

[0:00:00]

Robert Buckley: Today is May 24, 1991. It's a Friday, and we're in the country of Belgium. And we're here to do an interview of one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Would you please tell us your name?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Gijsbertus Nicholaas Van der Bijl.

Robert Buckley: I see. And where were you born and when?

Mr. Van der Bijl: August 25, 1914, in Rotterdam, Holland.

Robert Buckley: I see. And what was the name of your mother and your father?

Mr. Van der Bijl: The name of my mother was **Gwenelia Maria Libor** and my father **Marinaas** Van der Bijl.

Robert Buckley: Do you recall their ages as to when they were born?

Mr. Van der Bijl: My father in 1879, April the 8th, and my mother November the 13th, **1890**.

Robert Buckley: OK, very good. And what were the names of your brothers and sisters?

Mr. Van der Bijl: My oldest sister was **Reyta**. My oldest brother was Marinaas and then another sister, Maria Gwenelia, and my other brother, **Gwenelaas**.

Robert Buckley: Were they all born in Holland?

Mr. Van der Bijl: All born in Holland, yeah.

Robert Buckley: And what type of occupation did your father have?

Mr. Van der Bijl: He was an _____.

Robert Buckley: I see and when you were a young man, what type of schooling did you have and your brothers and sisters? What type of trades were you in?

Mr. Van der Bijl: We are all secular education, the general school, you know? After that, I went a little time, some months, to the high school. We call that ... how do we call that now in Dutch? No, the class who becomes after the general school. _____ **[Dutch]** I have some months _____ **[Dutch]**, but then I start to work. And I was working

in an atelier. There there was _____. *[Perhaps speaking Dutch?]*
That is making nice pictures in metal, in silver and in copper,
flowers and everything else. And I went about four years in that
skill, but I did not make big ones, only little ones. And then after
that in the years of '30, in 1930, the big crisis, then I became
without work and I did different other jobs. But then I start become
a sailorman until the war. When the war broke out, I stopped with
sailing, yeah.

Robert Buckley: What did you think in 1933, although you were in Holland, when
Hitler took over in Germany as the chancellor? What was the talk
in the community?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I cannot tell you that actually, but as a young boy, I was reading
much newspapers because I was always a reader, you know, books
and newspapers. And the war _____ that the news not like anyone
but I follow so the politics and so and did not – I have been in the
politics because I have been Communist. Yeah, I was district
overseer of the youth department from the Communists. But then
when I was about 17, 18 years, I stopped with them entirely. And
when I start sailorman, I did not do anything anymore about
politics.

Robert Buckley: What was your religious background if you were following the
Communist philosophy?

Mr. Van der Bijl: My father and mother, they were members of the Protestant
Church, but they did not much do nothing at all.

[0:05:00] Later when my father became old, they start _____ to
the church. And I was for awhile in the Protestant school, learned
about the Bible. I went once in awhile to the catechism so once in
awhile to the church. And what I sometimes did when I was
sailorman, before we depart to other countries, sometimes I was
praying to Jehovah—or to God because I didn't know Jehovah at
that time—to God if I would have a good trip, you know, that I
come back, selfish but anyhow it proved that I had kind of a belief
in God.

Robert Buckley: I see. How old were you went you went on the sea as a sailorman?

Mr. Van der Bijl: 20 years.

Robert Buckley: And that was in what year again?

Mr. Van der Bijl: In 1935.

Robert Buckley: '35.

Mr. Van der Bijl: 1935 I was sailing with the Holland American line.

Robert Buckley: I see. What were you doing, do you recall, when Hitler when into Poland when World War II started?

Mr. Van der Bijl: That was in '39, yeah. At that time about I was just stopped with becoming sailorman because I did not like to go on the sea and to lose my life. So I stopped with that, and I start working onshore in restaurants.

Robert Buckley: And what type of work did you do in the restaurants?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Let me remember the name. I did some work. I was dishwasher and I was also working in the _____ **[Dutch]** in the food department, where we have to give the food out.

Robert Buckley: Do you recall at that time what the people began to say and think about what was happening now in Germany and in Poland in 1939? How did the Dutch people feel?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, my mother did never like the Germans. No, she did never like the Germans. But at the time when I was working in the restaurants, I became a little interested in the truth because I had received a visit of a brother. And he made back calls with me, and I was playing the records for Brother Rutherford at that time.

Robert Buckley: OK, now you were saying that you became interested in the Bible then at that time?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah. He came at my home and he brought some records and playing the phonograph, and I was interested in the truth. And I started to go to the meetings, to the *Watchtower* and the service meeting at that time. This was just before the war.

Robert Buckley: What was on the albums that you heard them playing at your home? What was on the records that they were playing?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I don't remember the talk anymore but I know he – when my father was also listening to the talks. But I don't know anymore the title because that's long ago.

Robert Buckley: So there was Bible instruction?

- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah, in my home. He came at my home with the phonograph. There was a small phonograph, and they had the records, and he put it out and then played it.
- Robert Buckley:* So is that how they used to teach in those days then? Is that how they used to teach in those days?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* In those days, yeah, and telling it to you.
- Robert Buckley:* I see.
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Because—and the reason why I took the truth is I asked the brother a question, and it might’ve been about heaven or something. And I asked him about the soul or heaven or something, and then he show me a text of Psalms. And I said to him, “That’s the truth.” I said, “For that I want to work.” I said, “When I’m free in the evenings, I will also go from door to door.”
- But he told me if we do that, was showing we do it organized. He said, “If you want to come Sunday morning there and there, then you can come on Sunday morning.” And so when we were in the service, he said to me, “Here you have a booklet, and here’s the booklet for refugees.” Because at that time, the war was going on between Russia and Finland. And a lot of people had to escape their country, and the society had a booklet for refugees. And he said, “Here you have a booklet and so and so,” and then I started to preach after three back calls, about. *[Laughs]*
- [0:10:05]
- Robert Buckley:* I see.
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* And I placed the booklet, and I came out. I came on the street again, and he was somewhere else, so at that time I went home.
- Robert Buckley:* I see. So what was in the little publication that you were placing with the people that were coming over from Finland? What kind of information was in those publications?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* I really – I don’t remember, but I know the title. That’s what I know but what was in it? Perhaps it was about the situation at that time, but I cannot tell that for truth. But I know the title because I remember that because the war was going on between Finland and Russia, you know, yeah.
- Robert Buckley:* OK so what was the year then that you became ...

Mr. Van der Bijl: When I became Jehovah's Witness? When I start to preach? It was in April '40, 1940.

Robert Buckley: 1940

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah.

Robert Buckley: I see. All right so then what began to happen in your hometown there then with the work of Jehovah's Witnesses?

Mr. Van der Bijl: We were at that time – I heard it from Brother Kushnir, he was branch servant of Holland, and I heard once a talk. And he said to me at that time there were only 500 publishers in Holland. And Rotterdam was the first congregation in the Netherlands, you know, Rotterdam.

Robert Buckley: Now when you say 500 ...

Mr. Van der Bijl: Publishers in Holland.

Robert Buckley: OK, now what does that mean – “publishers”?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, the publishers that was meeting. They were going from door to door.

Robert Buckley: Ah, it meant people who went from door to door.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, yeah.

Robert Buckley: OK. All right so what began to happen to the people, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Holland at that time? Did they come under any type of a ban that you recall?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, the Germans _____, they did not like it, want them going from door to door and preaching and publications. But at that time, I was not so good in the truth because I had never received a home Bible study. At that time, that was not for everyone custom. They did some, but after three back calls, I went from door to door. So I had some booklets, you know, and the Germans were already in Holland. But what I did, I put the booklets in the mailbox by the people. But we still, when it became perhaps, they were – no, Rotterdam was bombed by the Germans and not our home but now for my brother that was entirely destroyed.

But at that time then they came, the brothers were looking if no one was dead or wounded they said. But sometime later, perhaps a week later, we started to preach again from door to door. I went Sunday morning from door to door even if the Germans were there. And the restaurant where I worked was also destroyed, so I had no work. But then the director, he had gotten hold on another restaurant, and I could work there.

But he told me, “But you don’t get a free day in the week,” so I had to work every day. And so in my time of taking lunch, you know, I went to the post office and I wrote a card to him. And I wrote on it that I did not come anymore, and I offer myself for the pioneer service.

Robert Buckley: OK, now when you say “the pioneer service,” what do you mean by the pioneer service?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, I had heard that you could go – that you could become pioneer, et cetera, and I offer myself. At that time was a pioneer had to make 150 hours in a month.

Robert Buckley: Oh, so you used to teach the Bible for 150 hours a month?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah so 150 hours but we may distract [*sic*] every day one hour for walking or with the bicycle. So in fact it was that we say at least 120 hours. But if you had to walk five minutes to the territory, then you could not distract [*sic*] one hour naturally.

Robert Buckley: I see.

Mr. Van der Bijl: But anyhow, we had to work hard to get our hours. But I became – in Holland was the custom so if someone became pioneer, then he got an assignment, and he got in a home by a family. Yeah, that is I think long time was the custom, perhaps still yet that you come in a home.

[0:15:00] So I had to leave my hometown and my parents, and I went to another place and enter in by a family. And then you had to pay every month three *kronas* for helping the people to take your meals, et cetera. So we had to cover that by placing your literature.

Robert Buckley: I see. So then what was the year and the month then that Hitler came into German, I mean, into Holland.

Mr. Van der Bijl: In Holland and Belgium, May the 10th, 1940. May the 10th, yeah. I remember it.

