

-TITLE-NICOLAAS ZWEERE
-I_DATE-MAY 29, 1991
-SOURCE-JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-GOOD
-IMAGE_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-DURATION-90 MINUTES
-LANGUAGES-
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

.01 Nicolaas was born 4/5/1908. in Zevenhuizen, as had been his father. He had one older and two younger brothers. One of the younger ones died at age 9 yrs. His other brothers are now deceased as well. His father was a farm laborer, and so was Nicolaas for a while, until he switched to work for a coal distribution company.

.04 His schooling consisted of grammar school, entering the labor force at age 12 yrs. Family's religious background : father was not religious, while his mother was an extremely strict Dutch Reform Church adherent.

.06 He states that in 1933 few Dutch reacted to Hitler's rise in power. None of his relatives belonged to the Dutch Nazi party :NSB.

.08 In 1938-- by which time he had established himself in private business-- coal distribution -- he learned about J. W's from a customer. His original reaction was negative, still influenced by his mother's strict religiosity. however, delving into the J. W's literature he liked the stance of neutrality.

.10 He did know about the imprisonment of J.W.s in Germany, especially that of Brother Winkler. His opposition to war was very basic, the only thing he believed in was opposition to wicked spirit, not opposition to people. He did know that opposition to war would lead to dire results.

.12 On the day of Germany's invasion of Holland, May 10, 1940, an all day meeting for J. W.'s had been scheduled in Utrecht-- 500 members had been expected-- , which was, of course, canceled. Post the invasion the Dutch were totally opposed to the Germans.

.15 At that time Nicolaas was married and had two daughters. His wife was a J. W. He carried on his business and carried on his J.W. work, that of pioneer, underground.

.17 His arrest took place in 1942. [dates are rather unclear in this tape. The witness's memory evinces occasional lapses.] By that time Nicolaas had become an overseer of other pioneers. He had participated for a full week in a gathering of overseers.

Needing to attend to his worldly business he almost did not go to the final meeting, but at the very last moment did go. And at that meeting he along with the other overseers was caught, and then imprisoned in (Dutch) prison in Scheveningen, by the Gestapo.

.20 From Scheveningen he was taken along with about 10 more prisoners (not exclusively J. W.s) to the concentration camp near Amersfoort. He had had no direct communication with his wife, although he had received one letter and some clothes from her in Scheveningen. He assumed that his wife and children were still safe at home. [I believe that by that time the witness and his family lived in Rotterdam.]

.22 He was shocked by the situation in Amersfoort : the barracks, the cold (he arrived in wintertime), and especially the starvation. The inmates were deteriorating physically and spiritually, living only from day to day. Their civilian clothes were taken away and they were issued worn out military clothing. All inmates were treated the same. There were no beatings. Starvation turned people into "living cadavers".

.26 Eventually (3 months ?) he was returned to the prison in Scheveningen. They were taken there by regular train. Having had his civilian clothes returned he had full opportunity to notice the amount of weight he had lost. The prisoners were walked from the train station to the prison and many had difficulty doing so. He remained in Scheveningen for six weeks.

.29 In the event he along with some J.W.s and political prisoners -- a total of approximately 500-- were taken by passenger train to Sachsenhausen.

.32 The first thing that struck him in Sachsenhausen was that people were not walking but running. The new arrivals, who had already had their heads shaven were issued prison clothing (cast off military clothing again), and beaten gratuitously by guards. He formed one in a nucleus of 20 people.

.35 He was put into a block, isolated from other blocks, which had exclusively J. W.: barracks 13 and 14.

.37 He was assigned to a work commando about 2 or 3 days later. Assigned to the WaldKommando (forestry work). His Kommando included several Dutch J. W. s. the work day lasted 10 hours in winter, 11 in summer, exclusive of time spent on the "Appellplatz" and the walking back and forth to the work place.

.40 His work team consisted of 20 -30 men. The work was very hard. Especially in the beginning, when they were very closely guarded and thus unable ever to change the pace of work. Eventually the guards were a little more spread out, and the pace of work could be spread. He found the work hardest during his first 3 months at it : his body became covered by sores, and he felt like JOB.

.43 He remained with the same work detail until the end of the war. He did witness mistreatment of prisoners by the SS and especially by the Kapos.

.47 The Kapo in his barrack was a political prisoner, who was O.K. re J. W. s. J. W. were allowed to hold meetings and sing their songs. Later on J. W. were split up and distributed among other barracks, but he was never the only J. W. in a barrack. He found that the political prisoners actively helped the J.W. organize their meetings.

.50 Routine: Awakening, meager breakfast, block by block (68), i.e. 10,000 to 15,000 people. Then off to the work commando. By the end of the war there were 30,000 prisoners.

He does not remember the oldest prisoner. However he remembers that the youngest one was only a late teenager from Eindhoven.

.52 The J.W.'s were assigned a Bible text daily and had the obligation to discuss with 4-5 people. Sometimes they were betrayed and the texts were found. However, the J. W's had worked out a system by which the youngest members would take the "blame" and thus incur the consequent beatings. He never saw a J.W. shot.

.58 End of the War. Nicolaas partook in the Death March. The J.W.'s were the last ones to leave Sachsenhaus camp. They marched in columns of 200 men. At first they were surprised at noticing the number of dead along the way. Then they realized that this was the result of the policy of separating those who could not march any more and shooting them.

.60 All the J.W.'s survived. [This does not accord with accounts given by other Witnesses]. They saved Brother Winkler, by pushing him on a cart. During the years many political prisoners, esp. Russians and Poles, had J.W. and exchanged their insignia for the purple stars of the J.W.'s.

1.02 The March lasted 10 days. One of the SS was sympathetic and found a farm, one night, where the J.W.'s were fed potatoes and they were allowed to sleep.

1.04 The first Allied military they encountered was a black Canadian soldier, who separated the prisoners from the Germans. Then there is an account of the confusion that reigned among the Germans, and a brief retaliation the prisoners took on the Germans.

1.09 The Allied Forces distributed food to the ex-prisoners. The German J.W.'s, well organized, warned his comrades to take it slowly with the food, lest they become deathly ill. German J.W.'s also organized a kitchen.

1.12 Nicolaas heard of the liberation of Holland during this period (June). The ex-prisoners were transported by the Allied Forces to Schwering (German), where they received medical treatment. Via the International Red Cross he was also able to send word to his wife.

From Germany the Dutch were sent to Ommen (Holland) where they stayed for ten days (re-entry), then for one more night to Amersfoort,

1.15 On July 10, 1945 the family reunion was extremely emotional. [The videotape shows the witness crying ; much in contrast to his (anxious) smile frequently displayed at previous "high" points of the preceding account.] His oldest daughter recognized him as he did her, but he had great difficulty recognizing his younger daughter. He states that throughout his ordeal he had always believed that he would survive, and he had continuously prayed for this, primarily to spare his wife and children his death.

1.20 Post War. He resumed his coal distribution business. He continued his work as a J.W. He displays a picture of his granddaughter. Also photographs of his daughters pre-war and photographs of his own wedding as well as a picture taken of him and his wife at their 50th anniversary. (He has now been married for 57 yrs.)

1.23 He has no hobbies per se. Still actively "pioneers" 30 hours per month. His wife has been in a nursing home for the past three years. He visits her almost daily, although her comprehension is much compromised.

1.25 Interviewer comments on the beauty of his garden. Nicolaas states that a J.W. friend takes care of this for him. Camera zooms around the room in which the interview has taken place; placing Nicolaas for this in his easy chair next to the window. Window is filled with plants, sun streaming into the wide window. Smile on witness's face.

.END.