

**Imperial War Museum
Department of Sound Records**

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**LIFE IN NAZI EUROPE 1933 - 1945
DUTCH RESISTANCE**

Piet Ketelaar

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Reels 4 to 6 only transcribed

CXW So during the interrogation, did the interrogator say to you, "Yes, we know that you are Piet Ketelaar"?

PK No, they didn't say so but they said that they had a notion that we were terrorists, that was all. And then I said, "O-kay, yes, I am a terrorist, now you can do with me what you like." That's funny. You come to a stage, you know, if you sense that these people know and they hit you hard, you get harder and harder. The harder they hit the harder you get and in the end, you say, "O-kay, that's all I want to tell you, I am a terrorist and you can go ahead, do with me what you want". And that's how it stopped. They knew at that stage that nothing could be got out of these people any more. You know, you come to that stage. They could hit you till you fall and you wouldn't say a thing.

And that's the stage I reached in Almelo. I thought, "Oh, you can go ahead mate, I won't talk any more". And he knew it, then he stopped, he knew. I said, "O-kay, fine, I'm a terrorist, what else do you want to know?" That was it. Then it fizzled out really and well, they promise you you would go to a place you wouldn't like to go to and all that sort of thing. They chuck you back into the cell and then it's wait and see.

CXW Now, when you were taken to Germany, can you remember who was on the journey with you?

PK My brother, my friend, Wim and I. We had lots of people in that cattle wagon.

CXW All resisters?

PK A lot of them, yes. There were also those

/people ...

people who got those millions out of the bank in Almelo, a poor farmer who hid the money in his hayrick and his son. He was in that cart as well, that cattle truck. There was, yes, a lot of people, all arrested people, you know, people with no healthy papers and all that sort of thing. They could see they were forged and all that, all sorts of people.

CXW Jews?

KP No.

CXW All Dutch people?

KP All Dutch people, yes, mainly people who did something wrong in their eyes, of course.

CXW Did you talk together or were you suspicious of each other?

KP No, we talked together. Not about what we were doing or what we came in for, just chit chat. And as you see, I asked people if they had paper on them and somebody had a piece of paper. So I divided it up in little squares. I said, "Who wants to write to his family to let them know what's going to happen to us?" So the ones who wanted to write a message, I handed a paper, somebody had a little bit of pencil in his pocket. And that's how this little message came written.

So a lot of others, I gathered them altogether, put them in - somebody had a toothbrush tube - I put them all in there. I held it in front of a hole in the side of the wall and asked the boys to have a look out through the slits in the wagon when we were crossing a level crossing and shout 'yes'. And when

/they ...

they said, "Yes" I just hit it hard and it fell in front of somebody with bike standing there and cars to cross the level crossing. Obviously, somebody found it and they sent it on to the families so they knew that we were on our way to Germany in transport.

CXW And you have the message to this day in the file?

PK That's the message I showed you, yes, in the file. So my sister received it and kept it during the war, not knowing if we ever came back. And she showed it to me and said, "Here, look, that's your little message we got and we knew that you were safe". Because my mother had heard already in North Holland that the two brothers Kelerlaar were shot, were dead. So it was quite a relief for my mother also to receive that little message, the knowledge of what was going on.

CXW What were conditions like on the journey?

PK Terrible. Too many people in the wagon, you couldn't stretch. No straw, hard things, you couldn't do your natural things, you know. It was terrible. No food and no drink, nothing. And that went on for a couple of days so you can imagine the state of the cattle trucks after a while. Well, you kept it to one side as much as possible and as clean as possible but it was very, very difficult.

CXW Where were you taken to?

PK To Neuengamme near Hamburg.

CXW Can you describe your arrival at the place?

PK A railroad running into a camp, all sorts of barracks and a few brick buildings. And we were

driven out of the railway trucks and herded along the road. And all those poor people walking around there in their prison clothes and we wondered what it was all about. Then we had to go into lausem - they call that - we had to take our clothes off. We put in the shower and shaven under our arms and everywhere and put stuff on, you know, white biting stuff everywhere and given so called prison clothes. But that wasn't very good either because it was all summer clothing, most probably from the Jews who had been there before.

There were stacks of shoes and clothing and all that sort of thing. And they told us they were from Jews who had been gassed there. And the tall ones were given small stuff and the little ones were given big clothing. So it was horrible.

CXW What did the clothing look like?

