

Escape from Camp Westerbork with Vitamin R

by Roel Wittink

During World War II, 376¹ Jews escaped from Camp Westerbork in the Netherlands. Among them were more than 20 Palestinian pioneers: young Jewish men and women preparing for a new life in Palestine by training to become farmers or craftsmen. The help of the Christian-Jewish resistance movement, the Westerweel group, was important in their organized escapes. Even more important was that many links were needed to make the plan succeed. In other words, without an ingenious plan and Vitamin R (relationships), there would have been no escape.



Martin Uffenheimer (1922)² and Paul Siegel (1924) escaped from Camp Westerbork on February 1, 1944. After fleeing Germany, they both followed a hachshará training program in the Netherlands. Martin was trained as a plumber in the Werkdorp, a group trainings Centre in Wieringermeer.³ Paul was affiliated with the Deventer group and followed the individual hachshará training on a farm in Brummen.⁴

They received help from outside the camp, but also support from within. Courier Alfred Fränkel (Zippi) was an indispensable link. Like Uffi, he stayed in the Werkdorp. Not only was he part of the Westerweel group, he was also appointed by the Jewish Council as a liaison between Amsterdam and Camp Westerbork. During his visits to Westerbork, he asked the hachshará members if they wanted to escape. And from mid-September 1943, a list of names of hachshará members in Westerbork circulated within the Westerweel group in Amsterdam. They had indicated that they were ready to escape.

On September 21, 1943, Uffi (Martin Uffenheimer) made his first escape attempt with Dudi (David Rosenbaum, born in 1925, Loosdrecht).⁵ They both worked in the agricultural group outside the camp. They left after work and were met by Lore Durlacher (Werkdorp) and Mirjam Waterman from the Westerweel group. They had two bicycles for four people. Near the station in Beilen, they were stopped by a police officer. Lore tried to negotiate. When she asked how can you be so sure that both young men are from the camp, he replied: their clothes smell strongly of Lysol⁶, which they use in the Camp.

They were locked up in punishment barracks 51 for serious cases. If you ended up here, your inevitable fate was to be sent away with the next transport. But after some time, Uffi and Dudi were

¹ [376 ontsnappingen uit Westerbork – Mei tot Mei](#)

² Photo Martin Uffenheimer, Collection heirs of Julius Reutlinger.

³ www.werkdorpwieringermeer.nl

⁴ Siegel, Paul. *In ungleichem Kamp, Christlich-jüdische Rettungsaktion der Westerweelgruppe*, p. 70

⁵ David Rosenbaum will not make a second escape attempt. On September 4, 1944, he was transported to Theresienstadt together with Esther Singer. From there, he was deported to Auschwitz and murdered. She remained in Theresienstadt and survived.

See <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/en/document/130365140>

⁶ Lysol is a cheap disinfectant and is used as a disinfectant in crowded and heavily contaminated areas.

allowed to return to their original barracks 60. The reason for this was that Esther Singer (Eschu), a friend of Dudi's⁷, worked in Gemmeker's house and garden. She told the camp commander that she also wanted to go with them if they were to be sent on the next transport. Gemmeker apparently did not want to lose her as a skilled worker and agreed to the return of Uffi and Dudi. And, it had become clear that the escape plan needed improvement.

Three improvements were made: the members of the Westerweel group would provide different clothing; the Westerbork gear of the escapees stinked awfully of Lysol⁸. Furthermore, a bicycle would be provided for each person. And, crucially, the escapees would sign up for transport, so that their escape would not be discovered immediately on the same day, but only upon arrival at their deportation destination. That was the idea.

Paul Siegel had also been placed on the Amsterdam list. Uffi and Paul volunteered for the transport to Bergen-Belsen on February 1, 1944.⁹ They hoped this would make them eligible for a prisoner exchange and thus enable them to reach Palestine, should the plan fail. The day before the transport, they discussed the final details in the camp with their friends Kurt Walter (Werkdorp) and Herman Italiaander (Deventer).

As the night of February 1, 1944, approached, the barracks leader appeared as usual with a policeman for the ceremony of reading out the names. The deportees prepared for the upcoming train journey. Uffi and Paul put on several layers of clothing. Over their usual clothes, they wore beige overalls with the white armband of the baggage handlers with the letters F.K. (Fürsorge Kraften). Over that, they wore their winter coats.

At 8 o'clock, Martin and Paul joined the stream of 908 people heading for the waiting train with twenty carriages. As they left their barracks, their names were crossed off the list of residents of Camp Westerbork. Herman Italiaander and Fritz Siesel (Deventer) stood on the platform. Both were members of the security service, helping the deportees with their luggage and boarding the train.

