Translated from the Dutch by Arnold J. Pomerans

Foreword by Eva Hoffman

Introduction and notes by Jan G. Gaarlandt

Etty Hillesum

An Interrupted Life

THE DIARIES, 1941–1943

and

Letters from Westerbork

METROPOLITAN BOOKS
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY NEW YORK

Metropolitan Books
Henry Holt and Company, Inc.
Publishers since 1866
115 West 18th Street
New York, New York 10011

Metropolitan Books™ is an imprint of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Published in Canada by Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd.,
195 Allstate Parkway, Markham, Ontario L3R 4T8.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hillesum, Etty, 1914–1943.
[Verstoorde leven. English]
An interrupted life: the diaries, 1941–1943; and, Letters from Westerbork / Etty Hillesum; translated from the Dutch by Arnold J. Pomerans; foreword by Eva Hoffman; introduction and notes by Jan G. Gaarlandt.
p. cm.
Previously published (1st work): 1st American ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
Previously published (2nd work): 1st English language ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.
1. Hillesum, Etty, 1914–1943. 2. Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945)—Netherlands—Personal narratives. 3. Jews—Netherlands—Biography. 4. Netherlands—Ethnic relations. I. Gaarlandt, J. G. II. Hillesum, Etty, 1914–1943. Denkende hart van de barak. English. III. Title. IV. Title: Letters from Westerbork.
DS135.N6H54813 1996 96-2960
940.53′18′09492—dc20 CIP

ISBN 0-8050-4894-4
ISBN 0-8050-5087-6 (pbk.)

Henry Holt books are available for special promotions and premiums.
For details contact: Director, Special Markets.

First compilation edition—1996

DESIGNED BY KATE NICHOLS

Printed in the United States of America
All first editions are printed on acid-free paper. ∞

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 (pbk.)

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Amsterdam

[18] December 1942[9]

This time, as usual, I came back with various commissions from the heath. An ex-soubrette with gallstones asked for some hair dye. Then there was a girl who couldn't get out of bed because she had no shoes. And all sorts of other trifles. Not that the lack of shoes is a trifle, of course. And there was the commission from Dr. K. that I undertook with great pleasure, but I find that it weighs more and more heavily on me. The soubrette has long since dyed her hair again and the girl-without-shoes is able to get out of her bed again and brave the mud, but I have still not been able to fulfill Dr. K.'s request. To be honest, that's not just because I haven't been well for a few weeks.

A few evenings before I left Westerbork, I went to his austere little office, where he sometimes sits working deep into the night. He looked tired and thin and pale. He pushed a thick file aside for a moment, after first telling me some remarkable things about it, with appropriate humor. Then he looked around as if searching for something and with some difficulty found a few words: He had been feeling like an old man the last few months. The war would be over one day, surely . . . To

start with, he would probably want to go and sit for a long time deep in a large forest and forget a good deal . . . then he might want to go and see Seville and Málaga, for where he should have memories of these cities, there are just a couple of gaps. He would also like to go back to work . . . there would surely be a League of Nations . . . How we suddenly got from the League of Nations to the two sisters in the Hague, one fair and one dark, I no longer remember. But, he said, once I was back in Amsterdam on leave, could I possibly write to them, something in my style, about life in Westerbork?

"Yes," said I, with much understanding, "it is certainly important to keep in touch with the outside world."

Your friend K. said almost indignantly, "Outside world? These two women mean much more to us here than just the outside world; they mean a whole part of our lives." And then, in that bare little office on that late evening, he spoke so movingly about you both that I gladly agreed to his request. But to be frank: now, sitting down to write, I'm not sure what exactly to tell you about life in Westerbork.

It was summer when I came here for the first time. Up till then, all I'd known about Drenthe was that it had a lot of megalithic tombs. And then suddenly there was a village of wooden barracks, set between heath and sky, with a glaringly yellow lupin field in the middle and barbed wire all around. And there were human lives as well, thick as flies. To be honest, I had never realized that refugees from Germany had already been held on Drenthe heath for four years, years in which I had been busy taking up collections for Spanish and Chinese children.[10]

During the first few days I walked around as if through the pages of a history book. I met people who had been in Buchenwald and Dachau at a time when to us these were only distant, threatening sounds. I met people who traveled all around the world on that ship without being allowed to disembark at any

port.[11] You must have heard of that; the papers were full of it. I have seen snapshots of little children who are probably now growing up in some unknown corner of this earth. Who knows whether they will even recognize their parents—if they ever see them again?

In short, one had the feeling of seeing in tangible form a small part of the Jewish predicament of the last ten years. And we had thought there was nothing at Drenthe except megalithic tombs. It was enough to take your breath away.

In the summer of 1942—it seems years ago; so much more has happened in a few months than can be told in a few pages—this small settlement was turned upside down and shaken to the marrow. With horror, the old camp inmates witnessed the mass deportation of Jews from Holland to Eastern Europe. From the very beginning they had to make their own considerable contribution in terms of human lives when the quota of "voluntary workers" was not completely filled.

One summer evening I sat eating red cabbage at the edge of the yellow lupin field that stretched from our dining hut to the delousing station, and with sudden inspiration I said, "One ought to write a chronicle of Westerbork." An older man to my left—also eating red cabbage—answered, "Yes, but to do that you'd have to be a great poet."

He is right, it would take a great poet. Little journalistic pieces won't do. The whole of Europe is gradually being turned into one great prison camp. The whole of Europe will undergo this same bitter experience. To simply record the bare facts of families torn apart, of possessions plundered and liberties forfeited, would soon become monotonous. Nor is it possible to pen picturesque accounts of barbed wire and vegetable swill to show outsiders what it's like. Besides, I wonder how many outsiders will be left if history continues along the paths it has taken.

There you are—I could tell right away that nothing would come of my report on Westerbork. The first attempt has got me

bogged down in generalities. On the whole, a person more or less contemplative by nature isn't really suited to describing a specific place or event. One discovers that the basic materials of life are the same everywhere, and that one can live one's life with meaning—or else one can die—in any spot on this earth. The Big Dipper looks down on some distant hamlet just as reliably as it does on a great city at the hub of a nation, or as it does on a coal mine in Silesia; so that all's right with the world . . .

All I really want to say is this: I am no poet. And I am rather at my wits' end to know how to honor my promise to K. For although the name Westerbork is highly charged for us, and will reverberate in our ears for the rest of our lives, I don't know precisely what I can say about it. Life there is so eventful, although many may consider it deadly boring.

But on the morning after I heard your friend K. speak the names of Seville and Málaga with such fanatical longing, I met him on the narrow paved path between barracks 14 and 15. He was wearing his usual trilby hat, which makes him seem so out of place among all the wooden planks and low doors. He was walking quickly because he was hungry, but he still found time when we passed to say pointedly, "Have you thought about what I asked you? You know, making the acquaintance of those two sisters will greatly enrich your life, too."

And so I find myself at an unheard-of late hour facing a blank piece of paper after all.

Yes—Westerbork.

If I understand it correctly, this place, now a focus of Jewish suffering, lay deserted and empty just four years ago. And the spirit of the Department of Justice hovered over the heath.

"There wasn't a butterfly to be seen here, not a flower, not even a worm," the very first German inmates told me emphatically. And now? Let me give you a rough idea from the inventory. We have an orphanage, a synagogue, a small mortuary, and a shoe-repair factory under construction. I have heard talk of a madhouse being built, and my latest information is that the expanding hospital barracks complex already has a thousand beds.

The two-person jail that stands like something out of an operetta in one corner of the camp is apparently no longer large enough, for they plan to build a bigger one. It must sound strange to you: a prison within a prison.

There are minor "cabinet crises," what with all the people who like to have a finger in every pie.