PK Nothing. Just a pair of trousers and a little jacket, that was all and then afterwards they gave us prison clothing, striped stuff - after we were sorted out - with a cap with stripes on and a number on the left with a red triangle. And I remember my number very well, it was H 70,896. And my brother had 70,897 and Wim had H 70,898 -
 yes, that was my number.

CXW When you first arrived there, were you surprised at the place or had you expected something of the kind?

PK No. We were pretty surprised, yes. I thought, "What the hell is this?" No, I was very surprised, yes.

CXW What in particular surprised you?

/The ...

PK The whole situation. The slogan over the camp entrance and all that and big chimney stacks and all the rows and rows of huts and big buildings and smoking chimneys and all that sort of thing. And people, you know, prisoners saying, "Well", he said, "there's only one way out of here, through that chimney there". But what we didn't know, and we found out later, they marked us especially, half-shaven head. And they put yellow rings round our trousers and a big yellow patch -triangle - on the back. And that meant that we were Torsperre. Torsperre means that you can never leave the gate, never. And it means also, I was rudely told by one of the prisoners when I walked by, "You are ph"

CXW Finger across his throat.

PK Finger across his throat. In other words, "You will be hanged" and that was true because we were condemned and supposed to be hanged or shot. And we were treated accordingly. We were separated from all the prison population, always our own place on the appel platz, where appel was held, always in a certain corner very close to the commandant's office.

We had to be there first always in the morning and evenings or whenever they called appel and we had to go there to be counted. And we had to stand there first and we were the last away. What happened then, in the morning, we were all lined up there in huge parties and counted by the Germans. And if there's anybody missing, they kept on counting, counting, counting until the figure was right. And very often people died in the night and they weren't found if they were on their bunk or something or died in a

/corner ...

corner. And then you had to wait for hours and hours on end till these people were found and the figure was right.

And that's where we were standing in the cold and in the wet and in the freezing wind for hours on end. And it was horrible. And then, they had a beautiful band. And the band struck up and the gates opened and off they went, those other prisoners, not us because we were not allowed out. And they took them to Hamburg to clear incendiary bombs and all that sort of thing. They used them outside the camp to work. And then at night they came back. We had to stand on to the appel platz again and see them all walk in formation back, under the strains of 'Alte Kamerade'. I hate that song, I hate that march, if you know that march - that so many people marched to death to the strains of that song.

And that was life in the camp to start off with. It was a horrible experience. We had to do work in cellars underneath those big buildings, huge blocks. And one day they told us that Count Bernadotte would arrive to inspect the camp. And we were kept in the cellars underneath the big, brick blocks - huge blocks with one, two storeys. And what happened was, in those blocks they kept the Norwegians and the Danes. And the funny thing was, Bernadotte came to inspect the camp, the remainder of the prisoners were out to work already. We were shoved into the cellar, we had to stick there - and the Norwegians. They showed Bernadotte the barracks which were empty and nicely made up, because you had to do that otherwise you were kicked to death - and clean and organised. And only the Stube Alteste and the . . . , they were there to receive him.

But the funny thing was, that the Danes and the Norwegians,

they were all kept in those big buildings. And they had beautiful, little duffle coats with D and then the name, for Denmark. They had nice warm trousers and clogs. They had clogs on their feet with nice, leather uppers. Plus, that they were in possession of parcels! We couldn't believe it. They had a special position in that camp.

CXW For what reason?

PK I don't know. Most probably, economic - that the Danish government supplied, I think, Germany with a lot of bacon or something of that sort. And the Norwegians, they got a lot of stuff out of Norway.

CXW Did it cause resentment?

PK Well, I felt a little bit strange about it. Although I think those people, they saved my life actually.

CXW In what way?

PK Well, we, all Torsperre, we had to do all sorts of nasty little chores, you know. And they sent me out to weed the little gardens alongside those buildings where the Danes and Norwegians were housed. And then sometimes they opened a window when I was sitting there and threw a piece of bread out of the window and some sugar or a little bit to eat. And I could eat it quickly. And that went on for a couple of days and it gave my strength back.

Because we didn't get much, only one slice of black bread in the morning with so called tea which wasn't tea, it was warm water. And in the afternoon we got

one little bowl of cold suppe, that is soup made of cabbage. And usually, the water was contaminated so a lot of dysentery started in that camp. I never ate it because I didn't trust the water. But these Danes, they chucked food out to me and I was able to eat a little bit and keep up my strength that way. So I really had to thank them. But why they were housed there and treated preferentially, I don't know.

