old boy. It includes travel to faraway places and encounters with mortal dangers, for what is an adventure without traveling far and facing dangers? And, of course, it includes brave heroes and evil monsters. The heroes are my parents—the incredible courage and resourcefulness shown in this story are the stuff heroes are made of. As to the evil monsters, their identity will become clear enough.

During the first part of my life after the war, I did not think much about our escape. I certainly had not blotted it out of my mind, but it was an experience of my childhood; it had no bearing upon my present existence. My parents rarely talked about it. Every once in a while, my father might relate an anecdote, but my mother could not bear to think of that episode in our lives. She became almost hysterical when the subject was brought up.

In recent years my thoughts have more frequently turned to this period, partly in response to questions from friends curious about our adventure. My initial motive was to offer them a more comprehensive and coherent account than I could provide during a brief dinner conversation. I wrote the first version of this memoir in the spring of 2005 and distributed copies to selected friends and family members. After reading it, some suggested that I should try to get it published, but at the time I saw little need to add my story to the existing vast literature on the Holocaust.

When I began this memoir, I did not really know the tale I tell here; I just had a large and diffuse collection of memories. In the process of writing, many memories have come into clearer focus, and I have gained a better understanding of much that took place. I began to be able to connect some of the dots. Even after completion of the memoir some fifteen years ago that process continued, aided by new information and documentation that came my way from a variety of sources.

The time now has come for a major revision and expansion, incorporating some of these new materials and insights. Nevertheless, my aim continues to be to tell a story based principally on what I remember, rather than a documented history of the life and death of the Jews in Holland during the Nazi years. I have added just a little about my family's history because I think that it might add to a fuller understanding of my tale—in particular, my father's experiences during his early youth

In view of what is happening in the world today, I decided no longer to limit the distribution of this story to family and friends. Traumatic experiences that I formerly believed to belong largely to the long-ago world of my childhood, such as one's city being bombed, one's country being occupied by a foreign army, having to flee and run for one's life, looking desperately for asylum, and ending up in a refugee camp far from one's homeland—all this is happening again right now! It is not happening to me and not where I live, but to many others in many other places. Therefore, the time has come to go public. Perhaps in a small way my memoir can serve as a warning that such things can happen to anyone anywhere, no matter the color of their skin, the language they speak, or the god or gods they worship. We need to be vigilant at all times, so we don't become victims and don't become perpetrators!

Acknowledgments

A few people were of great help to me in realizing this project. My late brother Herman ("Hermi") Silbiger, who played a crucial role in my early life (as will be evident from my story), answered many questions and scanned photos that were in his possession. He read early drafts of parts of this narrative and supplemented a few of my memories (although our memories did not always agree). Herman is also responsible for some of the unique illustrations accompanying this story—those preserved in "Het Blikke Doosje" (The Little Tin Box). Beginning during our stay in Paris he started saving ticket stubs, menus, bills, hotel stickers, and other paper debris, which he kept in a little tin cigar box. He later pasted them into a school notebook, accompanied by identifying captions and a few little illustrative sketches., but we continued to refer to the collection as *Het Blikke Doosje*. Before his death, Hermi passed on to me a suitcase that contained a lot of papers of various kinds, letters, certificates, photographs, etc. formerly belonging to

my father, which formed a kind of family archive. This proved to be a real goldmine, and information gained from them as well as copies of some documents were incorporated into this revised edition.

I also must express my gratitude to my cousin and life-long friend, Tom ("Tommy") Silbiger. His parents, Kurt and Ina Silbiger were my father's brother and sister-in-law, and his family, including his sister Flory, made an escape from occupied Holland roughly parallel to ours. Tom made available to me a copy of a diary his mother maintained throughout their travels, which provides a fascinating, day-by-day report of their experiences. I also must mention that his father, my Uncle Kurt, provided valuable help to our family when we were trying to leave France for a safer destination.

A cousin on my mother's side, Nicole Schaap (daughter of my mother's sister Lydia), who was born during the war while her parents were hiding on a farm in Belgium, surprised me last April (2020) by telling me about a final message left behind by my grandparents, apparently written on the eve of their deportation. Nicole, who now lives in Amsterdam, very kindly sent me a copy of that message. To my knowledge, she is the only one of my relatives who still resides in the Netherlands.

In recent years I was approached twice by people who were engaged in research projects on the Dutch Jews who during World War II found refuge in the Caribbean. Both asked to interview me, and after lengthy sessions with each, I probably ended up learning more from them than they learned from me. The first one to contact me was Oscar Lansen, a history professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who visited me in the spring of 2003. At that time he had already gathered a lot of information about the refugees in Jamaica and Curaçao, and surprised me with a few interesting documents I had never seen before. His questions regarding experiences that had not been in my mind for many years led to my renewed interest in this phase of my life, and eventually to my resolve to record the story of our flight to the extent I still remembered it.

Some fifteen years later, in 2019, I received a visit from a young scholar from the University of Amsterdam, Rosa de Jong, who was working on a similar project. She too had done extensive archival research, and in addition, had met with several former refugees whom I remembered from the Gibraltar Camp in Jamaica. I had had no contact with them since 1943, almost eighty years ago, and was of course pleasantly surprised to

learn they were still alive. Through her, I was able to get in touch with three of them, all in their late eighties or early nineties: Inez Baker (*née* Schpektor) and Jenny Weinshell (*née* Grishaver), both living in California, and David Cohen, in Amsterdam. It has been a thrill to exchange memories of the camp and learn a bit about the subsequent courses of their lives. They also were able to fill me in about what happened to some of the other refugees, almost none of whom are still living. The only other Gibraltar Camp "survivor" I am aware of is Bram Zadoks, now in Peoria, IL, with whom I reconnected a few years ago. All these survivors appear in some of the photos from Jamaica included here.

I owe special thanks to Sharon Halperin and Bob Jacobson, both of whom read through the entire draft of this revision and provided suggestions to help improve the clarity of several passages in my account.

Above all, my gratitude goes to Kathy, who listened to my stories and read my writings about this adventure more times than either of us can remember. She made perceptive and helpful comments each time, stopped me from going astray, and never lost patience.

Alexander Silbiger

Durham, NC, September 2020

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Based on extensive archival research on the Jewish refugees in the Caribbean, but with only a couple of paragraphs about the Dutch Jews and the Gibraltar Camp (which I don't believe to be entirely accurate, although that may reflect her sources).

Presser, Jacob. *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969.
Published originally in Dutch in 1965 under the title *Ondergang* (perdition), it provides the best summary I have seen of Jewish escape attempts during the occupation; see "Escape," pp. 284-96.

Unpublished Documents

"Het Blikke Doosje." Scrapbook with annotations compiled by Herman Silbiger (my brother) with materials such ticket stubs and suitcase stickers he had collected and originally stored in a tin cigar box.

"Jamaica-Uitgewekenen, Konvooi I per m.s. Marques de Comillas." Photocopy of typescript.
A roster of the refugees who crossed the Atlantic in November-December 1942 on the Marques de Comillas. The roster lists the names, birthplaces, birthdates, and professions.

A letter dated 7 December 1944, from Edgar Silbiger (my father) to the Governor of Curaçao regarding a dispute over the payment for our passage to Jamaica.
In the letter, my father provided a detailed account of our efforts to leave Vichy France.

Drafts of an article and a book chapter by Oscar Lansen dating from c. 2003 about the Jewish refugees in Jamaica and Curaçao and the attitudes of the authorities during World War II, c. 2003.
Professor Lansen kindly shared these interesting materials with me; to my knowledge they were never published.

Letters from Ina and Kurt Silbiger in Spain to Edgar and Sera Silbiger in France, 8 September to 12 October 1942.
My aunt and uncle describe their experiences after arriving in Spain and discuss their efforts to enable us to follow their path to freedom.

Diaries and Memoirs

Diary of Ina Silbiger, 21 March to 23 November 1942, unpublished.
A day-by-day, unadorned account of the flight from The Netherlands through Belgium, France, Spain, and Portugal to England by my Aunt Ina; a precious document!

"Our Life during the War Years." Unpublished memoir by Ida H. Zadoks, (Netherlands) ca. 1988.
Although the earlier part of the story of the Zadoks family, grippingly reported by Mrs. Zadoks, mother of my friend from the Gibraltar Camp, Bram, is quite different from ours—they escaped to France during the first days of the German invasion—it paralleled ours from the crossing from Vigo onwards.

Unpublished memoir by Jenny Weinshell (née Grishaver), San Francisco, 1983.
The Grishaver family left Amsterdam quite late, in August 1942, when Jenny was thirteen. A detailed and lively account of their journey to Jamaica, including about life in Amsterdam before they left and about several harrowing experiences during their escape.

Buchsbaum, Norbert. *Fotograaf zonder camera* [Photographer without a camera]. Amsterdam: Bataafsche Leeuw, 1991.
The story of the nephew of a close friend of my parents, who in August 1942 tried to escape

to Belgium along the same route we had followed a few months earlier. He was betrayed and deported but survived and became a successful photographer.

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The reminiscences of my old friend Mannie, whose family left Holland in February 1942 and after reaching Lisbon, made their way to Suriname on a Portuguese ship. I first met him in 1944, after the family moved to Curaçao.

Lemm, Robert. *One Rembrandt for 25 Jews: Herman Göring's present for Hitler*. Amsterdam: Aspekt Publishers, 2016.
The extraordinary tale of David Cohen and his family, who in 1942 bought their freedom with an original painting by Rembrandt, enabling them to find refuge in Jamaica and Curaçao.

Illustrations

All the documents reproduced here form part of the materials inherited from my father and brother, including the ticket stubs, etc., scanned from "Het Blikke Doosje." Most of the photos were scanned from family albums. I believe that the photographer generally was my father or other family member, except for some photos from Jamaica, which were taken by Wolf Schpektor. The maps of Europe were adapted from the *New Cambridge Modern History Atlas*, Cambridge, 1970; the map of the Atlantic was adapted from the *Rand McNally Atlas of World History*, New York, 1957.

OUR GREAT ESCAPE

13 APRIL 1942

On the 13th of April 1942, about a month before my seventh birthday, my comfortable and familiar childhood world came abruptly to an end. That morning my family—my parents and their two young children—left our home and our country. I had not been given any prior warning. Without a chance to prepare, I found myself cut off from my friends, my home, my toys, my school, everything I was accustomed to. I was told that from now on we would have to hide our real family name, our religion, our nationality, and eventually even our native language— I had to turn my back to my very identity. What crime had we committed that we had to flee and hide in this manner?

Before relating the story of our flight, which took much longer and brought us farther from our home than anyone could have imagined, I want to provide a bit of background on the history of my family and on the events that led up to that unexpected journey.

FAMILY HISTORY (Before 1940)

There already was a Jewish presence in the Netherlands in the Middle Ages, but substantial numbers did not settle there until the early 1600s. They first came from the South, the *Sephardim*, who in 1492 had been forced to leave Spain and had gone to Portugal, but a century later had to leave there again. Many of them found a new life and livelihood in the more tolerant environment of the cities of Holland, particularly Amsterdam, but also Rotterdam and The Hague. Later in the century they were joined by Jews from the East, the *Ashkenazim*. Even so, by the outbreak of the Second World War the proportion of Jews among the total Dutch population was small—barely more than one percent.

My mother was born in Rotterdam into a Jewish family that traced its ancestors in the city to at least the beginning of the eighteenth century. Their long-standing integration into Dutch society is evident from the presence of not only Dutch family names among her ancestors, such as “van der Straeten,” “de Bok,” and “Koekoek,” but also of first names like as Barend, Roosje, and Antje. Diminutives like Antje (little Ann, or Annie) were not merely nicknames for young children but served as their official names during

their entire life. Such was the case with my mother, who was named "Saartje" (little Sarah) after her grandmother, but although that was the name appearing on her passport, she never used it, preferring to go by the fashionably English-sounding Sera (pronounced like the English Sarah).

She was a well-educated woman and throughout her life a voracious reader, even though she dropped out of high school. According to her account, she told her father that she wanted to quit in order to devote herself fully to the piano, and he agreed, provided she would study under the best teacher he could find. for her. Thus she began working with Louis Schnitzler (1869–1933), at the time a noted pianist, composer, and conductor, although now largely forgotten.

On the right, my mother at 17, with her 7-year old sister Lydia and her 15-year old brother Hans (Rotterdam, 1922)

Eventually, another interest replaced her devotion to the piano. At a party of a close friend she met a handsome engineering student, and that very evening both of them sensed they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together. Her father at first was less than enthusiastic and made it clear that he would not agree to any alliance until young

Edgar proved he could provide for her. This meant that he first had to complete his studies at the Technical University of Delft, commuting from his home in The Hague on his motorcycle, and then find a steady job. Finally, on 11 April 1929, the young couple was able to join in marriage.

My father's background was quite different from hers. He was not born in the Netherlands but in a small industrial town in a region that forms part of Poland today, although at the time of his birth it belonged to Austria. During his early youth, he had certain experiences that paralleled mine at approximately the same age. When he was five years old, in 1909, his family moved to Antwerp in Belgium, along with several cousins and their families. I never found out exactly why they decided to emigrate at that time. There were no pogroms in Austria, such as had been taking place in Russia, and Jews were comparatively emancipated. On the other hand, antisemitism was on the rise, particularly in Vienna, and there were tensions between the Jews and the Catholic Poles. Economic opportunity may have been another factor. My grandfather had been an accountant, but in Antwerp he, like many Jews in that city, joined the diamond trade.

The move required adapting to new languages. The Silbigers were Silesian Jews, and members of the family always spoke German with each other. I once asked my father if he knew any Polish, having lived in Poland for the first five years of his life. He said no, except for a couple of (not very nice) expressions. His knowledge of Yiddish was likewise limited to a few words and sayings. However, in Antwerp, the family's new home, the common language was Flemish, which is more or less the same as Dutch (the difference is no more than that between British and American). Furthermore, his parents decided to enroll him in a French school, which many years later would prove fortuitous, if not lifesaving!

From left to right: Oma Sabientje, my father (seated on the swing), his brother Kurt (seated on my father), and Opa Willi (Antwerp, c. 1912)

The family was not to remain in Antwerp for more than a few years. In 1914 the First World War erupted, with Belgium and Austria on opposite sides. One evening a kindly policeman came to their door to warn them that there were orders for the family to be picked up the following morning and taken to an internment camp. As Austrian citizens, they were considered "enemy aliens" (somewhat like the internment of Japanese families in the U.S. after Pearl Harbor, although those included many who were American citizens). The family immediately packed their bags and went north to cross the nearby border with the Netherlands, which had remained neutral. They settled in The Hague, and my father now had to continue his schooling in Dutch, which he learned to speak beautifully, without a trace of an accent. (Eventually, he would add Spanish and English to his linguistic fluencies, although in English he never lost his heavy accent). In 1925 his father bought the house on the Bentinckstraat, of which he eventually became the owner himself, and in which I spent a large part of my childhood—except for the interruption that is the subject of this memoir.

As a teenager, my father showed considerable talent in drawing, and that might have been one of the reasons, in addition to excelling in mathematics and science, that he

entered the nearby Technical University of Delft ("the Dutch M.I.T.") to study civil engineering. He obtained his degree, more or less equivalent to an American M.Sc. in Engineering, in 1927, which allowed him to preface his name with "Ir." (like Dr. for a doctoral degree). During his long career, he would be involved in the design and construction of a large number of projects, including harbor facilities, bridges, land reclamation, industrial plants, office buildings, and movie houses in The Netherlands, Germany, and France, as well as, later on, in Curaçao, Bonaire, Surinam, Ecuador, and the United States.