We have a Dutch commandant and a German one. The first is taller, but the second has more of a say. We are told, moreover, that he likes music and that he is a gentleman. I'm no judge, although I must say that for a gentleman he certainly has a somewhat peculiar job.

There is a hall with a stage where, in the glorious past when the word "transport" had not yet been heard, a rather faltering Shakespeare production was once put on. At the moment people sit at typewriters on the same stage.

There is mud, so much mud that somewhere between your ribs you need to have a great deal of inner sunshine if you don't want to become the psychological victim of it all. The physical effects, such as broken shoes and wet feet, you will certainly understand.

Although the camp buildings are all one story, you can hear as many accents as if the Tower of Babel had been erected in our midst: Bavaria and Groningen, Saxony and Limburg, The Hague and East Friesland; you can hear German with a Polish accent and German with a Russian accent; you find all sorts of dialects from Holland and Berlin—all in an area of half a kilometer square.

The barbed wire is more a question of attitude.

"*Us* behind barbed wire?" an indestructible old gentleman once said with a melancholy wave of his hand. "*They* are the ones who live behind barbed wire"—and he pointed to the tall villas that stand like sentries on the other side of the fence.

If the barbed wire just encircled the camp, then at least you would know where you were. But these twentieth-century wires meander about inside the camp, too, around the barracks and in between, in a labyrinthine and unfathomable network. Now and then you come across people with scratches on their faces or hands.

There are watchtowers at the four corners of our wooden village, each a windswept platform on four tall posts. A man with a helmet and a gun stands outlined against the changing skies. In the evening one sometimes hears a shot echo across the heath, as it did once when the blind man stumbled too close to the barbed wire.

Finding something to say about Westerbork is also difficult because of its ambiguous character. On the one hand it is a stable community in the making, a forced one to be sure, yet with all the characteristics of a human society. And on the other hand, it is a camp for a people in transit, great waves of human beings constantly washed in from the cities and provinces, from rest homes, prisons, and other prison camps, from all the nooks and crannies of the Netherlands—only to be deported a few days later to meet their unknown destiny.

You can imagine how dreadfully crowded it is in half a square kilometer. Naturally, few follow the example of the man who packed his rucksack and went on transport of his own accord. When asked why, he said that he wanted the freedom to decide to go when *he* wanted to go. It reminds me of the Roman judge who said to a martyr, "Do you know that I have the power to have you killed?" And the martyr answered, "Yes, but I have the power of letting myself be killed."

Anyway, it is terribly crowded in Westerbork, as when too

many drowning people cling to the last bit of flotsam after a ship has sunk. People would rather spend the winter behind barbed wire in Holland's poorest province than be dragged away to unknown parts and unknown destinies deep within Europe, from where only a few indistinct sounds have come back to the rest of us. But the quota must be filled; so must the train, which comes to fetch its load with mathematical regularity. You cannot keep everyone back as being indispensable to the camp, or too sick for transport, although you try it with a great many. You sometimes think it would be simpler to put yourself on transport than have to witness the fear and despair of the thousands upon thousands of men, women, children, infants, invalids, the feeble-minded, the sick, and the aged who pass through our helping hands in an almost uninterrupted flow.

My fountain pen cannot form words strong enough to convey even the remotest picture of these transports. From the outside the impression is of bleak monotony, yet every transport is different and has its own atmosphere.

When the first transport passed through our hands, there was a moment when I thought I would never again laugh and be happy, that I had changed suddenly into another, older person cut off from all former friends. But on walking through the crowded camp, I realized again that where there are people, there is life. Life in all its thousands of nuances—"with a smile and a tear," to put it in popular terms.

It made a great difference whether people arrived prepared, with well-filled rucksacks, or had been suddenly dragged out of their houses or swept up from the streets. In the end we saw only the last.

After the first of the police roundups, when people arrived in slippers and underclothes, the whole of Westerbork, in a single horrified and heroic gesture, stripped to the skin. And we have tried, with the close cooperation of people on the outside, to make sure that those who leave are equipped as well as possible.

But if we remember all those who went to face the winter in Eastern Europe without any clothes, if we remember the single thin blanket that was sometimes all we were able to dole out in the night, a few hours before departure . . .

The slum-dwellers arrived from the cities, displaying their poverty and neglect in the bare barracks. Aghast, many of us asked ourselves: what sort of democracy did we really have?

The people from Rotterdam were in a class by themselves, hardened by the bombing raids. "We don't frighten easily anymore," you often heard them say. "If we survived all that, we'll survive this, too." And a few days later they marched singing to the train. But it was midsummer then, and there were no old people yet, or invalids on stretchers bringing up the rear . . .

The Jews from Heerlen and Maastricht and thereabouts came telling stories that reverberated with the great send-off the province of Limburg had given them.[12] One felt that morally they could live on it for a long time. "The Catholics have promised to pray for us, and they're better at that than we are!" said one of them.

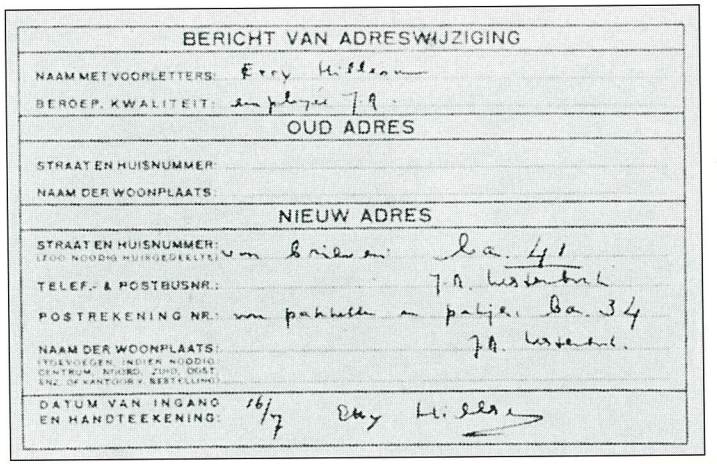
People came with all their rivalries. The Jews from Haarlem said somewhat loftily and acidly: "Those Amsterdammers have a grim sense of humor."

There were children who would not accept a sandwich before their parents had had one. There was a remarkable day when the Jewish Catholics or Catholic Jews—whichever you want to call them—arrived, nuns and priests wearing the yellow star on their habits.[13] I remember two young novices, twins, with identical beautiful, dark ghetto faces and serene, childish eyes peering out from under their skullcaps. They said with mild surprise that they had been fetched at half past four from morning mass, and that they had eaten red cabbage in Amersfoort.

There was a priest, still fairly young, who had not left his monastery for fifteen years. He was out in the "world" for the first time, and I stood next to him for a while, following his eyes

Roundup: the Jews summoned for Westerbork gather in Amsterdam-South.

Official notification of Etty's new address in Westerbork.



