Synopsis of 1st Interview with Frank Gryzenhout,
Burbank, Ca, 21st August 2010

Frank was born in Amsterdam on Feb 13, 1925. His parents were Franciscus Gryzenhout and Magdalena Adriana Praag, both born in Amsterdam.

Frank lived at several addresses in Amsterdam during childhood. He was fifteen years old when the German Army marched into Amsterdam and he remembers the sight well. Over the next three years Frank would personally witness the abduction of Dutch Jews off the streets and from their homes and businesses in Amsterdam. They were forcibly taken to “cattle markets” and put into rail boxcars and sent away. Frank remembers that friends and neighbors were afraid to speak of these events, lest they be identified and targeted themselves for deportation. Jews were the Nazi’s primary target, but Dutch Christians who spoke out were also picked up and deported. Dutch males were also picked up off the street at random and sent via rail to Germany to become forced laborers. Frank did not know anyone personally who was deported, but he witnessed those events on the street several times before he became a random victim of a Nazi round up.

The German Army abducted Frank when he was 16 or 17 years old (1941 or 1942). Frank was walking on Jan Evertson Straat, near Balboa Straat¹. The Germans cordoned off the area and he was trapped within it. Women and girls, men over 60 and boys under 16 were usually allowed to leave the cordoned area, while males between those ages were marched to deportation points and taken to work as forced laborers. Although Frank was under eighteen at the time, he was

¹ Not far from Fank’s home on Baffin Straat
not allowed to leave the cordoned area. He was marched with the men, all under guard, to a train station and put on a train. Frank did not plan on becoming a forced laborer for the Nazis. As the train slowed to approach the Dutch towns of Haulete and Ufelte Frank jumped from the train. He thought he heard shots ring out as he ran, but honestly does not know if the guards on the train were shooting at him or someone else. After he returned to Amsterdam he joined the Dutch resistance. A man named Tys, about 35 years old at the time, recruited Frank into the Dutch Resistance. Frank was seventeen years old at the time of recruitment. Tys and Frank both lived on Baffin Straat in Amsterdam. Frank had seen Tys in the neighborhood in the past and recognized his face, but they had never actually met before Tys recruited Frank. Only first names were used in the resistance, so Frank never knew Tys’ last name (Frank says that he learned after the war that Tys had survived and worked for the government or police in Amsterdam. But Frank never actually spoke with Tys after the war).

Frank was taught to derail trains by disassembling the rails and separating them. He took the bolts out with a crowbar and would separate the tracks by six inches. When the train approached it would derail. Frank participated in these operations three or four times before he was captured by the Germans. In April 1943, about 8PM one night, Frank was with three others the night the Germans caught them. Frank and his team were caught in the act of separating the rails. Frank and his team did not see the German soldiers approaching, were surprised and immediately overwhelmed. Frank and his team had their hands tied behind their backs. German soldiers marched them to the Reichsicherheitshauptamt (RSHA: a subordinate organization under Heimrich Himler and the SS). Frank described the
RSHA as something like a German Army Police Station responsible for keeping local nationals in line. According to Frank, every Dutchman was well aware of this organization and all feared and loathed it. Frank said that he was held in an absolutely pitch black cell with a few other prisoners. After two or three days at this complex, Frank was taken to Camp Amersfoort by train. He said that the train stopped at a station and some local Dutch citizens tried to pass food into the rail cars, but they were quickly chased off by German guards. The others on his derailment team were not sent to Amersfoort with him. He does not know what became of them and as always wondered if they were quickly executed. Frank believes that he may have been spared initially due to his young age. He turned 18 years old in Feb 1943 and was caught by the Germans in April of 1943.