CXW How did that prisoner know that you were condemned? From the yellow stripe?

PK From the markings. You could see from a distance I was a condemned prisoner - the markings you were wearing.

CXW Do you know what date you arrived at Neuengamme?

PK Just after Christmas.

CXW January, '45?

PK Yes, I think so. January - February, '45.

CXW What work were you doing in the cellars?

PK I don't know really. Sort of weaving with old material. I don't know, we had to make knots and knot it all together, I don't know what they used them for. Probably, nets of some sort - making knots with old material, old stuff.

CXW What was this slogan over the gate?

PK Can't remember any more. It was something written over the gate.

CXW Did the red triangle mean you were a political prisoner?

PK Yes, I think so. Well, I was a political -

CXW What other categories were there?

PK Well, there were political, .criminal. They had several categories, they all had different colours.

CXW Jews?

PK No, there were no Jews any more. Russians were there.

CXW You mean when you say Russians, Russian soldiers or civilians?

PK I don't know what they were. There were Russians there, prominenten, so called. There were children and women we have seen there. I think they used them for experiments, medical experiments. That was what the prisoners said, anyway. It was a certain part of the camp. And there was a huge crematorium of course, ^{it was} going day and night. It was funny, one day, we walked past the crematorium and a door opened. I said to Jan, I said, "Look, Jan, old cheese is there in that thing". But they were not cheeses, they were all heads. They had stacked the prisoners up on row(s) and then all the heads were going on top of each other, all to be burnt. Stacks of prisoners they had. You can imagine how many prisoners there had been. Our number is 70,000, I think they went into the hundred thousands or something, that camp. And that went day and night, that burning of corpses.

CXW You mean the corpses were stacked up?

/Yes ...

PK Yes, to be burnt in the crematorium. Prisoners, day and night, they were busy shoving them into the big ovens.

CXW You said, prominenten - were there any VIPs whom you recognised?

PK VIPs. Yes, I heard that some of the French government were arrested and held there so far as I know, some French, important politicians.

CXW Did you come across anybody who had been experimented on?

PK No, never because that was well separated from our part. It was a huge camp.

CXW Were any of the categories of prisoner treated better or worse than the others, apart from the Scandinavians whom you've mentioned?

PK No, not really. All the same except for us, we were Torsperre and we were really kept well under control, so they knew where we were.

CXW And you say there were no Jews left at that time when you arrived?

PK No, I haven't seen any Jews at all.

CXW Gypsies?

PK Probably, gypsies as well and all sorts, even I think Germans but criminal Germans. I think homosexuals, imprisoned there as well, Germans.

CXW Jehovah's Witnesses, did you come across

PK Yes, theological, yes. Priests, Catholic priests - all sorts. And pilots, a few pilots even.

CXW RAF pilots, you mean?

PK Yes, RAF. One Polish pilot.

CXW How did the prisoners behave towards each other, was it every man for himself or was there help given to each other?

PK Well, there could be animosity and stealing of things of each other, they didn't look and all that. Soon I lost my shoes so I had to walk on bare feet, these things happened. But you know, conditions were so cramped in those barracks, you were sleeping four men to one crib. I mean, it was ridiculous. And waking up in the morning and your next door neighbour was dead and all that sort of thing. It was hopeless, yes.

CXW What about the kapos there, how did they behave?

PK Oh, they were horrible, they were horrible, yes. They hit you any time. I mean, if you didn't do immediately what they said and weren't fast about it, you got clobbered.

CXW Was that to curry favour with the Germans or just out of sadism?

PK Discipline, they said. When I say, "Come! you come here" and all that sort of thing. You had to run as fast as you could with legs like this.

CXW Swollen?

/Yes ...

PK Yes.

CXW But would they do that just when the Germans were there or even when the Germans weren't there?

PK No, even when the Germans weren't. The Germans we didn't see very often. The only time I saw a German was when the prisoners walked out of the camp in the morning for work and coming back. And then of course, the counting. Then you saw Germans appear, they counted and they made sure it was all correct. Then they disappeared again. And the rest, the running of the camp really was done by the kapos, the camp polizei, I think they were called - kapos they called them.

CXW Were the kapos chosen from any particular categories?

PK Well, we had a Polish kapo, he was mad. I don't know, really. They were old hands anyway. They always knew where to get food and how to get it and they organised themselves very well.