BERICHT VAN ADRESWIJZIGING

NAAM MET VOORLETTERS: Etty Hillesum

BEROEP, KWALITEIT: employée 79

OUD ADRES

STRAAT EN HUISNUMMER:

NAAM DER WOONPLAATS:

NIEUW ADRES

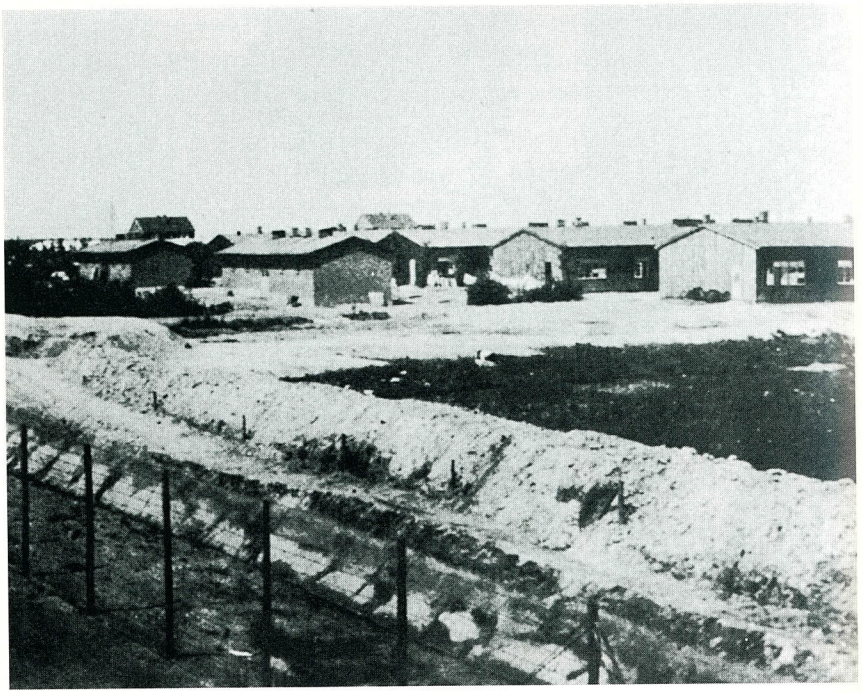
STRAAT EN HUISNUMMER: van Boelens laa. 41

TELEF.- & POSTBUSNR.: 78. Westerbork

POSTREKENING NR.: van pakketten en pakjes: laa. 34

NAAM DER WOONPLAATS: 78. Westerbork.

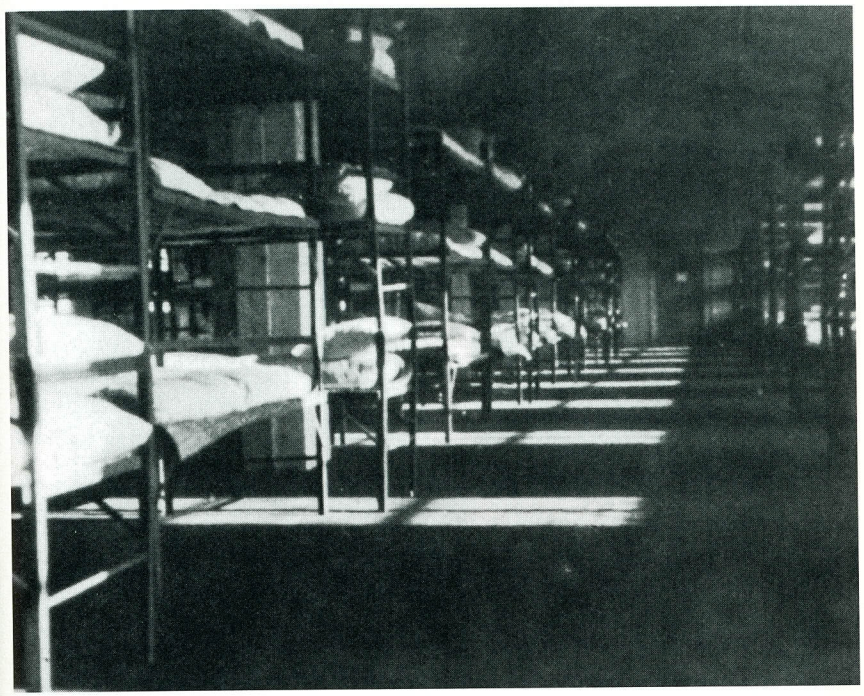
DATUM VAN INGANG EN HANDTEEKENING: 16/7 Etty Hillesum



"A village of wooden barracks, set between heath and sky, a glaringly yellow lupin field in the middle and barbed wire all around."

Facing page, top: *One of the 107 barracks in Westerbork: "those jam-packed hangars of drafty slats where, under a lowering sky made up of hundreds of people's drying laundry, the iron bunks are stacked in triple decks" [December 1942].*

Facing page, bottom: *Administration barracks in Westerbork. At night, the place was used as a theater.*

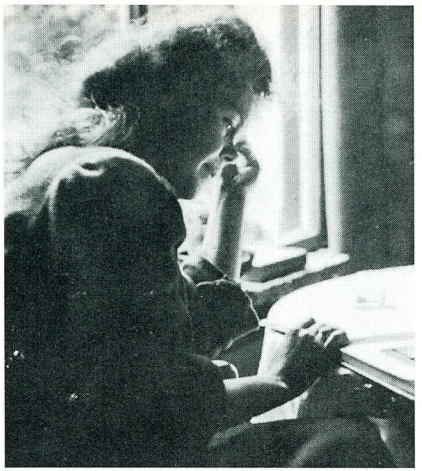


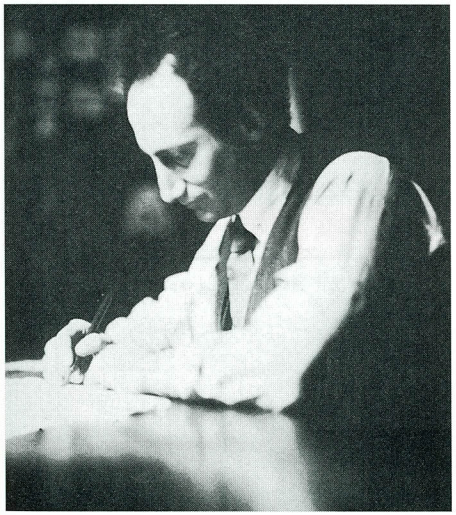
Rebecca Hillesum.

Louis Hillesum.

Mischa Hillesum.

Christine van Nooten.



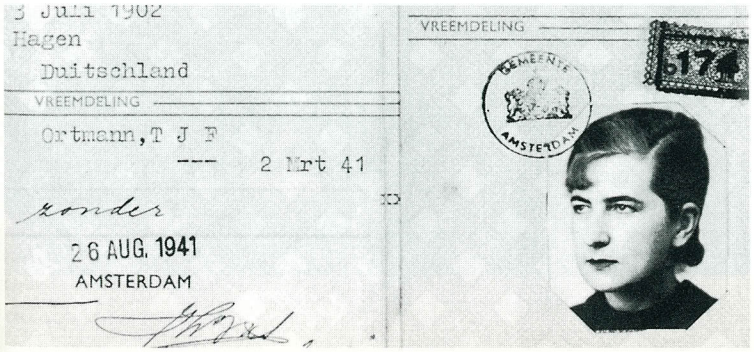


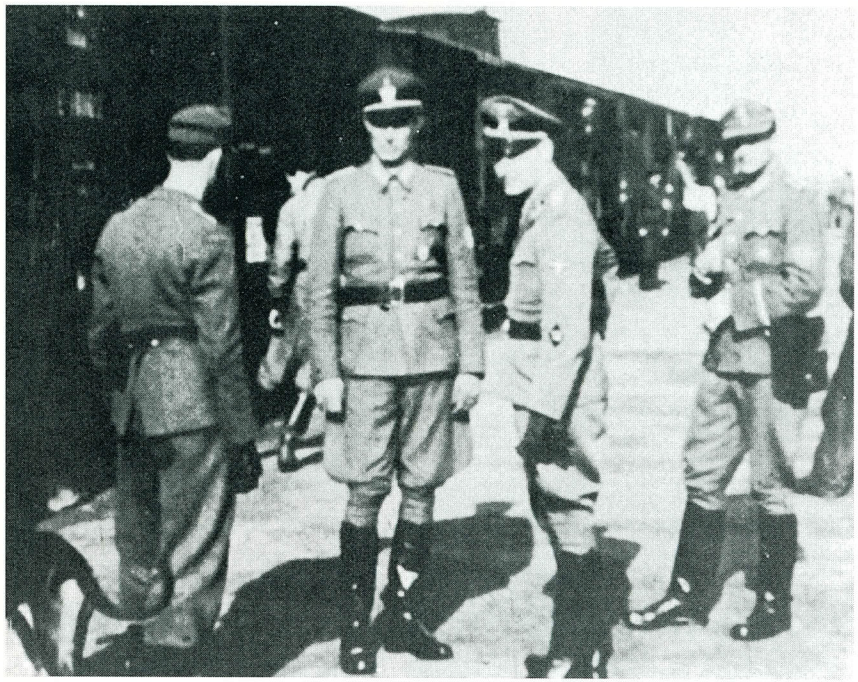
Above left:
Johanna ("Jopie") Smelik.

