

-TITLE-WILLEM LAROS  
-I\_DATE-FEBRUARY 1, 1991 - DELFT - NETHERLANDS  
-SOURCE-JEHOVAH WITNESS  
-RESTRICTIONS-  
-SOUND\_QUALITY-  
-IMAGE\_QUALITY-  
-DURATION-  
-LANGUAGES-DUTCH WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATOR  
-KEY\_SEGMENT-  
-GEOGRAPHIC\_NAME-  
-PERSONAL\_NAME-  
-CORPORATE\_NAME-  
-KEY\_WORDS-  
-NOTES-  
-CONTENTS-

Willem Laros is 88 years old; he was born 9 June 1902 in Delft. His father, Mr. Laros (first name unintelligible) was a stone mason. His mother was Anna Wilhelmina (maiden name unintelligible). He had only an elementary level of schooling. Once he left school, he worked several jobs, including bicycle repair and porcelain manufacture. (He shows a photograph of him, his wife and two children, circa 1936, of him and three other gentlemen in an automobile, circa 1920, and a portrait of him, circa 1920). He married at age 24. Delft of 1933 was small and old. The Dutch people were concerned about the rise of Hitler in Germany. They had heard about the arrest of some groups of people in Germany. He doesn't know if any Germans came to Holland to organize the Nazi Party there; a lot of Dutch people had joined the NSB Party already. Dutch involvement in the Nazi Party began after a bombing in Rotterdam in 1914. He was never involved in a political party. He was born into the Reform Church. In 1935, through one of his brothers, he came into contact with the Jehovah's Witnesses. He was very excited about what the Witnesses taught. The Witnesses were having Bible studies at his brothers house, but his brother had a three week old baby, and so the studies were moved to his house. The Witnesses did not mention Hitler in their studies. He remembers being very attracted to the concepts of a Heavenly Kingdom.

He was baptized on 15 April 1934 in Brussels. At first he would do preaching work once a week, but later he became more active. There were three Witnesses from Delft who were very active in preaching. There were assigned by the Church to preach in various suburbs in Holland. From 1937 to 1940, the Witnesses were free to engage in their religious activities.

After Hitler invaded Poland, there was tension in Holland; the Dutch expected Hitler to invade Holland, too. When he did in 1940, the Witnesses lost their freedom to preach. Before 1940, the Witnesses had been publishing their materials in Hempsted, which is in North Holland, near Haarlem.

The Witnesses had to stop their work immediately after the invasion. He was arrested by a Dutch policeman with one other person, Mr. Molerfeld, while his wife was out preaching. His three year old daughter was home with him; she was left with a neighbor. He had been turned in by a Witness in the Hague. He had been a supervisor of many Witnesses at the time.

The Dutch police brought the two men to the Hague, where they were interrogated by German SS officers. The officers mocked Willem and his religion; he was asked to sign a letter renouncing his faith. He received no physical abuse. He was threatened with imprisonment if he refused to sign the letter. The Witnesses had prepared themselves for persecution before the invasion. Mr. Molerfeld did break under the pressure; he signed the letter after three weeks in jail. Willem was in jail for three months. He was transferred to Dusseldorf, where he stayed for one week. He was then transported to Hanover, and then to Berlin, where he spent three or four nights. Then he was brought to Sachsenhausen. He was transported in a prisoners van. There were different prisoners transported with him, about 20 in all. He met another Witness near Hanover. The other prisoners included those "reluctant to work," Jews, Gypsies and others. (He shows his ID number badge with a purple triangle.) He had to wear a purple triangle. Red triangles were for the political prisoners, green for the criminals, and black for those "reluctant to work."

Upon arriving at Sachsenhausen, they were all cleaned and then forced to put on prison clothing. They were then tested by doing physical exercises. The prisoners had to be intimidated. This was four months after Willem's arrest. (He displays letters written to his wife from Sachsenhausen.) He sent letters to his wife; he was allowed to see her while at the Hague, but he could not write until he got to Sachsenhausen. He could write once a month, only a few lines, and could receive correspondence once a month.

The Witnesses were in solitary confinement; they couldn't have contact with others. The same block housed criminals who had committed crimes while in the camp. The criminals were severely beaten, usually with whips. The Witnesses were treated relatively better. The Witnesses could have Bible study together in their isolation. Whenever new Witnesses were brought in, especially from Germany, they would ask the newcomers for information on the latest teachings of the Church. But one of the Witnesses informed on the Bible study, and the Witnesses were scattered throughout the camp, not allowed contact.

He remembers that when the prisoners were brought together, those who were too weak were beaten to death. Once a Communist was hung in front of all the prisoners. If people tried to escape, they were killed and placed at the entrance of the camp as a deterrent to others who were thinking about escape. He never saw anyone commit suicide.