In the early years of their marriage, my parents moved several times, mostly in connection with my father's employment. Hermi was born in The Hague in 1930 and I saw the light of day five years later in my mother's hometown of Rotterdam. In 1938, when my father began working for the construction firm BATO headquartered in The Hague, we went back to that city, this time moving into the ancestral home on the Bentinckstraat, in the pleasant middle-class neighborhood of "het Statenkwartier." The BATO was to play an important part in our later history.

On the eve of the war...
My father's father with his children and grandchildren.
Back row, left to right:
my father and mother, Opa Willi with cousin Tommy on his lap, Aunt Ina, Uncle Kurt.
Front row, left to right:
Hermi, cousin Flory, and Lex.
(The Hague, July 1939)

THE GERMAN INVASION (May 1940)

My earliest recollection related to the impending war was a walk with my father along the beach in Scheveningen, not far from where we lived. I must have been four years old. I noticed a lot of Dutch soldiers laying sandbags along the road and I asked my father

what was going on. “They are preparing in case England decides to invade us from across the sea” he explained. It may seem odd that the Dutch would be concerned about an English invasion. But Holland had remained neutral during the First World War and hoped to maintain that neutrality (which Hitler still had guaranteed the day before his troops invaded the country). With its strategic location between England and Germany and the growing tension between the two nations, Holland felt the need to be prepared on both fronts.

When the invasion finally came, it was from the East, from Germany. I still carry vivid memories of the assault, which began in the early hours of May 10, 1940. I was awakened that morning by loud banging noises that seemed to come from my brother’s room, right above mine. Why was Hermi bouncing on the floor like that? Then I realized the noises came from outside, and looking out of the window, I saw plumes of smoke against the bright blue sky. I was at first more curious than afraid. But when I came downstairs to the living room, I sensed the fear that had overtaken the family. The curtains were drawn, and I was told to stay away from the windows.

That day the German troops had made a surprise air attack on The Hague, the seat of the Dutch government, in the hope of capturing the nation’s leaders. Fortunately, they were repelled, for the time being, anyway. Nevertheless, everyone realized that a Dutch defeat would only be a matter of time. Little Holland did not stand a chance against the best-prepared and most powerful military machine in the world. The Queen and her cabinet decided to flee to England while they could. There they formed a government-in-exile, which will play a part later in my story.

The rest of The Hague prepared itself for further assaults. My father hastily constructed a bomb shelter in a small area of the basement, right under the kitchen. He hauled in sand to reinforce the floor and heavy beams to support it underneath. Being a civil engineer, he knew what he was doing and where to get the materials.

Four days later sirens interrupted my fifth birthday party, and we rushed downstairs to the shelter. Only some close friends from the neighborhood had come to visit, since few ventured out during those days. I can still picture us in the basement, huddled on a pair of plain wooden benches, wearing gas masks, and waiting with

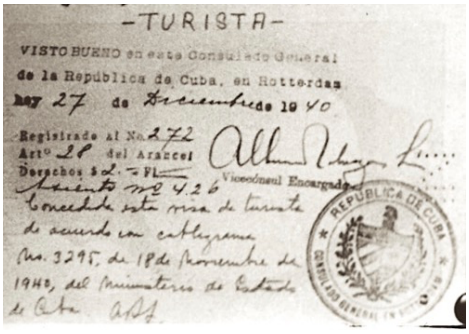
apprehension until the all-clear sounded. I think I cried. It was not the kind of party I had expected.

An air attack brings out a peculiar kind of fear, not like any other fear I have experienced. I still feel traces of it when I hear the sound of a siren, even when I know it to be a drill. I also relive it whenever I hear about a city being bombed from the air, and my heart always goes out to its people. In recent years this seems to happen all too often.

The following day we made our first attempt to leave Holland. We lived only a few blocks from the fishing harbor of Scheveningen, and my father had made arrangements with the captain of one of the small fishing boats to take us across the North Sea to England. I recall us standing in the living room around 7 pm with our coats on and our suitcases packed—another unforgettable moment. The radio was still on, broadcasting the latest developments. Then the voice of the commander-in-chief of the Dutch army came on, announcing that his troops had surrendered. It was all over. My brother recently told me that the reason the fishermen would not take us across after the surrender was that their wives would not let them go, knowing that they would not come back to an occupied Holland.

LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION (May 1940 – April 1942)

After we had watched the German troops march through our city, life returned more or less to normal, at least for a five-year-old. My parents made an attempt to leave Holland legitimately by applying for visas to Cuba, and in anticipation they started taking Spanish lessons. They succeeded in obtaining those visas—I found copies among their papers—but while at that time Cuba was willing to accept a few Dutch Jews, the Germans were not willing to let them go. My parents' investment in Spanish would, however, prove useful many years later.


-TURISTA-

VISTO BUENO en este Consulado General de la Republica de Cuba, en Rotterdam hoy 27 de Diciembre de 1940

Registrado al No. 272
Art° 20 del Arancel
Derechos $ 2.- = Fl.
Asiento No 426
Concedida esta visa de turista de acuerdo con cablegrama No. 3295, de 18 de Noviembre de 1940, del Ministerio de Estado de Cuba

Vicecónsul Encargado

REPUBLICA DE CUBA

Visa for Cuba in my father's passport, issued on 27 December 1940

11 October 1941: My parents celebrate their "copper" wedding anniversary (12½ years, as celebrated in Holland) among family and friends. My father in the center with his arm around my mother; next to her on her other side, her mother and father. In the front, my 11-year-old brother. Although I remember the event, I probably had already been put to bed at the hour the photo was taken. Several people in this photograph would not survive the Holocaust.

The Nazis did not begin to introduce anti-Jewish measures until 1941, the second year of the occupation, because they first needed to establish control over the population and identify the Jews by requiring everyone to register and declare their religion. The first time that one of these measures had a direct impact on my life was the fall of that year when the time came for me to enter elementary school. Rather than joining my neighborhood playmates to attend the school a few blocks from our home, I was forced to go to a school across town, where I knew no one. I was not very happy there, and eventually my parents were able to enroll me in a Jewish Montessori school which was much more pleasant. It too was far from our home, requiring a twenty-minute streetcar ride. But children were much more independent in those days, at least in Holland, and no one thought anything of a six-year-old taking a tram by himself every morning to go to school. One bittersweet memory I have of the Montessori school is that I developed a "romantic" interest, but when upon our return after the war I asked what had happened to my girlfriend, I was told that, to use the then-current euphemism, she was "gone."

The other anti–Jewish regulations and restrictions did not yet affect me much. Jews were barred from public places like restaurants, but my family was not in the habit of eating out much, except for an occasional excursion to an Indonesian restaurant. (Indonesian cuisine is to the Dutch what Italian cuisine is to Americans.) I recall that we continued to visit one of our favorite places—I don't remember the name, but it was right next to the Metropole Cinema on the Laan van Meerdervoort—and the management pretended not to be aware of our Jewish identity.

One decree that affected everyone, not just Jews, was that all radios had to be surrendered to the authorities, in exchange for special devices that could receive only a couple of government-controlled stations. Since radios had been taxed, the authorities knew who possessed them. Some people managed to construct their own devices so they could still secretly listen to shortwave BBC broadcasts. I recall sitting around one of those little homemade devices in the house of a neighbor and hearing, probably for the first time, the opening motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which introduced the British newscasts (short–short–short–long: the letter "V" in Morse code, signifying "V for Victory,"). I would hear that motif many times again throughout the war, and the beginning of that symphony became inextricably linked for me, and probably for many others, with the resistance against oppression and hope for liberation.

The obligatory yellow star was not introduced in Holland until two weeks after we left. I do remember signs posted in many public places with "Voor Joden verboden" (no Jews allowed—in Dutch it rhymes). These signs, if nothing else, increased my only recently developed Jewish self-awareness. Not long after the German invasion, before all this started to happen, my parents had tried to explain to me about us being Jews and about the Germans not liking Jews. This was not easy. My family was not very observant—I had never even been to a synagogue. I was the only Jewish kid on our street and hardly anything distinguished my family from the Protestant and Catholic families who were our neighbors. We all exchanged presents on the eve of Saint Nicholas, December 5th, which in the Netherlands is celebrated by everyone and has no religious connotations.

From what I recall (I was barely five at the time), it went something like this. "Your family, your cousins Florry and Tommy, your Aunt Ina and Uncle Kurt, they are

all Jewish, but your friends, like Frits and Marijke across the street, are not Jewish. Christians light candles on a Christmas tree, while Jews light candles on a Menorah." "But how can you tell whether someone is Jewish or not—do they look different?" "A little bit. Jews often have black hair and some Jews have big noses." Well, that made no sense. My mother had blondish hair, and my own hair was far from black. And none of us had big noses. As to why the Germans did not like us, I don't think they explained that, and I still do not understand it.

PREPARATION FOR A JOURNEY

The slowness with which at first the racial edicts were issued and their frequent pettiness—you were not allowed to go fishing, you were not allowed to join a bridge club or go to a barbershop—lulled many people into a false sense of security. Maybe it was not going to be so bad after all. Maybe it was just a matter of sitting things out until the allied forces came and kicked the Germans out, which, nobody doubted, would happen sooner or later. After all, Holland was not Poland, where awful things were said to have happened. The Dutch would never stand for this. The Jews had lived among them for nearly four centuries, they had become an integral part of the community, and they had made valuable contributions to the country's commercial, intellectual, and artistic life.

One must also keep in mind that the Wannsee Conference, at which the Nazis hatched their plans for the "Final Solution," did not take place until January 1942, and most of the world had little idea of how far they were prepared to carry their hatred. Yet it could not have been long afterward that my father's brother, Kurt, gave my parents a warning that led to their decision to start preparing our escape. Kurt had been an officer in the Dutch military and from his connections he had received disturbing news. The prospects for the Jews of Holland were not good. We would be wise to try to get out, no matter what the risks, as he was planning to do himself with his family.

Some people who tried to flee the country did not take their children but left them in the care of a Christian family, hoping they would be safe there. Undoubtedly traveling with some young children would make the journey a great deal more complicated and riskier. All too often their decision to leave them behind had tragic consequences, when upon their return after the war they discovered the children had been betrayed and were

gone. This happened to some acquaintances of my parents. I also know of cases where the opposite happened, when a child survived the war, but the parents did not, having been caught in their attempt to escape. I doubt, however, that my parents even considered leaving me and my brother behind.

The flight was planned with great care as well as in secrecy. To the west and north of Holland was the sea, with a coastline heavily patrolled against possible allied attack (part of the "Atlantic wall"), and to the east lay Germany itself. The only escape route with any promise was toward the south. The southeastern part of France was not under direct German control but ruled by a puppet government from the town of Vichy. From there it might be possible to get to either Switzerland or Spain, both of which were neutral and hence might provide at least a temporary safe haven. But Jews were not permitted to travel, and the only chance of surviving such an illegal journey would be with the assistance of the underground network of the Resistance.

My father had done work for the Dutch Resistance, providing blueprints of harbor facilities and bridges on which he had worked, and he called upon his contacts. He also confided in the boss of his company, Mr. Piel, who was German but a virulent hater of the Nazis, and who provided help with our departure, including the storage of our belongings in a company warehouse. The ownership of our house was transferred to a non-Jewish family so that it would not stand empty. This was a fake sale in which no actual money changed hands, and being decent people, the family returned ownership to us after the war. No one else was told of the plans, no matter how close they were to us, for their own protection as well as ours. My parents did not even risk calling off a dinner engagement with their closest friends, the Flessemans for the day we were to leave. They knew that their friends would understand when they did not show up and did not answer their phone.

THE LAST SEDER

In 1942 the eve of the first day of Passover fell on April 1st, and on that evening the family gathered for the traditional Seder meal at my grandparents' (my mother's parents) home. Oma Mina and Opa Nico lived only a few blocks from us on the Ten Hovestraat, in a three-story rowhouse very much like ours, although furnished in a

darker, more old-fashioned style. I recall us sitting at a long table with aunts, uncles, and other family members, some of whom I barely knew. My completely bald grandfather presided, but I too had a role to play—a role which, in front of all these grown-ups, filled me with apprehension.

מה נשתנה

Men schenkt den tweeden beker in, neemt den schotel van de tafel weg, en de jongste van het gezelschap vraagt:

Waarom is deze avond verschillend van alle andere avonden? Alle andere avonden immers mogen wij gezuurd en ongezuurd brood eten, dezen avond enkel ongezuurd. Alle andere avonden eten wij allerlei groenten, dezen avond moeten wij bittere kruiden eten. Alle andere avonden doopen wij zelfs niet éénmaal in, dezen avond tweemaal. Alle andere avonden eten wij naar verkiezing zittende of leunende, dezen avond zijn wij allen leunende.

מחזין לו כוס שני, ויצוה להסיר הקערה מעל השלחן, והצעיר במסובין שואל

מַה נִּשְׁתַּנָּה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה
מִכָּל הַלֵּילוֹת · שֶׁבְּכָל
הַלֵּילוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חָמֵץ
וּמַצָּה · הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כֻּלּוֹ
מַצָּה : שֶׁבְּכָל הַלֵּילוֹת אָנוּ
אוֹכְלִין שְׁאָר יְרָקוֹת ·
הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מָרוֹר : שֶׁבְּכָל
הַלֵּילוֹת אֵין אָנוּ מַטְבִּילִין
אֲפִילוּ פַּעַם אֶחָת · הַלַּיְלָה
הַזֶּה שְׁתֵּי פְעָמִים : שֶׁבְּכָל
הַלֵּילוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֵּין
יוֹשְׁבִין וּבֵין מְסֻבִּין · הַלַּיְלָה
הַזֶּה כֻּלָּנוּ מְסֻבִּין :

11

Page from one of our family's *Haggadahs* (order of the Seder service), published by J.J. Joachimstahl in Amsterdam in 1931.

According to a tradition going back many centuries, the youngest child capable of asking questions will ask the elders of the family to explain the reasons for the strange customs that accompany the Seder, beginning with "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The original idea of using this question–and–response dialogue was a lovely—perhaps typically Jewish—way of introducing the next generation to the ancient story of liberation from slavery and oppression. However, the tradition now also ordained the dialogue be held in ancient Hebrew, a language altogether unintelligible to this Dutch six-year-old, thus defeating its original purpose. I was given a piece of paper on which had been typed the transliterated Hebrew text with the instruction to memorize what to

me was a paragraph of nonsense syllables, so I could present it fluently when prompted. I protested vehemently, but to no avail, and so when the moment arrived, I delivered it with a quavering voice (I imagine) to the entire assembly.

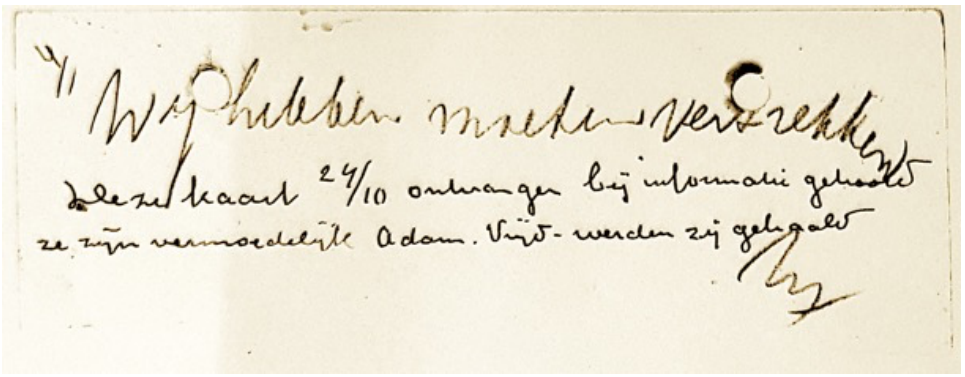
Oma Mina and Opa Nico would not live to celebrate another Seder (and probably neither would most of their other guests). On April 12, the eve of our departure, my parents went to say farewell to them. This was the last time they would see my grandparents, who until that time had not known of our plan to flee Holland.