Above right: *Osias Kormann.*

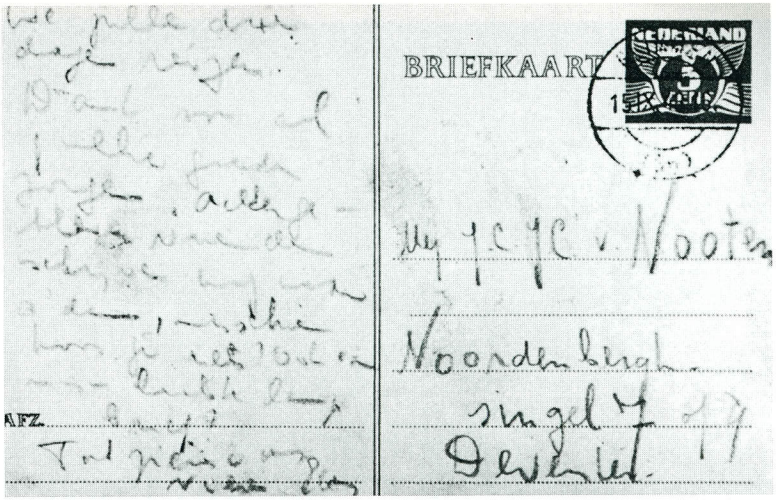
Left: *Philip Mechanicus, author of* In Depôt, *a memoir of Westerbork. He told Etty, "If I survive this time, I shall emerge a more mature and deeper person, and if I die, then I shall die a more mature and deeper one."*

Below: *Milli Ortmann.*





"Slowly but surely six o'clock in the morning has arrived. The train is due to depart at eleven, and they are starting to load it with people and luggage. . . . The camp has been cut in two halves since yesterday by the train: a depressing series of bare, unpainted freight cars in the front, and a proper coach for the guards at the back. Some of the cars have paper mattresses on the floor. These are for the sick" [August 24, 1943].



"We left the camp singing . . ." Etty's last postcard, thrown from the train; it was found and mailed on September 15, 1943.

as they wandered peacefully around the barracks where the newcomers were being received.

The others—shaven, beaten, maltreated—who poured in along with the Catholics that day stumbled about the wooden hut with movements that were still unsteady and stretched out their hands toward the bread, of which there was not enough.

A young Jew stood very still next to us. His jacket was much too loose, but a grin broke through his stubbly black beard when he said, "They tried to smash the wall of the prison with my head, but my head was harder than the wall!"

Among all the shaved heads, it was strange to see the white-turbaned women who had just been treated in the delousing barracks, and who went about now looking distressed and humiliated.

Children dozed off on the dusty plank floor; others played tag among the adults. Two little ones floundered helplessly around the heavy body of a woman lying unconscious in a corner. They didn't understand why their mother just lay there without answering them. A gray-haired old gentleman, straight as an arrow and with a clear-cut, aristocratic profile, stared at the whole infernal canvas and repeated over and over to himself: "A terrible day! A terrible day!"

And among all this, the unremitting clatter of a battery of typewriters: the machine-gun fire of bureaucracy.

Through the many little windowpanes one can see other wooden barracks, barbed wire, and a blasted heath.

I looked at the priest who was now back in the world again. "And what do you think of the world now?" I asked. But his gaze remained unwavering and friendly above the brown habit, as if everything he saw was known, familiar from long ago. That same evening, a man later told me, he saw some priests walking one behind the other in the dusk between two dark barracks. They were saying their rosaries as imperturbably as if they had just finished vespers at the monastery. And isn't it true

that one can pray anywhere, in a wooden barracks just as well as in a stone monastery, or indeed, anywhere on this earth where God, in these troubled times, feels like casting his likeness?

For those who have been granted the nerve-shattering privilege of being allowed to stay in Westerbork "until further notice," there is the great moral danger of becoming blunted and hardened.

The human suffering that we have seen during the last six months, and still see daily, is more than anyone can be expected to comprehend in half a year. No wonder we hear on all sides every day, in every pitch of voice, "We don't want to think, we don't want to feel, we want to forget as soon as possible." It seems to me that this is a very great danger.

True, things happen here that in the past our reason would not have judged possible. But perhaps we have faculties other than reason in us, faculties that in the past we didn't know we had but that possess the ability to grapple with the incomprehensible. I believe that for every event, man has a faculty that helps him deal with it.

If we were to save only our bodies and nothing more from the camps all over the world, that would not be enough. What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but *how* we preserve them. I sometimes think that every new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights. But if we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face, if we give them no shelter in our heads and hearts, do not allow them to settle and change into impulses through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning—then we are not a viable generation. It is not easy—and no doubt less easy for us Jews than for anyone else—yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate postwar world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough. New thoughts will have to radiate outward

from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult. And perhaps, on the common basis of an honest search for some way to understand these dark events, wrecked lives may yet take a tentative step forward.

That's why it seemed such a great danger to me when all around one could hear, "We don't want to think, we don't want to feel, it's best to shut your eyes to all this misery." As if suffering—in whatever form and however it may come to us—were not also part of human existence.

I see that I have strayed far beyond your friend K.'s innocuous request. After all, I was to tell you something about life in Westerbork, not about my own views. I couldn't help it, they just slipped out.

But what about the old people? All those aged, infirm people? What use is my philosophy when I have to face them? In the history of Westerbork, surely the saddest chapter will be the one that deals with the old. Probably even sadder than the story of the people from Ellecom, who arrived mutilated, sending a shudder of horror throughout the camp.

To the young and healthy, you can say something that you believe in and can act upon in your own life: that history has indeed laid a heavy destiny on our shoulders, and that we must try and attain the grandeur we need to bear it. You can even say that we should consider ourselves front-line soldiers, although we are sent to very peculiar fronts. It may seem as if we are doomed to complete passivity, but no one can prevent us from mobilizing our inner forces. No one. But have you ever heard of front-line soldiers aged eighty, bearing the red-and-white canes of the blind as their weapons?

One summer morning I came upon a man mumbling to himself, "For heaven's sake, look at the kind of labor forces for

Germany they've sent us now!" And when I hurried around to the entrance, masses of old people were just being unloaded from dilapidated trucks onto our heath. There we stood, almost beyond speech. That was really going too far, we thought. But later on we knew better and would ask each other with every new transport: "And—how many old people and invalids this time?"

There was a little old woman who had left her spectacles and her medicine bottle at home on the mantel—could she go and get them now, and where exactly was she, and where would she be going?

A woman of eighty-seven clung to my hand with so much strength that I thought she would never let go. She told me how the steps in front of her little house had always gleamed and how she had never in her life thrown her clothes under the bed when she went to sleep.

And the bowed little gentleman of seventy-nine: he had been married for more than fifty years, he told me; his wife was in the hospital in Utrecht, and he was about to be taken out of Holland the next day . . .

Even if I went on for pages, I still couldn't convey any idea of the shuffling and the stumbling and the falling down, the need for help along with the childish questions. You can't do much with words. A helping hand on the shoulder is sometimes too heavy. Oh no, these old people, they need a chapter to themselves. Their helpless gestures and exhausted faces crowd many a sleepless night . . .