- Robert Buckley:* May the 10th. So how were you able to carry out your activity, your Bible educational work then, under that type of conditions?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Well, Sunday we had the *Watchtower* study and at that time it was all. It was all.
- Robert Buckley:* You mean that was the only time you got together as a congregation or as a group?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah, it was on Sunday the congregation came together because Rotterdam was at that time no so big congregation, the 500 publishers in Holland, in all Holland. Then Rotterdam wasn't so big, perhaps 100, between 70 and 100.
- Robert Buckley:* Did you always have your meetings at the same place?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* I think I cannot answer because I remember my one place, and I don't remember the other. Yeah, I remember another place because the district servant visit was visiting over there, and he kept the meeting in another place. That's what I remember, yeah, yeah.
- Robert Buckley:* So they wouldn't have it in the same place all the time.
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* The *Watchtower* study I remember only one place. I don't remember other places, no.
- Robert Buckley:* When did your Bible educational work come under ban, heavy ban? Do you recall that?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* I think just when the Germans came in then because before I was arrested, the _____ brothers were arrested, the _____ brothers arrested, you know. They had before me been in prison.
- Robert Buckley:* I see. When was the first one that you heard being picked up by the Germans?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* First one?
- Robert Buckley:* Was it a half a year before you were picked up or a year?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* I don't remember. I don't remember. I think I heard that later, you know. I heard that later on that some brothers were arrested.
- Robert Buckley:* I see.

- Mr. Van der Bijl:* And the district servant also was arrested but later freed. They let him go, you know, yeah.
- Robert Buckley:* All right. When was the first time you yourself were picked up?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* February the 20th in 1941. I was not yet a year baptized. I remember it, yeah, February the 20th 1941.
- Robert Buckley:* And who picked you up?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Dutch policemen.
- Robert Buckley:* And what was –
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Not in uniform, just in his civil[ian] clothing. We were preaching, and I was just looking where the other ones. We were working a block, you know, and the other ones I think they were going so *[gestures around]* and I went so, so that we meet one another and sometime they were away. I think I look to where they are, you know, if I can find them. And then came a policeman. I didn't know exact that it was a policeman because he was in civil[ian] clothing. And he said to me, "Do you also have the books?" I said yes, and then I was arrested. *[Laughs]* I was arrested and had to go to the police office.
- Robert Buckley:* How did they treat you there?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Well, the police, the officer, he was a Nazi. He was a Nazi, yeah. And if I'm right, he phoned the Gestapo—the *Bibelforscher* was arrested. So I could come free, he said this some days later, he said: "You have only to sign a paper that you don't distribute literature of the Watchtower Society. You may keep your Bible, but you don't distribute Bible literature of the Society. Then you come free."
- I said, "If you give me two million guilders, I do not do that."
- He said, "Then you go to the concentration camp."
- I said, "Well, I have time." I told him I have time because at that time we were thinking that the prophets would come, you know. *[Laughs]*
- Robert Buckley:* I see. So how did they treat you in the jail?

Mr. Van der Bijl: It was good because the other policemen, they were not Nazis, you know, and they were very good for me. Even a Protestant policeman, he was very good for me. He gave me some literature, and he brought me food. They were all good for me, yeah, the Dutch police.

[0:20:00]

Robert Buckley: The Dutch police.

Mr. Van der Bijl: They were all good except the two, the one who arrested me, the officer and another policeman that he was always in civil[ian], you know, like the FBI, you know.

Robert Buckley: I see. OK then, after you were in this jail for awhile, where were you moved to?

Mr. Van der Bijl: They sent me to Scheveningen by the Gestapo, and there I had been about three months, three months.

Robert Buckley: OK and how were you transported there—truck or train?

Mr. Van der Bijl: No, with car, the car of the policemen. They sent me there.

Robert Buckley: And how many others were with you when you went?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I alone. Oh no, with another brother—the former branch servant of Holland, yeah, the former branch servant of Holland.

Robert Buckley: What was his name?

Mr. Van der Bijl: _____ Perhaps it come in my mind.

Robert Buckley: That's OK. Maybe you'll think of it.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah but I know him very good.

Robert Buckley: OK so you were transported there, and you were there for three months, and how did they treat you there?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, I had to come in the office perhaps the same day or another day. But then the Gestapo man, **Amos** _____, Amos just as you say English, Amos was his name. He is mentioned in yearbook of Holland. And he asked me, "How did you come in the literature?" I said I had that before the war, but that was impossible because it was February '41 and the war broke out *[laughs]*. So he *[knew]*

that I told him the truth, you know. And then I get clash in my face, but I didn't feel nothing. I feel nothing. Then he sent me to my cell, and I had what they call in German *Einzelhaft*. That means you are solely alone in the cell with nothing else. I could not write a letter to my parents. I did not get no one in my cell, nothing at all. I was all the day alone and alone, yeah, all the day alone and alone. And then later on, they had no place anymore. Then I got someone in my cell. And, well, I went there about for three months, and then they sent me to Sachsenhausen.

Robert Buckley: I see. Now, all the time you were in this particular jail, you were by yourself except for the one other individual there with you?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah.

Robert Buckley: You were in more or less solitary confinement.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, solitary.

Robert Buckley: Solitary confinement.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Most of the time I was there.

Robert Buckley: Did they take your clothing and give you another outfit to wear?

