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Mirjam Pinkhof

We sit in Mirjam Pinkhof's attractive flat on a quiet suburban street high up on Haifa's Carmel mountain. It is tastefully and simply furnished, cozy and tidy. The antique Delft tiles lining the fireplace belie Mirjam's Dutch origin. The large bookshelf dominating the room is solidly filled with books in three or four languages, most of them about the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Mirjam speaks slowly and carefully. She is a quiet, modest person with a pleasant manner, who nevertheless conveys the distinct impression of inner strength and determination.

She was born Mirjam Waterman, in 1916, to a family of comfortable means. She became a teacher at the age of 23 and ~~not long~~ thereafter devoted herself to the *hiding of pupils of the* Youth Aliyah movement.

Youth Aliyah, an offshoot of the Zionist movement, was organized in 1933 to save Jewish children from Nazi Germany and Austria. Before the Germans occupied Holland in May 1940, Youth Aliyah brought thousands of children to safety there, especially after the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938. The parents of these children were either imprisoned in concentration

camps or were attempting to get to a free country on their own. Because immigration certificates for Palestine were scarce, Youth Aliyah sent the refugee children to various Western European countries, especially Holland, and Britain. By the outbreak of war in September 1939, Youth Aliyah had arranged for the immigration to Palestine of over 5,000 German and Austrian Jewish children, and the safe transport of another 15,000 German and Austrian Jewish children to as yet unoccupied European countries. They called themselves Palestine pioneers.

My family was assimilated, except for my father, who came from the poor Jewish quarters in Amsterdam. He worked his way up in the world by leaving Amsterdam and moving into the country. He bought land in Loosdrecht and wanted to start a nursery of fruit trees and roses but around World War I there was a boom in the diamond trade and there were problems in the nursery business. So for the rest of my father's life he earned his living in the diamond trade, while his farm and his fruit trees became his hobby. He stayed in contact with Amsterdam Jewry and many Jewish refugees who came to Holland from Russia and Poland. He was a very "Jewish" man.

My mother was far more assimilated. She was from Portuguese Jewish origins and her name was Lopes Cardozo. As a young woman she entered a community for better living, the Frederik van Eeden Community (something like Walden in America). After her marriage she was active in humanistic, anti-military and anti-fascist organizations.

My father was a vegetarian, and a participant in socialistic activities. That is where the two met and how we five children grew up in Loosdrecht--far from Jewish life, in an enormous garden, with people around us who were trying to build a better world for all people

We were a very assimilated family, who knew nothing of Jewish subjects but were very advanced in liberal and humanistic ideas--I grew up in that kind of environment.

There was a school in Bilthoven called the Werkplaats Kinder Gemeenschap (Children's Community Workshop), headed by Kees Boeke, a man well known in educational circles all over western Europe for his progressive ideas. His school was notable for its idealistic principles; it formed its own community, growing food somewhat like a kibbutz. Boeke was a Quaker. The people who came to work there did so out of moral conviction and idealism, rather than to earn money. The school had very little money to pay their people. The head teacher was Joop Westerweel, who later became well known for his resistance against the Germans. I was a teacher at this school.

One of the principles of the school was that the pupils could influence our teaching and the life of the school community. It was in this spirit that one day in 1939 a student stood up and told us that when he came to school in the morning he passed a house where there were young teenage children hanging around, climbing the trees, with nothing else to do; they were all very bored. He got off his

bicycle to talk with them. They said they were Jewish refugees from Germany brought to Holland by the Youth Aliyah movement, but they had no books, no school, and nothing much to do. Our pupil asked if it was possible to bring these children to the Werkplaats so that they would have a school to attend.

The head of the teachers, Joop Westerweel, said, "Of course! They must come!" A special house was rented where the Jewish children, 25 in total, were taught. They came to our school every morning and returned to their Youth Aliyah house only late in the afternoon.