At 8:30 a.m., the order was given to board the train and take the assigned seats. Chaos reigned not only at the train but also inside it. Adults searched for family or friends and changed seats. Then it became important for Uffi and Paul to get off before the accompanying SS officers boarded. They only boarded after camp commander Gemmeker had given one of them the signed list of names of the deportees. Martin and Paul then took off their winter coats and walked to a carriage door. Martin got off successfully. Paul, on the other hand, got his right foot caught between two steps, pulled his leg free and injured his knee in the process. A little later, they walked between the barracks to Rachel Karlsberg's barracks (Werkdorp). Because of her night shifts at the hospital, she had a screened-off corner in her barracks. She was waiting for them both and treated Paul's painful knee.

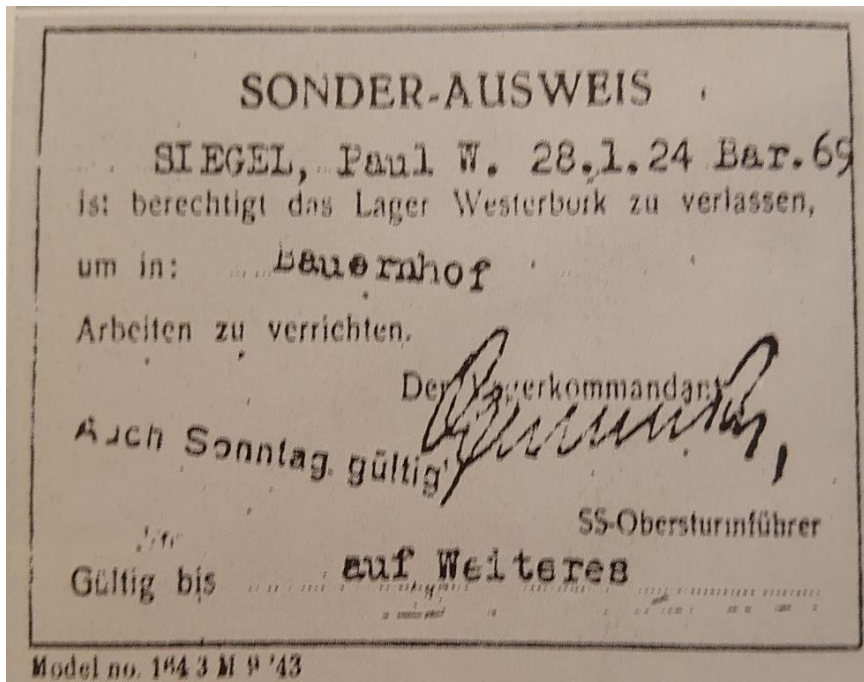
The train didn't depart at 10 o'clock, as was usual. Martin and Paul feared that another head count had taken place. Shortly after Herman entered with the announcement that the doors were closed and the SS officers had taken their places, they heard the train depart. They could breathe a sigh of relief. Herman and Rachel left. Martin and Paul tried to get some sleep, but were unable to. When

⁷ GFHA, Cat.nr. 191 Information on David Rosenbaum, letter from Moshe Keny to Jan Smit, 21th July 1994. See: Schipper Hans, *The Westerweelgroup and Palestinian Pioneers*, p. 149. Moshe Keny is also known as Max Krezower. He stayed in Loosdrecht.

⁸ See footnote 6.

⁹ Siegel Paul. *In ungleichem Kampf, Christlich-jüdische Rettungsaktion der Westerweelgruppe*, p. 154.

darkness fell, Herman returned and took them to the horse stable. They hide in the hay and spend the night there. The first stage was complete.



When they woke up, Paul's head was severely swollen. Martin could no longer see Paul's eyes. Shortly before sunrise, Herman appeared and asked if they were ready for the next stage of their journey. They walked to the exit gate, where armed Dutch military police were standing guard alongside members of the security service. They showed their forged Ausweis¹⁰ and were allowed to pass.

Uffi and Paul walked to the agreed meeting point, a small wood near the railway line from the Camp to the canal, called Oranjekanaal. There they could hide and waited until evening. Only then it was time to walk across the open heathland to Café Halerbrug, located on the road from Beilen to Hooghalen.



After a few hours, Kurt Walter appeared with a few sandwiches. He worked as an engineer on the train from the Camp to the Oranjekanaal and vice versa, picking up new cargo delivered by ships. Shortly after he had left it started to rain. Uffi and Paul decided to venture across the heath to take shelter in a barn. They succeed and when it got dark, they set off for their meeting point, Café Halerbrug.