Oma Mina (Wilhelmina Davids-Katz, 1882-1942) and Opa Nico (Nathan Davids,1875-1942)

We would not find out what happened to them until years later, after the war had ended, and some details I only learned very recently (see Preface). Six months after we left, they were apparently picked up from their home and taken to the Hollandse Schouwburg (the Dutch National Theater) in Amsterdam, which served as a collection point for Jews about to be deported. Two days later they were taken to the holding camp of Westerbork in the east of the country, from which each week a train transported 1,000 Jews to the East—a two-day's journey in a padlocked cattle car. My grandparents must have remained in Westerbork only a couple of weeks, because according to the well-kept Nazi records, both were murdered in Auschwitz on 11 November 1942.

Generally, people were given notice of their impending deportation (supposedly to a work camp) and given a list of clothing and a few other necessities they should bring

along. My grandmother prepared a postcard with the words "Wij hebben moeten vertrekken, M" (We had to leave, M[ina]), which she gave to an unidentified person to post. Below her message is an annotation that the card was received on October 29 and that they had been picked up [the previous?] Friday. The bottom half of the card, presumably containing the name and address of the intended recipient, had been cut off, probably to protect that person's identity. One can only speculate on why and to whom she wrote that message.



"We had to leave. M"; final message from my grandmother (with annotation by unknown party), The Hague, October 1942.

West Europe in 1942. The thick hatched line marks the boundary of German control; the solid red line roughly traces the path of our journey.

THE DEPARTURE (13 April 1942)

When I awoke early that morning, I was told to get ready quickly because we were going on a little outing. This came as a surprise. Until that morning there had been no mention of leaving town, and I had made other plans. “I better dash to Frits and tell him I cannot come and play today,” I told my mother. But before I had a chance to run off, she grabbed hold of me and said, “There is no time now. The car is waiting.” There was noticeable tension in her voice.

Lex (on the right) and Frits in 1941

We no longer owned a car. However, outside the house a vehicle from my father’s company awaited, with Piet, the company driver, at the wheel. We all piled in, my parents, my eleven-year-old brother Hermi, and I, along with some luggage, and Piet whisked us to a railway station on the other side of town. Little did I suspect that I would not see our house in The Hague again until some four years later. By then it would have been turned into an empty shell, with all furniture gone and every fixture removed.

We boarded a train for Roosendaal, a small town in the South near the Belgian border. Although I was only a child, I knew that we were not supposed to be on that train. The Nazis had occupied our country nearly two years earlier, and Dutch Jews were no longer permitted to travel. Once we arrived in Roosendaal, my brother and I were told there had been a change of plan. We were going to spend the night in Antwerp. This meant crossing the Belgian border, which was also forbidden to Jews, and which turned out to be a bigger adventure than the train ride.

At the station, we were met by someone I did not know. Later I understood that he was with the Dutch Resistance (or "the Underground," as it was called). He drove us to a point close to the border. There he told us we had to split up. Hermi and my father would continue in the car, but my mother would go on a bicycle with me perched on the back. This was apparently a precautionary measure. The border was not heavily guarded since the Germans controlled the countries on both sides. People often moved back and forth because they worked in one country while living in the other. The presence near the border of a car with some men in it, even if one was a teenager, was not likely to attract much attention. Neither would a woman bicycling on a country road with her child. However, a car containing an entire family, including two children, might arouse suspicion.

The path we had been told to follow with the bicycle came to a long, straight highway and, at the crossing, someone was waiting for us. He told us to get off the bike and wait. The highway was the border, and from a guardhouse in the distance, a border patrol could survey it for unauthorized crossings. However, at an agreed-upon time, some fellow conspirators paid the guard a visit to distract him. At that moment we crossed the road.

Once in Belgium we met up with the car and the rest of our family and were driven to a small hotel near Antwerp. The following morning my father broke the news that we would not be going back home that day. "We are going to Brussels and from there probably to France. We are not sure yet where we will end up, but we won't be going back to Holland until the Germans are gone." I doubt that my parents at this point anticipated that the end of our journey would be on a tiny little island across the ocean and that it would take nearly a full year to get there.

Needless to say, my father's announcement came as a shock. He also gave us rules that would have to be unconditionally obeyed, because breaking them could put the whole family at risk. It might well lead to our capture by the Germans, and, were that to happen, we could only expect the worst. (I don't recall if I was told what that would be, but I was convinced that they would kill us at once.) "From now on you must be very careful about what you say and do. You must not to tell anyone where you came from. If asked, you give your family name as 'van Sipbergen' (which sounded less Jewish than

'Silbiger'). And of course, you must never, never let on that you are Jewish." In France, the rules on our behavior would become even more restrictive.

My parents made not attempt to shield me from the reality of the terrible danger that hung over us. Even though I was only six, it was essential for me to be fully aware of it, so that I would exercise the necessary care!

FROM BRUSSELS TO PARIS (April 1942)

Two things in Brussels made a lasting impression on me. One—right in the center of the city—was 't Manneken Pis, the statue of a naked little boy relieving himself with a gushing stream of water. It continues to be a popular tourist attraction to this day. The other was a large wall map that hung in the lounge of the boarding house in which we stayed. My brother explained that those colorful patches represented countries and showed me where we were and where we had come from. He also pointed to places where we might go. I was fascinated by that map. During our further travels, I would pour over maps to trace our progress, and I have remained a lover of maps ever since.

We stayed in Brussels for two weeks, after which we took the train to Paris. To enter northern (occupied) France from Belgium was comparatively easy since for short visits Belgians did not require a visa and the control at the border was cursory. We used forged papers, identifying us as Belgian citizens. I believe this was the only time during the journey that we relied on forged papers since my parents were never sure if they would stand up to close scrutiny. We arrived in Paris at the *Gare du Nord* (North Station). As we emerged from the station, I was overwhelmed by the noise of the people and traffic that filled the large square in front. Coming from quiet, sedate The Hague, where under the occupation life had become even more confined and fuel shortages had taken most cars off the road, I was thrilled by the hustle and bustle of this large city.

LIFE IN THE FRENCH CAPITAL (April – June 1942)

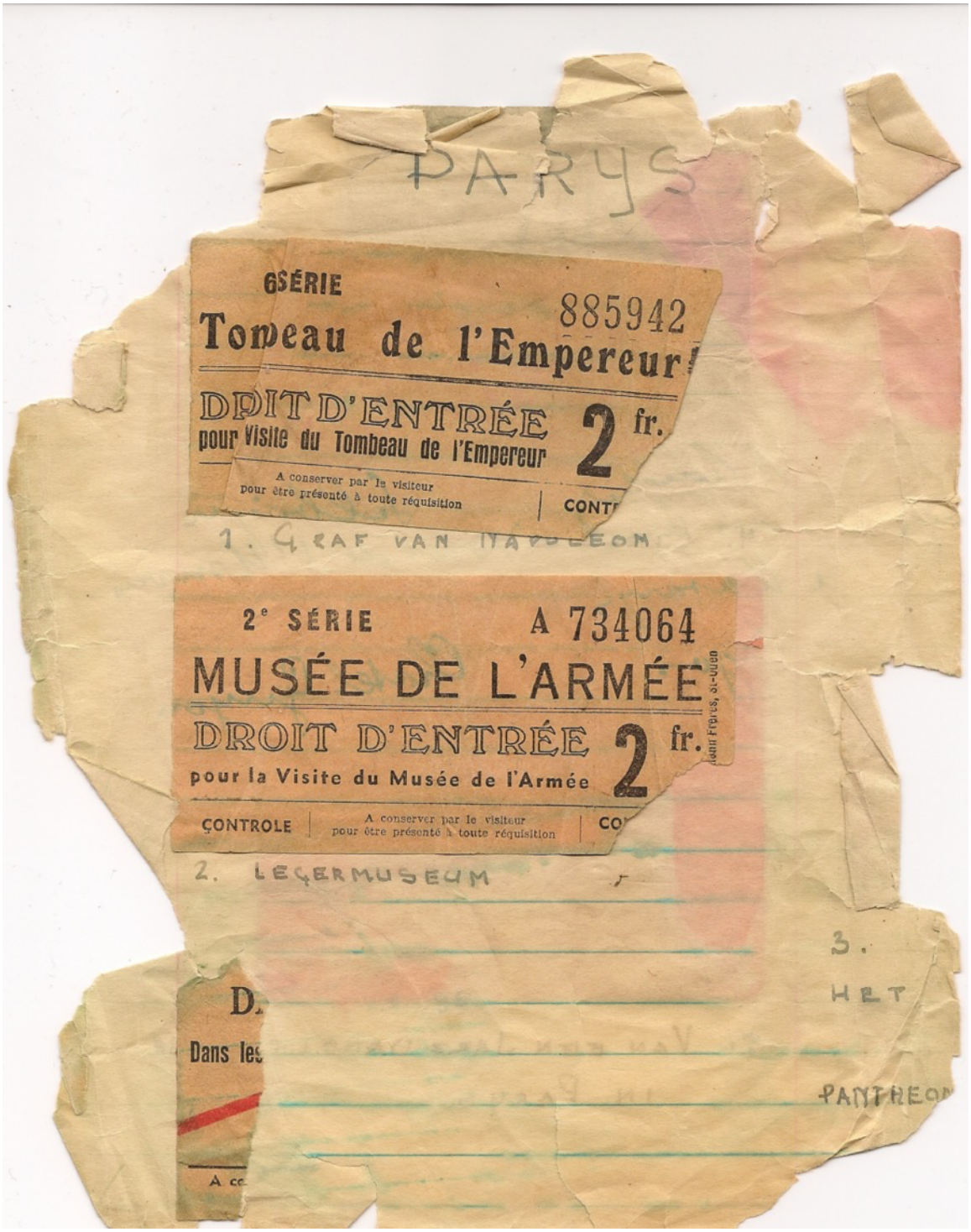
The German rule in France (and in Belgium also) was less oppressive than in Holland. Both countries were under the jurisdiction of the regular German army (the *Wehrmacht*) and treated as occupied territories, whereas Holland, slated for annexation because of its "pure Aryan" population, was controlled directly by Hitler's Nazi party and its notorious

special corps, the SS. Paris still had plenty of food, including luxury treats like chocolates, which back home had become dim memories. The high spirits of the city seemed barely affected by the occupation, even if German soldiers were everywhere and many major buildings were festooned with large red banners with swastikas.

We stayed for a few days in a slightly seedy hotel near the station on the Rue des Messagerie, and then moved to a boarding house on the Boulevard de Grenelle, in a more pleasant section of town. However, we by no means remained holed up in our rooms. My parents organized a vigorous program of sightseeing, and for two children of six and eleven there were indeed many wonders to behold. We saw the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, we visited *Les Invalides* with its collections of medieval armor and impressive Tomb of Napoleon, the Wax Museum, and the great Paris Zoo (zoos had been off limits for Jews back home).

There were few sights in Paris we didn't see. We entered the monumental cathedral of Notre Dame, where we glimpsed the pomp and ceremony of a service. We went to the huge Palace Gaumont, Paris's Radio City, to watch a movie and a stage show. On my birthday we went to a concert of the jazz band of Jean Omer at the Salle Pleyel. (My mother told me later that the concert had been my choice for a special treat—my passion for music was apparently already showing.) To go to these places we took the underground Metro, which was as fascinating as any of the tourist sights. And then there was the rich splendor of French food, with such exotic dishes as calf brains in caper sauce. Some of it did take getting used to.

In retrospect I marvel at the nerve, the *sang froid*, of my parents to have us behave like an ordinary family visiting the capital. But this was precisely our cover. In France we had assumed new identities and we now had French names. According to our forged papers (which we hoped not to have to use), my brother and I went by the names of Armand and Alexandre Duchenes. We also had a new code of behavior. We were not to speak Dutch in public, which meant that until we had mastered some French (which eventually we did), we were to keep our mouths shut. My parents both spoke fluent French, virtually without accent, due to circumstances of their upbringing. My father, when living in Antwerp, had attended a French school, while my mother spent a few years at a Swiss boarding school, at the time a fashionable complement to one's



Het Blikke Doosje, p. 1. Admission tickets from Paris: The Tomb of Napoleon, the Museum of the Army (with thrilling collections of medieval armor), and the Panthéon (fragment).

Het Blikke Doosje, p. 2. Tickets for the Circus and for a concert of the jazz band of Jean Omer in the Salle Pleyel. (Note the date of the concert, 14 May 1942, my seventh birthday.)

Het Blikke Doosje p. 3. Tickets for the Paris Metro (Dupleix was our station) and for a wax museum.

Het Blikke Doosje, p. 4. Tickets for the Palace Gaumont ("the largest movie theater in Europe"), the cable car at the Montmartre, a receipt from UNIP (the Parisian Woolworth), and a train ticket for a dog. At the Gaumont we saw *Brazza ou l'épopée du Congo* (1940), about the French explorer of Central Africa Pierre de Brazza, and on stage, the great cabaret singer Charles Trenet.

education. These were among several small details of their background that may have made the difference between success and failure for our venture.

I remember an example of how far my parents went in adopting our cover. While in predominantly Calvinist northwestern Holland one saw few public displays of religion, in Paris Catholicism was manifested everywhere. Crucifixes hung on the walls of many rooms, and sacred statues could be seen inside as well as outside of buildings. On the streets, priests and nuns wearing traditional attire were a common sight, as were children with their pretty first-communion customs. I became intrigued and wanted to know more about this. Under normal circumstances my parents might have become uneasy, but now they were all too happy to indulge me. They bought me a large picture book with colorful depictions of the Holy Family and the Saints, which I carried around with me.

I did cause one scary moment, which I don't remember but was later told about. In our boarding house, there also lodged some German soldiers. One of these came up to me and offered me a piece of chocolate. Like every child I had been warned never to take candy from strangers, and that the stranger was a German soldier was especially frightening. I shook my head emphatically and drew back. My parents, who were witnessing the scene, became nervous and tried to encourage me to take the chocolate, but I obstinately refused. The soldier, probably attributing my behavior simply to shyness, took it in good humor and stopped insisting.

FAMILY LIFE

Despite the danger that hung over us during this period, I do not remember living in constant fear. Throughout the journey, I never lost faith in the ability of my parents to protect us and lead us to safety, and within the family circle I always felt secure. Luckily, my faith proved justified.

Since contact with strangers was risky, the family turned to itself for companionship and we became very close. During air raids, which occasionally occurred, we all crawled in a bed together. My parents did not want some of us to survive without the others. Indeed, if Hermi and I had suddenly become orphaned, we would have been in dire straits.

For Hermi and me too, contact with others in our age groups was not possible, and so we had to rely on each other. Together we created an imaginary world, in which each of us ruled his own country. We drew elaborate maps, named rivers, cities, and mountains, and imagined all kinds of happenings. Our joint universe provided a much-needed escape.

For me, Hermi was an inexhaustible source of knowledge and wisdom, and I probably owed at least as much of my education to him as to my parents. I imagine that for him the forced exclusive relationship with a five-year younger brother was rather more taxing. Besides, he had to be more than my companion. My parents had put him in charge of looking after me and keeping me out of trouble. In particular, he had to make sure that I did not wander off by myself, which, nevertheless, I managed to do a few times. But more about that later. Hermi and I continued to be very close throughout the rest of our lives. For much of our lives, he remained my confidant and advisor as well as close friend.

Occasionally I did feel a pang of envy when on the street I saw a group of school kids about my age march by. At the same time, I was repelled by the discipline suggested by their black smocks and berets and by the priest who led them. School uniforms were not a common sight where I came from.