Frank was in Camp Amersfoort only one or two days when Lieutenant Kotaella came into his barracks with two SS guards. They targeted the only black man in the camp. Frank recalled other prisoners in the camp saying that the black man had been a musician who played in Amsterdam. The black man was taken outside and forced to drape himself over the “boch”. Frank described the boch as made out of wood and somewhat rounded over the top, like a log. A prisoner would be laid over the boch with his feet wedged into a kind of brace below and behind the boch. The prisoner’s rear side would be raised and exposed and in that position he would be whipped. Lt Kotaella and the guards whipped and beat the black man in front of Frank and the other prisoners. Frank never knew the musician’s name and he died a few days later from injuries incurred during the beating. Frank recalled that after the war Lt Kotaella was returned to Holland and convicted of

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2 Later, Frank talked about leaving the RSHA by truck. It was not clear if he was transported by truck all the way to Amersfoort or if he was transported by truck first and then by train. Frank’s remembrance of Dutch citizens trying to pass food to prisoners on a train may have been a separate event.
war crimes. He was given the death penalty, but the Queen of Holland commuted the sentence to life in prison and he died there many years later. Frank had the misfortune to experience this man’s sick brutality first hand. And he followed closely Koetella’s trial and conviction as it was reported in Dutch newspapers. To paraphrase Frank, “Koetella died many years later and he suffered a painful end from some type of disease. He got what he deserved in the end.” Frank’s absolute loathing of Lt Kotaella was clear in his tone, words and expression.

Frank recalls that he spent about five or six months at Amersfoort. His prison number was 13 or 33. Daily food consisted of a piece of bread and some potato soup. Once, Frank stole a raw potato and was caught. He was strapped over the boch and whipped for that infraction. He received twelve lashes, which he said was less than the more usual 25 lashes for minor offenses. Once again, Frank thinks it was his young age that caused the Germans to show a little restraint.

Frank did not smoke cigarettes, but the German soldiers were fond of the habit and tossed cigarette butts at random. Frank and other prisoners would collect the cigarette butts. When they had enough remnant tobacco to create a cigarette it could be traded for a slice of bread. Those trades usually took place amongst the prisoners. In spite of a near starvation diet, some prisoners would gladly trade a meager ration for a smoke. Frank wisely chose food over cigarettes.

Frank was next moved to Camp Vught, still in Holland. His camp number at Vught was 73993. He recalls spending about 8-9 months at this camp, but he seemed fuzzy on this fact. Frank guesses that there were about 2000 prisoners at

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3 The U.S. Holocaust Museum provided a copy of Frank’s prison record from Vught. The prison number matched, as well as Frank’s full name (Dutch Spelling), date of birth and Amsterdam as his origin.
Amersfoort and about 7-8000 at Vught. Frank said that treatment at Vught was “heaven” compared to Amersfoort. Vught did make use of Capos, who were mostly German prisoners put in charge of other prisoners. Frank described the various colored triangles, and of course the yellow star worn by Jews, that identified prisoners’ “crimes” to the Nazis: Black triangles for black marketeers and conventional criminals, Pink triangles for homosexuals, Red for political prisoners, Green for murderers, and the Yellow Star of David for Jews. Frank said that he only saw prisoners with red triangles at Amersfoort. But at Vught he saw all colors of triangle and the Star of David on prisoners imprisoned together in the same barracks. The Capos targeted Frank on numerous occasions because he was young and rebellious. Frank complained of the abuse to one of the block officers. After that Frank was moved into Barracks #14, which had engineers, doctors, priests and some younger prisoners. The prisoners in Barracks #14 seemed to have a protected status and living conditions for Frank improved 4.