Lore Durlacher (Werkdorp and Westerweel group) and Frans Gerritsen (Westerweelgroup) were already waiting for them. They had brought two extra bicycles for the 12 km trip to Assen. There, they were welcomed by friends of the Westerweel group with a hot meal. After a warm and refreshing bath, they surrendered to sleep.

The next morning, clean clothes were waiting for them. Their own clothes still smelled of Lysol.

¹⁰ See Pinkhof, M. De jeugdaliyah van het Paviljoen Hollandsche Rade 1939-1945. p. 128. See also Siegel, Paul Im ungleichem Kampf, Chrislich-jüdische Rettungsaktion der Westerweelgruppe, p. 233.

They continued their journey from Assen via Amsterdam to The Hague. There they stayed for a few days with friends from the Westerweelgroup. Then the day arrived to begin the crossing to Belgium and beyond. First they reached Eindhoven, then they traveled by train to Weert. There, four bicycles were waiting for them, and Jan Smit and Joop Westerweel took them across the border through a

forest near Budel. They arrived at the home of Belgian friends in Hammont, where they spend the night.

By then, it is February 17, 1944. On that day, a telex¹¹ is being prepared in Bergen-Belsen for SS-Sturmbahnführer Wilhelm Zöpf, head of department IV B 4, based in The Hague. He is in charge of the deportation of Jews from the Netherlands. In Bergen Belsen, upon arrival of the transport on February 1, 1944, they counted and recounted the number of deportees and could not get beyond 906 deportees instead of 908. By then, it had become clear to them that Martin Uffenheimer and Paul Siegel had not arrived in Bergen Belsen. The plan worked and was repeated several times until April 1944, when the risk became too great.

Der Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD
für die besetzten niederländischen Gebiete
Nachrichten-Übermittlung

Aufgenommen Zeit Tag Monat Jahr 17 Feb. 1944 von durch		Rechts für Eingangsstempel 10605/44 FEB 1944		Befördert Zeit Tag Monat Jahr an durch	
N.Ü. Nr. 03394		Telegramm - Funkspruch - Fernschreiben Fernspruch			

LUENBURG NR. 337 1.2.44 810 310 ---
SS-AUFENTHALTSLAGER BERGEN-BELEN.
AN DEN BEFEHLSHABER DER SIFD UND DES SD FÜR DIE
NIEDERLANDE,
Z. HD. VON SS-STURMBANNFÜHRER Z Ö P F ,
IN D E N H A A G .
BETRIFFT: TRANSPORT AUS WESTERBORK AM 2.2.1944.
VORSANG: BEKANNT.
MIT DEM TRANSPORT AM 2.2.1944 TRAFEN 906
TRANSPORTTEILNEHMER IN BERGEN-BELEN EIN. DIE IN DER
LISTE UNTER NR. 160 BEZW. 639 GENANNTE S I E G E L ,
PAUL, GEB. 28.1.24, LANDARBEITER, UND
U F F E N H E I M E R , MARTIN, GEB. 18.6.22
LANDARBEITER, SIND NICHT EINGETROFFEN. NACH
MITTEILUNG EINE S MIT DEM GLEICHEN TRANSPORT
EINGETROFFENEN SOLL U F F E N H E I M E R VOR ABGANG
DES TRANSPORTES IN WESTERBORK ERKLÄRT HABEN, ER
FÜHRE NICHT MIT, DA ER ZURÜCKGESTELLT SEI. UEBER
S I E G E L KONNTE NICHTS IN ERFAHRUNG GEBRAUCHT
WERDEN.
SS-AUSENTHALTSLAGER BERGEN-BELEN
RDEM 1 - SIFD 30/44
BEZ. DR. S E I D L , SS-HAUPTSTURMFÜHRER.

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Een telexbericht uit Bergen-Belsen naar aanleiding van de vermissing van Paul Siegel en Martin Uffenheimer

Paul and Martin were on their way to Palestine, where they arrived on November 4, 1944, after traveling through Belgium, France, Spain, and taking a boat trip from Cadiz.

¹¹ Telex message from Siegfried Seidel to Wilhelm Zöpf, In: Westerbork Cahiers 10, Abuys G. and Mulder D. A hole in the barbed wire, Camp Westerbork – escapes and resistance, p. 42. Seidel was commander of Camp Bergen-Belsen from July 6, 1943.