They eventually appointed me to be the teacher of this group, since I was Jewish; out of this contact Joop Westerweel and I became very good friends. I knew his enthusiasm for helping the Jewish children and his anti-Nazi, anti-German feelings. He was one hundred percent on the Jewish side, wanting to enrich their lives and do everything possible to help them. We both worked extremely hard trying to show that we wouldn't collaborate with the Germans and that we were against everything the Nazis represented.

In December 1940 the German civil government in Holland decreed that Jewish teachers were to be dismissed from teaching in public schools. In the middle of 1941 Kees Boeke asked Mirjam to resign from her teaching post at the Children's Werkplaats because she was Jewish.

On August 29, 1941, by German decree, Jewish children

were barred from attending public and vocational schools in Holland. ~~As a result, Jewish teachers organized ~~several~~ little ad hoc schools for Jewish children.~~ <sup>Some</sup> ~~of these schools were organized by the teachers.~~

Mirjam returned to her parents' home in Loosdrecht, a small town between Utrecht and Amsterdam, where she opened a school for local Jewish children who could no longer attend their regular schools. She had 60 pupils coming to her house everyday.

Not far from my parents' house in Loosdrecht was a place called Paviljoen Loosdrechtse Rade. In the busiest time as many as seventy people lived there between the ages of twelve and sixteen with their leaders. They were all members of another Youth Aliyah group; most of them were also German Jewish refugees, although a few Dutch people were among them too. They devoted themselves to studying and preparing for life in Palestine. The boys worked with Dutch farmers, learning agricultural techniques, and the girls worked with the farmers' wives learning how to milk cows, do household tasks, and everything else a farmer's wife should know. Some of the boys were learning other things, such as carpentry or blacksmithing, but everyone was working to be ready for a new life in Palestine. They called themselves young pioneers.

I had never given much thought to Zionism before the war, but when the war started and Hitler occupied Holland, I became a Zionist. It was only in '39 or '40 that suddenly something inside told me I belonged

to the Jewish people, to the Jewish side of the whole thing, and then I joined the Zionist youth movement. Like most people who become involved in something new, I entered into it with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Naturally I had a lot of contact with the Loosdrecht Youth Aliyah house; I became very involved in their cultural life. For every Jewish subject, for a Jewish holiday, or the Friday evening Sabbath, for instance, I invited the Palestine Pioneer leaders to come and talk to my pupils about these things. I was also deeply involved with the Zionist youth movement and I sought their help on those matters as well. This was in late 1941, early '42.

By 1942 the school in my parents' home was finished. The Germans opened a school for Jewish pupils <sup>where I was a teacher</sup> but soon afterwards they were all deported via Amsterdam to Westerbork. The whole German plan was like this. First people had to leave their houses and were concentrated in a kind of ghetto in Amsterdam. Sometimes after people received a letter telling them to report to a special place, but more often by razzias (round-ups), they were taken from Amsterdam by trucks either to the train station or directly to Westerbork concentration camp where they were all kept together. From Westerbork at first twice a week, afterwards once a week, a transport left for the east, for camps in Poland. <sup>and</sup> By 1942 most of the children who were in my Loosdrecht school were already sent to Amsterdam.

As the round-ups of Jews became more and more frequent, <sup>two of the</sup> ~~the four~~ Loosdrecht leaders and I started to think about what to do with all

the young pioneers in their care. You might ask, why was it your business to worry about those kids? Well, we were trying so hard to resist the Nazis, it was just understood that we would attempt to protect those kids. Even so, most of the leaders thought that hiding them would be completely impossible. In the first place, it was not very easy to find families who were willing to save people. And then these children hardly spoke any Dutch; they were very Jewish and had had virtually no experience with the gentile world. They were living together in a closed, isolated world.