CXW In what way was the Pole mad?

PK He was mad. For hours he could line us up and we had to learn the commands of "Attention" and then "At ease" and then "Heads up, heads down", you know, "Midsen auf, midsen up, stielge stand !" - all that sort of thing. And we had to do that for a long time, stand to attention, relax, hat off, hat(?) on. It could go on for hours, it was silly really.

CXW Just purposeless drill.

PK Yes, drill, one way or another.

CXW Did anybody attempt to escape?

PK No, it was an impossibility. All the big fences were heavily electrified in such a way you couldn't even attempt to approach them. You would get a shock and die on the spot. Plus ditches, plus towers - watch towers - all around with machine guns, always manned, with lights, dogs and handlers walking the perimeter of the camp. No, it was virtually impossible. The only way was going out and to do work, you might disappear with work, say, if they took you for clearing bombs or something. Perhaps you would be able to disappear one way or another - but - sometimes it happened. But very often, they were caught again, they were too weak.

CXW Did you ever see any executions?

PK No, but I've heard them shooting. And I was in the bunker two or three times to be hanged and taken out again and put in again - and taken out again. Some people were taken from our bunker to be hanged and they were hanged. And well, three times I was in there and out.

CXW For what reason?

PK To be hanged. But they didn't, I don't know why. Took people out and they were hanged, just perhaps when your number came up, one way or another.

CXW Did you fall sick?

PK Yes. My friend, Wim, he fell sick pretty quick. He wasn't a very strong boy to start off with. And he caught pneumonia very quick and he collapsed on the appel ground. And he was taken into hospital

and he died after four or five days. He was too weak. And then in the end, towards the Lübeck transports, my brother, he developed a real, bad diarrhoea. And he was taken into the kranke revier, we called it - the sick bay - and he got really, very bad with passing blood and everything. It was horrible. And later on, I felt sick and I wanted to go in there to look for my brother. And I feigned that I was sick. I was really. I'd got terrible diarrhoea as well.

So they took me in there. What happened was, a doctor got hold of me. I don't know, I think it was a Swedish doctor or some sort - I don't know. A doctor got hold of me. They gave me an enema. Put me on my head, gave me enema and he'd clean me inside, he said. He said, "I'm going to clean you", so he poured water into me, standing on my head. Some prisoners held me and he administered and I stood up - cleaned me out that way, most probably. Anyway, he said, "Here, take this one" and he gave me a big pill. He said, "That will stop your diarrhoea". So I took that pill and indeed, it stopped it. The diarrhoea disappeared.

And I started looking for my brother and I found my brother in one of the barracks there.

9725/06/05

CXW You were saying you found your brother.

PK Yes and he was very sick. And he was asking me for water all the time. He wanted water because his mouth was so dry, he was dehydrated. But I told him, "No, you can't because all this water here is contaminated".

In the meantime there was already a lot going on outside, we could feel it. There was talk of evacuation and all that, that's when it started. And all of a sudden, Red Cross parcels appeared. And what happened, they gave one Red Cross parcel to four prisoners. So it was hacked in parts and you got a little part of a parcel. Luckily enough, I got a part with cigarettes were in, sugar and some milk powder and all that sort of thing.

So what I did, I said to Jan, "Never drink that water, it's all contaminated, here, sugar, suck, chew sugar." So I gave him sugar and some milk powder and his mouth was wet again - "And try to eat that". And I swapped cigarettes for sugar and for milk powder and anything that was eatable because other prisoners preferred cigarettes. I didn't smoke so I didn't want them. So I changed for eatable goods.

Anyway, rumour went that we were going to be evacuated and taken out of prison. We could hear guns roaring and all that sort of thing. The Eighth Army were already on their way up. And all of a sudden, big activity. I thought, "Well, hell, I have to do something about my identity". So what I did: we had to be washed anyway when you go into that - he treated me with the enema, I said, "Can you shave my head?" because my head was half shaved, that's also a sign that you were a Torsperre. So they shaved my head completely.

And what I did, I got rid of my prison clothing, I took it off. And I saw a Danish donkey jacket lying around with the Danish number on. So I put that on quick and started moving about in that. And some of these people in charge said, "Oh, what the hell are you doing here? You shouldn't be here". All of a sudden they saw the Danish number and they thought,

"Oh, my God, what have we done, there's a Dane here, he shouldn't be here". They were taken away already, before us. They were on their way home or something^{or} taken away. We never saw the Danes or the Norwegians any more. They were taken away to safety, most probably.