Frank recalled stories that the Germans were building a “Boef” at Camp Vught. That was a brothel for German soldiers. Frank heard that women given the death penalty could opt for the brothel to save their lives. Prisoners heard that the Red Cross found out about the plan and the German’s closed down the operation before it really began. Frank recalled that he was moved to Dachau about Dec 1944 or Jan 1945. But looking at Frank’s prisoner record from Camp Vught it appears he

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4 The Nazis added extensions to camp Vught in 1943; in May the Frauenkonzentrationslager (FKL), a women’s concentration camp and in August the Polizeiliches Durchgangslager, (PDL), a police ordered transit camp. The PDL was reserved primarily to hold Dutch prisoners for hostages. A number of inmates of the PDL were shot by firing squad in retaliation for acts of sabotage committed by the Dutch Resistance. According to Frank’s prison record at Vught, he was held in the PDL section before he was moved to Barracks #14, which was outside the PDL camp.
as moved in April 1944. He may have gone direct to Dachau or he might have spent some time at another transition camp. But Frank recalls that from Vught he was put on a bus\(^5\), like a school bus, with 40 to 50 other prisoners. His prisoner number from Vught stayed with him at Dachau. All Frank did at Dachau was eat and sleep. He said the Germans knew the end was near and became easy going towards the prisoners as the end of the war approached. Frank remembers waking up one morning and all the Germans were gone and Canadian soldiers liberated the camp the same day. Frank said that he knew they were Canadian soldiers by the uniforms they wore (with a small “Canada” patch on the upper sleeve).\(^6\) Prisoners moved thru the camp looking to take revenge on any German soldiers who remained. But most prisoners, to include Frank, were quickly put on trucks and moved to hospitals. Frank stayed at the hospital for several days then ran away. Frank hitched rides on American and Canadian military trucks to get back to Amsterdam. Getting rides was not hard. Allied trucks would stop and when they learned that Frank was Dutch and recently released from Dachau they were happy to help. During the trip he spent at least one night sleeping in a chicken coop. Frank was told along the way that a curfew of 8pm was in effect and it was dangerous to be out at night. It took Frank a few days to get back to Amsterdam.

\(^5\) Frank often interchanged the words “buts” and “truck” while referring to how he was transported. I am not sure if the confusion was due to language (Frank barely spoke English when he came to America in the late 50’s) or perhaps due to faulty memory. I suspect he was transported by both means at various times.

\(^6\) The 45th US Infantry Division is credited with the liberation of Dachau. But other units, to include combat arms, medical, transport, and supply units, were probably committed to the evacuation, housing, feeding and healthcare needs of the prisoners. Dachau also had about 30 sub-camps in addition to the main camp, which may have been liberated by other units. Perhaps Frank was at a sub-camp liberated by someone else. Or perhaps Canadian trucks assisted in the evacuation of prisoners to hospitals. Frank had no doubt, however, that they were Canadian as he recognized their uniforms, which had small “Canada” patches on the tops of the sleeves near the shoulder. Dachau prisoner records are not online. But the Holocaust Museum provided contact information for Dachau and said that they are very good at researching and finding prisoner records. I attached that contact information to a copy of Frank’s prisoner record from Vught, which I mailed.
Frank heard that there were still German soldiers occupying parts of Holland, especially along the coast, as the war was not yet over.

Frank arrived in Amsterdam with no warning. He knocked on his parents door (Frank cannot remember the address, but it was on the west side of Amsterdam near the Suder Sea, which is now landfill) and his mother answered. It was a very emotional event. For two years Frank’s parents knew nothing of his whereabouts or what had happened to him. They had feared the worst.

In the immediate months after the war, Frank lived at home with his parents and got his strength back. He eventually went back into construction with his father and became a master mason. But Frank had dreamed of going to the United States and was already thinking about how and when he could do that. Frank got married during that time, about 1947, at City Hall, in Amsterdam. In the late 1940’s Frank was drafted into the Dutch Army and was deployed to Indonesia to fight an insurgency (or war for independence, depending on your perspective; Frank’s perspective was that the Indonesians were fighting for independence and the Dutch had no business being there). In some manner, Frank’s experience in Indonesia was just as influential on his life as were the Nazi concentration camps. Sadly, we never discussed his experiences in Indonesia in any great detail.