One of the leaders was Joachim Simon—everyone called him Shushu. He was an exceptionally fine man and had a great influence on all the children, but he was also very pessimistic about what non-Aryans could do to save themselves from the Nazis. He was German and had already been in a concentration camp in '38, after Kristallnacht. He believed he understood the German mentality very well and he had no hope that anything good would come for the Jews or that it was possible to win out against the Nazis. He was convinced that they were so powerful it was absolutely useless to resist. *He thought it his duty to accompany the children into the concentration camps in the east.*

Another leader was Menachem Pinkhof, a Dutchman, who after the war became my husband. He was also very pessimistic about what was happening in Germany, although none of us in Holland knew anything about death camps or gas chambers. I must say the Dutch people were very naive; we couldn't even imagine all the things that had actually happened already. Then one day a man named Edelstein came to Loosdrecht who knew much more about the situation than we did. He had been sent from Prague by the Germans to help set up the Jewish Council



in Amsterdam. He warned us that we should expect only the worst when people were sent east to Polish or German camps. This was actually the first time that I heard about these things, not gas chambers yet, but that death was to be expected and nothing else.

Menachem was the only one of the four leaders who had made up his mind that we should never give ourselves up to the Germans. He was the one who finally persuaded Shushu that we should try to get all these children a safe place to hide. To Shushu it seemed impossible, but then I approached Joop Westerweel and asked him if he were willing to help us. I knew his personality and that he was connected with a group of people who, like himself, wanted to rescue Jewish people.

From the moment Westerweel came to help us everything changed. We began to work. We set up a small group of mostly gentiles, but it also included Jews like myself, Menachem, and Shushu. We started by making a list with the names of all the children to be rescued and tried to place opposite each child's name the name of a family that was willing to accept them. We also made photographs of each child for false identity cards. It went very slowly, trying to find more than fifty places; we searched all over Holland. From the effort of working to save this group of children grew a resistance movement of Jews and non-Jews laboring equally one next to the other, until the end. The end for some of them was death. Many were caught. Joop Westerweel was shot to death in August '44. Shushu was caught in January '43. When he was in prison he committed suicide; he was afraid he would break down under interrogation and betray his friends. So that was the end for them. In 194<sup>4</sup>, Menachem and I fell into a

traitor's trap and were caught. We went through prison camps and ended up in Bergen-Belsen, but we lived. We were very thin at the end, but I'm here, and able to tell you the story.

We had a group of people trying to keep our fifty young Palestine pioneers underground, which meant a safe place to stay, ration cards for food, money, books, visits to keep up their morale, and passing letters from their friends, sometimes from their relatives. The need for places to hide was never ending. People became afraid; they were asked by neighbors if they had a Jew in the house and then they became fearful about keeping the child any longer--so we had to look for a new address. It was an enormous job.

Our group grew in numbers. We made contact with other groups that worked on different levels, with different aims. You got to know people who could help you with ration cards or identity cards: we looked for clerks or officials who were willing to collaborate. When somebody died we tried to get his identity card and to avoid the recording of the death, so the card would still be valid. We did all kinds of things, but the most difficult was to find hiding places.

When I came to a house I never knew if I could trust the people or not. The only way to figure it out was to have a talk with them. I always looked them straight in the eye and tried to decide, can I trust him? It was a decision everytime, but I daresay I never found traitors. This was the particular strength of Westerweel. Even people who were collaborating with the Nazis, if he talked with them, they would start to feel guilty. He had an extraordinary gift of

touching that good part in everyone; he went straight to it. When he went to a house to ask if they would take a boy or a girl, he never came back with a no.

We were a very close group. When Joop Westerweel was still a teacher we had meetings in his school, then after he went underground we met in other places. Everybody had their own contacts, and when we came together we exchanged information and planned how to work together.

In March '43 my family had to leave our home in Loosdrecht to go underground. Actually, my parents were taken off to prison first. The Germans came to our house looking for my sister and me, and not finding us at home, they took our parents as well as a younger sister and brother and sent them to Westerbork. I managed to get them free; there were people you could bribe--Germans, Gestapo. I made contact with them, which was very dangerous, but I was able to bribe them, and my parents, sister and brother were all sent back to Amsterdam.

Two days later the Gestapo came to fetch them again, but in the meantime I had found a hiding place for them, where they stayed safely until the end of the war. From then on I slept every night in a different place. I never stayed long at one address because it was too dangerous. That's how it worked.

