

-TITLE-CORNELUS DE VREEDE
-I_DATE-MAY 27, 1991
-SOURCE-JEHOVAH'S WITNESS
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-IMAGE_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-DURATION-
-LANGUAGES-
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

Cornelus was born 4/24/1916 in Amsterdam. He had two brothers and three sisters. His father had been a greengrocer in Amsterdam. Father sold the store in the 1930's and went onto the flower bulb business in Lisse. At the time the family moved to Lisse, Cornelus, age 10 and half left school and went to work in the bulb business.

What was Holland like in 1933? Many people joined the NSB (Dutch Nazi party). His own boss was an NSB sympathizer. Meanwhile Cornelus had become a J.W.

Although his parents had attended the Dutch Reformed Church, he himself had stopped going to church. He was a supervisor at work and had two subordinates who were interested in studying the Bible. He thought that there was injustice in the fact that a minister earned 40 guilders for preaching once a week, while a laborer, with a family to support, worked for half that income 5 and half days a week. J.W.'s explanations of the Bible, and the J.W. doctrine on existence post-death appealed on him.

He was baptized J.W. in 1937 in Heemstede.

Pictures shown of 1937 preaching, with loudspeaker mounted on a bike. The preaching group attracted people first by use of music and then explained Bible texts. They frequently used a record of a speech about the dealing with Christians by the authorities.

The Dutch government in the 1930's, headed by prime minister Colyn banned all sales on Sundays. This ban affected the Jews whose business used to be open on Sundays (closed on Saturday). It also meant that the J.W.'s could not sell their literature on Sunday. However, the free donations brought in more money than they had earned via sales, previously.

Snapshots are shown : 1) of a boat, the Nomadis. A ship he had bought, after he had given up his business, and become a full time pioneer, together with one young man and a couple. 2) passengers on his boat : Brother Winkler and Sister Bootsman. He points to a placard on the boat announcing a literature depot. He further explains that they used the ship's lights for further advertisements. Adds that he strictly adhered to J.W.'s principles, including no use of tobacco. The ship was used for one and half year for preaching purposes.

During the 1940 German invasion of Holland, the boat was near an airport, near Alkmaar. The crew was accused by the Dutch of using the ship's lights for signaling to the Germans. At the first interrogation the other three were freed, but he was detained because he was subject to military service. This led to 3 interrogations. He explained that he refused military service. He was then imprisoned. At the time of the Dutch capitulation he was taken from military prison to a police station, and the police set him free.

Later during the war the ship was listed on police lists, which could lead to confiscation of the ship and arrest of the crew. However, one of the police force was sympathetic to the J.W.'s and warned the J.W.'s of this danger. This led to a reorganization within the J.W.'s community. The married couple stayed in Amsterdam, while Cornelus was sent to Zuurdyk (near Groningen).

He continued Bible education and despite German ban, distributed the Watchtower. However, in the country side they were relatively free to preach. Once on the way from Groningen to A'dam, he received very specific directions for obtaining literature. The directions were complex and complicated, because distribution of literature was very dangerous.

He shows a picture of a J.W.'s pamphlet accusing the Roman Catholic Church of being a "Fifth column" (accomplices of the Germans). He received 400 copies of that pamphlet. He explains the mechanics of his distribution.

On a Sunday, mid March 1941, he was arrested during a J.W.'s meeting. The next day he was brought to the Groningen Gestapo. Although on the Sunday only he and one other J.W. were arrested, the Germans were quite insistent that there had to be more J.W. And indeed they then arrested more J.W. members.

On March 16, 1941 he was imprisoned. The (nearby) prisons of Groningen and Leeuwarden were full. Subsequently he was transported, by open car, by the S.S. and NSB to the prison in Assen. He was there for 3 months.

Treatment in prison? He was in solitary. On the second day he was taken for another interrogation by the Gestapo, in a large town house. He was lambasted after refusing to accept a cigarette, and he was shown the 5th column pamphlet. The Gestapo were primarily interested in finding out where Brother Winkler was and where the literature was printed. Cornelus was kicked for his persistent answers of "I don't know".

He was returned to prison. The Dutch guards were O.K. Was he fearful then? He knew of German J.W.'s incarcerated in concentration camps, but at that stage he did not fully realize that he himself could end up in a concentration camp.

On July 7, 1941 he thought that he would be freed. However, he was taken instead to the prison in Utrecht. Then the next morning, he was taken by train, with a full trainload of prisoners to Berlin. He did not know who were the other prisoners.

Only in the train -- it was a passenger train -- did he learn from the S.S. that he had been condemned to a concentration camp. There were no Jews on this transport. From Berlin they were taken, in busses, to Oranienburg (Sachsenhausen). The bus was jampacked and it was a very hot day.

On arrival in Sachsenhausen they had to run the gauntlet between S.S. The sign above the entrance: Arbeit Macht Frei: The whole situation was incomprehensible. The Dutch prisoners did not understand anything about the military regime that reigned there, e.g. they did not know how to salute.

In the beginning 300 J.W.'s were together in one block and they were mutually supportive. This was much better than in other groups where each man was out for himself.

What was his work assignment?

He along with 43 other J.W.'s were assigned to build the water purification system.

He got a uniform on the first day. Later on he was given a better quality uniform. The video tape shows the second uniform, including his number : #39367.

