

RG-50.407.0069

Interview: Alex de Zoete, May 1996

Summary

Alex de Zoete, born in Amsterdam on November 12, 1916, describes: his parents, Isaac, an upholsterer, and Ava née Kayfeld*, and his one younger brother, Rudi; his parents not being religious but his being sent to both state and Jewish schools until his bar mitzvah, and his family's secular life; having a pleasant upbringing and being unaware of anti-Semitism until he was about seventeen; organization of the Jewish community; being aware of developments in Germany after 1933; believing Hitler's determination to harm the Jews but not being particularly fearful—as most Dutch Jews, who believed Holland would remain neutral and uninvaded as in the First World War, were not; working for the Amsterdam stock market; his active pursuit of cosmopolitan social and cultural interests; the German invasion in 1940 and subsequent loss of his job in May 1941; the death of an estimated 30,000 civilians in air attacks in Rotterdam (where he was working at the time) at the same time the city had surrendered; Dutch optimism after the invasion that Britain and the U.S. would come to their aid; introduction of legal restrictions on Jews and the introduction of the Juden star in 1942; seizure of Jewish businesses; permission granted to Jews to patronize certain places that later served as convenient concentration points during roundups; enabling of previously impermissible and suppressed anti-Semitism among Dutch people; meeting and falling in love with a Jewish hospital nurse; becoming an apprentice nurse and living in the same Jewish hospital; his marriage in October 1942; establishment of a Jewish ghetto; general knowledge in 1942 of the existence of concentration camps and the gassing of Jews; the roundup at the hospital while he was working; being taken by bus with the patients to the railhead for transport to camps where he was certain he would be killed, but convincing a German guard to let him go; returning to the hospital to get his wife and sister-in-law, and then convincing the next transport bus driver to take them to safety; fleeing on August 13th with his wife to Sprongcapela*, a village in southern Holland; finding separate places for him and his wife with brave Christian couples; becoming a member of the underground; his exploits with the underground, including being captured and then rescued shortly after D-Day; liberation by Canadians and Poles on October 29, 1944; moving in with his wife and in-laws; being employed for five months on a British military base; becoming a paymaster for UNRRA in Germany and visiting all of the refugee camps; being informed by the Red Cross in 1949 that his parents and brother had been transported and killed by the Nazis; his wife becoming matron of a hospital in Eindhoven, which was devoted to assisting concentration camp survivors; experiencing anti-Semitism among occupation soldiers; returning to Holland and working, selling office machines; emigrating to Australia in March 1951 with his wife and two young sons; a successful business career in Australia; his two sons who between them have eight grandchildren.

*Transliteration as heard.