Frank’s notion to emigrate from Holland turned to action during two crises in 1956; the Soviet Invasion of Hungary and the Suez canal crisis of the same year. He believed that World War III was right around the corner and he did not want his wife or children to suffer the horrible experiences of war.
Frank moved to the United States about July 16, 1958. He came on a KLM flight from Amsterdam and landed first in Iceland (layover) and then made the “big jump” to New York, from there to Chicago, on to Denver then Salt Lake City. No direct flights in those days! Frank had sponsors in the USA, Herman & Nanny Finstra, who lived in Salt Lake City. Frank had an uncle from his Mother’s side living in Salt Lake City. The uncle found the Hermans to act as sponsors for Frank. A US Citizen had to sponsor an immigrant and the sponsor had to put up $500 bond to be used if the new immigrant had to be deported. In essence, the sponsor agreed to provide support so the new immigrant would not become a burden to society. And so began a new life that would eventually lead the Gryzenhout family to settle permanently in Burbank, California, where Frank lives to this day.

Interviewers Comments

Frank was 85 years old at the time of this interview. Unsurprisingly, his memory on some facts may be faulty since the events described happened more than 60 years ago. Any future research may reveal variations or discrepancies in the details. But further research may also confirm Frank’s memory. For example, Frank told me that prisoners at Amersfoort all wore Red Triangles, indicating they were political prisoners. In fact, Amersfoort held prisoners of all types, to include Jews, black marketeers and conventional criminals. And Frank himself would reaffirm that in later talks, seemingly contradicting his prior comments. Hence, I realized early on that his memory was at times jumbled and he often struggled to find the right words in English, his second language. On the other hand, it’s possible that prisoners at Amersfoort were segregated by type and that he only saw
those with red triangles while at Amersfoort, perhaps learning later of the other type of prisoners. In a similar vein, his memory may actually be in reference to the Vught PDL camp, where Frank was held for several months, rather than Amersfoort. I understand that The PDL was used to imprison Dutch hostages for future retribution against acts of the Dutch underground and it makes sense that the PDL held only Dutchmen with Red Triangles to meet that purpose. My point is that Frank’s memory may have mixed facts and events from different times and places and only factual research into the management and layout of Amersfoort and Vught would contribute to an understanding of Frank’s experiences.

By the time of the interview I had known Frank for approximately four years. During that time he spoke of his wartime experiences on several occasions. While I tried to capture here some of his experiences I did in one case take note of the lack of one. Specifically, that he could not name or remember a single fellow prisoner at any of the three camps who became a friend, supporter or partner in survival. I considered that fact in the context of Frank’s request that some of his experiences not be retold to his grandchildren. Those experiences revolved around the kind of behavior that resulted from a desperate desire to survive amid extreme deprivation, abuse, torture and hardship. In an environment of “every man for himself”, maybe it should not be surprising that friends often betrayed friends and that self-preservation could sometimes be found only by withdrawing from others. I will not judge how a person should or would behave under such extreme circumstances. The Frank I know is a decent man who has frequently provided support and backup to my 85 year old mother. And he has done so asking nothing in return. I recognize good character when I see it. Whatever Frank may have
done as a prisoner of the Nazis reflect their extreme cruelty and his youth, not any character flaws in him.

Note to Frank’s Grandchildren: I hope one day that you will find the time to visit Holland. You should stand on the street where your Grandfather was first abducted by the Nazis and walk the rail line near Heulette where he jumped the train. And by all means, visit the concentration camps where he was held. Your identities are largely formed by those who came before you, and their experiences defined the lessons, morals and principles that your parents instilled into your young lives. Go stand on the ground that defined your grandfather’s life and you will find it a powerful experience.

Patrick J. Ahrens
Interviewer, August 2010

Follow-Up Video Interviews conducted by Elise Ahrens in February and August 2011. Two Disc Video Interview included with this submission to the US Holocaust Museum on 21 December 2012.