He did all sorts of jobs at the camp. He had to take care of the wood. Then he had to dig holes for drains; some holes had to be as deep as eight meters. In the winter, his fingers would freeze and shorten in the cold. The prisoners wore striped clothing. For a while he worked in the laundry, and he stole an extra shirt to wear underneath. When the extra shirt was discovered, he was punished. The prisoners could wear only the shirt and pants, and nothing else. They had wooden shoes with no socks. The clothes were not regularly washed -- maybe once or twice a month. They did have other clothes to wear while their clothes were being washed. They also had hats. He makes a comment about being forced to take the hat and something else off at the same time, and being forced to repeat the action until they got it right. This had to be done every morning and night when the prisoners were counted. If anyone was missing, all the prisoners had to wait until that person was found. Sometimes they ended up having to stand in the rain for hours at night until the person was found, and they would have to go to bed sopping wet.

The Witnesses were often asked to sign a letter renouncing their faith. If they refused, their food would be given to another prisoner and they would be told that their Lord would have to take care of them.

The prisoners had to get up at 5 a.m. The number of people in the barrack rose from 200 to around 600. The barrack had a small (coffer?) into which all the prisoners had to put all their belongings. In the mornings they were given cold soup of water and flour. If the soup hadn't been mixed well, they might only get water. If someone was a laborer, he also got two slices of bread. At night, they got one liter of soup, usually cabbage soup. When he entered the camp, he was 70 kg, then got as low as 48 kg. He was always shivering in the winter. He was in the hospital for a while with dysentery. Even in the hospital he had to work, closing plastic bags.

After some time, he had to go to Flossenberg to pick fruit. For the 600 people in the barrack, there were only 10 toilets, with no privacy.

Sachsenhausen was a general camp. Everyone was mixed in together. At first only the Witnesses were isolated, but after they were turned in for their Bible study, they were spread throughout the camp. The Jews were sent to Dachau.

His work never changed from season to season. Sometimes the prisoners would have no work, and would have to wait until they were reassigned. One day he was assigned to an apple farm. There he ate so many apples that he got a stomach ache. He was always tense while in the camp because there were always SS officers watching him. He would wonder how much longer he would be there and have to endure it.

The Witnesses would try to comfort and strengthen each other; they tried not to look at the other groups of people, who were fighting amongst each other and turning each other in. When the Witnesses were mixed into the rest of the camp, they were free to preach to the political prisoners. He was even able to start a Bible study with some Dutch and Belgian political prisoners. He had found a Bible while working in the laundry, and used it for the Bible study. He kept the Bible under his pillow. Once there was a checkup, and blankets were taken from the prisoners' beds for the war. His Bible was not taken, however; it was put on top of his pillow, so he began to hide it in his clothes.

During the Death March, there were about 38 people baptized in Mecklenberg. (He reads aloud from a paper.) The baptism came when the prisoners heard on 1 May that their liberation would come soon, that the Americans were nearby. The paper from which he read spoke of the Witnesses' desire to greet other Witnesses from all over the world. It was compiled on 1 May 1945, when they heard about their coming liberation. They baptized the people in a bathtub in a military camp in Mecklenberg. They had been put in stables, and it was while in the stables that they arranged for the baptism.

The SS had wanted to shoot the prisoners at the end of the Death March. The Witnesses stayed together on the march, because anyone who tried to escape was shot. The Witnesses would dig deep holes to feed each other. They had been told nothing about where they were going or how long they would be walking. Groups of about 500 at a time left Sachsenhausen. Each group would be given a little food, but when his group, which was the group in which most of the Witnesses were in, was ready to leave, there was no food left. Seventeen female Witnesses had collected food for them, and this lasted them for the first 36 hours. They then came upon a farm, and the people there let them sleep on the farm and gave them food. There was a sick female and a lame male Witness on the march, and the other Witnesses carried them in a cart. His group was the last to leave the camp; he doesn't know why. He remembers that the Witnesses got together and prayed before they left, because they knew they were going to be saved.

They spent a few nights in the forest until the Red Cross brought them some food. They had one packet of food for every six people. They were discovered by the Canadian Army, and were very happy to see them. When they arrived at the camp, there was talk like they had never been gone.

They had to cross the Eisel River to go back to Holland, and then spent the night in a castle near the city of Oman. They returned to Delft in a truck. In the marketplace, he saw his brother, who brought him home on his bicycle. He saw his daughter, who was now eight, and didn't remember him. He felt wonderful to see her again.

How did you stay strong all that time? (He became too emotional to answer the question. He then shows the places he was on a map.)

The Death March was about 200 km on foot from Sachsenhausen to Mecklenberg.

After the war he became a storekeeper in Delft. His wife became lame, and so he had to take care of her. The Dutch government gave him a monthly allowance because of his experiences during the war, so he was able to work part-time and take care of his wife. (His wife sits down next to him.) They have five children and at least 18 grandchildren. They are still active in Bible work; he is an elder in their Church.

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