Mr. Van der Bijl: No, not in the prison, no, not in the prison, no, no, no.

Robert Buckley: And your food? How many times a day did you get food?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, in the morning we got one bread like this. [*Forming rectangle with fingers*] In the afternoon, we got potatoes and prison food, you know, yeah. And then in the time of the Germans, there was not much. And then in the evening, I was always saving a little food so that in the evening also something to eat and then some coffee or tea. That was all what we got.

But I had a nice experience in the prison. The Nazi prisonman, Amos, he brought my paper that I was in *schutzstaat*. That means I would be sent to concentration camp. In German they said *schutzstatt* in protection, protection by the state. They call it *schutzstaat* in German. I had a shawl. I don't know how you do that.

Robert Buckley: A scarf?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, a scarf and I had taken some *draad*. I had taken something out, and from the paper bag, what we got sometime a little **soap** in a paper bag. And I had made from the paper bag a G, capital letter G. And I put the *draad* to it, and then the Gestapo man, he brought me that paper, the *schutzstaat* paper that I was in this by the state protection. And he saw that, and he was mad *[laughs]* and he turned down, you know, yeah, and did me nothing.

[0:25:08]

Robert Buckley: OK so you were there then for three months in this jail?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah.

Robert Buckley: Was it a jail or was it a prison?

Mr. Van der Bijl: No, it was a prison. It was a Gestapo prison.

Robert Buckley: A prison.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Special for political prisoners and for Jehovah's Witnesses who were in prison.

Robert Buckley: And how many other Jehovah's Witnesses were there?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I was alone, so far I know, because when we were in the cells to get some fresh air, I had made from paper bag some letters. And then I put on above the door Psalm 34 or Psalm 29. So that when other Jehovah's Witnesses looked there, they could see that they were not alone. But, yeah, we weren't there the whole day. We were only 50 minutes there to get some fresh air. But I don't remember that there was another Jehovah's Witness. It might be, but I don't know.

Robert Buckley: What did you do during that three-month period in order to keep your faith strong?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Oh, I went the whole day walking and little fantasy, thinking a little fantasy. And later when we got a Bible and we got newspapers, so life became a little lighter.

Robert Buckley: You mean they even permitted you to have a Bible for awhile.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, for awhile we had the Bible. Yeah, we had the Bible. And I started to talk with the boy who came later on in my cell, but he was firmly against Jehovah's Witnesses. He was a firm Catholic.

Robert Buckley: Had you heard at this time about Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany, how they had been picked up already, how they were being put into camps and so on? Had you heard about Jehovah's Witnesses?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Perhaps. I cannot remember all the details, but perhaps because I was in contact, when I was free, still in contact with some German brothers who were _____ who escaped Germany and were in Holland, and perhaps they have told me something about that, but I cannot remember something special.

Robert Buckley: Now, on the day that you were transferred from the penitentiary to Sachsenhausen, how did they take you there, and how did they treat you? And who took you there, and how many people were with you?

Mr. Van der Bijl: The Gestapo, he took me with his car and with two other SS Gestapo men. And they brought me to Dusseldorf in the new _____, the new police prison. For that, I was ten days, but life was good there. That means for prison, you know. For a prison, the life was good there because we got our bread, et cetera. It was a new prison. It was a new prison, so it was not dirty there, and I was alone in the cell, alone in a cell, so it was not so bad. But then after ten days, they send me on transport to Hanover, to Hanover. And there I was one night, one night. And then after Hanover, they sent me to Berlin. And there I came on the *Alexanderplatz*. That is the main building from the Gestapo in Berlin, the *Alexanderplatz*.

Robert Buckley: And how did they treat you along the way?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, that was in a train. We were in a train, a train special for prisoners so –

Robert Buckley: Was it one where you had seats or did you stand or ...?

Mr. Van der Bijl: No, seats. We could sit. At that time, there were not so many, many prisoners the last years of the war. And then they came in Berlin, and then was in *Alexanderplatz* we were in a cell, in a cell, and there were 70, 80 prisoners. They had to sleep on wooden *bank* or they had to sleep on the floor.

And the experience: There was a German prisoner and they came—. He was also – he had also be _____ so we were talking about. He said, “Well, you may tonight—” It was a very privilege. “You may tonight sleep on my bed.” And I went sleeping, on my neck I was

feeling – they were biting me, so I went out the bed. I didn't want to sleep any *[laughs]*.

[0:30:00]

Robert Buckley: You mean it was filled with lice?

Mr. Van der Bijl: *[Laughs]* Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was – happily it was one night because it was a terrible and terrible, terrible situation there, yeah, terrible.

Robert Buckley: What all were some of the conditions there? Now, that's in the *Alexanderplatz*?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, you had to be – they had a whole day where they're together there, and the German prisoners they had, they were naturally the boss. They were the chiefs and so the other ones and so most of the people who were there Polish. They were all of them in the Resistance. You know what Resistance means? Resistance that they said they were working from the ground against the Germans. In France they say Resistance and we say *weerstand*. Here in Belgium, we say the *weerstand*.