As time went by the situation grew worse: more and more people wanted a hiding place, which became harder and harder to find. At a certain point our group made an effort simply to get the children out of Holland. Shushu found the first contacts into France. It was easier

for them to live in the south of France than in Holland. Belgium was a little easier, but France was much easier because the French had only a military occupation, while in Holland it was a civil occupation and much more oppressive. We discovered people, mostly smugglers, who could help you across the Belgian border, and eventually we had three different routes. We called it going over the "green border" because you did not go on a road, or past a regular border post, but crept through bushes and across fields—a route where there was no route. Westerweel himself took many of the kids through this border.

From Belgium they went to France and in France there was yet again an illegal group, all Jewish pioneers, who set up an organization, first in Paris and afterwards in the south of France. It worked so well that seventy of our young pioneers managed to cross the Pyrenees during the German occupation, come into Spain and from Spain travel on illegal boats to Palestine. That was our greatest success—seventy people reached Palestine in '44, before the end of the war.

One day Joop and another man, who by the way, is still alive today, tried to take two girls across the "green border" into Belgium and right on the border they were caught. Joop was already underground, living on false identification; by that time the Gestapo knew a lot about him and were looking for him. Joop was using the identification card of a Belgian tobacco smuggler, but what he didn't know was that this man whose papers he had was being sought by the Germans for killing a German policeman. When Joop was caught on the border with the two girls, they looked at his papers and said, "Ah hah! We've got Le Lievre!"

Then Joop discovered that this Le Lievre had a record of crimes against the Nazis a mile long. He thought it would be better for him if he told them who he really was, so he confessed that he was Westerweel. This turned out to be not much better, and, soon enough the situation became worse and worse for him: first in the local police station, afterwards in the police station in Rotterdam, then prison in Rotterdam, and finally in Vught, the <sup>a</sup>second concentration camp in Holland after Westerbork. In Vught he was imprisoned in a concrete bunker with no hope of escape.

We were able to make contact with him through a certain Doctor Stein, a non-Jew, who was also a prisoner in Vught, but a prisoner under special conditions and with certain privileges. The lack of medical personnel made doctors and nurses were important for the Germans. This Doctor Stein was a prisoner, but for somewhat unimportant things. He was scheduled to finish his sentence in a few months and then be set free, but in the meantime while he was still in Vught he tried to help us as much as he could. Westerweel concocted a plan to attempt an escape. He was to take special pills given to him by Dr. Stein which would make it appear that he was hemorrhaging. He hoped that the Germans would then transfer him to the prison hospital and from there he would try to escape. He did get to the prison hospital and from there he attempted to smuggle a letter to us, with the details of his escape plan, using Dr. Stein as a courier. Somehow the Germans sniffed out something suspicious going on and unexpectedly decided to search Dr. Stein, finding Joop's letter. Then they set up a traitor to deliver Joop's letter which was addressed to someone in our group. This man came to us with a genuine letter from our friend Joop and said, "I'm going to help you with this." He went on to tell us how he was going to help and that's how he infiltrated our group.

When we expected Westerweel to come out of the prison, this traitor came with the Gestapo to the place where I was staying, rounded up all of us and took us off to prison. The same thing happened to Menachem who was waiting at the railway station with a suitcase full of clothes for Westerweel. They caught Menachem at the station and put him in prison too. Menachem and I were kept handcuffed and under very heavy guard with no possibility of escape. When we came to Westerbork we

were put in the camp prison.

Even in prison Menachem and I always had some contact. In Westerbork we had good friends who tried to do whatever was possible for us, but the only thing they could actually do was to put us illegally on the list of people being sent to Bergen-Belsen instead of Auschwitz. This may have saved us, who knows? Bergen-Belsen was a death camp too, but a certain number of inmates of Bergen-Belsen were set aside for possible exchange with German POW's in Palestine, and we were on the list of people who had certificates for Palestine. An exchange of prisoners actually happened only once: two hundred and twenty-two people left Bergen-Belsen by train and came to Palestine. After they left, it was exactly like all the other camps--terrible!

