

Interview with Catherina Polak
On her parents.

- Q: We are interviewing Mrs. Polak about her parents. Let's start with your father. Would you tell me your father's full name and his date of birth and where he was born, and anything you might know about his family.
- A: My father's name was Abraham Soep, the Dutch word for soup, which was not a nice name to go out with as a child, as you can imagine. He was born on April 17, 1892.
- Q: Anything else? Do you know anything about his childhood, about his family?
- A: I don't know too much about his childhood. I know that his mother was very young when she married. His father started a diamond factory which was built, I guess with money from his father. Before that as far as I know, they were cigar makers. They were out of poor Ashkenazi background. But the diamond factory was a success and they became well to do later. My grandmother I remember very well. She was a very wise person but very uneducated. She had an inner wisdom but she didn't know much about anything. My grandfather died when I was four so I don't remember him too well. I think he was quite a bit more intelligent. My father was the oldest. He was born ten years after his parents were married. They couldn't have children. They adopted or took in a niece, a sister of my grandfather had one child after the other and did not know how to take care of them, so they took one of those children as a child, who I consider my aunt and my father who was born after ten years of marriage after the adoption, considered her his sister. She was quite a bit older. Then they had four other children who all died before age one for different reasons. One had diphtheria, another was dropped by somebody else and horrible stories that never really was talked about because in those days a lot of people lost a lot of children. And then my uncle was born who was ten years younger than my father. His name was Hans Soep and he was a very sickly child. They thought they were going to lose him, but they didn't. Where my father was this tall, broad heavy person. My uncle was the opposite. He was small and very small boned and small build. They got along well. My uncle looked up to my father a lot and really was always a little bit in the shadow. He went into business, after schooling he went into business with my father, as a partner, or a junior partner. My father had three years of high school, which at that time was really quite a bit. It was an official three-year course high school and after he finished he went into business with his father. His father died at the age of 64 and his mother died in the beginning of the war in 1942, I think. What else do you want to know about them?
- Q: I think we have most of the story.
- A: My mother was from a family of six children. She was born on December 8, 1895, her name is Toni Fredrika Kauffman was her maiden name. Everybody called her Toni. She came from a very liberal family. My father came from an orthodox family, but when he married my father, she became a dutiful kosher housewife and later on took an interest in Hebrew. She took Hebrew lessons conversation lessons to learn the language. Her parents were German but they had moved to Holland in the 1880's and the six children were all born in Holland. The oldest one, I think, in '87, and there was a span of twenty years between the oldest and the youngest. One of my aunts is still alive and lives in Israel, the youngest one who is going to be 85 in May. And we are all going to Israel, all the nieces and nephews that are still there for a reunion.. She

was a dutiful housewife, it was a very good marriage, but my father was a very dominant person, not of many words but his whole being was a little authoritarian. But my mother was perfectly happy in her role and not until after he died, which was in 1953, and she lived until 1980, not until a few years after he died did she become her own person and showed a lot more personality and initiative and everything than I had ever seen before. We were on very good terms all the time.

Q: How was she as a mother when you were growing up?

A: Well, when we were growing up she was, you know, like a mother should be. Very nurturing, but we lived in a fairly big house and we had two maids and one of them was more or less what they call a "kinder fraulein." They all came from Germany. They took care of the children. And there was a cleaning woman and there was a seamstress. There were a lot of people to take care of us. My father traveled a lot because in the diamond business he went every other week to Belgium to sell. Once a month to England, to London, to buy. He was on lots of committees, so my mother was often alone with us. But she was kind of a, she doesn't stand out in my mind as a child. I always used to say as a child, I'm not being brought up I'm just growing up by myself. I felt kind of independent, I guess, from my young years on. But not realizing it I probably wasn't, but it seemed that way. But she was very sweet. Everybody loved her. She was a real lady. She looked like a lady, and she was cultured. She came from a cultured background than my father. She was fond of music, she played the piano quite nicely. She spoke beautifully French. My father took an interest later in music and became very musically inclined. I think he played the violin when he was a young boy so there must have been something there already. They traveled quite a bit without us, which we resented when we were children. When we used to complain, my mother used to say in a German expression which her mother used to say to her, you just travel with your own husband. That's about all I can say about my mother from the early years. About my sister, she is still alive.