In a few months the population has swelled from a thousand to roughly ten thousand.[14] The greatest influx dates from the awful days of October, when after a massive Jew hunt throughout the Netherlands, Westerbork was swept by a human flood that threatened to engulf it.

Hence this is not exactly an organically evolved community, with its own even rhythms. Yet—and this is what takes the

breath away—you can find every attitude here, every class, ism, conflict, and current of society. And the area still remains only half a kilometer square.

In retrospect is that really so surprising, since every individual carries deep in his inner being the trend, the part of society, the cultural level he represents? But what always strikes one anew is that even at a time of shared distress these distinctions are maintained.

One day in the mud between two big barracks I met a girl who told me she had ended up in Westerbork by chance. This is a typical phenomenon: everyone views his *own* case as an unfortunate accident. We have not yet gained a common sense of history. But to come back to the girl: she told me a pathetic tale of little packages that failed to arrive and of a pair of lost shoes. And then her face brightened, and she said: "But we have been lucky with people; our barracks is full of the best people. Do you know what they call it? The bocht van de Herengracht!"[15] Confounded, I looked from her worn-out shoes to her made-up face and did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Of all the shortages in Westerbork concentration camp, the shortage of space is surely the worst.

About two and a half thousand of the more than ten thousand people are housed in 215 small huts, which used to be the main part of the camp and which held one family each in pre-transport times.

Every little hut has two small rooms, sometimes three, and a little kitchen with a faucet and a WC. There is no doorbell, which makes entering a quick and unceremonious business. As soon as you open the front door, you're standing in the middle of the kitchen. If you're there to visit friends who live in the little back room, then with your newly acquired informality you rush straight through the front room, where another family may be sitting at the table or having a fight or getting ready for bed.

And for some time now, these little rooms have usually been crammed with visitors eager to escape for a while from the big barracks. The hut dwellers are housed like princes by comparison, envied and constantly besieged by all Westerbork.

The scandalous shortage of space in Westerbork is really clear in the colossal, hastily built barracks, those jam-packed hangars of drafty slats where, under a lowering sky made up of hundreds of people's drying laundry, the iron bunks are stacked in triple decks.

The poor French would never have suspected that Jews, exiled to one Drenthe heath or another, would someday dream their fearful dreams on beds built for the Maginot Line. I'm told that's where these bunks come from.

On these iron beds people live and die, eat, fall ill, or lie awake through the night, because so many children cry, or because they cannot help wondering why so little news comes from the thousands who have already set out from this place.

The beds provide the only storage space there is: suitcases lie under them, and rucksacks hang over the iron bars. The other furniture consists of rough wooden tables and narrow wooden benches. Matters of hygiene I shall not mention in this modest account, lest I cause you some unappetizing moments.

Scattered through this vast space are a few stoves, which don't even give enough heat for the old ladies crowded around them. How people are expected to live through the winter in these barracks has not yet been made clear.

All these great human warehouses have been put up in precisely the same manner in the middle of the mud and have been furnished in the same, let us say austere, style. But the remarkable thing is that while a trip through one barracks may make you feel you are in a squalid slum, another will give the impression of a solid middle-class district. In fact, every bunk and every rough wooden table seems to radiate its own atmosphere.

I know of a table in one of the barracks where a candle burns

in a glass lantern every evening. Some eight people usually sit around it, and it's called the "bohemian corner." When you go on a few steps to the next table, also with eight people sitting around it, the only difference may be that it holds a couple of dirty pans instead of a candle, but it is an entirely different world.

Like circumstances do not yet seem to produce like people.

Leading lights from cultural and political circles in the big cities have also been stranded on this barren stretch of heath five hundred by six hundred meters. With one mighty convulsion all their scenery has collapsed about them, and now they stand around a little hesitantly and awkwardly on this drafty, open stage called Westerbork. These figures wrenched from their context still carry with them the restless atmosphere of a society more complicated than the one we have here. They walk along the thin barbed-wire fence. Their silhouettes move, life-size and exposed, across the great stretch of sky. You cannot imagine it . . . Their armor of position, esteem, and property has collapsed, and now they stand in the last shreds of their humanity. They exist in an empty space, bounded by earth and sky, which they must fill with whatever they can find within them—there is nothing else.

One suddenly realizes that it is not enough to be an able politician or a talented artist. In the most extreme distress, life demands quite other things.

Yes, it is true, our ultimate human values are being put to the test.

Perhaps I have persuaded you, with my chatter, that I have now told you something about Westerbork. But when I let Westerbork rise up in my mind's eye, in all its facets and with all its spiritual and material needs, I can see that success has eluded me. Furthermore, this is a very one-sided story. I could have told quite another, filled with hatred and bitterness and rebellion.

But rebellion born only when distress begins to affect one

personally is no real rebellion and can never bear fruit. And the absence of hatred in no way implies the absence of moral indignation.

I know that those who hate have good reason to do so. But why should we always have to choose the cheapest and easiest way? It has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. And I also believe, childishly perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter.

Saturday afternoon, 26 December [1942]

The more I think about it, the worse it seems that I have left you without news for so long. I wanted to write as soon as I got back here, to you and to Rosenberg and Haussmann: you were always so kind and hospitable, I felt so much at home with you. Haussmann's potato soup certainly lives as a culinary high point in my memory, and the Hanukkah lights in the big barracks are an even more precious memory because I was there with you.

The reason I haven't managed to write is probably that I felt rather ill, quite apart from being downcast when the doctor told me I would have to rest for another five weeks. But my good humor is gradually creeping back.

I am so glad that I spent those weeks in Westerbork and that among other things I know how and where you live. Dear Osias, I promise that there won't be any more long pauses from now on. Please remember me to Rosenberg of course, and to your comrades Haussmann ("niece" and all) and Frank and Grüneberg, won't you? And lots and lots of love to you, from

Etty

[Probably to Father Han and friends[66]]

24 August 1943

There was a moment when I felt in all seriousness that after this night, it would be a sin ever to laugh again. But then I reminded myself that some of those who had gone away had been laughing, even if only a handful of them this time . . . There will be some who will laugh now and then in Poland, too, though not many from this transport, I think.

When I think of the faces of that squad of armed, green-uniformed guards—my God, those faces! I looked at them, each in turn, from behind the safety of a window, and I have never been so frightened of anything in my life. I sank to my knees with the words that preside over human life: And God made man after His likeness. That passage spent a difficult morning with me.

I have told you often enough that no words and images are adequate to describe nights like these. But still I must try to convey something of it to you. One always has the feeling here of being the ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history, but there is also the need sometimes to be a still, small voice. We must keep one another in touch with everything that happens in the various outposts of this world, each one contributing his own little piece of stone to the great mosaic that will take shape once the war is over.

After a night in the hospital barracks, I took an early-morning walk past the punishment barracks. And prisoners were being moved out. The deportees, mainly men, stood with their packs behind the barbed wire. So many of them looked tough and ready for anything. An old acquaintance—I didn't recognize him straightaway; a shaven head often changes people completely—called out to me with a smile, "If they don't manage to do me in, I'll be back."

But the babies, those tiny piercing screams of the babies, dragged from their cots in the middle of the night . . . I have to put it all down quickly, in a muddle, because if I leave it until later I probably won't be able to go on believing that it really happened. It is like a vision, and drifts further and further away. The babies were easily the worst.