This traitor who caught us, I didn't trust him from the beginning, but the others did, and he's still alive today; he lives in Amsterdam. I had a very bad feeling about him. That's why he never knew I was Jewish; I always told him my whole made up story. I was living as a non-Jew with a false identity card so it was easy. When I came to the ~~Westerbork~~ prison they didn't know I was Jewish and I had a hard time convincing them of the fact. The prison interrogations were very, very difficult. In the end I thought it would be better to be a Jewish woman and just be sent to a camp; I was afraid that as a resistance worker I would be shot, like Joop. Finally they believed that I was a Jew and I was sent to Bergen-Belsen where I remained exactly one year, from April '44, until we were freed in April '45. It was a terrible terrible year, but that's another subject. Menachem and I were married in Holland when we both came back from

Bergen-Belsen, but after the camp Menachem was never really healthy again. That was how we ended the war.

We both knew that we could easily have saved ourselves quite early in the game. Before the resistance group was formed Joop Westerweel said to me, "I want you to come to me and I will look after you. I want to help you." I told Menachem we had a chance to be saved and he said, "No, I need to stay here. I'm responsible for these children." He was one of the leaders and couldn't leave them. Soon after that the idea was born of saving the whole group. We didn't want to save only ourselves; we wanted to save as many children and Jews as possible.

Today we are all very close together, the Zionist pioneer children, and all those non-Jews who helped. We have a past together; not only the experiences of the war but also coming to Palestine, as many of us did, and trying to build up a new country here together. I feel closer to them than to ~~my own family~~, many relatives.

Once I had to take a sister and brother from their parents to one of the stations in Amsterdam, and there a young woman took them from me. The little girl was two years old and her brother was less than a month old, a very small baby. Today he lives five minutes from here and we see each other frequently.

I took these two children from their parents, which was always *emotionally* terribly hard, brought them to the railway station and handed them over to a young woman who took them somewhere else, I had no idea where. Afterwards I came to Hilversum to visit one of our pioneer



girls who found a hiding place in a home there; it was a home to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents. The woman director of the home was very helpful and took in a lot of Jews. When I came to visit our pioneer girl she said, "Come here. I must show you something. I have two little children to look after now." Then she showed me the two children I had brought to the station in Amsterdam, the same ones. I was so happy to know where they were and to have contact with them again. Although there were two German raids on the house, when the war ended the children were safe; they somehow managed to escape, but their parents didn't come back. We had their names and birthdates and were able to trace them. They were gassed a few days after they gave away their children. It's known exactly in what camp and on what day.

Immediately after the war there was quite a bitter fight in Holland about the Jewish children who were rescued by non-Jews and who had no family left to come back for them. The non-Jews had no understanding of the Jews' feeling that these children should come back to the Jewish community. They felt, as good humanistic people do, that all the people in the world are one big family and it made no difference whether or not they were raised as Jews. The non-Jews who hid them had very close ties to these children; they loved them and they wanted to keep them. With the two children I was concerned about it was a different situation, because they were not with a family but in a home, and it was not a good place for them to stay.

So in the context of this fight to get Jewish children back into Jewish families I said that I wanted to adopt the two children, knowing that I did not really want to adopt them myself, but I wanted

to take them to Palestine. That's what I did. They were adopted by a family in Haifa and now this boy who was a tiny baby when I first saw him is married and has a family with four children.

It is estimated that the Westerweel group Mirjam Pinkhof helped form and tirelessly worked for saved the lives of 320 Zionist young pioneers out of the 821 who were living in Holland after 1938. They helped smuggle about 150 of them to France of whom approximately 70 reached Spain and Palestine during the war. Of the 48 teenagers living in Loosdrecht in 1942, 34 survived the war, or about 70%, whereas approximately 80% of the Jewish people living in Holland during the war perished at the hands of the Nazis.