Q: In that case, I need to talk to her.

A: Do it yourself. She has lots and lots of problems. I don't think they relate to the war. She's been a problem her whole life. She doesn't have a very happy present life. She lives in Los Angeles. She's a very strong, determined person, but it's lots of problems.

Q: Can we go on a talk about these two friends?

A: Yes, let's talk about these two friends. One of them Rudi Acohen who was really my boyfriend. I met him when he was 13 and I was 12. We lived next to each other during the summer at the summer resort. Our parents had rented homes.

Q: What was the name of that resort?

A: Zandvoort and it's very close to Amsterdam. My father commuted every day from business by car, because the chauffeur came and picked him up and brought him. That's what was done in those days. He also went to Montessori High School, but a different one from mine, and I remember hearing his name when in June '35 we went to visit our Montessori High School for the first time just for orientation and everybody's name was mentioned. I thought what a strange name this boy has. And then we went a few weeks later to Zandvoort and who lives next door, the boy with the strange name, and we were very crazy about each other, even when that young,

and you know, like children are we played together. We played ball, we went to the dunes, we went swimming and then he was in my class for several years and then he was transferred to another school. He wasn't entirely a good student and couldn't stay in our school. But I stayed very friendly with him. Actually 'til he was arrested also in a raid. Again a reprisal raid in July '42, just before the deportation started. Also a German soldier had been killed and they emptied that whole street of all the Jews. One very long street, very nice residential street, went in every home where there were Jews and arrested them.

Q: Do you know what year Rudi was born?

A: Yes. His birthday was June 4, and he was born in 1922.

Q: Did he have any other interests, did he have musical interests?

A: No. He also played tennis and he played the violin, he had violin lessons. He liked popular music, records.

Q: Do you remember any in particular, or anything like that?

A: Well, we listened a lot to French songs, like Charles Trunet (?) You probably don't even know that name. He was very popular then, and also Austrian songs like Marta Keller, I think that was her name. No, that was not her name. We listened to American songs. Frank Sinatra was big. We played a lot of classical records. We had an old fashioned player. For his Bar Mitzvah he got a record player, you know, that you turned a handle to play, and we played a lot of classical music. What else? I don't know. We did what young people do. We went on trips, bike trips and stuff like that. He was caught in one of those raids and that was the end of him. The day after he was arrested, he was sent on o Auschwitz or wherever. I never heard from him. With his parents and his brother. I even went in a day or two after because I worked for the Jewish Council in that department that was called Aids to Departing People and I was able to send some stuff to Westerbork because most people stayed. But later on I heard they weren't even there. And, of course, he never came back. And I didn't know that at the time during all those years, all of the sudden he might be back. He was young and everything, of course we realized that he probably didn't live three days afterwards.

Q: What month was that?

A: It was June 1942 and it was just after his birthday. It was a Sunday. And I am trying to look back, his birthday was on June 4, 1942 and whatever the Sunday was after that; I think it was June 9th, it was that date. He had just turned 20. He had a younger brother who was very, very bright and very, very musical, was about three or four years younger than him. Of course, he went, his parents, everybody. And then, after that I had some sort of a boyfriend, his name was Hans Rudelshim, and he was born in Kampen, which was near _____, _____. I don't know when his birthday was. He was very interesting. He went into hiding a lot. His father was a tailor, and he was a good tailor too. AS a matter of fact he remodeled some sports clothes of my father for my sister and me into skirts and little top and he was also a very gifted pianist and he took some piano lessons from a blind Hungarian pianist who lived in Holland. Was also caught in Holland and who used to practice when he couldn't play concerts anymore. He used to give house concerts of the piano and he practiced at my parents' house. We had a grand piano. And he got to know this friend of mine and he taught and gave him lessons

Q: Do you know what year Hans was born?