Anyway, I put the jacket on and I acted innocence. I said, "What? Me no speak German" and all that sort of thing, ^{acted} like I was sick. Luckily enough, I got rid of my markings and was wearing a Danish jacket. Anyway, in the meantime, the activity got more and more.

And we were driven out of those huts and into those cattle trucks again. I thought, "Oh, here we go again". And that was the time that you were taken out of that camp, luckily enough, without the death markings on you and chucked into those cattle trucks. And that was the day we were moved in cattle trucks on to Lubeck - the railway sidings in Lubeck - where the train was waiting to take us aboard and put us on the CAP ARCONA. And on the railway siding, Jan got worse and worse, somebody got some water for him - he asked other prisoners for water, water. And he drank some more water and I could see it happen, you know, more and more blood appeared. And in the end, he got so weak and so dehydrated, in the end he was, oh, he was . . . it was terrible. His skin over bone and his mouth fell open and he looked at me . . . And I stayed with him as much as I could.

When we arrived there on that railway siding in Lubeck, I scrambled down the embankment, I almost fell in the water, I couldn't hold my own weight. And got a rag, wetted it in the water and got back and washed his face a little bit and stayed with him for a long time. Tried to feed him with sugar again and all

that to no avail. He got weaker and weaker and weaker.

And we were put on the ship. Jan was put in the hold. I clambered into the hold also. And that ship, it was undescrivable. It was filthy. And water sloshing about - it had been bombed before - and they had emergency-repaired it, I think.

PK Yes, I think, that ship. Luckily, I found Jan again, lying on the floor somewhere. And he was in a state, you know, he was terrible. And a priest amongst the prisoners came to me. He saw us, me sitting with Jan, holding his head. He said to me, "Do you know who he is?" I said, "It's my brother". He said, "Do you know he's dying?" I said, "Yes, I do". And Jan looked up to him, with his big eyes. And the priest said, "Jan, do you know you are dying? Jan said, "Yes, I do". "Oh". He said a prayer and then Jan said, "Forgot 'Queen and country'" and closed his eyes. I thought, "Well, that's it, it's the end". And they rushed him upstairs again because all the bodies were taken out, up. And I clambered up the iron thing again to follow him up on the deck. And I almost fell into the deck because I had a little bit of a parcel on my back and a prisoner standing in the middle grabbing it and pulled me almost into the hold. I almost fell back, that would have broken my neck.

Anyway, I was able to clamber out again, find Jan again, I followed him. I stayed with him again and then I lost him. The said, "Don't be silly, don't be silly, you can't stay with a dead man". And they grabbed him by his legs and pulled him away on his two legs over the road towards that big pit and they

/chucked...

chucked
/him in pit and that was the end.

I think they threw a lot of people in there, you know, who must have been still alive or perhaps still recoverable or something, I don't know. I didn't believe that he was completely dead. Well, how can you? They left me three times for dead on the way home so what can you do? Your temperature drops, your pulse goes and people can't feel anything, "He's dead". But I got up three times.

CXW What happened to you next?

PK Then I was herded back on to that ATHENE again and finally, the moorings were loosened and off we went down the Trave, the river, towards the Luebecker Bight - isn't that the Trave?

CXW How do you spell it?

PK The Trave, I believe, T R A V E, towards Luebecker Bight. And Jan was gone. I thought, "Ah, my God, what's going to happen now?" But in a way, I was standing on the deck and that fresh air from that East Sea blowing in, that fresh air - and there was a little bit of sun shining - and I felt strange, you know. I thought, "Oh, isn't this heaven after all that filth in that terrible?" . . people dying around you, wetting you when you were lying next to them and all that, the stench, uh! It was such a strange experience standing there on a ship, moving and breathing fresh, sea air again.

And then we went out to sea and there were three big ships lying and we moored aside one of the big ships which was the CAP ARCONA. And all of us were transferred from the ATHENE on to the CAP ARCONA.

/What ...

ACW What kind of a ship was it?

PK A big passenger liner, South Atlantic passenger liner. They say that liner was used on the South American run to Rio de Janeiro before the war. It was a luxury liner. And the state on that ship, the prisoners, it's unbelievable. It was bulging with people.