ALMOST STUCK IN PARIS

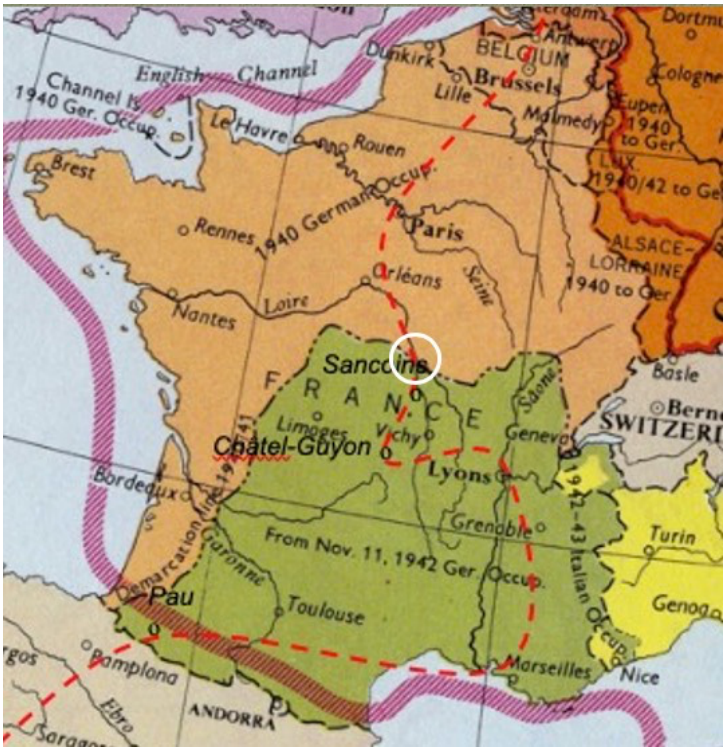
It seemed like we stayed in Paris forever—in fact, we were there for nearly seven weeks. Why did we often stay put in places, rather than move on as quickly as we could toward freedom? Although the Resistance network helped us with our escape, they were not a travel agency that booked the entire trip toward our final destination and we did not start out with a firm itinerary. My parents did not even have a clear idea of where we might go eventually—just somewhere beyond German domination. I recall talk of Casablanca, goodness knows why, and of Switzerland, which would have been a bad choice. The Swiss on the whole were not very hospitable to Jewish refugees and sometimes sent them back at the border.

The Resistance merely provided us with a contact in the next place to which we were headed and, if needed, help or advice on how to get there. Once we arrived, my

father would try to locate the contact and plan the next lap of our journey. This is how it worked in Brussels. The main holdup there was the time it took to prepare our forged identity papers. In Paris, however, my father learned that his would–be contact had just been arrested.

We were in a fix, the more so since the next segment of our journey would be the most critical part of our entire escape route—the crossing of the Demarcation Line. This was the boundary between occupied and semi–autonomous (Vichy) France. It ran east–west through the center of the country, except for the Atlantic coast, which was entirely under German control. Since it formed in effect the current border of the German Reich, it was heavily guarded. There was no way we would get past without expert help.

However, luck was on our side. In Paris lived a second cousin of my father's by the name of Rosen. Ordinarily, my parents would not have looked him up because of the usual safety concerns, but our situation was desperate. To my parents' relief, Monsieur Rosen was able to track down someone who could make arrangements for our critical crossing.



Our route through France

CROSSING THE DEMARCATION LINE (June 1942)

We traveled due south from Paris by train to a station close to the boundary. There we were met by our "passeur," as the guides who took people across were called. They generally demanded a large sum of money for their services, which was not unreasonable considering the risk involved. But sometimes they double-dipped. After taking the money, they led their clients to the Gestapo, who in turn provided a second reward. We later heard of several of such cases.

The region of France in which we found ourselves, part of the Loire valley, consisted mostly of sparsely populated farm country. Wherever you looked you saw fertile green fields dotted by an occasional farmhouse or shed. The plan was to walk through these fields until we hit the boundary, which ran along the Allier, a branch of the Loire. I believe the entire walk took less than an hour, although at the time it seemed much longer. The passeur, who was a grumpy type, kept urging us to go faster. I recall being pulled along—at times almost dragged—by my mother or father. We had to negotiate several barbed wire fences, which caused not too much hardship since they were intended more as barriers for cattle than for people. Some I had to crawl under, others I was simply lifted across. Finally, we arrived at the river, which was quite wide. A little rowboat was hidden in the bushes by the bank, and the passeur rowed us to the other side in several shifts.

Once we had reached the other bank we sat down in the grass to rest. There was a bag of cherries—I don't know where it came from—and we began eating, while euphoria over our successful escape set in. At one point I noticed on the occupied bank a group of German soldiers patrolling along the river, which gave me a momentary scare. My parents reassured me that the soldiers would think us to be a family picnicking by the riverside, and I should pay no attention to them. But our euphoria was not to last long.

ARREST IN SANCOINS (June - July 1942)

Although our passeur did not deliver us to the Gestapo, he did deliver us to the French police. We were taken to a hotel in Sancoins, a small village not far from the border, where the chief of police told my parents that they were under arrest. After all, we had entered Vichy-France illegally and did not possess the proper papers for continuing our

journey. He took my father aside for further questioning. I don't know precisely what transpired. Apparently, my father was able to make the police chief understand our special circumstances—that we were running for our lives and that there was no way we could have obtained the needed documents in occupied Holland. However, he was confident that the representative of the Dutch government–in–exile in Lyon would be able to assist us. Besides, if the police were to throw him and my mother in jail, who was going to take care of their two young children?

My father was good at this sort of thing and undoubtedly was much helped by his fluent command of French. The chief decided not to separate the family. Rather than going to jail, my parents could stay in the hotel, but they had to remain in Sancoins until they received the necessary documents from Lyon. My father did, however, pay a small price for this concession. He owned a beautiful silver four-color pencil. Such pencils, which I don't believe are made any longer, had four slides on the sides which allowed you to pull down a lead of a different color. It was an object I much admired, and sometimes he let me play with it. During the interview with the Sancoins Chief of Police he must have pulled it out to write something, and the Chief asked to see it. After the interview, my father realized that his pencil was never returned.

And so, after having feasted for nearly two months on the inexhaustible riches of Paris, we found ourselves stuck in a remote rural village with maybe a couple of thousand inhabitants (currently 3,600, but probably fewer back then). But at least we were no longer in immediate danger. A few photographs, the first from our journey, provide a glimpse of our stay in Sancoins.

Snapshots from Sancoins (July 1942):
Lex and Hermi playing border guard.

Snapshots from Sancoins:
Hôtel Saint Joseph, where we were detained.
I am standing in front of the hotel, with Hermi a little to the left.

Snapshots from Sancoins:
With my father.

Snapshots from Sancoins:
With my mother.

Snapshots from Sancoins:
At a nearby farmhouse.

THE PIPE

We had now been on the road for nearly three months and another four months would pass before we were able to leave France. Without any source of income, how were we able to survive all this time? We were a family of four who had to sleep in a hotel or boarding house every night and eat in a restaurant for every meal. There were no ATM's, and Dutch currency would have been useless once we left Holland, in fact, it would have betrayed us. My parents needed a safe way of carrying money and changing it to local currency no matter where we found ourselves, without recourse to regular banking institutions.

My father decided the perfect method would be to convert our money into diamonds. They take little room and can find a buyer virtually anywhere. (Al-Quaeda frequently used diamonds for illicit money transfers across the globe—see Douglas Farah, *Blood from Stones*: *The Secret Financial Network of Terror*, New York, 2004.) My father knew about diamonds. His father, like many Jews in The Netherlands and Belgium, had been a diamond merchant. Although my father had never been in the diamond trade himself, he had picked up enough about his father's business to know where to purchase diamonds, how roughly to assess their value, and how to sell them again. Such knowledge was of course essential.

One further problem needed to be solved. How could he prevent the stones from being discovered by customs inspectors or the police, or from being stolen? For this, my father came up with an ingenious device. He took a smoking pipe with a particularly squat shape—a model known among pipe connoisseurs as "bent bulldog"—and hollowed out a compartment within which he could store the diamonds. The compartment was so constructed that he could smoke the pipe with the diamonds in place, which he often did––he was an inveterate pipe smoker. He could always carry the pipe with him, as pipe smokers usually do, and nobody was likely to steal a smelly old pipe. I still own the pipe, a rare artifact from that period in our lives (see the last page).

Needless to say, at the time I was unaware of my father's diamond smuggling operation. One aspect of his scheme continues to remain a mystery to me and my brother. Where did he get the money to buy the diamonds in the first place? It must have been

quite a large sum, considering that it sustained us for at least half a year. In Holland, my family had enjoyed a comfortable middle-class life, but without many luxuries. My father probably earned a decent salary as an engineer, but my mother, like most married women of the time, did not work. Could my parents, who were in their late thirties, have put aside such a large amount? Did someone help us or loan us the money? It is hard to imagine who, since almost no one knew of our escape. Did Mr. Piel, the Director of my father's company, help out? It is not inconceivable, since he helped with some other matters, such as the storage of our belongings. My brother and I wished we had asked our parents before they passed away. Most likely we shall never know the answer.

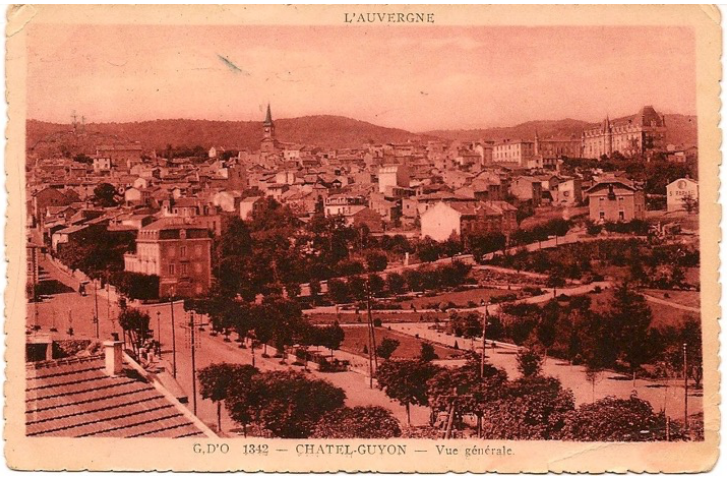
CHÂTEL-GUYON (July – September 1942)

The concern of the authorities about refugees like us was not so much that we had entered illegally as that we might remain in France unless we had a place to move on to. The so-called forced residence (*residence forcée*), which kept us under supervision in Sancoins, would not be lifted until we had obtained a visa to enter another country. However, during those years it was not easy to acquire such visas. Despite the desperate plight of the Jews, much of the world had closed its doors to them. At best a country might have a quota, that is, a severely restricted number of people of a given nationality that could be admitted each year. Even those fortunate enough to get onto the quota usually had to wait several years before it was their turn to be admitted. For many that turn came too late to save their lives.

It would take another four months before my parents succeeded in finding a way to get us out of France. However, a situation arose that enabled us to leave Sancoins. My father began to suffer severe attacks of pain in his side. I recall his face being distorted in agony during one of those attacks. A local doctor diagnosed the problem as a kidney ailment and recommended that my father seek a cure at a mineral spring. The doctor wrote a declaration for the authorities (I still have a copy), who agreed to transfer our *residence forcée* to Châtel-Guyon, a spa one or two hours' train ride south of Sancoins. And thus we moved on to a new temporary home.

Châtel-Guyon proved to be a more pleasant place than Sancoins. It is a picturesque little resort in the Massif Central, France's central mountain range in the

Auvergne. Volvic, source of the well-known waters, is close by, and the city of Clermont-Ferrand is not far away. In the center of the town is a park with pretty pavilions that house the mineral springs with supposedly curative powers. There were band concerts in the park and a movie house. Our hotel (the Hotel de L'Univers) was on the lively main street, through which passed a fair amount of traffic. Now and then Hermi spotted a late model American car, which caused great excitement—as if the car were an emissary from that fairyland of liberty and plenty. Outside the town, the scenic countryside offered many opportunities for hikes, with some spectacular views. For someone who had seen mountains only in pictures (our part of Holland was as flat as the sea), the sight of the real thing was thrilling.



Châtel-Guyon, c 1942, with the park in the foreground

Hotel de L'Univers in 1996

Unfortunately, during our stay, the family was plagued by further health problems. My brother developed acute appendicitis and had to be taken for surgery to a hospital in the slightly larger nearby town of Riom. My mother also suffered from abdominal pains, which she believed to be due to an intestinal condition from which her mother had suffered. She joined my father at the springs. Her ailment was not diagnosed correctly until the following year, when a kidney stone was found to be the source of her discomfort. I was the only one without a serious ailment in Châtel-Guyon, but my turn had come earlier in Paris. There I had developed a nasty, diphtheria-related skin infection, which was all over my face and throat. I don't remember what kind of treatment I received, but the condition had gone away before we left Paris.

My parents were becoming concerned about the schooling I was missing and decided that my mother should start giving me lessons. She was going to give special attention to handwriting, in which I had as yet developed little proficiency. This venture never got far off the ground. My mother had no clue about how to teach a first grader and she had no materials.

During this period we also met up for the first time during our journey with my Uncle Kurt and his family. They had traveled more or less in parallel with us, but we had avoided all contact while in the occupied territories. Now it was deemed safe to get together. My aunt and uncle also had two young children: Florry, who would have been around nine at that time, and Tommy, who would have been around four. We spent a few days together in Mont d'Or, a town in the mountains on the other side of Clermont-Ferrand. After all this time of just being by ourselves, the reunion was an occasion of great joy.

When the time came for them to be on their way, we accompanied them to the train station in Clermont-Ferrand to see them off. There I had an upsetting adventure, which at the time I kept to myself. We had some time before the train was to depart and, since it was a pleasant, sunny afternoon, the two families decided to have coffee at a sidewalk café across from the station. After a while, I asked my mother if I could go for a walk around the block. Thinking that I was getting bored with adult conversation, she answered, "Yes, but don't go very far and come right back." And off I dashed.