A: I think probably also in 1922, it may have been '21. He may have been a year older, and he had to leave Kampen _____, like all the people from the Provinces were sent. He looked very Jewish. He dyed his hair blond and went into hiding and did all kinds of reckless things, traveled and went everywhere. And, of course, they were betrayed.

Q: Do you know when that was?

A: I don't know exactly when that was. We were still in our house and we left there in May '43, so it must have been February or March '43. I don't know what happened to him. Never heard a word. He was sent away. And then this other picture here is of a young man named Gideon, we called him in Dutch, it's called "Chideon", and we called him "Chi." He was from a very prominent Dutch gentile family. They were originally Huguenots, therefore the French name. We were very good friends. We were in the same grade. He was a very good friend of my boyfriend, Rudi. In the very beginning I hear of the Dutch National Socialist Movement in the early '30's, a lot of people became members of this Nazi group. Even Jews, because they thought, you know, it was a good system and very orderly and everything. Before we knew all the stuff that was going to happen, but his family eventually, of course, totally abandoned this and they were very, very good and had many Jewish friends. He went into the Resistance and hid Jews. His father was sent away and died in, I think it was Buchenwald or Dachau, one of the two. His mother was in Ravensbruck, survived, came back a wreck and lived for quite a few years as a wreck, and never really got over all of this.

Q: Can you tell us anything about either Gideon or Hans, or both, and Rudi, what were they like? What was their personalities like?

A: Well, you know when you grow up together as children you don't delve that much in the personalities or whatever. He was just also not the greatest of students, but a very sweet guy and fun. We had a lot of fun together. We were young, we had parties. We organized our own parties. We decided whether we would go formal to this party or should we go another way. Everybody brought their best records and we played and we danced. We had very happy teenage years. It was mostly for fun. Although I do remember though once we were in high school that we had very deep conversation subject about the incarnation or vivisection, you know, experiments on animals. Who was for and who was against. You know, like teenagers who go to a decent school do. But it was mostly just friends together all the time. I spent really all my years in high school with my friends rather than with my family. We did our homework, but it had to be done quick because then we would get together and play records and talk and have fun. Of course girls were involved. He had a girlfriend too.

Q: Hans, how did he fit in with the circle?

A: No, Hans really didn't move to Amsterdam until the war was already on, and his uncle was a physician in Amsterdam and they were the best friends of Rudi's parents. So I knew him really through Rudi. And then Rudi was deported, you know, he went after me, because he liked me from the beginning. So somehow that's how all these people fit in. I mean these are just three of them. I showed you a little tennis picture, there were several more we were always together with. These were really after school friends.

Q: What was Rudi like?

A: Rudi was a very nice down to earth, rather simple kind of guy, I think. You don't know. I sometimes wonder what would he have been or become. He was as I said he didn't have very good head for learning, but his father was a stockbroker and I think he could have become that too. He was interested in business and everything. But there wasn't much time for development yet. You know, we were both 16 when the war broke out in Europe and 17 when Holland was invaded. We were kids. I mean even today 16 and 17 years old, and they are much more sophisticated than we were, but even they are little kids, while they know more of what goes on in the world, you know, with television. We didn't have television, of course. We didn't have a radio in the house until I was 14. If I wanted to hear children's programs on the radio, I walked 25 minutes to my grandmother's every Tuesday afternoon to hear children's programs. We were not really spoiled kids. It wasn't that much.

Q: Is there anything else? I know I've picked your brain and put you through the wringer. Is there anything else you would like to add?

A: There's probably a million things I can add, you have to stop somewhere.

Q: Thank you very, very much.

A: You're very welcome.