

Frank van Riet
The Jewish guards
Supervision in the Dutch Gateway to Hell

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INTRODUCTION

In 1939 the construction of a central refugee camp was started on the heath in Drenthe, near the Municipality of Westerbork. The camp, consisting generally of wooden barracks, was destined for the Jews who had fled from the Nazi regime. When the occupier took over the camp on 1 July 1942 and changed its function from a facility for Jewish refugees to a transit camp, order and discipline became even more important than before. The deportation machine had to be started and kept running at full speed. Every hitch could potentially jeopardise the solution of the Jewish question in the Netherlands. From mid-July 1942 onwards, the first trains left for the (extermination) camps. Nearly 107,000 Jews and several hundred Sinti and Roma were deported to these camps, largely via Westerbork.

Apart from a visit to the memorial centre and the camp site, my first more or less direct confrontation with the past of Camp Westerbork took place during an interview with J.J. (Jacobus) Bombergen in early December 1997. This former Sergeant of the State Police was part of a Dutch Police Battalion during the occupation. According to Bombergen, this Amsterdam based battalion was in charge of the outdoor surveillance of the transit camp from 1 June 1944 onwards. He stressed that he and his colleagues had nothing to do with internal affairs and that they were not allowed to maintain contact with the Jews.

The former Policeman was still struggling with the past, even after so many years. He reacted not only fiercely but also emotionally to some (scientific) publications, in which 'his' Police unit was generally depicted very negatively. This did not apply directly to the standard works of Jacob Presser and Loe de Jong¹, since both historians did not include a comprehensive analysis or value assessment of the Dutch guards of Camp Westerbork in their publications. In later studies, the opinion of Bombergen's Battalion is less nuanced and far from positive. Willy Lindwer, for example, wrote in his book *Kamp van hoop en wanhoop (Camp of Hope and Despair)* that most of the Battalion consisted of Schalkhaarders. According to him, these were greatly feared Police Officers who had followed an SS based training course at the Police Training Battalion in Schalkhaar.²

Because Lindwer did not criticise the Gendarmerie Detachment that had been in charge of the surveillance of the camp for much longer before the Battalion arrived, Bombergen did not understand Lindwer's negative attitude towards 'his' Battalion. After all, he knew that when the railway line to Westerbork had not yet been finished, the Jews had been escorted from Hooghalen station to the camp by the gendarmes. In addition, Lindwer's book contains a photo in which it is clearly visible that the gendarmes celebrated the Germanic Yule festival in the camp together with the Schutzstaffel, or SS. Bombergen said that it left a bad taste in his mouth, because the Police Battalion did not maintain any contact with the SS Officers in the camp.³ By saying this, he tried to confirm that he and his colleagues had played a different and much more limited role during the German occupation of the Netherlands.

The Jewish journalist Philip Mechanicus, who had kept a diary during his stay at the camp, admitted that there were some bad men among the gendarmes, but he also ruled that the majority was friendly and mild. According to Mechanicus, the Dutch guards, originating mainly from the three northern provinces, looked surly and strict, but were generally mild in their actions. They were even said to pity the Jews they were supposed to guard and they were far from positive about the task imposed on them by the occupier.⁴

It is not possible to immediately be able to create a unanimous judgment on the various Dutch Surveillance Units of Camp Westerbork. It should also be borne in mind that these units were only responsible for outdoor surveillance from January 1943 onwards. For the supervision of the barbed wire fence, a specific service group was formed that consisted of Jewish men from the camp's population. In Dutch it was called the Ordedienst (OD). This term will be used in the rest of the book to refer to this service group. Mechanicus' view on this service was anything but mild. Among other things, he wrote that the worst people among the Jews, both German and Dutch, had been chosen as OD members. They were rude men, without civilisation, without feeling, without compassion; who lived solely for a cigarette and an easy adventure with women of their own kind. According to Mechanicus, the Jews in the camp had labelled the OD members as 'the Jewish SS'.⁵ Presser and De Jong took over this term.

Another historian, Jacob Boas, concluded that the tasks of the OD corresponded to those of the regular SS in other camps. He further described these tasks as misdeeds and because the camp residents witnessed these on a daily basis, they feared and despised the OD members with an 'unprecedented ferocity'.⁶ Other statements and literature show that the guards of Camp Westerbork were both hated, loved and feared. If it could be said that the Amsterdam Police Battalion was not made up solely of highly feared Policemen, that the gendarmes were good to a large extent and that the term 'Jewish SS' was too harsh for the OD, why did the occupying forces not deem it necessary to employ many of their own men instead? It would have been much more in line with their usual approach to send a number of sadistic and brutal guards from their men to Westerbork, as they did to many other camps and to the Extermination Camps, the final destination of the packed trains. However, the presence of only a dozen SS men, most of whom had suffered grave injuries on the Eastern Front, proved sufficient to run Camp Westerbork like a well-oiled deportation machine. In addition to answering the question of how the organisation and the monitoring of the camp could have been so effective, the background and motivation of the individual guard is explored for the first time.