His following work assignments were variable. Some Kapos were O.K., others bad, still others worse. At some time he had a civilian supervisor, who was working under contract, and this boss was able to give him extra food. That assignment -- outside the camp -- lasted 5 months.

Was he asked to renounce his J.W. faith? Yes, but he refused. At that time he was on another assignment, namely batman for a group of S.S. officers (J.W.'s were trusted). He was told that he could be freed after another 6 months, if he renounced his faith, as his predecessor in that job had done. He was not forced to by any cruder means.

What led to the dispersal of the J.W. over the whole camp? This was due to the betrayal by one J.W. who had revealed that some J.W.'s had Bibles. (His own Bible was never found). The J.W. who did betray the others was indeed freed from the camp. But, at the exit he was met by the Wehrmacht, told he could have 14 days leave, and then would be sent to the Eastern front.

He shows another brochure which was produced by Brother Winkler, who spent most of his imprisonment in the infirmary. The infirmary was to a large extent manned by J.W. and the S.S. rarely entered that barrack out of fear of contagion, enabling the J.W.'s to be pretty well organized. Most of the time the J.W.'s worked outside of the camp proper. They arose at 4.15AM, went to appellplatz, and by 6AM were marched to their work sites. Almost always the J.W.'s had a chance to discuss their Bible texts.

Asked about mistreatment of prisoners Cornelius answers that there was only mistreatment. After reveille they had to make up their beds -- 3 tier bunks -- If only one bed was in disorder, the S.S. would mess up everything, and the whole column was kicked and forced to do exercises. Corpses were trod upon. The "Muselmen" were routinely kicked.

Change of jobs? He did all sorts of jobs. That was OK, because some assignments were better than others, e.g. when he waited on some of the officers, it was easy to steal some of their food, without their noticing it.

Did he have any correspondence with the outside world? He answers NO, but then goes on to say that once in three months he was able to write 4 lines to the outside. He shows an example of these, pointing out that below the 4 lines is an S.S. stamp explaining that the J.W. prisoner is still stubborn, unwilling to renounce his faith, and thus deprived of correspondence with his family. (he must mean limited to only a few lines).

He talks of being batman to the head commander of the camp: Adolf Gustav Schorke. During that assignment he was not allowed to be outside of the camp unless accompanied by a member of the S.S. One of his tasks was changing the bedlinen for Schorke. for this he had to obtain the fresh laundry, and to make sure that he was inside the commander's quarter's prior to 9 a.m. At 9 a.m. the flag would be raised, and he did not want to salute the flag.

One day he was delayed by the laundry service, and ran into the commander's quarters. However, he is caught, and is told to report the next day at 1.30 p.m. to receive 25 lashes. He did report. However after the commander and he had walked about 200-300 meters, and Obersturmfuhrer was called to the telephone. He was never called to report for the lashes again. He tells this incident as proof that even inside the camp, the J.W.'s kept to the principle of neutrality (not saluting the flag).

The deathmarch started on April 20, 1945. At night there had been a lot of planes which cast a circle of light over Berlin. One hour later that led to a heavy bombardment of Berlin.

He marched through Berlin. At the time he had been in a small camp, Lichtenfeld, After the bombardment of the Reichskanzlerei, J.W.'s were chosen to do the after-clean-up, e.g. Himmler's room.

At the time of the disbanding of Sachsenhausen, and the beginning of the deathmarch, the J.W.'s were segregated from the other prisoners, and were the last group to leave the camp. He mentions that female J.W.'s [from Ravensbruck? Other J.W.'s do not mention this combination.] were also gathered in the J.W. barracks. He mentions the issue of the ill, e.g. Brother Winkler. He mentions the wagon, given to the J.W.'s and the two crates, they were to pull along. Mentions that the wagon was used to pull the ill.

The march lasted 14 days. Their group contained 230 men. They were given neither food nor drink. The Germans arranged that the female J.W.'s would not sleep in the forests, but would be quartered at farms. The women thus were able to smuggle in some food. They were supposed to be taken to a ship in the harbor, and then sunk. But the situation became increasingly confusing, because the Germans did not know the location of the Allied troops.

At some point the J.W.'s used their plates to dig for water, and did find water. At that point the S.S. kept other prisoners away, so only the J.W.'s were able to use the water.

What was the crates' content? At some point an S.S. Kommandant arrived with a car and grabbed the crates. He obtained one. The other crate was dropped and burst open: it was filled with jewelry. That Kommandant was arrested by U.S. troops. Most of the S.S. had fled.

At the time the Allied troops arrived, they allowed the J.W. to take whatever they could from the German cars. The first night the J.W.'s had to organize themselves with tents and blankets, taken from military trucks.

A few days later, in Schwering, the Allied troops organized housing etc, in a horse's stable where they were to remain for ten days. Then they were transported by truck to Holland. They reached Holland on May 20, after they had received medical treatment.

On return he worked again as a pioneer in Deventer. On May 25, 1946 he married. He worked for a while in a sanatorium, where he witnessed a lot of corruption, so he quit that job.

His wedding photograph is shown. Right after the war American J.W.'s sent a lot of clothes to Dutch J.W.'s. The bridal gown was made out of an American nightgown.

After his brief job in the hospital he started to work in a textile factory, where he remained for 18 yrs. Then he retired. He got pension from work as well as a pension from the Stichting van 1945 (Dutch Gov't Restitution fund for war victims).

His wife is introduced on the video.