

Rescue in Nieuwlande, an amazing story of kindness and humanity.

The Second World War (1939 – 1945), in which the USA were allied with Great Britain and the Soviet Union against Germany, Italy and Japan, was the biggest upheaval of the Twentieth Century. In the course of this war, in May 1940, the small country of the Netherlands was overwhelmed by the German army. In the following five years the Dutch population suffered under the harsh terms of the German occupation. The 140.000 Jews living in the Netherlands were hit the hardest of all. In February 1941 the Nazi-regime, headed by fanatical followers of the *Führer* Adolf Hitler, started the persecution of the Dutch Jews. By May 1945, at the time of the liberation, almost three quarters of them were dead.

The majority of the 102,500 Jewish victims were put on a train to Poland where they were gassed in the death camps Auschwitz and Sobibor. Barely 37,500 Dutch Jews survived, of whom an estimated 17,000 left their homes and were hidden among the non-Jewish population. Most of these hiders needed help to get from their homes in the big cities in the West to their hiding places in the rural Northern, Eastern and Southern parts of the country. Many problems had to be – and were – solved in the course of this migration.

To give you an insight in the complexity of this rescue operation, I need you to imagine that you are a Jew living in the Dutch capital of Amsterdam in the spring of 1943. The German police and their Dutch allies are rounding up the Jews of one neighborhood after another. You know that your neighborhood will be next. You guess that it is a very bad idea to try to hide in Amsterdam, because of the 3,000 German police that are stationed there.¹ But where else can you go? What do you have to do to escape from the capital?

If you have non-Jewish friends near Amsterdam, it will be relatively easy to ask them to hide you. A few thousand Jews did so and were hidden by families in the rural areas to the North of Amsterdam. But what if there are no non-Jewish friends nearby? You have nowhere to go. You can try to leave the city on foot and ask the farmers along the way to hide you, but you realize that your chances for success will be very limited. You start to feel doomed. You need help and you need it fast.

At this point, if you are lucky, the Dutch resistance comes in. An unknown person rings your front door bell. You are terrified because you think that it's the police who will take you away. When you finally open the door, this person asks if you would be interested in a hiding place in the countryside for you and your family. On the condition, of course, that you will be separated from your children. You won't see them again until the country is liberated. A great many questions attack you at the same time. Can this person be trusted? Where are these hiding places? How do we get there? Who pays for the transport? Who will feed us? Who will take care of my children? How about security? How long until the liberation? Do we go with this person into an enormous amount of uncertainty or do we board the train to the East as so many of our people have done?

You agonize about that choice, completely unaware of the fact that this unknown person is a member of a well-organized resistance group that is getting better every day in solving all these problems. If you can take the big step to trust this person, you stand a very good chance of survival. The problem was, of course, that (too) few Jews could bring themselves to take that step. The majority chose to board the train to the East instead.

Let's suppose that you choose to trust this person. What will happen next? Firstly you and your family are provided with false ID's and your children are taken away. Then another unknown, but very young person –

¹ A case in point is Anne Frank and her family. They hid in Amsterdam and were ultimately caught.

a student perhaps – takes you to the train station.² When you get to the platform you are handed over to another youngster, who accompanies you to a small train station in the countryside. During the trip you are very scared **and** have to stay very calm when a uniformed man comes to inspect your false papers. After a few hours you leave the train to be delivered to yet another stranger who takes you to the family that from now on will hide you. Again, you are unaware of the fact that this family is part of an extensive resistance network, headed by the local elite and capable of providing food, shelter and security to numerous people in hiding, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

In the small village of Nieuwlande, located in the East near the German border, a man called Arnold Douwes, the son of a vicar, was a prominent member of one of these local resistance networks. His main ally became Max Leons, a Jew from Amsterdam that he helped to escape. Together these two men managed to find hiding places for an estimated 200 Dutch Jews. Some of them were hidden for an endless-seeming two and a half years. Often, for reasons of security, they had to move from one family to another. The entire community helped out to keep the German authorities and their allies in the dark. These Jews survived to tell the tale and now, finally, this book tells their story.

The author, Gert Jan de Vries, could work with a great many sources. Among them are the diary of the late Arnold Douwes, hidden at the time in the ground of the family garden. Every fortnight or so he dug it up and made a new entry. Another source is the postwar report that Max Leons wrote for the Israeli Institute of Yad Vashem in order to get recognition for the heroes from Nieuwlande. Max wanted to publish the report, but could not find a publisher, so it ended up in a drawer in Jerusalem. As a Jew, Max himself could not be honored, but he managed to get a medal for his wartime companion. In this way, Arnold Douwes became one of the first persons to get his own olive tree in the Yad Vashem *Garden of the Righteous*. Douwes even came to live in Israel after the war. When Yad Vashem refused to honor the other heroes from Nieuwlande, Arnold Douwes went to the institute and threatened to personally root out his tree if this decision was not reversed. In the end almost the entire village population was honored by Yad Vashem.

Now, for the first time, the gripping story of the massive rescue that took place in Nieuwlande is available in English. Gert Jan de Vries has painstakingly solved the problems of dates and reliability that always accompany the retelling of a story of so long ago. Even the entries in the diary of Arnold Douwes could not entirely be trusted, because sometimes two weeks had already passed since the occurrence of the events that he wanted to write about. If you stop and think about it, you'll know how your memory can deceive you even after only two weeks have gone by. In the end, De Vries succeeded in mastering all the difficulties, resulting in this wonderful book on the rescue activities of a bunch of nondescript farmers in an obscure Dutch town. Most of these farmers are dead now. But even after so many years, they still deserve our highest respect.

Bert Jan Flim,

Historian of the Jewish hiding in the Netherlands.

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² Travel by car was very rare in those days.