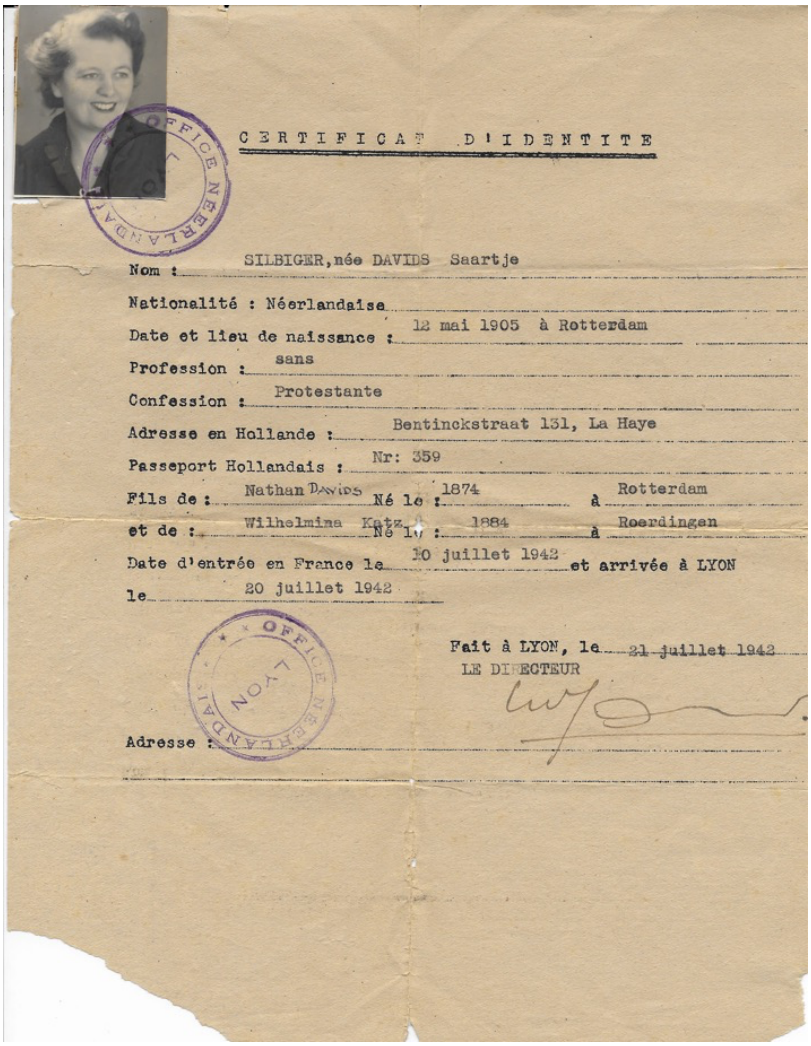
I did not tell them that I had a special mission. In Paris, I had become interested in churches, especially big ones. I had spotted the two towers of Clermont-Ferrand's grand cathedral and wanted to have a closer look. It seemed to be just a couple of blocks away, behind some other buildings. That appearance was deceptive, however. The church is quite large and built on a hill. When I walked a few blocks and saw it again, it did not appear any closer. I continued walking, hoping I would soon reach it. Sometimes I would lose sight of the towers, and then they reappeared, but I did not seem to get nearer. Suddenly I came to a small square where a group of children were playing. They were about my age. They spotted me, yelled something I did not understand and burst out laughing. To them I probably looked strange and oddly dressed. I became embarrassed and wished I could disappear on the spot. At the same time, I also realized that I had been going for quite a while and that it was beginning to get dark. I turned around and, as quickly as I could, made my way back to the station. There I found my parents in a state of near hysteria. My aunt and uncle had already left, although they had waited as long as possible, hoping still to see me. In my feeble defense, I just kept saying, "But I never was lost! I knew where I was all the time and how to get back." I don't think they heard me; I don't believe they were even mad at me. They were just relieved to have me back.

LEAVING FRANCE (September–October 1942)

As our forced stay in Châtel-Guyon stretched from weeks to months, my parents must have felt a growing apprehension, notwithstanding the charms of the town and its environs. The Vichy government, under German pressure, had begun arresting and deporting its Jewish citizens as well some Jews from elsewhere to the East, although not yet Dutch nationals. After entering the unoccupied zone, we had reassumed our Dutch nationality and we hoped that our citizenship would give us some protection, along with documents in our possession that showed we were of the Protestant faith.

I had not known about those documents but discovered them among papers I inherited from my brother. One of these, from the Netherlands Protestant League, declared that my father was a member of the League since 1927 and had paid his dues through 1941. This was entirely untrue, but since the document was dated 23 January 1942, he either obtained this official-looking piece of paper before we left in anticipation

of a future need or it was forged for him in Lyons. A second one, dated Marseille, 29 August 1942, was issued by an Association of French Christian organizations concerned with aiding refugees and stated that my father with his wife and two children was "attached to Protestantism," and was very interested in the Association's mission. He had provided "precious services," and they warmly recommended him.



CERTIFICAT D'IDENTITE

OFFICE NEERLANDAIS LYON

Nom : SILBIGER, née DAVIDS Saartje

Nationalité : Néerlandaise

Date et lieu de naissance : 12 mai 1905 à Rotterdam

Profession : sans

Confession : Protestante

Adresse en Hollande : Bentinckstraat 131, La Haye

Passeport Hollandais : Nr: 359

Fils de : Nathan Davids Né le : 1874 à Rotterdam

et de : Wilhelmina Katz Né le : 1884 à Roerdingen

Date d'entrée en France le 10 juillet 1942 et arrivée à LYON le 20 juillet 1942

Fait à LYON, le 21 juillet 1942

LE DIRECTEUR

OFFICE NEERLANDAIS LYON

Adresse :

My mother's *Certificate d'identité*, showing her to be of the Protestant faith

I do not know for sure how he obtained these false testimonies, manufactured presumably in the hope that they would save us from being deported, but I suspect they came from Sally Noach, who was associated with the *Office Néerlandais* (Netherlands Office) in Lyon. This office, functioning in lieu of a Dutch consulate, also issued my mother a *Certificate d'identité* that show her to be "Protestante." Noach, a Dutch refugee

himself, has been called "the Dutch Schindler," because he helped and most likely saved the lives of hundreds of refugees stuck in Vichy France. My father was one of ten refugees who signed a letter, probably intended for the Dutch government and dated 1 November 1942 in Madrid, which expressed deep gratitude for Noach's role in their escape to freedom. I'm not sure though whether the testimonies regarding our Christian faith, while perhaps helpful when dealing with French authorities, would have cut much ice with the Germans, who were not so much interested in one's beliefs as in the racial purity of one's blood. They likely would have guessed what kind of blood ran through our veins.

As time went on, the advances of the Allied forces in North Africa began producing persistent rumors that the German troops were about to move into unoccupied France, and then we would once again be trapped. The *Office Néerlandais* did manage to secure entry visas for Curaçao, a small Dutch island in the Caribbean, and for Surinam—also known as Dutch Guyana—on the South-American mainland. However, the Director of the *Office* informed my father that these visas did not really give us the right to travel to those places! They were issued merely to stop the French authorities from detaining or hassling us since they would show that we were in France merely in transit.

It might seem strange that these Dutch territories were hesitant to admit Dutch citizens, especially when those citizens were in such a perilous situation. As elsewhere, anti-Semitism likely played a part, but probably just as important was the fear that a sudden flood of refugees would tax a community's resources or upset its social fabric. For a small island like Curaçao, such fear is easier to understand than for a large nation like the United States. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that if those colonies had not been so reluctant to take in the Dutch refugees stuck in France, they could have saved hundreds of lives of people fated to be sent eventually to their doom in the East.

***

In early September my Uncle Kurt and his family were able to leave for Spain. Through the personal intervention of Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who was Commander of the Dutch Armed Forces, Kurt obtained visas for Spain and Portugal. From Lisbon, he traveled with his family to London, where he was appointed Major and Head of the Infantry Division of the Dutch Department of War. (Through the remainder

of the war he worked closely with the Prince, and after the war, back in The Netherlands, he was promoted to Colonel and served for some years as Deputy-Secretary of the War Department.) After reaching Lisbon, my uncle began making efforts to get us also out of France. He learned that arrangements were being made to take a select group of refugees by boat from Spain to Surinam, and with the help of the Dutch authorities he succeeded to get us on the list for that journey. The ship was to sail on the tenth of October, which did not leave us much time to get to Spain. We needed to go first to Lyon, where the *Office Néerlandais* would provide us with the needed Spanish transit visas. These visas were supposed to be obtained for us by the Dutch Consulate in Madrid and sent to the Lyon *Office*. Thus, after three months we finally left Châtel-Guyon.

Het Blikke Doosje. Postcard with good news: "Lyon, 28 September [1942]. Dear Edy [my father], I am writing you to Marseille and Châtel-Guyon with the happy message that your *sortie* (exit visa) has arrived. You now have a good chance to get away. Congratulations! Regards also to Sera and the children. Simon [Schoenberg]"

In Lyon, my parents learned that the departure of our ship had been postponed until the beginning of November. Furthermore, the transit visas from Spain had not yet arrived. The original plan to pick up our visas and move on immediately to Spain was not going to work. We had no choice but to remain in Lyon and wait for the visas.

I don't remember much about Lyon, a big city traversed by two major rivers, the Rhône and the Saône. I managed to get lost once again while shopping with my brother, but I now was primed for that eventuality. I had been drilled to say in French: "I am a Dutch boy (*Je suis un garçon hollandais…)* staying at the hotel such-and-such on the something street…please put me on a streetcar that will take me there." I always carried enough money for the fare, and thus was able to get back safely to our hotel.

Meanwhile, the situation in Vichy France looked more threatening every day. My father was advised that it would be safer for us to move further south to Marseille, where there was a Dutch Consulate. After another wait in Marseille, when we still had not received our Spanish visas and the departure date of our ship was approaching, the Consul advised us to take a chance and travel to the Spanish border. There we could see if the authorities might admit us, possibly at the cost of a good sum of money. (I am not sure if this was for a special fee, an outright bribe, or the latter disguised as the former.) And so, on October 26, after having spent the preceding night in Pau near the border, we boarded the train to Spain.

The border station at Canfranc

Along the French-Spanish border runs a formidable mountain range, the Pyrenees, with peaks over 11,000 ft. The train ran through its narrow valleys with steep walls of mountains on both sides. When we reached the border station at Canfranc, we were joined by several other Dutch refugee families who also lacked visas and who had been advised by the Marseille consul to attempt entry jointly with us. Lengthy negotiations took place between the representatives of the families and the border officials. In addition to money, a few personal belongings such as fur coats had to be sacrificed, but in the end they let us pass. Our departure from France was none too soon. Two weeks later, on November 11, 1942, the Germans occupied Vichy France. The several hundred Dutch Jews still waiting there were rounded up and deported to Poland to be slaughtered.

SPAIN (October – November 1942)

As we emerged from the mountains, the Spanish landscape appeared barren compared to that of southern France. The damage wrought by the Civil War—concluded only three years earlier—was much in evidence, with bullet holes disfiguring many buildings. However, Madrid, our destination and home for the next few weeks, was an exciting place, with much to see and do. As before in Paris, we visited the major tourist sights, including the Prado, Madrid's great art museum. I was fascinated by the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch with their fantastic and grotesque images.

Out hotel in Madrid (Grand Hotel Internacional)

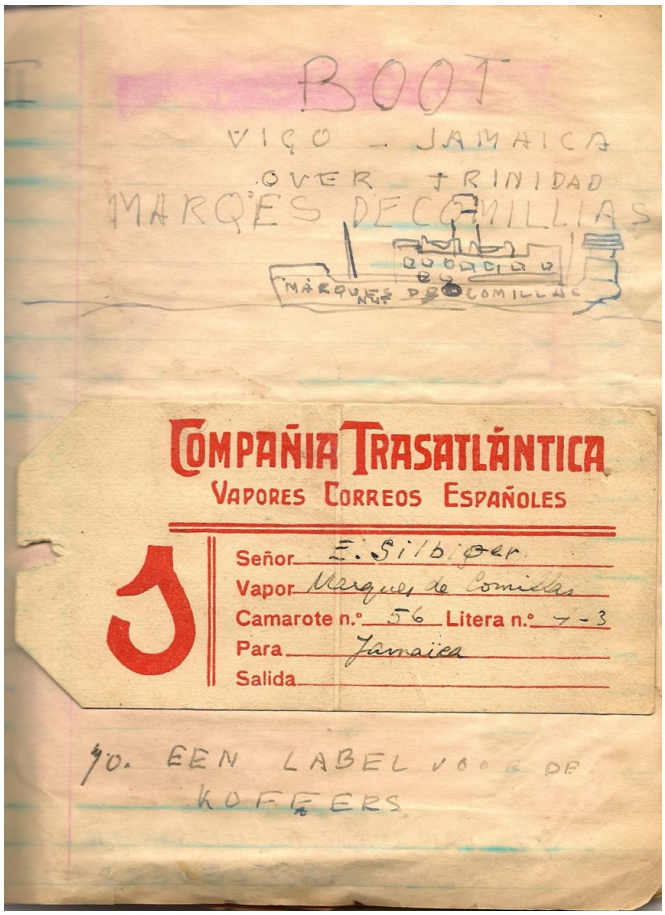
Our hotel in Vigo

Around the middle of November we traveled to Vigo, a port city on Spain's west coast, from which our ship was to leave. It was already waiting for us in the harbor, and

after spending a couple of days in a hotel while bureaucratic details were taken care of, we were allowed to embark. Our ship was a beautiful Spanish luxury liner, the *Marques de Comillas*. In happier times it took affluent tourists across the Atlantic to Havana and New York, as it would do again after the war, but now it had been commandeered to take our rag-tag band of refugees to safety. Meanwhile, we learned that Surinam had changed its mind again and that we would not be welcome there. Neither were Curaçao or any of the other Dutch islands in the Caribbean ready to receive us, but the island of, Jamaica, still a British colony, could accommodate us and agreed to take us in.

The Marques de Comillas

The Marques in Vigo harbor



Suitcase label, with Hermi's sketch of the Marques

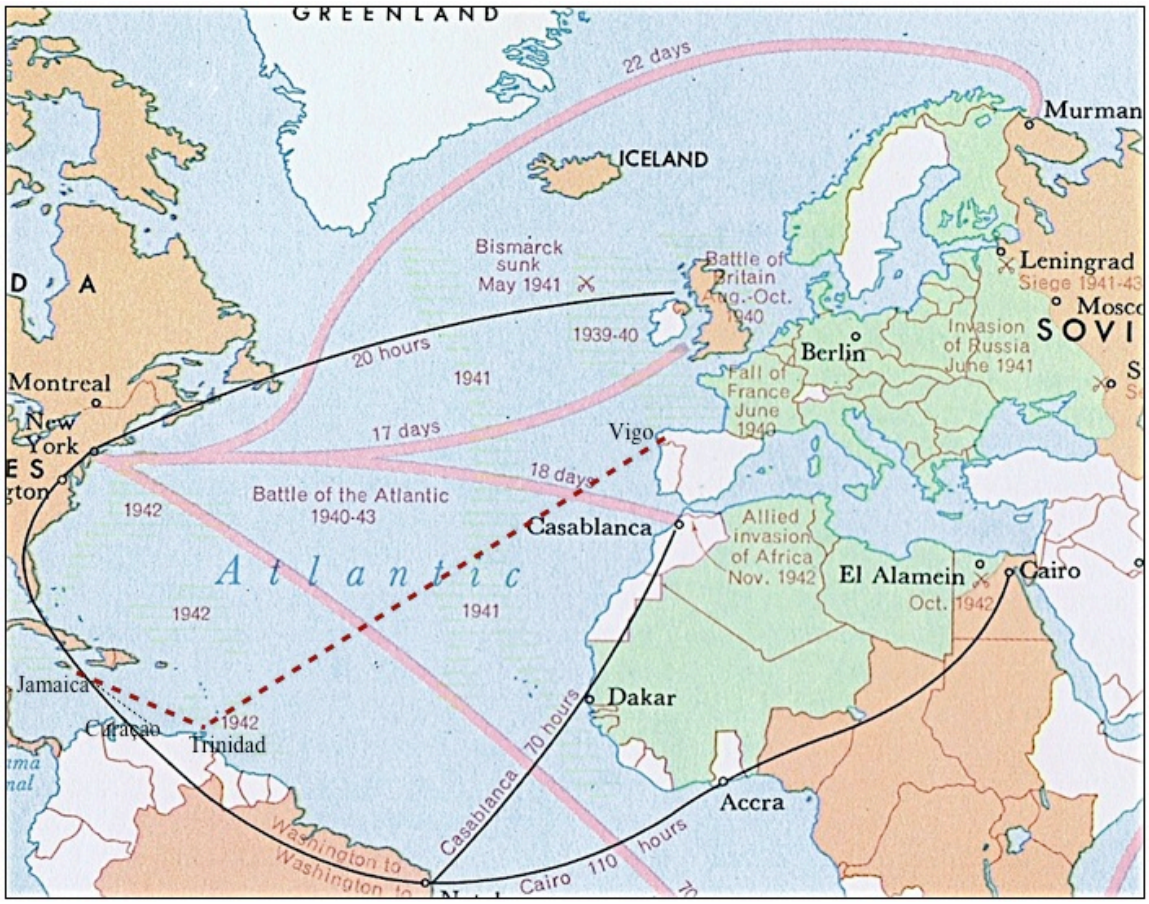
CROSSING THE ATLANTIC (November – December 1942)

We had already met some of our prospective fellow travelers in the hotel in Vigo. After a long time being deprived of ordinary social contact outside the family circle, we found ourselves in the midst of a large group of people with whom we would be living in close proximity for some time to come—in fact, for longer than any of us anticipated. It might be of interest to cite some statistics from the passenger roster, of which I possess a copy. The group consisted of 173 refugees, all but a few of whom were born in the Netherlands. Most were married couples, many of them with children. Altogether there were thirty-seven children under fifteen, which was good news for me and my brother. The professions of the passengers covered an amazing diversity, among them accountant, art dealer, barber, car mechanic, diamond polisher, doctor, electrician, film producer, geologist, journalist, high school teacher, kindergarten teacher, nurse, salesman, shoe manufacturer, seamstress, stenographer-typist, and tailor.