And then there was that paralyzed young girl, who didn't want to take her dinner plate along and found it so hard to die. Or the terrified young boy: he had thought he was safe, that was his mistake, and when he realized he was going to have to go anyway, he panicked and ran off. His fellow Jews had to hunt him down. If they didn't find him, scores of others would be put on the transport in his place. He was caught soon enough, hiding in a tent, but "notwithstanding" . . . "notwithstanding," all those others had to go on transport anyway, as a deterrent, they said. And so, many good friends were dragged away by that boy. Fifty victims for one moment of insanity. Or rather: he didn't drag them away—our commandant did, someone of whom it is sometimes said that he is a gentleman. Even so, will the boy be able to live with himself, once it dawns on him exactly what he's been the cause of? And how will all the other Jews on board the train react to him? That boy is going to have a very hard time. The episode might have been overlooked, perhaps, if there hadn't been so much unnerving activity over our heads that night. The commandant must have been affected by that, too. "*Donnerwetter,* some flying tonight!" I heard a guard say as he looked up at the stars.

People still harbor such childish hopes that the transport won't get through. Many of us were able from here to watch the bombardment of a nearby town, probably Emden. So why shouldn't it be possible for the railway line to be hit, too, and for the train to be stopped from leaving? It's never been known to happen yet: But people keep hoping it will, with each new transport and with never-flagging hope . . .

The evening before, I had walked through the camp. People were grouped together between the barracks under a gray, cloudy sky. "Look, that's just how people behave after a disaster, standing about on street corners discussing what's happened," my companion said to me. "But that's what makes it so impossible to understand," I burst out. "This time, it's *before* the disaster!"

Whenever misfortune strikes, people have a natural instinct to lend a helping hand and to save what can be saved. Tonight I shall be helping to dress babies and to calm mothers—and that is all I can hope to do. I could almost curse myself for that. For we all know that we are yielding up our sick and defenseless brothers and sisters to hunger, heat, cold, exposure, and destruction, and yet we dress them and escort them to the bare cattle cars—and if they can't walk, we carry them on stretchers. What is going on, what mysteries are these, in what sort of fatal mechanism have we become enmeshed? The answer cannot simply be that we are all cowards. We're not that bad. We stand before a much deeper question . . .

In the afternoon I did a round of the hospital barracks one more time, going from bed to bed. Which beds would be empty the next day? The transport lists are never published until the very last moment, but some of us know well in advance that our names will be down. A young girl called me. She was sitting bolt upright in her bed, eyes wide open. This girl has thin wrists and a peaky little face. She is partly paralyzed, and has just been learning to walk again, between two nurses, one step at a time. "Have you heard? I have to go." We look at each other for a long moment. It is as if her face has disappeared; she is all eyes. Then she says in a level, gray little voice, "Such a pity, isn't it? That everything you have learned in life goes for nothing." And, "How hard it is to die." Suddenly the unnatural rigidity of her expression gives way, and she sobs, "Oh, and the worst of it all is

having to leave Holland!" And, "Oh, why wasn't I allowed to die before . . ." Later, during the night, I saw her again, for the last time.

There was a little woman in the washhouse, a basket of dripping clothes on her arm. She grabbed hold of me; she looked deranged. A flood of words poured over me: "That isn't right, how can that be right? I've got to go, and I won't even be able to get my washing dry by tomorrow. And my child is sick, he's feverish, can't you fix things so that I don't have to go? And I don't have enough things for the child, the rompers they sent me are too small, I need the bigger size, oh, it's enough to drive you mad. And you're not even allowed to take a blanket along, we're going to freeze to death, you didn't think of that, did you? There's a cousin of mine here, he came here the same time I did, but he doesn't have to go, he's got the right papers. Couldn't you help me to get some, too? Just say I don't have to go, do you think they'll leave the children with their mothers, that's right, you come back again tonight, you'll help me then, won't you, what do you think, would my cousin's papers . . . ?"

If I were to say that I was in hell that night, what would I really be telling you? I caught myself saying it aloud in the night, aloud to myself and quite soberly, "So that's what hell is like." You really can't tell who is going and who isn't this time. Almost everyone is up, the sick help each other to get dressed. There are some who have no clothes at all, whose luggage has been lost or hasn't arrived yet. Ladies from the "Welfare" walk about doling out clothes, which may fit or not, it doesn't matter so long as you've covered yourself with something. Some old women look a ridiculous sight. Small bottles of milk are being prepared to take along with the babies, whose pitiful screams punctuate all the frantic activity in the barracks. A young mother says to me almost apologetically, "My baby doesn't usually cry; it's almost as if he can tell what's happening." She picks up the child, a lovely baby about eight months old, from a

makeshift crib and smiles at it. "If you don't behave yourself, Mummy won't take you along with her!" She tells me about some friends. "When those men in green came to fetch them in Amsterdam, their children cried terribly. Then their father said, 'If you don't behave yourselves, you won't be allowed to go in that green car, this green gentleman won't take you.' And that helped—the children calmed down." She winks at me bravely, a trim, dark little woman with a lively, olive-skinned face. She is dressed in long gray trousers and a green woolen sweater. "I may be smiling," she says, "but I feel pretty awful." The little woman with the wet washing is on the point of hysterics. "Can't you hide my child for me? Go on, please, won't you hide him, he's got a high fever, how can I possibly take him along?" She points to a little bundle of misery with blond curls and a burning, bright-red little face. The child tosses about in his rough wooden cot. The nurse wants the mother to put on an extra woolen sweater, tries to pull it over her dress. She refuses. "I'm not going to take anything along, what use would it be? . . . my child." And she sobs, "They take the sick children away and you never get them back."

Then a woman comes up to her, a stout working-class woman with a kindly snub-nosed face, draws the desperate mother down with her on the edge of one of the iron bunks, and talks to her almost crooningly. "There now, you're just an ordinary Jew, aren't you? So you'll just have to go, won't you . . . ?"

A few beds farther along I suddenly catch sight of the ash-gray, freckled face of a colleague. She is squatting beside the bed of a dying woman who has swallowed some poison and who happens to be her mother . . .

"God Almighty, what are You doing to us?" The words just escape me. Over there is that affectionate little woman from Rotterdam. She is in her ninth month. Two nurses try to get her dressed. She just stands there, her swollen body leaning against

her child's cot. Drops of sweat run down her face. She stares into the distance, a distance into which I cannot follow her, and says in a toneless, worn-out voice, "Two months ago I volunteered to go with my husband to Poland. And then I wasn't allowed to, because I always have such difficult pregnancies. And now I do have to go . . . just because someone tried to run away tonight." The wailing of the babies grows louder still, filling every nook and cranny of the barracks, now bathed in ghostly light. It is almost too much to bear. A name occurs to me: Herod.

On the stretcher on the way to the train, her labor pains begin, and we are allowed to carry the woman to the hospital instead of to the freight train—which, this night, seems a rare act of humanity . . .

I pass the bed of the paralyzed girl. The others have helped to dress her. I never saw such great big eyes in such a little face. "I can't take it all in," she whispers to me. A few steps away stands my little hunchbacked Russian woman; I told you about her before. She stands there as if spun in a web of sorrow. The paralyzed girl is a friend of hers. Later she said sadly to me, "She doesn't even have a plate, I wanted to give her mine, but she wouldn't take it. She said, 'I'll be dead in ten days anyway, and then those horrible Germans will get it.' "

She stands there in front of me, a green silk kimono wrapped around her small, misshapen figure. She has the very wise, bright eyes of a child. She looks at me for a long time in silence, searchingly, and then says, "I would like, oh, I really would like, to be able to swim away in my tears." And, "I long so desperately for my dear mother." (Her mother died a few months ago from cancer, in the washroom near the WC. At least she was left alone there for a moment, left to die in peace.) She asks me with her strange accent in the voice of a child that begs for forgiveness, "Surely God will be able to understand my doubts in a world like this, won't He?" Then she turns away from me, in an almost loving gesture of infinite sadness, and throughout the

night I see the misshapen, green, silk-clad figure moving between the beds, doing small services for those about to depart. She herself doesn't have to go, not this time, anyway . . .

