

PAULA KAUFMANN AND BERRIE ASSCHER:

TWO STORIES OF YOUNG JEWISH RESCUERS WHO OPERATED IN THE
DUTCH WESTERWEEL UNDERGROUND GROUP WHICH INCLUDED JEWS
AND NON-JEWS

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Paula Kaufman obtained a position as secretary to the director of the construction department of the Gestapo in Paris, January, '44. Paula, born in Drabowa, Poland, in 1920, had lived in Vienna with her parents from infancy; German was her language. After the Anschluss she fled and moved to the Netherlands where she was employed in different cities. When the war broke out, she moved from Amsterdam to Haarlem, living with a Dutch family, the Gerritsens. Frans Gerritsen and his wife, Hanny, active in the underground and part of the Westerweel Group, were parents to twins born in August, 1942, and could use a nanny. At the Gerritsen home she participated in the forging of documents together with Frans who was an expert. Sometime during 1944 Paula was able to escape to Paris where she knew of an apartment used by the Dutch resistance group who had escaped earlier. A few days after she arrived, part of the group was arrested, the equipment used by them for espionage being confiscated by the SD.

"At the beginning of 1943, the Armee Juive (one of the prominent French Jewish Resistance groups, armed. CA) had been mapping out an escape route to Spain mainly intended for young people who wanted to join the Allied Forces or reach Palestine. Passage to the border zone, in the meantime, had been banned by the Germans for a breadth of approximately 100KM. In order to pass, one had to carry special safe-conducts and to pay professional *passeurs* who demanded hefty prices." ⁱ

The Dutch Westerweel group had already begun to seek out an escape route through Belgium and France to Spain some six months earlier. In January 1943, Shushu, the charismatic young Jewish leader of this group, was arrested on his return from France

(where he had been mapping out a route to the Pyrenees with the help of the French comrades) and committed suicide in a Dutch prison, thus delaying attempts in this direction. They came to a standstill only to be picked up a few months later by the AJ with the help of the Dutch group then in Paris.

In April 1944, some of the members of the Dutch group were arrested in Paris and incarcerated in the Fresnes prison nearby.

Remnants of the group decided to leave unsafe Paris and with much difficulty reached Lyons in southern France. The first thing they did once there, was to look for work. Paula saw a sign on one of the central squares of Lyons: *Wehrmacht Commando*. She decided to check out her options. Equipped as she was with a – forged – letter purportedly testifying to the fact that she had worked for the Wehrmacht in Rouen, she went in and presented herself as a candidate. With her perfect German, she soon found herself being offered a post as secretary of a friend of the commander of the Wehrmacht in Lyons. The utterly drunk fellow commander was not, however, her dream of a new boss but the ease with which she had been hired gave her an idea: what could be done in Lyons could be done in Paris, and she returned to the big city. In Paris, the whole Avenue Foch was Gestapo and that's where she went. As she was being put to a shorthand/typing test, the "big boss" entered and, looking at her impressive presence, claimed her for his office at 82, Avenue Foch. Paula hoped that working for the Gestapo would give her a chance to find out where the arrested friends were and this time she accepted. Her new boss was the Head of Construction works at the Gestapo HQ in Paris and, as his secretary, she went with him on tours of the city. Thus she found out where construction was going on, where investigations – read torture – were taking place (in big mansions that had formerly belonged to Jews) and where her friends were being detained (in Fresnes, near Paris). Rummaging through the cupboards, she came upon "plans for the future", copied them and gave them to the contact person of the Dutch Queen in London; these were maps of the provision cellars under the Bois de Boulogne and of launching sites of the V1 and V2 missiles. Being present at important meetings of the Gestapo, Paula had highly classified information; she made contact with the communist groups of armed resistance in France as well and gave them the information. The *marschbefehle* gave her the freedom to go back and forth to Holland thus being able to keep in touch with

her friends and giving them the information she had as well. Then her friends in Paris turned out to be her betrayers... They were double agents.

Paula was arrested, on July 18, 1944, and - after cruel interrogations - was put on transport to the east together with the other members of the Dutch Hechalutz and AJ French resistance who had been caught in Paris in April. She was tried and sentenced to death, but with the Allied forces at the gates of Paris, the whole group was taken to Drancy instead from where they went on a train to Germany which also contained the Nazi commander of Drancy and the retreating German Air Force. One train car only was reserved for Jews to be taken to their death. It had fifty-four occupants, mostly young people: Dutch (German-born), French Communists, and three prominent French-Jewish families, among whom a Rothschild family. First stop was Buchenwald which was going up in flames. The guys were taken out and the women were sent to the prison in Weimar after which they were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There, in return for survival, they were offered "work." The women refused. They were then sent to Bergen-Belsen which was already terribly overcrowded and food was almost non-existent. She survived due to some Dutch non-Jewish workers in BB who gave her a sandwich every day. At the very end of the war, the group of women was sent to Theresienstadt where they were liberated by the Russians

GOUDA

In the small city of Gouda, south of Amsterdam, a Jewish youth farm had been established in 1937 on grounds that were owned by a Jewish organization since 1910. The farm served as a training center for teenagers and was one of a chain of Youth Aliya homes operating in Holland before the war. The one in Gouda was called Catharinahoeve and in the years 1940, '41, and '42 there were around 20 youngsters at the home. On April 22, 1943, the Gouda police presented the home with evacuation papers. They were to present themselves the next day at the notorious Vught camp not far away. The following day none of the potential deportees reported to Vught; they all went into hiding. The Catharinehoeve was the last of the Youth Aliya houses to be emptied out in this way. The boys and girls, residents of the farm in Gouda, had been equipped with excellent forged papers; the brunt of the work for this was done by the director of the farm, Shoshana Litten-Serlui, who deserves special mention here as she

rescued the youngsters under her supervision while she and her husband perished in the camps.