Robert Buckley: OK, so these German prisoners were with the Resistance.

Mr. Van der Bijl: No, the Polish, mostly the Polish, they were in the Resistance. And the German prisoners, they were the boss, but they were no-good people. The Polish boys, they had no good life there.

Robert Buckley: Oh, they treated the Polish boys very badly?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I think not so good. But I went the next morning already to Sachsenhausen. Then we were sent on a train from Berlin to Sachsenhausen. That's about 30 kilometers, and then we came to Sachsenhausen and, yeah, then ...

Robert Buckley: And how were you transported? Just for a moment to regress, how were you transported from Berlin to Sachsenhausen.

Mr. Van der Bijl: A truck.

Robert Buckley: A truck and how many people were on there with you?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I don't know exactly but 20, 30? We were standing there. We were standing.

Robert Buckley: It was full.

- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah. Oh, pardon. We came in a train to Sachsenhausen, and then we went out the train. Then we had to go in the car from the station and then to the concentration camp. But they were riled and the SS troops, they were riled on the prisoners, but they did not touch me, no. They did not touch me.
- Robert Buckley:* They didn't touch you. Now, when you entered the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, did you still have on your civilian clothing when you entered?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah, when we came in. But when we came in, then had to change my clothing and got the usual concentration camp clothing _____.
_____.
- Robert Buckley:* And what was that first day, the first hour like? Do you remember that at all as you look back in history? What actually happened if you could describe it to us?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* I came in and some prisoners, they were slapped in their face, special youths, special youths. And then they came to me because we had to pass. We had to tell them, to the Gestapo, to the SS troops, for what we were arrested. And so I said to them, I said I was selling Bibles, selling Bibles in Dutch, but they didn't understand me what I was talking, *[laughs]* so they let me go. But other people, they were slapped and mistreated, et cetera. So they let me go, and then they came in the barrackson *[sic]*.
- Robert Buckley:* The barracks?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah and there I came in the by just over this. There was an isolated section that was for Jehovah's Witnesses, and there was for homosexuals, one block for Jehovah's Witnesses, the other block for homosexuals. And there were two other blocks that were for other prisoners.
- Robert Buckley:* So you mean the one barracks just had Jehovah's Witnesses and the barracks next to you had homosexuals?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah, yeah.
- Robert Buckley:* So they didn't permit you to get together?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah, you could, but we did not. We didn't mixed up with those people because we took care for ourselves. We studied. We had *Watchtower* studies. We had talks about the prophecy of Daniel.

There were some leading brothers, German brothers, who were a long time there. And they had the lead in taking care for getting spiritual food.

Robert Buckley: OK so you actually conducted some Bible meetings there then.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Robert Buckley: Were you able to do it openly or did you have to do it secretly?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Secretly because there was always a brother. There was an isolated section, so there was a door, and there was always looking a brother if there came no SS soldier. And when there came one, then we got a sign, and then we stop it, naturally. But at that time we had not much trouble because it was on a Sunday afternoon and he did not on Sunday not take much care about us. So we could study the Bible or the *Watchtower*, what they had smuggled in.

[0:35:00]

Robert Buckley: I see. Now, when you first went into Sachsenhausen on the first day, did they shave your hair?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, yeah, shave your hair _____ and, yeah, shave your hair.

Robert Buckley: And what type of shoes did you receive?

Mr. Van der Bijl: It was wood, wooden shoes, and you got some clothing, and there was not much otherwise. That's all we got. Happily, it was just in summertime. It was a good summer, so we did not have much cold.

Robert Buckley: So when you first got there?

Mr. Van der Bijl: The winter was something else, but we came through it.

Robert Buckley: What type of work were you assigned to do there?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, the first time we had no work. They did not let us work. And they called it the *stam komando*. That means you had the whole day. You had to stand before the barrack the whole day.

Robert Buckley: You stood there all day long.

Mr. Van der Bijl: All day long for some days, perhaps for some weeks. I don't remember anymore the time _____ but it was very bad because it was standing the whole day, [*stands up to demonstrate position*] your belly and your underpart of your body. That became painful there too, not happy but any other – it was not interesting to stand there the whole day _____ [*shuffling*]. If possible, we were talking with one another 'til 12 o'clock until we got the meal.

Robert Buckley: You mean you stood there into the dark?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, about 7:00 to 12:00 and from 1:00 to 6:00 or 5:30 or something, yeah, the whole day standing on the same place.

Robert Buckley: Did you get anything to drink or eat while you were standing there?

Mr. Van der Bijl: No, no, no, no. If there was – it illegal, you know, if you could go in to take some things, but in fact it was forbidden—no drinking or eating.

Robert Buckley: I see so you stood outside.

Mr. Van der Bijl: If we had something we had saved from our morning meal but I think mostly nothing. No one had something.

Robert Buckley: What happened if you had to go to the bathroom? Were you permitted to go to the bathroom at all?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, yeah, yeah, we could do that. But I think if there was no SS soldier. I think if there was an SS soldier, then he could inspect I think. I don't think that we was allowed to go to the bathroom, no.