I'm sitting here squeezing tomato juice for the babies. A young woman sits beside me. She appears ready and eager to leave, and is beautifully turned out. It is something like a cry of liberation when she exclaims, arms flung wide, "I'm embarking on a wonderful journey; I might find my husband." A woman opposite cuts her short bitterly. "I'm going as well, but I certainly don't think it's wonderful." I remembered admitting the young woman beside me. She has been here only a few days, and she came from the punishment block. She seems so level-headed and independent, with a touch of defiance about her mouth. She has been ready to leave since the afternoon, dressed in a long pair of trousers and a woolen sweater and cardigan. Next to her on the floor stands a heavy rucksack and a blanket roll. She is trying to force down a few sandwiches. They are moldy. "I'll probably get quite a lot of moldy bread to eat," she laughs. "In prison I didn't eat anything at all for days." A bit of her history in her own words: "My time wasn't far off when they threw me into prison. And the taunts and the insults! I made the mistake of saying that I couldn't stand, so they made me stand for hours, but I managed it without making a sound." She looks defiant. "My husband was in the prison as well. I won't tell you what they did to him! But my God, he was tough! They sent him through last month. I was in my third day of labor and couldn't go with him. But how brave he was!" She is almost radiant.

"Perhaps I shall find him again." She laughs defiantly. "They may drag us through the dirt, but we'll come through all right in the end!" She looks at the crying babies all around and says, "I'll have good work to do on the train, I still have lots of milk."

"What, you here as well?" I suddenly call out in dismay. A woman turns and comes up between the tumbled beds of the poor wailing babies, her hands groping around her for support.

She is dressed in a long, black, old-fashioned dress. She has a noble brow and white, wavy hair piled up high. Her husband died here a few weeks ago. She is well over eighty, but looks less than sixty. I always admired her for the aristocratic way in which she reclined on her shabby bunk. She answers in a hoarse voice, "Yes, I'm here as well. They wouldn't let me share my husband's grave."

"Ah, there she goes again!" It is the tough little ghetto woman, who is racked with hunger the whole time because she never gets any parcels. She has seven children here. She trips pluckily and busily about on her little short legs. "All I know is, I've got seven children and they need a proper mother, you can be sure of that!"

With nimble gestures she is busy stuffing a jute bag full of her belongings.

"I'm not leaving anything behind; my husband was sent through here a year ago, and my two oldest boys have been through as well." She beams. "My children are real treasures!" She bustles about, she packs, she's busy, she has a kind word for everyone who goes by. A plain, dumpy ghetto woman with greasy black hair and little short legs. She has a shabby, short-sleeved dress on, which I can imagine her wearing when she used to stand behind the washtub, back in Jodenbreestraat. And now she is off to Poland in the same old dress, a three-days' journey with seven children. "That's right, seven children, and they need a proper mother, believe me!"

You can tell that the young woman over there is used to luxury and that she must have been very beautiful. She is a recent arrival. She had gone into hiding to save her baby. Now she is here, through treachery, like so many others. Her husband is in the punishment barracks. She looks quite pitiful now. Her bleached hair has black roots with a greenish tinge. She has put on many different sets of underwear and other clothing all on top of one another—you can't carry everything by hand, after

all, particularly if you have a little child to carry as well. Now she looks lumpy and ridiculous. Her face is blotchy. She stares at everyone with a veiled, tentative gaze, like some defenseless and abandoned young animal.

What will this young woman, already in a state of collapse, look like after three days in an overcrowded freight car with men, women, children, and babies all thrown together, bags and baggage, a bucket in the middle their only convenience?

Presumably they will be sent on to another transit camp, and then on again from there.

We are being hunted to death all through Europe . . .

I wander in a daze through other barracks. I walk past scenes that loom up before my eyes in crystal-clear detail, and at the same time seem like blurred age-old visions. I see a dying old man being carried away, reciting the Sh'ma to himself[67] . . .

Slowly but surely six o'clock in the morning has arrived. The train is due to depart at eleven, and they are starting to load it with people and luggage. Paths to the train have been staked out by men of the Ordedienst, the Camp Service Corps.[68] Anyone not involved with the transport has to keep to barracks. I slip into one just across from the siding. "There's always been a splendid view from here," I hear a cynical voice say. The camp has been cut in two halves since yesterday by the train: a depressing series of bare, unpainted freight cars in the front, and a proper coach for the guards at the back. Some of the cars have paper mattresses on the floor. These are for the sick. There is more and more movement now along the asphalt path beside the train.

Men from the "Flying Column" in brown overalls are bringing the luggage up on wheelbarrows. Among them I spot two of the commandant's court jesters: the first is a comedian and a songwriter. Some time ago his name was down, irrevocably, for transport, but for several nights in a row he sang his lungs out for a delighted audience, including the commandant and his

retinue. He sang *"Ich kann es nicht verstehen, dass die Rosen blühen"* ("I know not why the roses bloom") and other topical songs. The commandant, a great lover of art, thought it all quite splendid. The singer got his exemption. He was even allocated a house, where he now lives behind red-checked curtains with his peroxide-blonde wife, who spends all her days at a mangle in the boiling-hot laundry. Now here he is, dressed in khaki overalls, pushing a wheelbarrow piled high with the luggage of his fellow Jews. He looks like death warmed over. And over there is another court jester: the commandant's favorite pianist. Legend has it that he is so accomplished that he can play Beethoven's Ninth as a jazz number, which is certainly saying something . . .

Suddenly there are a lot of green-uniformed men swarming over the asphalt. I can't imagine where they have sprung from. Knapsacks and guns over their shoulders. I study their faces. I try to look at them without prejudice.

I can see a father, ready to depart, blessing his wife and child and being himself blessed in turn by an old rabbi with a snow-white beard and the profile of a fiery prophet. I can see . . . ah, I can't begin to describe it all . . .

On earlier transports, some of the guards were simple, kindly types with puzzled expressions, who walked about the camp smoking their pipes and speaking in some incomprehensible dialect. One would have found their company not too objectionable on the journey. Now I am transfixed with terror. Oafish, jeering faces, in which one seeks in vain for even the slightest trace of human warmth. At what fronts did they learn their business? In what punishment camps were they trained? For after all, this is a punishment, isn't it? A few young women are already sitting in a freight car. They hold their babies on their laps, their legs dangling outside—they are determined to enjoy the fresh air as long as possible. Sick people are carried past on stretchers. I almost find myself laughing; the disparity between

the guards and the guarded is too absurd. My companion at the window shudders. Months ago he was brought here from Amersfoort, in bits and pieces. "Oh, yes, that's what those fellows were like," he says. "That's what they looked like."

A couple of young children stand with their noses pressed to the windowpane. I listen in to their earnest conversation. "Why do those nasty, horrid men wear green; why don't they wear black? Bad people wear black, don't they?" "Look over there, that man is really sick!" A shock of gray hair above a rumpled blanket on a stretcher. "Look, there's another sick one . . ."

And, pointing at the green uniforms, "Look at them, now they're laughing!" "Look, look, one of them's already drunk!"