So I was loaded over on that ship and I thought, "Now what's going to happen?" Nothing, because I couldn't see any guards. There were no guns on it, it was a very strange awareness being on that ship with all those people milling about and no guards any more. You didn't see any more SS because they don't leave anything that's . . . no guns, nothing. Once I walked past the door and I could hear Germans talk but they kept themselves inside. I picked up something but I can't remember exactly - because my German was pretty good at that time because we learnt French, German and English at school. So I picked up quite a lot. I can't remember exactly what it was.

But anyway, I went below decks and the heat, all these people. And the Russians were down in the lowest of the lowest, they said they were shoving them into the holds there, the Russians at the bottom and then us all milling about, all over the decks and in the big saloons and all that. I couldn't stand it any longer, you could hardly breathe there. There was no place to lie down, it was so full of people. So what I did, I went up deck again and I stayed the night on deck.

And the next morning, all of a sudden the tannoy announced that any Belgians or Dutch on the ship

had to go on to the ATHENE who in the meantime had moored alongside the CAP ARCONA again. And that's what I did. I just walked over as well as I could and I was back on the ATHENE. And then we moved away from the CAP ARCONA towards the shore. I could see a town there which was Neustadt, the U boat base - the training school for U boat personnel. And all of a sudden, the engine stopped and a roar of aircraft engines started and the attack happened.

And we saw and we started crying. We thought, "Oh, why are they doing this, the English? They are English planes, they are English planes". And they were bombing - we didn't know about rockets then, but - well, they were bombing the CAP ARCONA. And all those people on board, all those friends of ours. And hell broke loose, not only the CAP ARCONA was hit but the DEUTSCHLAND was hit and the THIELEBECK was hit as well. But we were saved.

And anyway, we moored on the quayside in Neustadt, one way or another. In the meantime, the prisoners took the tarpaulins off something that was stacked on deck. And I could see people standing there emptying contents of tins, drinking it and eating it, as weak as they were. And people were dropping dead around me, just flopped over and died - they were over-eating. But I wouldn't have any of that.

CXW Where had this food come from?

PK That was under tarpaulin, I think, on deck. There was food on board, I don't know what it was for.

CXW What kind of food?

PK Tins. I saw people ripping open tins and

opening tins with things, drinking out of them and eating things but I wouldn't have any of that. So I thought, "Piet, better get off as quick as you can". So I grabbed hold of that mooring cable and I let myself slide down that mooring cable and with a big thud, whoomp, I landed on to the quayside. And I fell into the arms of two crying, English army personnel. They were crying their eyes out. And off I went, finding my way to see what was going on. I was so weak at that time I could hardly walk.

Saw all sorts of horrible things. Prisoners got hold of a kapo, they heated a piece of iron white hot and burnt 'kapo' on his back. That will stay there for life - they got hold of one. Funnily enough, we didn't see any more SS or marines or anything. It was just Allied soldiers round there.

CXW In what kind of numbers?

PK Not many. But they had control of the camp, I think. The Russians soon organised themselves, the amount of Russians that were there. They broke open one of the clothing stores and they were soon kitted out with nice, warm naval uniforms and red stars they had made on their caps. They were organised already and I was walking around in my birthday suit almost.

CXW What was your objective?

PK My objective was to get home. But nobody could tell you anything. I tried to explain to personnel that I was a political prisoner of war. It was chaos, nobody wanted to know. There were a lot of sick people and the hospital was full. I found a barrack with a mattress on a bunk. The attack happened at four o'clock

in the afternoon and it was getting dark. So I slept in one of the barracks - and sheer luxury I could find a mattress on a bunk. And I lie down there with a piece of blanket over me and I slept till the next day.

And then they took me into so-called hospital.

CXW Who did?

PK There were people all over the place. They were lying in beds in the corridors and they were lying on the ground and they were lying in the wards and everywhere. And I was put in one of the beds and I can remember that I fell very, very sick then. I had a high temperature. I think I caught brochitis then. And I tried to pull myself off, scrambling out of bed, putting my head in the water, under the tap. And that went on for a while and almost no food. Nothing was given to us, no food, no water, nothing. I drank from that tap a little bit. And that went on for a day or two, I think.

Anyway, one day, a couple of Dutchmen, they found me. The said, "Piet, there is transport, we're going home!" And I was so sick I could hardly move. What those two boys did, they found a trolley, they picked me up and chucked me on the trolley and they wheeled me out of that hospital. And chucked me on a big army lorry, an open lorry.

CXW They knew you, did they?