Crossing the Atlantic in 1942 was risky, since even ships sailing under a neutral flag were not immune from U-boat attacks. (A total of eight Spanish ships were sunk by German submarines during the war—a small number, to be sure, compared to the several thousand allied ships that suffered this fate.) Fortunately, nothing worse happened during our crossing than a horrendous storm, the kind with towering waves that today passenger ships know how to avoid.

We had been at sea for well over two weeks when we sighted the lush green hills of the British island of Trinidad sticking out of the intensely blue Caribbean Sea. The ship's anchor was lowered at some distance off the coast, and we were approached by a police boat. When the police boarded our ship and emerged on the deck, I received a shock. The men were wearing sparkling white uniforms and helmets, which gleamed in the bright sunlight, but under those helmets their faces were pitch black, or so they appeared. I had never in my life seen a black person in the flesh, only in picture books (usually in rather grotesque portrayals). But here they were, armed and ready to inspect us.

They made a very thorough search of the entire ship, including our personal belongings. According to my brother, they confiscated an atlas he owned. At the same time, US intelligence officers, who had also come aboard, grilled each of the adults. They may have hoped to obtain fresh information about the German–occupied territories, but their primary concern was to identify spies who might seek to enter under the cover of being a refugee. This concern proved justified, because a spy was indeed discovered among the passengers—I have no idea how. The whole exercise took several days, but eventually we received the green light to sail on, and our ship laid a course for Kingston, passing on its way close by Curaçao—that free bit of Dutch territory that had rejected us.



Route of m.s. Marques de Comillas, 14 November to 6 December 1942

The map shows the Atlantic during the time of the greatest Axis expansion (areas in green). Neutral countries are left white. The years marked on the ocean indicate areas of German submarine concentration. The black lines show air routes and hours from the US; the thick pink lines show ship routes and days. Our crossing from Vigo to Jamaica via Trinidad is shown by the red dotted line.

ARRIVAL IN JAMAICA (December 1942)

There are some things today's travelers sacrifice when exchanging leisurely boat journeys for swift and more convenient flights by plane. One of these is the thrill, after many days or even weeks at sea, of watching the slow emergence of one's destination, often first spotted as a small blip on the horizon. Some approaches are especially spectacular, such as that to lower Manhattan when sailing into New York harbor. Perhaps even more awesome is the one we observed when we approached Kingston harbor. As the enormous bulk of Jamaica's Blue Mountains gradually rose out of the sea, the blue haze that, true to its name, enveloped it in the sunlight, produced the appearance of a mirage. However, as we came closer and details of the town became discernible, the place proved real enough.

After coming ashore, we were transferred to a set of buses. Soon we left the colorful chaos of the town behind and headed into the mountains. We must have been driving for perhaps an hour when a wide valley surrounded by mountains came into view. Suddenly several people on our bus started to scream. We seemed to be heading for a large complex of unpainted wooden barracks surrounded by barbed-wire fences. It resembled all too closely the nightmare we thought we had left behind: a concentration camp. This was the Gibraltar Camp, where the Jamaican authorities had decided to house us.

The Gibraltar Camp in Jamaica. Note the two rows of barbed-wire fences in the foreground, and beyond them, the mess hall and the residential barracks.

GIBRALTAR CAMP (December 1942 – April 1943)

My memories of Gibraltar Camp are much clearer and more detailed than those of the earlier part of our journey. This probably is due to the length of our stay and to my more varied social experiences. A further reason may be that I was beginning to mature. When we left Holland I had been six years old, but when our stay in Jamaica came to an end I was a month short of my eighth birthday.

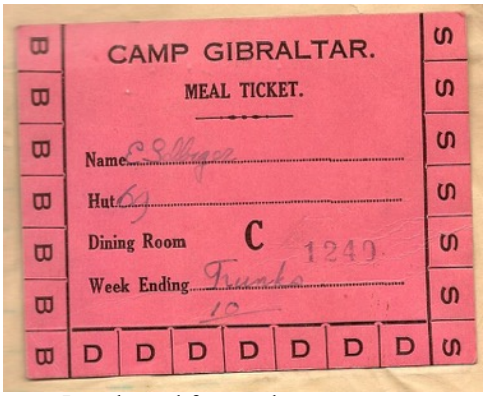
The refugees brought to the camp were not treated like the inmates of a concentration camp. But neither were they treated like tourists in a resort hotel, despite the camp's setting—a scenic valley on a tropical island. Movements in and out of the camp were carefully controlled. Everyone received a passbook that had to be brought along to the exit gate and within which leaves and returns were recorded. One could go out of the camp only during the day and had to be back before the nighttime curfew. To stay out overnight required special permission. No one was allowed to search for a home or for work outside the camp. The only way to be released from the camp was to be granted residency in another country. Hence, while the camp provided safe refuge for a group of people who had fled from persecution in their homeland and who had nowhere else to go, it at the same time violated their basic human rights. We were detained without being charged with a crime.

The camp had been constructed in 1940 on the site of a former sugar plantation. It was built in a rush to house 7,000 people whom the British expected to have to evacuate from Gibraltar. (Gibraltar is a small British dependency situated strategically on the southern tip of Spain at the entrance to the Mediterranean.) In the end, only 1,500 Gibraltarians were brought there, and through the war years, the facility was used to house various other groups, which included, in addition to the Dutch refugees, German prisoners of war. The POW compound was next to ours, separated only by a barbed-wire fence. The sight of these German soldiers, even if in captivity, gave me the shivers. Needless to say, they did not enjoy daytime leave privileges.

The housing was fairly Spartan. The Dutch compound consisted of four longitudinal barracks of unpainted wood set on stilts above the grass. They were divided into small cubicles with bunk beds, which opened directly onto a veranda running along the buildings. Instead of glass windows, there were simply openings that closed with a

wooden flap. For toilets and showers one had to go outside to an adjacent structure. In our rooms, we were occasionally visited by scorpions, which always caused much commotion. Usually, my father tried to kill them or chase them away by throwing a shoe. I was terrified that at night while I was sleeping one might drop down on me from the ceiling.

The Feiners, the Schpektors, and the Silbigers in front of one of the residences. My family is on the right.



Punch card for meals.

The mess hall was some distance from the residential units, but there were covered walkways to protect us against the occasional powerful tropical downpours. The hall was open on its sides, and we sat on benches at long tables. The fare left something to be desired. During this period I began suffering from fainting spells, and a doctor diagnosed my problem as malnutrition. Although the food was not lacking in quantity, it did not provide the type of nourishment required by a growing young body.

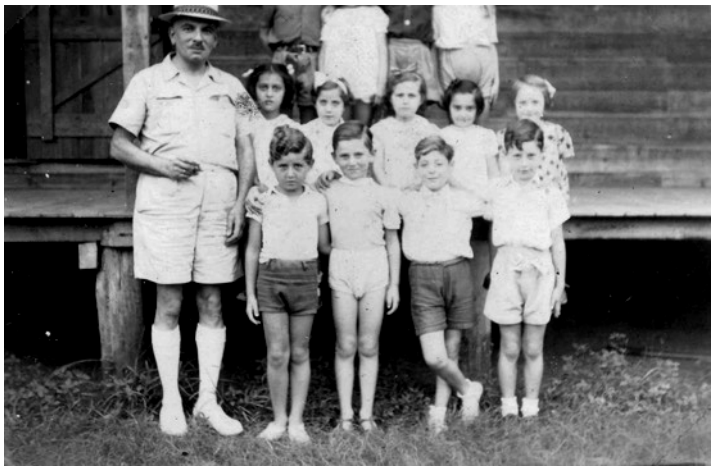
The community did not take long to organize itself. Among the adults, councils and committees were formed and friendships were established, some of which were to last long after everyone had scattered across the world. A Dutch flag was permitted to be flown, near which ceremonial gatherings took place. A photograph of one of those

gathering includes an officer of the British Naval Intelligence, who was to acquire world fame during the post-war years as the creator of Agent 007. Ian Fleming was a frequent visitor and seems to have developed a friendship with some members of our group. I don't know if he had an ulterior motive, such as looking for spies or trying to get fresh information about what was going on behind enemy lines, or whether, as I heard through a later rumor, there was a romantic interest. To me he was the member of a species I had not encountered before: that of a very British gentleman.

A gathering by the Dutch flag. In the background a covered walkway leading to the mess hall. The gentleman in the white suit, third from the left, is Ian Fleming, of James Bond fame.

We children had a great time. Plenty of friends to choose from, beautiful weather just about every day, fields to run around in, and lots of free time. I formed part of a gang of four kids of almost exactly the same age, and we became inseparable, even though we were from different national and linguistic backgrounds (André was Belgian, Robert French, and Bram and I both Dutch). This began to make up for the preceding long period of social isolation. An attempt was made to give us some schooling. In a one-room schoolhouse, Mr. van Leeuwen tried to impart skills and knowledge to a bunch of kids of diverse ages and backgrounds. I don't think he was a trained teacher (he had worked for the radio), and I don't believe we learned much, although I recall receiving instruction in Hebrew.

The children of the Gibraltar Camp in 1943, including five still alive today (2020, see *Preface*): Jenny and Ineke in the back row, on the right; Bram and David in the third row from the back, second and fourth from the left; and Lex on the extreme right, third row from the front. Hermi is in the back row, second from the left.



The Notorious Gang of Four
Front row: Robert, André, Bram, and Lex.
On the left: Mr. van Leeuwen.

We frequently made excursions to the outside world. A footpath provided a pedestrian shortcut past a guardhouse to a road that led to Papine, a small nearby town. To reach the town required a hefty walk of about half an hour in the tropical heat. As we approached the town, we encountered large numbers of vendors along the road, who sold everything from often unfamiliar fruits and vegetables (including pieces of sugar cane, which were great to suck on) and brilliantly colored cakes and cookies to embroidered dresses and native handicrafts constructed from natural materials like wood, coconut

shells, or straw. There also were many beggars and people in rags. From Papine you could take a bus to Kingston, where you could do more serious shopping.

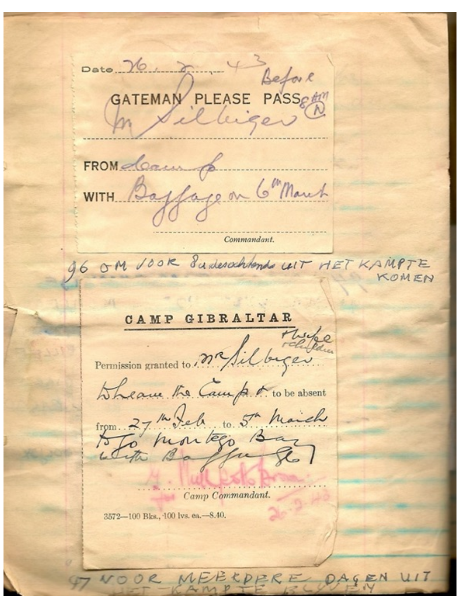
The short-cut to the road to Papine. I am in the middle.

The vendors along the road to Papine. The blonde woman on the left is my mother.

Occasionally we would hike in the mountains that surrounded the camp. If you look carefully at the picture from one of our hikes, you will see that I am clutching a small object. This was a little stuffed monkey with white fur called Jocko—the only personal possession I had been allowed to bring along during our entire flight. Since I dragged him with me like a security blanket, he had by now become quite threadbare and had lost an arm, which according to family legend had fallen into the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, he was precious, not just to me but to the entire family, as a good-luck mascot.

Hiking in the mountains, with Mr. Schpektors, his two children, Jenny Grishaver, and the Silbiger brothers. My father was probably taking the picture.

A highpoint of our Jamaica stay was a one-week vacation in Montego Bay, to which everyone was treated by the exiled Dutch government in London. Was this to soothe its guilty conscience for failure to get us admitted to its colonies? Montego Bay is one of Jamaica's foremost beach resorts, situated on the Northwest coast. To get there from Kingston we had to take a scenic train ride diagonally across the entire island. In Montego Bay we finally got to experience first-hand the lures of this island paradise: the white sandy beaches, the inviting deep blue sea (the sea at Holland's beaches is always drab green), the extraordinary variety of exquisite shells and corals for sale at the beach or seen in even more magnificent manifestations on trips with glass-bottom boats. My family was put up in a friendly little hotel, where for the first time in quite a while we got to eat well. I was introduced there to American-style cold cereals such as corn flakes and rice krispies.



Date 26.2.43 Before 8 AM

GATEMAN PLEASE PASS

Mr Silbiger

FROM Camp

WITH Baggage on 6th March

Commandant.

96 OM OOK ... UIT HET KAMP TE KOMEN

CAMP GIBRALTAR

Permission granted to Mr Silbiger

to leave the Camp to be absent

from 27th Feb to 5th March

to Montego Bay

Camp Commandant.

3572—100 Bks., 100 lvs. ea.—8.40.

97 VOOR MEERDERE DAGEN UIT HET KAMP TE BLIJVEN

Het Blikke Doosje.
Permits to leave the Camp for our "vacation" in Montego Bay.

Despite such diversions, for the adults the enforced stay in Gibraltar Camp must have been increasingly frustrating. Many were still young and energetic, ready to resume building their lives, families, and careers. They had been placed in a holding pattern, with little to do, uncertain how long this situation would continue, and with little idea as to what awaited them thereafter. Some of the camp's residents were to remain until 1946, after the end of the war. We, however, were more fortunate. We were the first to leave the camp, after a stay of only five months.

A construction company in Curaçao needed my father's special expertise in building harbor facilities, and therefore the island's government was willing to admit him and his family. At approximately the same time he received an invitation for a job in England, probably arranged by his brother, who now lived in London. It was not a difficult choice. My parents had little desire to return to Europe at this time and be separated from the Nazis by only a narrow strip of sea.

The fact that my father's professional skill made it relatively easy to find work, and that this resulted in our early liberation, made a deep impression. The life lesson was that one must choose a profession that will always be in demand, no matter where one ends up. Engineering obviously fills the bill. Music, for instance, does not. It was because of this doctrine that I, my brother, and also my cousin Tommy started out with degrees in physical science or engineering, although all three of us subsequently earned degrees in less transportable fields (music, psychology, and law respectively).

On April 7, 1943, almost exactly a year after we left Holland, we departed for Curaçao. The trip provided me with another thrill not often experienced by a seven-year old during those years. The only way of getting from Jamaica to Curaçao was by air, and so I had my first taste of flying. After a three-hour flight, the little twin-engine Lockheed Lodestar landed at the Curaçao's Hato Airport, and we found ourselves on this strange, tiny island that would be our home for the next few years.

A Lockheed Lodestar flying over Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao.

CURAÇAO (April 1943 – November 1945)

Curaçao is scrubby, dusty, prickly and bumpy. *Lonely Planet World Guide*

With our arrival back on Dutch soil, where we were once again able to enjoy a safe and free life, I could bring my story to an end. But the story does not really end there. In a sense, the story has never ended for me. I feel the need to give some account of the rest of my childhood and adolescence, which in many ways unfolded as a consequence of the events related thus far.