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1. FLEEING THE NAZI REGIME

On the morning of Saturday 1 April 1933, uniformed and partially armed National Socialists, including members of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), marched through the streets of many German villages and cities. Linnich, near the Dutch border, was one of them. Around 10:00 AM a number of National Socialists who came from the village were on their way to the shops and businesses of Jewish owners. Linnich, with a total of 2,248 residents, had a Jewish community of 138 people.¹ A few SA men had chosen the Department Store of the Jewish businessman Albert Moses, located at Rurdorfer Straße 40, as a target. They stood guard in front of the entrance to scare off customers. They likely also had pamphlets with them on which stood: *Deutsche! Wehrt euch! Kauft nicht bei Juden!* A photograph was taken of customers leaving the shop and they were warned that they were in the process of supporting a Jewish business.

Born and raised in Linnich², Albert married Henriëtte Samuel Baum in 1920. The couple had a son and a daughter. Albert was actively involved in



Members of the SA in front of a Jewish store with a warning sign.

the village community as a member of the Voluntary Fire Brigade and the carnival association. He even served in the German Army during the First World War. Back then, the fact that he was of Jewish origin was not considered a problem. For his actions on the front, Albert was awarded the Iron Cross.³

Boycott Campaign

At the end of January 1933, after the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor, many Jews noticed that there was more and more hatred and aggression towards them. The new rulers blamed the Jews for all problems and considered them the inferior race. From the end of February onwards, many 'wild actions' took place, of which mainly Jewish merchants and traders were victims. They were abused, threatened, imprisoned and in some cases even murdered. In addition, their businesses and shops were plundered and destroyed or closed by order of the National Socialists. Several countries, including Great Britain and the United States, protested against these actions and some (Jewish) organisations proceeded to ban German wares and services.

The new National Socialist rulers saw in this so-called *Greuelhetze* from abroad an opportunity to take large scale measures against the German Jews for the first time. Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda, was partially responsible for the national boycott action, which then took place on Saturday 1 April. The action had been announced in the newspapers. The Jewish people would find out who they were dealing with that Saturday. However, the organisers had probably hardly taken into account the Sabbath, because they found many shops and businesses closed. That is why the National Socialists began bashing windows and looting.⁴

For many Jews, the boycott action and the increasing anti-Semitism were signs that there was no future for them anymore in Germany. As a result, the first major emigration wave began in 1933. They hoped to be able to build up a better life elsewhere. Approximately 51,000 men, women and children were able to leave Germany quite simply. Of this group, 4,000 people chose the Netherlands as their (temporary) destination, including Albert Moses. He saw his expectations of the future fall apart as well because of these events, so he went to Sittard with his family. Here the businessman opened a furniture store, which he named 'De Limburgsche Meubelcentrale'.⁵ Albert's wife followed his example and became an entrepreneur. She opened a fashion house called 'De Dame' at Limbrichterstraat 30 in Sittard.⁶

Initially, the first group of foreigners was able to settle in the Netherlands without having to deal with legal regulations. According to the Act of 1849 regarding the admittance of aliens, foreigners who had sufficient means of livelihood and who were in possession of valid documents would be granted access to the Netherlands. The second major exodus started after the introduction of the so-called Nuremberg Laws on 15 September 1935. These particularly racist laws, which are also referred to as 'racial laws', banned non-Jewish Germans from marrying Jews or having sexual relations with them. Furthermore, the Jews lost all civil rights.⁷

Because many of the Jews who had emigrated to the Netherlands found work, the chances of anti-Semitism developing among the Dutch population increased significantly. Partly because of the already existing crisis, there were not many jobs available, which led to a large number of families having to live on Government support. As in Germany, there was the possibility that Jews who had been allowed into the Netherlands would be blamed for the increasing unemployment and poor conditions. The Government considered it of vital importance to prevent further escalation. One of the measures taken to prevent this was the continuous tightening of refugee policy. By introducing a permit system in 1934, refugees already had a smaller chance at finding work. The result of this measure was that those who did not have their own funds were less likely to meet the requirement of having sufficient means of livelihood.⁸ In addition to more stringent measures in the Netherlands, the persecution of Jews in Germany began to take on greater forms. As a result, the Jews' escape from the Nazi regime was increasingly hasty and often difficult.