PK Yes, they seemed to know that I was a Dutchman and I was far gone then. I mean, I was so sick, mentally, how you go, I was sick. But you notice that I remember all these things. I mean I registered everything that went on but I was very sick, I can tell you that.

Anyway, they chucked me on to that lorry and I was told that we were going home. So the lorry took off and stopped on the way to the Lueneberger Heath, they said they were going to take us. They were taking us to the Lueneberger Heath. And half way, Neustadt, in Lueneberger Heath, we were off loaded in a camp, in army camp and chucked into one of the tents.

And again, half naked. Nobody ever got a thought to give us a pair of shoes or a warm coat or anything. Half naked, you know, I was led into a tent. I fell on the floor and I slept again. And that was the first time that I thought I was dead because I must have been so low at that time. And I uprighted myself and I started moving: "Oh, no, no, he's still alive, he's still alive". So off we went again. You know, those boys stayed. They picked me up again. They chucked me on to that army truck and off we went again.

CXW Was that a British army camp?

PK Yes, British army camp. And then, nothing was done for us. We - or I never got any attention or food or anything or clothing. And as I say, I was walking on bare feet and only a sort of nightdress of some sort, that was all in that cold, on that lorry. Oh, horrible. Oh, yes, somebody put a coat round me on that lorry. Because all sorts of things were stolen from me. I had time also to gather ^{bits of} little things. I had nice binoculars, pair of binoculars and all that sort of thing, it's funny, things you do, you know, when you see that lying around, you gather things. They were all stolen again, taken away, all those little possessions you had.

CXW You got them from Lubeck, had you?

/Yes ...

PK Yes, from Neustadt. Anyway, I lost all that. And then we arrived at Lueneberger Heath and there we were put in one of those big, army buildings and we were kept there. And I slept on the floor there in a big room, somewhere in those buildings on the Lueneberger Heath. And then the next morning we woke. And again, there was pandemonium because again they thought, "Oh, he's dead" and they left me on the floor.

And I woke up and I started moving about. And they called, "Doctor, doctor, come here, he's not dead, he's alive". I could hear them. Anyway, I was moving again, so they took me away. And from there we went to an airstrip and we were loaded in a Dakota. And the Dakota, that was marvellous because I think the nine thousand feet we flew at was a relief for me. It was relieving my chest, I think. I felt marvellous, you know. I could breathe again and all that. And I got flying, you know, that was my life. I wanted to be a pilot always and flying, that was marvellous.

And we passed over, I could see Cologne. Big American standing there in the middle, he said, "That's Cologne there". And we looked out of the window and it was all flattened. And only the big cathedral was standing there and the bridge was bombed. And I asked the Americans, I said, "Are we going to Amsterdam, to Schiepol?" He said, "No, no, no question, it's all out. It's impossible, we can't land in Holland at all". I said, "I want to go to Holland". "Well", he said, "we are going to Bruxelles". And we landed in Bruxelles, Melsbroek, that's where I finally arrived.

And again, no transport, nothing. I was walking as I was, half naked, can you imagine, through Bruxelles? We made a little trip on a tram, I can remember that.

/Who ...

CXW Who were you with then?

PK With prisoners, with people.

CXW How many of them?

PK Quite a few. And those Dutchmen, they kept an eye on me, I think. Anyway, they took us to a hospital and that's where the trouble started because then I really got sick. They took me into a hospital and there I contracted a disease - what was it? Tick-typus. And I was isolated, I was put in an isolation ward. They said in the beginning, I was quite wild because I thought the people wanted to get rid of me; I was contagious and they were going to poison me. So anything they tried with me to feed me, I knocked off the table, I knocked out of their hands. Nobody was to touch me because I was contagious. And in the end they had to restrain me of course and take me away.

And they brought me to an isolation hospital - afterwards I found out - in Anderlecht. They put me in isolation ward and that's where they left me to my own devices. I was all alone in a big ward, you know, having hallucinations. I could see walls falling on to me and all that sort of thing happening. Anyway, they treated me most probably and finally, I think, I got over the worst.

And I started searching myself for food. And then I think they let me go, on purpose and ^{then} left some bread out and I could find the bread. And I tried to light a gas ring. And then I thought, "They won't have me because I'm going to toast the bread: anything dirty that's on there, I will burn". And I had an aversion to flies, I didn't want any flies around

/me ...

me or any people giving me food. I had to find it myself and make sure it was [alright] - this was all part of the sickness of course.