Robert Buckley: OK, then after a period of time, what assignments did you begin to have then?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Then we start to work in general, the most important whatever there was in the forest, in the forest. And we had to work, to work in forest because the SS was cutting all the trees and they sent – they make the barracks for the things which they want to put there. And there was for us it was an easy work because we looked the Germans as the people who were occupying our country. So if we had a chance, then we did not work so hard for them. But I had for some months, for one and a half year had worked in the forest. Then I became sick. I became sick, you know, and I had at least 40 temperature. And then they were taking up – they took me up in hospital. And then I had the doctor who was from Norwegian [*sic*],

and he had an assistant. He was a student, I think, from Prague, Czechoslovakia. And they were very good for me because they kept me longer as was allowed. They were very good for me, yeah, the Norwegian and the student from Prague, and so I became better. And then sometime later, not so long, I got another work, and it was by brothers in the clothing department from the SS, and that was better for me.

Robert Buckley: So you had a job there working with the clothing.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah and then it was always inside, and that was 'til we had the death march.

[0:40:00]

Robert Buckley: Yes.

Mr. Van der Bijl: You know the death march.

Robert Buckley: Yes, OK, we'll talk about that in just a few minutes. What was the mistreatment that you saw in connection with other prisoners? Did you observe any of the mistreatment?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Well, on day we had to every day *appel*. That means the counting of the prisoners there. So when one had done something wrong according to the SS, then he was bound. He was bound on a **block**. We call that a block, and then he got 25. Everyone had to see and to heard it. And it was not with a little stick, but it was with *zweep*, you know, 25. And sometimes we saw someone was hanging. We had to see that. He was hanging. And one day four became hanged, and we had to see that—two in the morning and two in the evening when we came back from our work.

Robert Buckley: What had they done?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I don't know what they had done because we didn't know them. But what had they done I don't know.

Robert Buckley: But they held them up as an example?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah as an example and we had to see them. We have seen different sometimes and we had to stand, and we had to see that one, and then we had to march. We had to march along the ones who were hanging so that we became scared about what they are doing. And there were some prisoners that had done something and

then they became – and they did not want to betray their fellow prisoners, and then they became hanged. That means hanged, I mean their hands, they were behind their back and there was a cord. [*Demonstrates hands behind back*] And then they took the cord so that all – it was all broken here [*gestures toward shoulder*]. And then we heard them crying, you know, crying. It was a terrible pain, and they had for weeks to be in hospital; then they can healed, you know. That's what we were hearing sometimes.

But the Russians, when Hitler invaded Russia, there came thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands prisoners, war prisoners. Where they have been, we don't know, but I know there were about hundred prisoners that were **older**. They were **older**, and what **we heard**, they were so hungry. They were so hungry that they were eating the dead bodies, their fellow prisoners who were dying. They were eating their flesh, what they told us, only what they told us. I haven't seen it.

When they got a shower, when they had the privilege to get a shower, then for example, here was their barrack. And there was the bathroom. It was about let me say 50 meters, and then when it was winter it was terrible. Then they had to walk naked from the one barrack to the other one. They got in shower, and they had to walk naked back to their barrack, so it was just a terrible situation. But many Russians died, many. Many died. They had also terrible treatment.

But happily we, if possible, so long as possible we were always together—Jehovah's Witnesses.

Robert Buckley: They kept the Witnesses together. I understand that they had a document that they would bring out every so often for you to sign. Did they ever try to have –

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah.

Robert Buckley: What would happen on those situations or those circumstances?

Mr. Van der Bijl: The signing did never interest me. That was no temptation for me.

Robert Buckley: But what was on the document?

Mr. Van der Bijl: The document was the last time you had to deny Jehovah and your belief. That was written on it. You had to deny Jehovah and your belief and then you came free. They came free after some months. They came free. Some did it, but most not. We did not like it.

- [0:45:00] And they had to sign. They had to sign.
- Robert Buckley:* You had a picture there of some of the correspondence that you sent to your parents from Sachsenhausen or is that the actual envelope?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah, here is on this is written. On this part is written that I could not write more than five lines because I did not want to lose my – to betray my faith. That is here written. Someone who knows German can read it.
- Robert Buckley:* What did the letter say?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* The letter: “Dear Parents, Everything good. In good health and I did not slack back. Keep good *moed*.” *Moed*, what is *moed*? *Houd goede moed*, keep good spirits! Yeah “Keep good spirit. Stay strong. Does [*sic*] greetings on all from me and write soon back. Thank, thank ... give thanks to Father.” That means Jehovah. It means Jehovah. “Give thanks to Father for everything just what you are doing. I also and much kisses from your son.”
- Robert Buckley:* But in effect you weren’t in good health, were you?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Well, ’44? I was better. I had a good commander, a good work commander, so I was soon better.
- Robert Buckley:* So when was that piece of correspondence written? What was the date on the letter?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* June the 4th 1944.
- Robert Buckley:* And how many times a month were you permitted to write?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* If I remember right, once in a month.
- Robert Buckley:* One time a month.
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* And what was written by the SS is the stamp, “This prisoner ...”
- Robert Buckley:* If you want to read it in German, go ahead. Just read it in German.
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* [*Speaking German*] _____
- Robert Buckley:* Which means what now? What does that mean?