When Albert Sachs⁹ wanted to leave Germany with his wife Emma and their daughter Friedl, they faced the stricter refugee policy. In May 1938 they asked permission from the Dutch authorities to move to Borne. It was no coincidence that they chose this village in Overijssel, as Emma was born there and several of her relatives, including her brother, still lived there. Mid July 1938, the family received a message via the Mayor of Borne that the Minister of Justice had decided to allow them a temporary stay. However, certain conditions were attached to this: they had to be in possession of valid residence documents and their stay in the Netherlands could not be paid for by the public purse. For the latter, the family could count on the support of the church council of the Dutch Israeli Municipality of Borne if necessary. In a letter, the church council let the Sachs family know that they would never have to use public or private charity. If this should prove to be necessary, the church would take care of them. But the family did not need help, because Emma got a job as a teacher at the Jewish school in Almelo.¹⁰

Novemberpogrom - Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass)

In early November 1938, Ernst vom Rath, Secretary of the German Embassy, was shot down in Paris by the 17 year old Herschel Feibel Grynszpan, a Jewish Polish immigrant. The Secretary lived for another few days, but died of his injuries on 9 November. This incident led the German authorities to announce a national retaliation campaign immediately.¹¹ Thus, on the night of 9 to 10 November, many Jewish properties fell prey to the vindictive National Socialists. A large number of synagogues went up in flames. Furthermore, Jewish shops were destroyed and plundered, while the windows of many of the Jews' residences were smashed. Because of all the broken glass, this night went into history as the *Reichskristallnacht*.

Another retaliatory measure involved arresting a great number of Jewish men, including Siegfried Frank.¹² Siegfried worked in his father's butcher's workshop in his hometown Velen, but after the number of customers and sales dropped as a result of the boycott, there was nothing more to do than to rent out the business. Siegfried lost his job, but was given a job by a Jewish

businessman in nearby Gemen. There he was arrested during the *Kristallnacht* and locked up in the local fire station with a number of other Jewish men. A few days later, it was decided at the headquarters of the *Geheime Staatspolizei* (Gestapo) in Münster that those who had visas for another country could be released immediately. Since Siegfried did not have these papers, this did not apply to him. On 15 November 1938, he received a message from the Mayor that he would be transferred to a Concentration Camp two days later, together with six other Jewish men. It was not yet known which camp this would be.

In the meantime, family members of his 18-year-old fellow inmate, Werner Romann, were feverishly working to get him and the others visas that would allow them to go to the Netherlands. For this they called on acquaintances and friends from Winterswijk. On 17 November, the day of transport, the telegram came which showed that Werner Romann, Moritz Neumann, Richard Wolff and Siegfried had permission to settle in the Netherlands. The men left Germany as soon as possible on the day of their release.¹³ Siegfried reported directly at the crossing point in Winterswijk. There he was allowed in on the grounds of a so-called family visit by order of the border inspector.¹⁴

Hermann Anspacher¹⁵ owned a horse and cattle trade at Kornstraße 37 in Bremen. Because of the trade ban imposed in 1937, he could hardly keep his business running. In the *Kristallnacht*, Hermann was arrested and taken to Sachsenhausen. This camp, together with Buchenwald and Dachau, was one of the Concentration Camps where 30,000 mainly Jewish men were imprisoned in mid-November. Hermann and his wife had managed to send their son Bernhard and daughter Rosemarie abroad safely. Bernhard left in November 1938 with a so-called '*Kindertransport*' (children's transport) to England. There he joined the *Manchester Regiment* in 1940. Rosemarie was placed with family members in Antwerp.

After a few weeks, Hermann was allowed to leave Sachsenhausen, provided that he did not tell anything about his experiences, would strictly comply with the trade ban and would leave Germany as soon as possible. Because there was a possibility that he could emigrate via the Netherlands to the United States, he moved to Groningen in early April 1939, where some family members let him move in. His wife remained alone in Bremen because she had not yet been given permission to settle in the Netherlands. The formalities were not completed until 8 May 1940. Since the German Army was on the verge of invading the Netherlands by then, it was impossible for her to travel to her husband. The family members with whom Rosemarie had been staying fled and left her in Antwerp; an aunt living in Brussels took her in. After a while, her mother managed to bring Rosemarie to Bremen. However, family reunification in the Netherlands would no longer take place, because mother and daughter were deported to Poland in November 1941. Sometime later, both women ended up in the Minsk ghetto. There they were killed at the end of July 1942, during a purge by the SS or the German Police.¹⁶

Initially, it did not seem that the victims of the November pogrom could easily settle in the Netherlands, because the Government had drastically