Curaçao was not the least bit like Jamaica. I can perhaps best describe it as a clump of Southwestern desert set in the middle of the ocean, to which a bit of old Amsterdam was transported and made over in pastel shades by an impressionist painter. The island measures 37 miles from east to west, but is only a few miles north to south so that in some places one can see both coasts. It has little to offer in the way of white sandy beaches and never became a typical Caribbean tourist paradise. The coast does, however, have several inlets that open to large bays, and the largest of these forms an ideal natural harbor, with easily controlled access. Because of this, the island has seen throughout its history a lot of maritime traffic, and Willemstad, the capital, and only town to speak of, has become one the Caribbean's busiest ports. In earlier centuries the island was a center for the slave trade, and in the early twentieth century the Shell Oil Company built a huge refinery by the bay, where crude oil from the Venezuelan mainland was brought for processing.

In the 1940s Curaçao's population was approximately 60,000; it has grown close to 160,000 today. It was ethnically diverse, although descendants of slaves constituted the

majority. Curaçao had been a Dutch colony since the seventeenth century, but the Dutch segment of the population was small—I would estimate it at no more than ten percent. The earliest European settlers also included a group of Sephardim (Portuguese Jews), whose descendants, while few in number, had become prominent in the island's economic and social life. Their beautiful Synagogue "Mikvé Israel" in downtown Willemstad is the oldest in the Americas that has remained in continuous use. Its floor is covered with sand, also found in ancient synagogues in Jamaica, St. Thomas, and Surinam, which serves as a soft carpet.

Synagogue Mikvé Israel in the 1940s

Dutch was the official language of the government and the schools. However, when among themselves, virtually all Curaçao natives, regardless of ethnic origin, including those of Dutch and Sephardic descent, spoke Papiamento, the island's peculiar creole. Papiamento is a mixture of (in order of importance) Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, and elements from African and Indian languages, but with a grammatical structure all its own. It is only spoken in Curaçao and, in slightly different versions, in the neighboring Dutch islands of Aruba and Bonaire.

In this curious place, so unlike where we came from, my family tried to resume normal life. I was sent to a public school, where my class reflected the island's population. There were only a few Dutch kids amidst a majority of Curaçaoians, who conversed with each other in the to me unintelligible local language. Most students were of mixed race, as were many of the teachers—Curaçao never had segregated schools. I quickly got used to this diversity, and some of my friendships developed across racial and

ethnic lines, although most of my friends were from Dutch families. A bigger problem at first was that I entered school after having missed a year. I was behind my classmates in several subjects and had a tough time. My teacher seemed to have little understanding of the cause of my difficulties and called my parents to complain about my poor performance. The mother of one of my friends even asked my mother if I was a little retarded. However, it did not take me more than a term to catch up, except that I never developed a decent writing hand. I also performed poorly in physical education classes, due to the long period away from physical activity with kids my age. In that area, it took much longer to catch up with my classmates.

I joined the cub scouts, or rather, was coerced by my father to do so. He probably thought it would help with my social reintegration. I did not care much for scouting, especially not for the camping trips to remote spots on the island. I did not enjoy roughing it (still don't) and disliked the quasi-military discipline. On the other hand, I did not need my parents' encouragement to attend regularly the Friday evening services at the old synagogue, and they did not give me any. They themselves only came to High Holiday services and special functions. I doubt that my synagogue attendance was motivated by religious fervor. In fact, I don't think I was a believer even back then. In part I was attracted by the personal charm of Rabbi Jessurun Cardozo, with whose children my brother and I had formed friendships. I also enjoyed the ceremony and, even more, the socializing over a little glass of sweet wine that took place afterward.

In December 1943 Hermi celebrated his Bar Mitzvah at the Mikvé Israel Synagogue, with a reception held afterwards. Those attending included several friends from the Gibraltar Camp who had also settled in Curaçao, but the most special guest was Opa Willi, my father's father, whom we had not seen since before the war. He had managed to flee from Antwerp at the outbreak of the war, and after a brief stay in Lisbon, made his way to the U.S. He flew in from New York to join the celebration and, aside from the two of us and our parents, he was the only member of the family present at the event.

Hermi's Bar Mitzvah celebration in Curaçao in 1943. My family is in front on the left; Opa Willi in the middle of the third row, looking to the right; Rabbi Jessurun Cardozo with bow tie in front on the right.

In spite of the return to a more or less normal life, we never considered Curaçao anything but a temporary and in a sense enforced refuge. We eagerly awaited the day when we could return to our homeland. This explains why I never bothered to learn Papiamento, something for which in retrospect I cannot forgive myself. At the time it did not seem to be a very useful skill for making one's way in the world once we left the island. Besides, it would not have been easy to learn, since it was not taught in the schools.

My parents anxiously followed the shortwave BBC news broadcasts to track the progress of the war. The invasion of Normandy on D-day (June 6, 1944) raised our hopes. However, the advances of the Allied troops were slow and included several setbacks, such as, in September, the battle of Arnhem. But finally, in May 1945, five years after its invasion of the Netherlands, Germany capitulated.

Throughout the years since we left Holland, we received no news concerning the family we left behind, and my mother's worry about the fate of her parents continued to gnaw at her. Shortly after the end of the war, she learned that they had been gassed in Auschwitz. I was with my mother when she checked through typed registers of victims and found their names. According to my father, the loss changed her profoundly and permanently. Irrational guilt about having left them behind and the years of not knowing

but fearing the worst—which now had come true—were no doubt strong contributing factors.

MANHATTAN (November 1945 – March 1946)

Immediately after the war, Holland was in chaos. However, late in 1945 my parents decided the time had come to go back. The return journey provided me with one more exciting experience. We had to go by way of New York because at the time it was not possible to sail directly from Curaçao to Holland. This gave us a chance to spend time with Opa Willi, my only surviving grandparent. (Oma Sabientje, his wife, had died back in 1936 of a heart attack.)

We remained in New York for four months, waiting for a boat that would take us to Holland. We stayed in a hotel on the Upper West Side, only a few blocks from where I was to live sixteen years later while a graduate student at Columbia. I visited the Empire State Building and was introduced to such thrills as the Horn & Hardart Automats. When it appeared that we would be staying a while, I was enrolled in a nearby public school. At the time, my command of English was at best rudimentary, but this was not a major problem, since most classmates were in the same boat. We looked at books with lots of colored pictures and were shown many educational movies, neither of which I was used to from previous schooling. Otherwise, I did not learn much, but I did finally figure out what that word meant that the teacher kept yelling at us and that in my mind I spelled as "kwaiet."

In March 1946 we finally obtained passage on a ship that could take us back to Holland. The MS Talisse was a freighter built in 1930 and during the war had been converted to a troop transport ship—the accommodations were commensurate with that purpose. The tiny cabins housed six in two adjacent triple bunk beds, and families were split, with its members rooming with others of their gender. We dined while sitting on benches at long tables and were served in shifts at set hours. That ship offered no luxuries, but it did finally take us back home!

TERUG IN HOLLAND – BACK IN HOLLAND! (March 1946 – January 1949)

When as kids we used to make a trip, even if it was just a short car ride, upon our arrival back home my father would always announce to us, like a bus operator, “Einde van de reis! Terug in Holland!” (“End of the journey! Back in Holland!”). We were finally back in Holland, after four years that to me seemed like an eternity. But then, I was only six when I left and nearly eleven when I returned.

We immediately went to look at the old house on the Bentinckstraat, which was still standing, but in appalling shape. It had been evacuated because it was only a block from an area razed by the Germans and prepared as part of a defense line against a possible Allied invasion by sea (the "Atlantic Wall") and launching site for rockets.

While we were standing in front of the house, a boy of about my age came running across the street toward us. It was Frits, who had been my playmate since we first moved to the Bentinckstraat in 1938. Years later I asked him what his reactions had been to our sudden, unannounced departure in ’42. He responded that it seemed very strange: "You were there every day and then one day you weren’t." His family figured that either we had been picked up in the middle of the night for deportation to the East, or we had in fact managed to make our getaway. Frits did not expect ever to see us again, and it was a joyous surprise when all of a sudden we reappeared, right in front of our house! Through the years Frits and I would lose track of each other, but some sixty years later his sister found me on the Internet, which, in 2017, led to a happy reunion in the Bentinckstraat.

It took several months to restore our house to a livable condition, and during this time we stayed in the house of some friends. When we were able to move back in, it seemed that finally our wandering had come to an end. We always assumed that after returning to Holland, we would pick up our lives where we had been forced to leave off four years earlier and that we would look back on the escape and its aftermath as no more than an unfortunate, temporary interruption. At first that expectation appeared to come true. My father went back to work for the BATO, his old construction company. As for me, the next few years seemed finally to be the resumption of the normal childhood that had been abandoned when we fled. Indeed, those years back in Holland were the happiest of the earlier part of my life, the one period when I did not feel like a stranger in a strange land.

I was placed in a neighborhood school, no longer off-limits to Jews. I did notice at first some resentment from my schoolmates, who in the preceding years of food and fuel shortages had suffered hunger and cold while I supposedly was enjoying myself in tropical Curaçao. However, I soon was able to win them over by distributing chewing

The house at Bentinckstraat 131, ca. 1947.
In front from left to right: Lex, a friend (Oscar), and Hermi

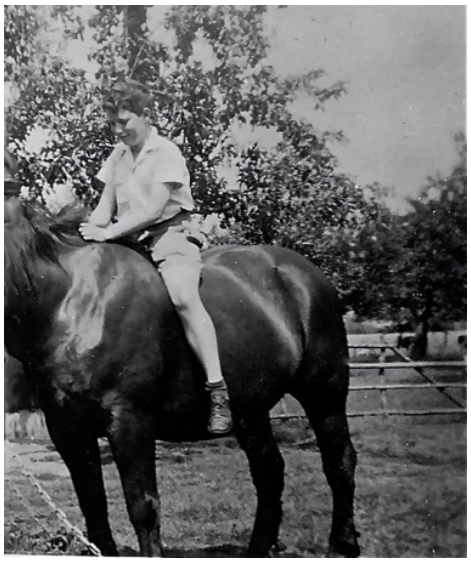
gum brought back from the US—a commodity still virtually unavailable in Holland. In fact, in the period immediately following the end of the war, many goods were still scarce. Most foods continued to be rationed, and at first, one even had to get a government permit to buy a bicycle, awarded only if one could establish a need for such a vehicle.

Permits for car ownership were still more difficult to come by; nevertheless my father was able to obtain one. He was supervising two big construction projects in the eastern part of the country: a huge sewage treatment plant in Enschede, and land reclamation at an inland sea (the Noord-Oost Polder). This required him to visit those projects once a week, and so we ended up having the only car on our block. (Today you

can hardly find a parking space there). He used the car only for those visits, not for transportation within the city, for which, as for every other Dutchman, the bicycle was the preferred vehicle. Occasionally we were allowed to join him on those cross-country car trips, which was a big treat!

A fringe benefit of my father's weekly trips was that he would often stop by a farm on the way to get some fresh dairy products and produce, still hard to obtain in the city. He became friendly with the farmer and arranged for me to spend a couple of summer weeks on his farm. I had a great time there, sharing life on the farm with the farmer's kids. A special attraction for me was an old-fashioned harmonium in the parlor, where the family would gather on Sunday mornings to sing hymns. I would sneak in there at other times and pump away while trying out its many stops.

With mother on the Dutch lakes



On the farm, attempting to ride a horse

In the fall of 1946, I entered a wonderful private high school, het Nederlands Lyceum, one of the best in the country, where I could study Latin and Greek as well as modern languages and sciences. The teachers had the equivalent of PhDs in their subjects rather than degrees in education, and the school organized a full program of social and cultural activities. My extracurricular life fared equally well. On my bicycle, I had easy access to all of The Hague and the nearby countryside, and I made many exploratory trips, in the company of friends or by myself.

In 1948 I celebrated my *bar mitzvah* in the beautiful old synagogue on the Wagenstraat, amidst what was once The Hague's thriving Jewish neighborhood. The ceremony required that at the Saturday morning service I read a portion of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), hand-lettered in Hebrew on a sacred scroll stored in the synagogue's ark. In order to be able to chant the Hebrew text according to the traditional formulas, I received many months of weekly coaching, but I did my family proud. Incidentally, that synagogue had been set on fire in 1941 by members of the Dutch Nazi party, but it was restored after the war. In 1975 it was closed since the Jewish community of The Hague had dwindled from 17,000 to 2,000 and the synagogue was no longer able to attract much of a congregation. It would be opened again six years later, repurposed as a mosque.

All dressed up for my *bar mitzvah*, May 1948

Something much more important than any of this happened during my years back in The Hague. I discovered music, or rather, music exploded within me—an expression that will probably only make sense to those who have experienced it. During the escape, I never had access to a piano or to music lessons. Now my parents decided it was time to remedy this gap in my upbringing, and they engaged someone to come to our home to teach me accordion. My teacher arrived on a motorcycle wearing a leather jacket, and when I did well on my lesson, he would take me for a ride afterward. However, not long

after I started on that instrument (for which I still have a special affection), I became more and more exposed to classical music through educational concerts organized by my school. I tried to play that kind of music on my accordion, but soon realized it was not the ideal vehicle if one wanted to go beyond polkas and waltzes. I began a campaign for my parents to acquire a piano, and when they finally relented and bought a second-hand upright, I entered a heaven that I have never left.

My parents were not having such a good time. The Holland they came back to was not the Holland they had left four years earlier. So many of their friends and family members were gone and there were so many painful reminders of the past. Another matter was that the political situation in the East became increasingly threatening. We were only a few hours from the boundary of Soviet domination and my parents had no illusions about Stalin and his ambitions, even if he had helped to defeat Hitler. They did not relish the thought of being once again trapped under a brutal dictatorship. My parents were by no means the only Jewish survivors who felt uncomfortable in post-war Holland: a large percentage decided to turn their back to their one-time homeland, and emigrated, either to North or South America or to Israel.

My father got the idea to return to Curaçao and open a branch of the BATO. With the post-war boom he expected that there would be plenty of work on the expansion of the island's harbor. My mother was enthusiastic about the idea. So it happened that in January 1949 my family departed for the second time for Curaçao, and we sailed once again by way of New York. There, a nasty immigration official almost sent us to Ellis Island because we did not have tickets for the continuation of our journey in hand. Only the intervention of an agent of the Holland-America Line saved us from such a forced detour.

CURAÇAO ONCE MORE (February 1949 – August 1952)

My father's venture worked out well. He was successful in establishing and building up the branch of his Dutch company. During its heyday, it employed as many as 300 people. He had some experience as an architect, and after we had been back for a year he designed and built a beautiful house for us.

For me, the move back to Curaçao was not so happy. The school I attended, Peter Stuyvesant College (the only public high school on the island, now known by the more politically correct name of Kolegio Alejandro Paula), followed the same government-dictated curriculum as Holland's university-preparatory schools. But the classical languages option, which I had elected in the Hague, was not offered, and the school provided little in the way of extra-curricular activities. Musical opportunities on the island also were scarce. There were few concerts and I had a hard time finding a decent piano teacher. However, sometimes limitations are transformed into virtues. I found a few other musicians of my age and together we organized our own musical life. We frequently got together to play, to listen to recordings, and to argue about the relative merits of our favorite composers and performers. We organized our own concerts and eventually started a youth orchestra that continued to exist until 2000.