Mr. Van der Bijl: That means because I keep going with Jehovah's Witnesses and I did not want to leave that “,” _____ *[speaking German]* they said, _____ “false religion,” for _____ I did not want to stop to be in the *Bibelforscher* or Jehovah's Witnesses. And because of this reason, I was writing, that is a record, **stopping**.

Robert Buckley: I see.

Mr. Van der Bijl: That means I could only write five lines—that was all. Other persons, they could write a whole letter. But I could only write five lines because I want to stay Jehovah's Witness.

Robert Buckley: I see. Well, what was it about the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses that the Nazis didn't like or that they disliked? What was it that you believed that made them angry with you folks?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Well, I think just what we were reading here in the *Watchtower*, I mean the *Watchtower* for Sunday, that I was reading. I think the *Watchtower* this Sunday that we study that I think those are mainly he was against Jehovah's Witnesses and also by the support of the Catholic Church. _____ *[speaking German]* I was reading that. Oh, I was reading it in the *Awake!* or in the *Watchtower*.

Robert Buckley: OK. Well, I was trying to remember from what you remember back there.

[0:50:00]

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Robert Buckley: All right so then what happened then? So you were working inside up to the death march. Now, what is the death march?

Mr. Van der Bijl: The death march is when the Russians were nearing Berlin.

Robert Buckley: And when was this now?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Near to Berlin.

Robert Buckley: What time of the year and what year was this now?

Mr. Van der Bijl: It was in the spring of '45. Yeah, the Russians came to Berlin, and so they evacuated the concentration camp. And so we had all to leave the camp, but Jehovah's Witnesses stayed together.

Robert Buckley: OK, now did they tell you ahead of time that you were going to all go out of the camp?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, except the very sick ones. They were staying there, you know, the very sick ones. We took our sick brothers with us. We did not leave them there

Robert Buckley: So Jehovah's Witnesses took all their own people.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Oh, everyone, yeah, we took them. And so the very sick ones we put them on the cart. We had some cart to draw. We did it ourselves, and we put the sick ones, and we put them above the cart so they could not walk.

Robert Buckley: I see.

Mr. Van der Bijl: And we were taking them with the cart.

Robert Buckley: What was on the cart?

Mr. Van der Bijl: I think they were the most valuable things from the SS that were with us.

Robert Buckley: Oh, you mean the valuables that belonged to the SS?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah because they know Jehovah's Witnesses. They could trust them. They knew that we did not steal, and so they put them on the cart, and we had to take care of the cart.

Robert Buckley: Oh, so they put you around the cart and had you pull the cart.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, yeah, pull the cart.

Robert Buckley: So what part of the line of the death march were you in—the front or the end or the middle or ...?

Mr. Van der Bijl: *[Speaking Dutch]* _____

Robert Buckley: That's OK. If you'd just tell us from your personal experience, from what you remember.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, we went for some days. We were walking, walking, and walking. And in the night we were sleeping by a farmer or something else. I remember one night even in the **bosque** on the ground. We were walking, and so we went from Sachsenhausen to

Schwerin in the walk from Crivitz here, walk from Crivitz there.
[Showing picture of map]

Robert Buckley: And you went all the way?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, all the way, yeah, and I was hungry. I was hungry because we did not have much food then. And so I had a tube of toothpaste. And every time I took a little toothpaste and put it in my mouth because of only the feeling of always, always hungry, you know, it wasn't nice. So because of the toothpaste, that make a little difference. And at one moment while we were marching, I had to take care because I was falling asleep.

Robert Buckley: When you were marching, you were actually falling asleep.

Mr. Van der Bijl: I had to take care that I was falling asleep because I had to go with them.

Robert Buckley: So were you walking alongside the cart?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah or behind the cart.

Robert Buckley: So you took turns.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, the brothers were always where there's a sick one. We left no one in the concentration camp, no one.

Robert Buckley: I see and so how long was this death march if you can remember?

Mr. Van der Bijl: It might be some days. I do not remember exactly, but it was some days, day, four, five. I don't remember. But anyhow when we came in the forest, then that was then the last night. And we were there in the forest, and the SS was also there. And so far I heard, the Russians were coming nearer and nearer because we saw the shooting. On the war zone, we saw the shooting and everything and a lot of noise, and the SS became afraid. And they were drinking their gin, and they became drunk. They fell asleep. They were falling, sleeping. And the leading brothers by us, they were praying to Jehovah what they had to do, and so they come then to the decision in the morning.

[0:55:00] in the early hours of the morning, we go escape the forest without the SS. And we went out early in the morning, and so we came by the Americans and we were free. And after that – but that's what I hear. I cannot confirm it, but what I heard that later on when the SS became awake, they must have killed a lot of people, prisoners who were still in the forest.