Some of those who went into hiding soon fled Dutch territory on an escape track that went from Holland, through Belgium and France to Spain.ⁱⁱ One of these young men was Berrie (Jissachar) Asscher, who was later to write his memoirs of this period in his book *Van Mokum naar Jeruzalem*, which appeared in Beersheva in 1996.ⁱⁱⁱ

As Nanno (Kurt Reilinger), a member of the Dutch Jewish-Christian Westerweel resistance group, had meanwhile set up headquarters in Paris, the use of blank German forms and stamps was in full use. The *marschbefehle* that had been stolen and copied served these youngsters to present themselves as Dutch citizens working for German construction firms in France. One of these was the Organisation Todt, which was building the Atlantik Mur all along the Atlantic coast in Europe and which employed thousands of workers from the occupied countries. The *marschbefehle* were the "return tickets" from home leave on Wehrmacht train cars. The Dutch Westerweel group had been instrumental in using these forms to spirit young Jewish men out of Holland. Other forms for use of these youngsters were food coupons for German soldiers in France which served the so-called recruited workers of Jewish origin just as well.

Asscher writes:

"Thousands of young Dutchmen were being sent to Germany as forced laborers. Many had gone into hiding to evade being conscripted but lately they had found another way to avoid this. They left for France illegally and once there, due to the growing demand for workers, could easily get a job working for the OT. Not only did they make a reasonable salary, they were also eligible - once registered officially as foreign workers - for a trip home to the Netherlands on a paid vacation every half year." (119) The tickets for the way back from vacation were the above-mentioned *marschbefehle*.

Into this slot the youngsters from Gouda and other places fitted perfectly: young, energetic, adventurous, and strong, they could work and use the system to their advantage. A group of several of them arrived in northern France.

Asscher again:

"Upon arrival at Dannes Camiers we were taken to the work camp Scharnhorst accompanied by our German foremen. We were housed in one of the barracks, given a bed and left our luggage there. What struck us most is that the famous German *punktlichkeit* was grossly exaggerated; we were just divided into work details and no one inquired whether or not we had worked there before. It turned out that there was a good deal of coming and going in the *Organisation Todt*, something that would serve us well in the future." (138)

The whole point of being in France was to get to Spain and Dannes Camiers was a long way from Bordeaux and Toulouse. Almost from the first day the Dutch group started planning an escape, but for this they needed a special permit and money. There being no chance in the world to get a special permit for traveling, they concentrated on getting the money for the tickets and took their chance with the rest. The little group of three to which Asscher belonged, decided to sell their most precious possessions: one, a leather jacket, the other, leather boots, and Berrie Asscher had an electric shaving machine. The ease with which they sold these items was another surprise and they set out on their journey. Their luck was good, they reached Paris and, full of excitement at their first visit to this famous city, they spent the whole day sightseeing, boarding the train to Bordeaux after dark.

Friends from the Westerweel underground group had come down to Bordeaux and established headquarters there. They brought forged papers and stamps with them. "A number of *haverim* had managed to get administrative jobs in German offices in Paris and the area around it and they managed to put their hands on stamps, travel documents, *Wehrmachtspapiere* (military documents), and *Marschbefehle*." The boys started issuing themselves travel documents with official stamps which looked like the real thing! The *marschbefehle* carried the lines: "the German army is kindly asked to provide the carrier of this document with every help and protection necessary."

After some further adventures – including work on an island off the coast and a ten-day visit to Holland with German papers – Berrie returned to Bordeaux via Paris and the last stage of his escape took place.

It was November 10, 1943, and the crossing of the Pyrenees was planned before the worst of winter, but the calculations bounced on the reality of heavy snow fall and the crossing had to be called off in the middle. It was postponed for months. During this time, the group joined small outposts of the *maquis* in southern France. Conditions were Spartan and danger was a constant presence. Some of the *haverim* found their death during this waiting period but the crossing did finally take place in late February, 1944. Thirty-two people, among which were twenty-three *haverim* from Holland, and an assortment of fugitive Allied pilots, French police officers, some elderly French Jews and two women made up this group which successfully, although not without great risk, crossed the Pyrenees. Before they left, at the foot of the mountains, they received a surprise visit by Joop Westerweel who came all the way from the Netherlands to see them off. In a memorable speech, worthy of the educator he was in all fibers of his body and soul, he sent them off and returned to Holland where he was arrested and executed in August the same year.

After six grueling days of crossing the Pyrenees in sub-zero temperatures, with minimal amounts of food, the group reached the village of Montgarri in Spain. The poor farmers there received them with great hospitality, fed them, and sent them on their way.

Eight months later, in October 1944, most of the Dutch group, counting some sixty members, as well as a large group of children set off from Cadiz, on the western coast of Spain, picking up more immigrants from Tanger in North Africa (opposite the rock of Gibraltar) and landing in Haifa on November 5, 1944. All had British certificates to enter the country, something highly unusual at that time.

Thus ended a painful but adventurous period in the lives of dozens of Dutch Palestine Pioneers. Their rescue had been brought about by the Westerweel group, who were both Jews and non-Jews. The non-Jews were recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Gentiles, but the Jews have never been recognized by the same institution.

Sources:

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Footnotes:

ⁱ Tsilla Hersco, "L'Armee juive AJ-OJC", in *Organisation juive de combat*, Editions Autrement, Paris, 2002, p. 38 (my translation, CA)

ⁱⁱ Frans van der Straaten, *Om Nooit te Vergeten*, published in the Netherlands, #ISBN 90-76061-13-0, no date.

ⁱⁱⁱ Berrie (Jissachar) Asscher, *Van Mokum naar Jeruzalem*, Beersheva 1996

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