Curaçaos Jeugdorkest in 1951
I am the entire cello section, to left of the conductor

In spite of my passion for music, I never seriously considered a musical career. In our social milieu, it was not deemed a suitable choice for a young man. How would I earn a living? Playing in nightclubs? There were no role models for a musician in Curaçao. The music teachers I knew were a moonlighting dentist and the wives of a veterinarian and a minister. The expectation had always been that after graduation I

would follow in my father's footsteps and go to the Technical University in Delft to study engineering. However, during my final year in high school, both my parents and I were having second thoughts. My parents feared that if I were to return to Holland I would be drafted and sent to Indonesia to defend the remnants of the Dutch colonial empire. They proposed that I join my brother in America. While we were still in Holland, Herman had left to continue his schooling in the United States, and he now was studying civil engineering at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. But I had a different plan for my future in America.

I had been enjoying my math and physics courses and was intrigued by the prospect of unlocking the secrets of the universe. Although in the pre-Sputnik 1950s physics seemed less practical in terms of employability than civil engineering, my father had enough respect for the field to consider it an acceptable career choice. He had more trouble understanding why I was adamant about not wanting to attend Ohio University.

In Curaçao, we knew little about American universities. People tended to choose institutions where there was already someone from the island. This explains why more than half a dozen sons from Curaçao families were attending Ohio University. Besides, since Ohio was a state institution in a small town, both tuition and living expenses were low, which was important to parents who earned their salaries in Curaçao guilders rather than American dollars. But I was not keen to move to a little Midwestern community, where cultural offerings were likely to be even worse than in Curaçao. In an American music magazine to which I was subscribed, *Etude*, I saw an advertisement for Boston University. I knew nothing about that university, but I had heard about Boston and knew it had a great symphony orchestra. I wrote for information and forms and sent in my application. Since Boston University was private, tuition was considerably higher than at Ohio (almost $500 as opposed to less than $100!) and living expenses in the big city would no doubt also be steeper. Nevertheless, after I had been admitted my father relented, but not until he extracted from me the promise to live as frugally as possible. (I did—I still have copies of the accounts I sent my father, which itemized the purchase of every candy bar.)

In August 1952 I sailed from Willemstad to Tampa in the company of my father and my brother, who had spent the summer in Curaçao. Our vessel was the Donges, a

French asphalt tanker. Because asphalt needs to be kept at a high temperature to prevent it from solidifying, it was unbearably hot onboard—so hot that you could not walk on the decks with your bare feet. After having cooled off a few days in Tampa and visited the Barnum & Bailey Circus Museum in St. Petersburg, we took a Greyhound bus to New York. From there my Uncle Kurt, who was now living in New York, drove us to Boston. After my father saw that I was properly installed in my dormitory, he left me to make the return trip home, and I began my new existence as an independent adult.

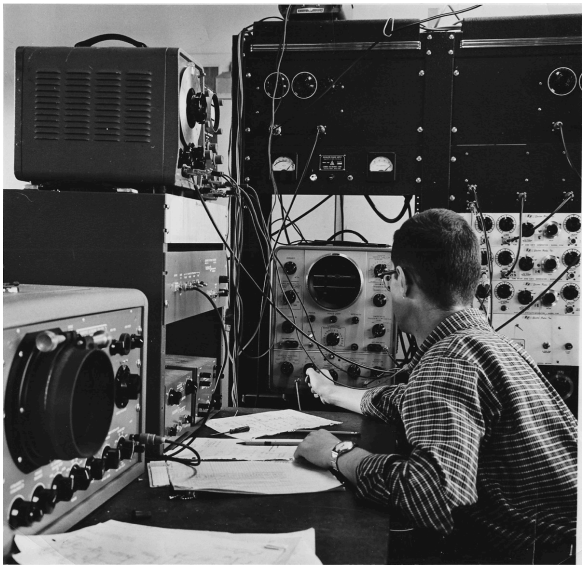
AMERICA (August 1952 – present)

I was only seventeen but already had a tumultuous life behind me. I had never lived in any place for more than two or three years, I had crossed the oceans by ship nine times, and I had attended eleven different schools, not counting kindergarten. During my first years in America, I was on the move almost as often.

One effect of the frequent moves during my childhood was that I could quickly adapt to new surroundings. It did not take me long to become comfortable in Boston, even though the school English with which I arrived was far from perfect. That I did not stay there for more than two years was not because I was not happy there. Boston proved to be as much a musical and cultural paradise as I had hoped. I enjoyed my professors and fellow students, and I fell in love with the city, some neighborhoods of which reminded me of The Hague. However, I soon discovered that if I was going to be serious about physics, Boston University was not the place to be. I applied for transfer to Harvard and the University of Chicago. Harvard turned me down even though I had earned straight A's (GPA of 4.0) in my last semester—all the more curious since Chicago offered me a full-tuition scholarship. So, in 1954 I moved West to one of the most exciting physics programs in the country, at that time arguably more exciting than Harvard's. Enrico Fermi was on the faculty, although he died a few months after I arrived.

In 1957, after earning my MS in Physics, I took off a year to work at the University of Miami's Marine Lab and to see more of my parents, who now were living in Miami. There, unexpectedly, a new musical perspective opened up for me. At a small shop specializing in selling and teaching early music, I discovered a little harpsichord—

an instrument that I had heard in concerts and on recordings, but never laid hands on. I fell in love instantly, and soon I was playing it in concerts with other musicians in the area. From Miami I moved on to New York, to obtain my Ph.D. at Columbia, and from there back to Boston, where I took a job with a small research and consulting company. This time I managed to stay in Boston for a long stretch, from 1960 to 1974.



Researching sound in the ocean, Miami Marine Lab, summer 1957

Two happenings during those Boston years would have a major impact on my further life. In 1965 I married a wonderful woman, Gian Lyman. She came from Montreal, and like me, was passionate about music, particularly about early music (music from the time of Bach and earlier). She was a very fine player of the viola da gamba and we performed together in many concerts. Unfortunately, she began suffering from a progressive heart condition, which proved ultimately fatal, and after nine years of marriage I lost her. I continue to mourn her to this day.

It was largely through Gian's encouragement that during this period I made the decision to abandon a successful career as a scientist and began pursuing the study of musicology. Although I was already in my middle thirties, I returned to graduate school to obtain a second PhD. After a lengthy stint of dissertation research in Italy, I completed my studies at Brandeis University and took a position at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Part of my duties there were directing an early music ensemble, and it was while auditioning for this ensemble that I first set eyes upon the woman with whom I was to

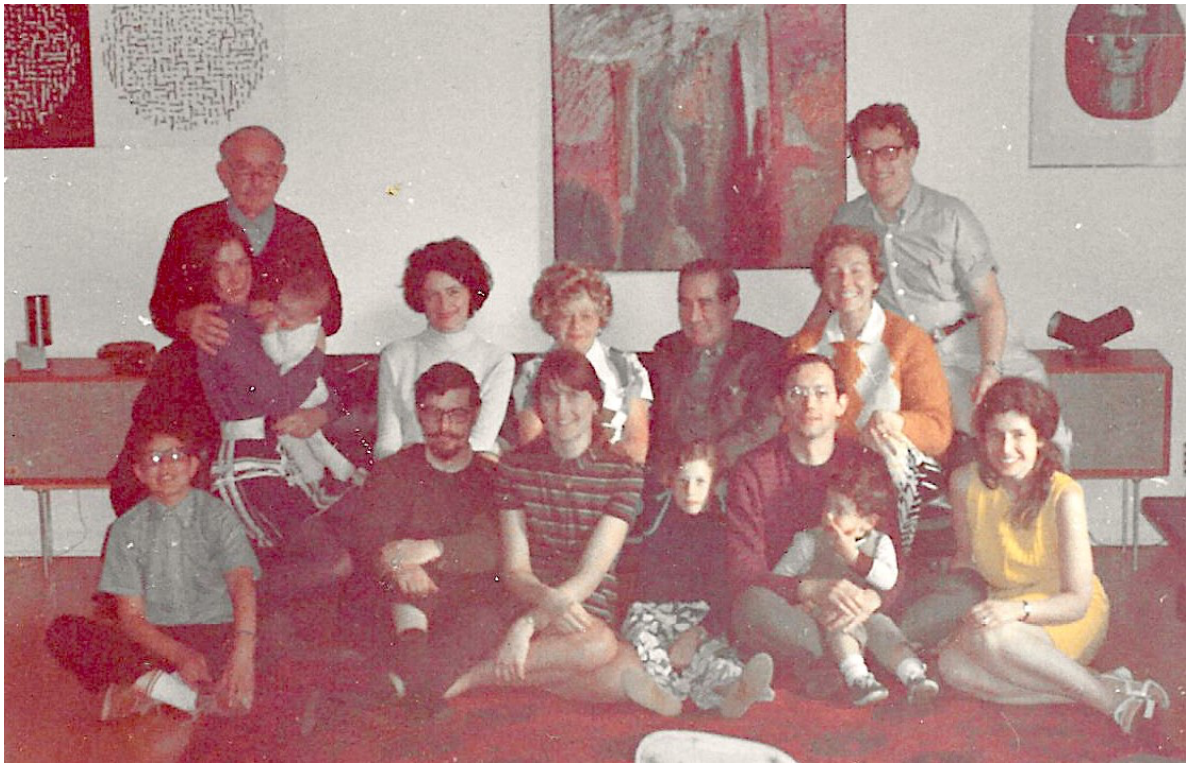
share the rest of my life. Kathy was, and still is an extraordinary musician, although she professionally worked in arts management. We were married in 1977, and in 1984 we moved to Durham, North Carolina, where we both took positions at Duke University. I served as Professor in the Music Department, including some years as department chair, while Kathy became Executive Director of Duke Performances, the university's presenting organization for the performing arts. After we both retired, we moved to a retirement community, Croasdaile Village, where we continue to lead active lives, including much travel and music-making.

With Kathy in Norway (2018)

A few lines about what happened to the rest of my family. Two years after I left home, in 1954, my parents moved to Caracas, Venezuela. In 1957 they settled in Miami, where they spent the remainder of their lives. My father ended up working for the City of Miami and played an important role in the construction of a new port facility that accommodates large cruise ships. Although my parents' marriage had its rocky moments, they stuck it out together. My father died unexpectedly in his sleep in 1988, six months short of their sixtieth wedding anniversary, and my mother passed away in 1992. Hermi worked most of his professional life for Bell Labs in New Jersey. His original specialty was in psychoacoustics but in later years he worked mainly on international communications, for which he made frequent trips across the globe, especially to Geneva

and Tokyo. He left this world in 2017, survived by his wife Joan, his children Russell and Julie, and Julie's children Alexandra and Evan. We all miss him terribly!

The good news is that today my parents' grandchildren and great-grandchildren are thriving, as are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of my Uncle Kurt and Aunt Ina. None would have existed if it weren't for the daring Great Escape of Sera, Edy, Ina, and Kurt Silbiger!



The Silbiger Clan in 1970
From left to right, front row: Herman's son Russ, Lex, Gian (my late first wife),
Herman's daughter Julie, Tom with his son Andrew, Tom's wife Sara.
Second row: Flory with her daughter Lara, Ina, my mother, Kurt, Fran (Herman's ex).
Standing: my father and Herman.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Most people who have survived mass killings or other major disasters will at some point ask themselves, why did they survive when so many others didn't? For some, my mother for instance, the question leads to the entirely irrational response of survivor's guilt. But even those who do not suffer such an extreme reaction cannot easily dismiss the question.

For the Netherlands the statistics are dismal. Before the German invasion, approximately 140,000 Jews were living in the Netherlands, which includes the c. 20,000 who, like Anne Frank and her family, fled there to escape persecution in Germany. Fewer than one out of five survived the Holocaust—a considerably smaller proportion than the one out of three for Europe as a whole. Most of those survivors had gone "underground," hiding behind walls, in closets, under floorboards, or in country barns. The number of Dutch Jews who, like my family, tried to survive by fleeing the country is estimated to have been slight, not more than a few thousand.

Why did not more Jews attempt to leave the country, rather than face the uncomfortable situation and uncertain outlook of going into hiding, or just stay at home––as did the majority—in the hope of somehow surviving what was in store for them? There probably was a combination of reasons. Fleeing required knowledge and resources that not everyone possessed. It also required courage and willingness to leave everything and everyone behind: home and comfort, family and friends, and probably even one's native and familiar language—without assurance that one would ever gain them back. When my parents attempted to persuade Oma Mina and Opa Nico to leave, they responded (as reported by my mother): "We are old people and have lived here all our lives. This is our home and our country; we are not going to leave it. Besides, since we don't have that many more years to live, the Germans probably are not going to bother with us."

Fleeing also meant breaking the law—not something most upstanding Dutchmen were in the habit of contemplating even if it was a law imposed by the hated occupiers—and there was the danger of getting caught! That danger was real enough. I still see us in Sancoins waiting with a father for the rest of his family to cross the demarcation line. When that family never showed up, a mixture of sadness and fear took a hold of us.

Several Dutch refugees we encountered in Lyon, who like us were anxiously waiting for their visas to enter Spain, did not receive theirs in time before the German troops occupied Southern France. They were never heard of again. Then there was what happened to Norbert Buchsbaum, the seventeen-year-old nephew of close friends of my parents and neighbors on the Bentinckstraat, who a few months after us tried to follow exactly the same escape route, crossing the border south of Roozendaal with the help of the Resistance. He was betrayed, arrested at the border, thrown into prison, taken to Westerbork, and from there to Theresienstadt and Birkenau. Being a resourceful young man, he somehow managed to survive, and later told his story in *Fotograaf zonder camera* (see the Bibliography).

I mentioned before that the deciding factor for my parents to leave was the inside information from my uncle that the fate the Germans had in store for us was no longer a matter of speculation but had become a certainty. I now strongly believe that another factor in their decision to pack their bags and leave was what my father had experienced during his childhood. He had done this before; when it came to our survival he was not tied to Dutch soil! His own father had already set the example a few years earlier, quickly departing from Belgium when the threat of a German invasion became likely.

It is evident from my story that during our flight we did encounter many close calls and narrow escapes. Did we owe our survival against all the odds to some kind of divine protection? I do not believe, and cannot believe for one moment, that a being exists who decided to spare my family, while at the same time allowing thousands of others to suffer unspeakable misery and a horrible death. (Were such a being to exist, I certainly would not worship it.) That we survived shows merely that at each close call we were just lucky. The probability of such an extended streak of luck may have been small, but it was not zero. That I am here to tell the story proves the case!

* * *

People sometimes ask me how I felt during this journey and how it affected me during my later years. When reporting on our life in Paris I said that I don't recall living in constant fear. In truth, while I have clear memories of many events of that time, I don't remember much about my feelings. A bundle of phobias and anxieties suggest that on a subconscious, if not on a conscious level, I must at times have been deeply afraid. In

most cases the sources of these anxieties are obvious. For example, although I have done much traveling in later life, entering a foreign country and dealing with immigration and custom officials remains a traumatic experience. Even getting ready for a trip can fill me with anxiety, and I take pains to be prepared for all eventualities. Policemen and other people in uniform continue to make me uncomfortable. Other anxieties have faded, however. I used to feel a twinge of horror when suddenly hearing someone speak German, although I studied the language in school and enjoyed its literature. For years I avoided visiting Germany. But when I finally had to go there for my research, I found myself as much at ease as anywhere else.

For me, the disruptive experience, traumatic as it may have been, was not without beneficial consequences. I have already mentioned my ability to adapt quickly to new circumstances. Other legacies include a strong survival instinct and, most important of all, an appreciation of life. When after the war we began to hear the stories of what had happened to the Jews who remained behind, I started to understand the details of what would have been my fate had we not left in 1942. Most likely we would have been picked up a few months later, around the same time as my mother's parents who lived only a few blocks from us, and taken to Westerbork. From there, the nightmarish train would have transported us to Auschwitz, where children and old people did not stand a chance. In all likelihood, I, like my grandparents, would not have survived the year. The rest of my life was therefore a gift. Since my parents risked their lives for mine, it was a most precious gift, not be squandered. I have tried to live by that.