More and more people are filling up the spaces in the freight cars. A tall, lonely figure paces the asphalt, a briefcase under his arm. He is the head of the so-called Antragstelle, the camp Appeals Department. He strives right up to the last moment to get people out of the commandant's clutches. Horse trading here always continues until the train has actually pulled out. It's even been known for him to manage to free people from the moving train. The man with the briefcase has the brow of a scholar, and tired, very tired shoulders. A bent little old woman, with a black, old-fashioned hat on her gray, wispy hair, bars his way, gesticulating and brandishing a bundle of papers under his nose. He listens to her for a while, then shakes his head and turns away, his shoulders sagging just a little bit more. This time it won't be possible to get many people off the train in the nick of time. The commandant is annoyed. A young Jew has had the effrontery to run away. One can't really call it a serious attempt to escape—he absconded from the hospital in a moment of panic, a thin jacket over his blue pajamas, and in a clumsy, childish way took refuge in a tent, where he was picked up quickly enough after a search of the camp. But if you are a Jew you may not run away, may not allow yourself to be stricken with panic. The commandant is remorseless. As a reprisal, and

without warning, scores of others are being sent on the transport with the boy, including quite a few who had thought they were firmly at anchor here. This system happens to believe in collective punishment. And all those planes overhead couldn't have helped to improve the commandant's mood, though that is a subject on which he prefers to keep his own counsel.

The cars are now what you might call full. But that's what you think. God Almighty, does all this lot have to get in as well? A large new group has turned up. The children are still standing with their noses glued to the windowpane; they don't miss a thing. "Look over there, a lot of people are getting off, it must be too hot in the train." Suddenly one of them calls out, "Look, the commandant!"

He appears at the end of the asphalt path, like a famous star making his entrance during a grand finale. This near-legendary figure is said to be quite charming and so well disposed toward the Jews. For the commandant of a camp for Jews, he has some strange ideas. Recently he decided that we needed more variety in our diet, and we were promptly served marrowfat peas—just once—instead of cabbage. He could also be said to be our artistic patron here, and is a regular at all our cabaret nights. On one occasion he came three times in succession to see the same performance and roared with laughter at the same old jokes each time. Under his auspices a male choir has been formed that sang *"Bei mir bist du schön"* on his personal orders. It sounded very moving here on the heath, it must be said. Now and then he even invites some of the artistes to his house and talks and drinks with them into the early hours. One night not so long ago he escorted an actress back home, and when he took his leave of her he offered her his hand; just imagine, his hand! They also say that he specially loves children. Children must be looked after. In the hospital they even get a tomato each day. And yet many of them seem to die all the same . . . I could go on quite a bit longer about "our" commandant. Perhaps he sees himself

as a prince dispensing largesse to his many humble subjects. God knows how he sees himself. A voice behind me says, "Once upon a time we had a commandant who used to kick people off to Poland. This one sees them off with a smile."

He now walks along the train with military precision, a relatively young man who has "arrived" early in his career, if one may call it that. He is absolute master over the life and death of Dutch and German Jews here on this remote heath in Drenthe Province. A year ago he probably had not the slightest idea that it so much as existed. I didn't know about it myself, to tell the truth. He walks along the train, his gray, immaculately brushed hair just showing beneath his flat, light green cap. That gray hair, which makes such a romantic contrast with his fairly young face, sends many of the silly young girls here into raptures—although they dare not, of course, express their feelings openly. On this cruel morning his face is almost iron-gray. It is a face that I am quite unable to read. Sometimes it seems to me to be like a long thin scar in which grimness mingles with joylessness and hypocrisy. And there is something else about him, halfway between a dapper hairdresser's assistant and a stage-door Johnny. But the grimness and the rigidly forced bearing predominate. With military step he walks along the line of freight cars, bulging now with people. He is inspecting his troops: the sick, infants in arms, young mothers, and shaven-headed men. A few more ailing people are being brought up on stretchers. He makes an impatient gesture; they're taking too long about it. Behind him walks his Jewish secretary, smartly dressed in fawn riding breeches and brown sports jacket. He has the sporty demeanor yet vacuous expression of the English whisky drinker. Suddenly they are joined by a handsome brown gundog, where from, heaven knows. With studied gestures the fawn secretary plays with it, like something from a picture in an English society paper. The green squad stare at him goggle-eyed. They probably think—though *think* is a big word—that

some of the Jews here look quite different from what their propaganda sheets have led them to believe. A few Jewish big shots from the camp now also walk along the train. "Trying to air their importance," mutters someone behind me. "Transport Boulevard," I say. "Could one ever hope to convey to the outside world what has happened here today?" I ask my companion. The outside world probably thinks of us as a gray, uniform, suffering mass of Jews, and knows nothing of the gulfs and abysses and subtle differences that exist between us. They could never hope to understand.

The commandant has now been joined by the *Oberdienstleiter,* the head of the Camp Service Corps. The *Oberdienstleiter* is a German Jew of massive build, and the commandant looks slight and insignificant by his side. Black top boots, black cap, black army coat with yellow star. He has a cruel mouth and a powerful neck. A few years ago he was still a digger in the outworkers' corps. When the story of his meteoric rise is written up later, it will be an important historical account of the mentality of our age. The light green commandant with his military bearing, the fawn, impassive secretary, the black bully-boy figure of the *Oberdienstleiter,* parade past the train. People fall back around them, but all eyes are on them.

My God, are the doors really being shut now? Yes, they are. Shut on the herded, densely packed mass of people inside. Through small openings at the top we can see heads and hands, hands that will wave to us later when the train leaves. The commandant takes a bicycle and rides once again along the entire length of the train. Then he makes a brief gesture, like royalty in an operetta. A little orderly comes flying up and deferentially relieves him of the bicycle. The train gives a piercing whistle. And 1,020 Jews leave Holland.

This time the quota was really quite small, all considered: a mere thousand Jews, the extra twenty being reserves. For it is always possible—indeed, quite certain this time—that a few will

die or be crushed to death on the way. So many sick people and not a single nurse . . .

The tide of helpers gradually recedes; people go back to their sleeping quarters. So many exhausted, pale, and suffering faces. One more piece of our camp has been amputated. Next week yet another piece will follow. This is what has been happening now for over a year, week in, week out. We are left with just a few thousand. A hundred thousand Dutch members of our race are toiling away under an unknown sky or lie rotting in some unknown soil. We know nothing of their fate. It is only a short while, perhaps, before we find out, each one of us in his own time. For we are all marked down to share that fate, of that I have not a moment's doubt. But I must go now and lie down and sleep for a little while. I am a bit tired and dizzy. Then later I have to go to the laundry to track down the facecloth that got lost. But first I must sleep. As for the future, I am firmly resolved to return to you after my wanderings. In the meantime, my love once again, you dear people.

1 September 1943

Christine,

My dear, considerate friend, I am sending you one of the two postcards we are allowed. The family is still together so far. Father and Mother are now housed in a large barracks again, so life has become much more difficult. You cannot imagine what such a barracks is like. Father is childishly happy if he is not actually trampled underfoot. He sits on his wooden bench and, while small children crawl all over his back, reads about King Solomon and about love. Me you know about. Mischa is stamping tickets in the bathhouse, with a musical score lying open under the bath tickets. Mother looks after her awkward menfolk and will thank heaven if they are allowed to remain. If. None of the Adelaars is left here now. Will you tell Simon that he doesn't have to send things to the Frank family anymore? And will you thank him for the careful packing and dispatch of so many good things? We voice our wishes and you fulfill them. Please give our warm regards to kind Hansje Lansen. We only wish we could thank everyone personally for everything; it would be so very nice if we could.

It won't be long, perhaps, before you hear something from Maria Tuinzing again. The griddle cakes were lovely and fresh! And to continue on this theme: it's a very good thing that the bulk of the bread and butter arrives at the end of the week here, or at the very latest on Monday, so that we are prepared for any eventuality each time a transport is assembled. The greatest recent family drama: Father's only pair of shoes were missing (to avoid the word *stolen*) one bad night, and now he walks about in a borrowed pair that's too big. It's really pitiful, but never mind, we'll get over that, too. We could get over everything here, actually, if only we were allowed to remain in this small country. Oh well. It's gradually becoming quite empty here. And are you