- Robert Buckley:* I see so you **got out**. So you went over to the Allies' side, to the United States side?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Yeah, yeah.
- Robert Buckley:* And how did you feel when you saw the American soldiers? How did you personally feel?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* We were free, yeah. We were free.
- Robert Buckley:* How did you feel? You remember your feelings that day?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* Well, in general I'm not so ... what? How can I say it? We were with the truth. I did not think so much about any other freedom. And the interesting was our chief of the camp—he was SS officer—he was now prisoner. We saw him as war prisoner [laughs]. Yeah, he was now _____ prisoner by the Americans.
- Robert Buckley:* What did the soldiers ask you, ask Jehovah's Witnesses? Did they ask you any questions as to who you were?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* No, no, because there were so many. There were so many. There were Polish prisoners, I mean, political prisoners. There were so many who were now free, so they had a lot of work. But we got good food. The Americans gave us good food, and they took care of us. Later on, we became by the English and by the English soldiers. And the Canadians took care that we came back in our country, yeah.
- Robert Buckley:* I see. Now, how did you get home then after this? Your outfit—did you change clothing? Did you keep your uniforms or what?
- Mr. Van der Bijl:* No, I had to make some change in clothing, but I had still my number. And I came – the Canadians has brought us to Nijmegen. That's a city on the German border, in Holland. And so we were there together. And the man who had leading there, he said, "If someone has family here in the city, then you may go." I said, "Well, my sister's living here". He said, "Well, you may go," so I went to the home of my sister, but my sister wasn't there. She was evacuated to another place in Holland. So I think, well, then I go home on foot, walking, but that's a few hundred kilometers. But it was in the evening. I went to the police office in Nijmegen, and I told them, the policeman, if I could sleep there at night, so they give me to sleep in the cell. And then in the early morning, I went. I went alone, and I was walking for awhile, and then came a Dutch

soldier, he came to me. He said, "What are you doing here?" I said, yeah, so and so, I told him you see. And he was looking and came a truck. He keep on standing. He said, "Where are you to go?" He said, "To Rotterdam." He said, "You can take him because he has also to go to Rotterdam." *[Laughs]*

Robert Buckley: So you got to ride all the way to Rotterdam?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, to Rotterdam, yeah. *[Laughs]*

Robert Buckley: I see. Did you have any type of documentation from the army to prove who you were and what happened to you?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, I have here a little document from the Americans. This is this. *[Holding up card]* Displaced persons index, you see, displaced persons index card.

Robert Buckley: I see.

Mr. Van der Bijl: And on the backside is written: "Keep this card at all times to assist your safe return home. The registration number and your name identify you and your registration record."

Robert Buckley: OK, thank you very much. All right.

Mr. Van der Bijl: And I have still a little document that was in the concentration camp. I had the privilege because I was working in the clothing department from the SS and had the privilege to take two or three showers in a week. It was privilege to get it. *[Holding up card]*

Robert Buckley: And so they gave you a little card so that you were allowed?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah

Robert Buckley: Let me see if I can ... *[camera zooms in]* All right, very good. Now, you also said you had a picture there. What is that picture of?

[1:00:03]

Mr. Van der Bijl: *[Holding up document with picture]* Yeah, well, that was that I was – let me – that we make a member of an organization from _____ 1949 to '55 – 1945. And from this organization I got the pension because I have been in concentration camp. I have been, yeah, because of the concentration, I get a pension. Everyone who have been in the war as a prisoner, whatever he is, it doesn't make difference. They are not – there does not discrimination here in

Holland. And everyone who can prove has been in prison during the war, he get a pension.

Robert Buckley: I see. Now, you have a few pictures there from before the war. Maybe we'd like to see what you looked like before the war?

Mr. Van der Bijl: *[Holding up pictures]* Here I was a little boy. The picture show that. Here I was a little older. And here is just perhaps in six months, perhaps one year, before the war when I was 24, 23, 25.

Robert Buckley: OK.

Mr. Van der Bijl: *[Showing handwritten documents]* And then that was the first letter, which I wrote to my parents, the first letter to say hello to my parents. And this is the photocopy from the envelope.

Robert Buckley: OK, now what was the year that that was recorded or that you wrote that?

Mr. Van der Bijl: July the 2nd in 1941.

Robert Buckley: I see.

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah but before that, I was already some time imprisoned by the Gestapo and by the police office in Holland, because it was February 20 I was arrested.

Robert Buckley: OK, very good, yes. Now after the war, what did you do after the war? Did you continue on in your Bible educational work?

Mr. Van der Bijl: Yeah, because I was arrested as a fulltime preacher. I started fulltime preacher work in October the 3rd in 1941 – in 1940, October the 3rd 1940 I started fulltime. And when I came at home, I went the same day. When I came at home, I went to the congregation servant and told him that I want to continue in the pioneer service. And after three weeks perhaps –

[End of Audio]