But anyway, miraculously, I survived. And I got a little bit better. They took some blood off me and samples and a puncture in my back, you know, to see what the sickness was all about. I can remember a professor taking fluid off me. And after a while, resting, I got a little bit stronger and could move about. And people came to me then that the worst was over, most probably the contagious time was over. And then gradually, I perked up. I was telling people my father's name, my mother's name, where I lived and all that sort of thing.

And then they put me on the train and I landed on the Belgian-Dutch border, Bergen-op-Zoom - that was another big hospital. It was more or less, I think, a mental hospital. And that's where my sister found me, my elder sister. They had word from other people that I was in a hospital in Bruxelles - that's all the letter said there from my mother to me, to Bruxelles. That never reached me of course. And she found me and - on my way back home. And she found me and took me in a car, a military escort more or less took me home.

CXW Going back to Neustadt, were there German civilians about there?

PK Civilians, yes but they locked the doors when they saw us. They wouldn't have anything to do with us, they were scared of us, there was so much sickness around. We looked awful of course, you can imagine. No, the civilians did not do anything, no help from anybody. I think even the military stayed

/away ...

away from us. They were very, very, very scarce. I can't remember ever seeing, only that moment that I fell off that ship - I couldn't carry my own weight so you can imagine I went whoosh on that mooring rope - that's the only time I was in close contact with military personnel.

And then of course also the flight to Bruxelles, from Luenegerger Heath to Bruxelles - the crew, of course, was a big, American . . . two Americans there, one's standing in the back and one in the front just keeping an eye on us, huge fellows. That's the only time.

CXW The bombing of the CAP ARCONA and DEUTSCHLAND, how long did it take as far as you can remember?

PK Not very long. I saw it happen and then I turned my head and I moved off. I mean, I didn't linger to look what's happening and the burning and everything. You know, it registered, well, bombing's happening and CAP ARCONA is being hit and that was it. Then I moved off. I think by that time I was so weak and sick that a lot of things don't register.

CXW So the ATHENA wasn't hit at all?

PK No, no. That was moored on the quayside there and the prisoners were taken off as far as I know. But I made a quick exit.

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CXW What do you think about the bombing of these ships, today?

PK Well, we were always very laconic about that sort of thing happening. When anything happened in our groups as well, we say, "Oh well, tough luck" and I regard it more like tough luck. I mean, it's one of those things that happens in war, you just accept it.

CXW I think you were telling me earlier that you had some comments about the recent publicity which the incident received in STERN magazine. Could you repeat that?

PK Well, I don't agree with the way the Germans put this together. I think it's bad. I don't agree with it.

CXW Can I ask you about, in Neuengamme, did you ever despair or did you feel that you would be rescued?

PK I never despaired, I always thought [about] going back home, I was fighting for that. I wanted to go home. I was never down.

CXW Because you already knew about the military situation?

PK Yes. I had complete peace of mind with everything really. If the worst had happened, o-kay, I would have accepted it. I have been in that bunker to be hanged, o-kay, fine. It isn't a nice thought but I could accept it. But I always had the feeling also that it won't happen to me, it won't happen to me, I'm going back, I want to go back. And that's what I told my brother as well. But he was so much weaker than I was of course because of the loss of blood. And my friend as well, he was weak in himself already. He couldn't stand.

CXW Was there much organisation or any organisation amongst the prisoners in Neuengamme?

PK Not that I know of, no.

CXW So they didn't organise a committee or officials or anything of that kind?

PK No, nothing, no. I haven't heard about that at all. I was only surprised about the Danes and the Norwegians, I don't know what happened there. I was very surprised about that.

CXW Going back to the organisation of the Dutch resistance, you were talking about commandants and so on.

PK Yes.

CXW What kind of ranks did you have?

PK I think I was group commander. Well, not in the English sense, I was a groeps commandant, that means, most probably, rank of sergeant, most probably, of a group of people. I think that's more or less the rank. When you read official papers in Holland also, they called me groeps commandant, that's all. Well, literally translated into English it's group commander but I don't think that's the right name for it. I was in charge of my group and that's all I was.

CXW Did you get an award from the Dutch government?

PK Yes. Well, it's the Resistance Cross, the one you see on there.

CXW Who is entitled to have it?

PK People who have made themselves known in the
Resistance.

CXW Anybody who served in the Resistance?

PK Served in the Resistance, yes.