

# Wageningen Students' Lives under Nazi Occupation

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### Opening word by Angela Lewis

“We have a very special evening ahead of us. It is an honour and certainly a pleasure for me to introduce to you tonight our four guest speakers, the first of whom is Mr. Bob Kernkamp. He is from the Wageningen Municipality, working at the city’s archive. He has also undertaken an inventory of the Ceres archive and has combed over other students’ associations archives. We look forward to his brief overview of some facts and figures regarding Wageningen University during the war and the students associations.

Then we will move straight into our main feature of our presentation this evening with three other guest speakers. I am pleased to introduce to you Mr. Anton van Diest, who used to be a professor here at the soils department at Wageningen University. He began his studies actually right after the war but he became friends with someone who participated in the students’ resistance movement. Through this friendship he got to know what it was like on the front line of one of these students’ resistance movements and he will be sharing his stories about that with us tonight.

I am also very proud to have Mrs. Maria Crijns-Herebrichs here this evening. Her husband Fons passed away just weeks before we made the appointment to have this event. She graciously agreed to be here in her late husband’s place to share his story and read extracts from his diary written during his interment in a work camp in Germany. I am very thankful Maria, that you are willing to do this.

Thirdly, we have with us tonight Mr. Bolt, who is also a former professor at Wageningen University. He began his studies in 1942 and he is going to share his stories with us as well. I am very thrilled that he can be here with his wife.

### Introduction by Mr. Kernkamp

“I am going to give a brief overview of the student society in Wageningen in the Second World War. Wageningen in 1940 had 14,500 inhabitants, which is about one third of what we have now. Among them were 570 students, which is 4%, 25 professors and 5 lecturers. The total number of people registered as studying in Wageningen in 1940 was 716 and there were 5 student associations at that

time. The oldest one is Ceres, which was founded in 1878 and had 346 members. Many members came from the more upper middle class family which is in consistence with the fact that it is the oldest association for students. Then there was the WVSV, Wageningse Vrouwelijke Studentenvereniging, which was founded in 1917 and had only 27 members in 1940. But at that time there were not many women students.

Then the third one is KSV Franciscus Xaverius, which is the Roman Catholic society founded in 1921. The SSR which is the reformed student association and last but not least, certainly not at that moment, Unitas, which was founded in 1935, with most of its members coming from middle class families. It was possible to be a member of two associations at the same time.

The war in Holland and in Wageningen started on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1940 with the German invasion. Before the Germans were here, we saw a carefully planned and executed evacuation of the entire city which started in the same day, in the morning. Because of the defence lines along the Grebbeberg, which is the hill to the west of Wageningen, there was a military line there called the Grebbeline, which stretched from the Grebbeberg in the south to Amersfoort in the north and from there to the IJsselmeer, which is the big lake in the centre of the Netherlands. It mainly existed of a string of fortifications west of the stretch of lowland that could be flooded with water from the Rhine as a way of defending the territory.

In May 1940 one third of the Dutch army was deployed at the Grebbeline. That fight on the Grebbeberg which lasted from 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of May is famous because Dutch soldiers here were among the last to fight the German invasion.

Then after a while, when the Germans occupied The Netherlands, lessons restarted as usual at the university at the 28<sup>th</sup> of May. Most students associations were anti-German. For example the students from Ceres, which felt that students had nothing to do with politics. So it was easy to be not anti-German or try to be not involved in politics, which was the way of thinking at that time.

When earlier in the 1930's several members of Ceres had shown an interest in Nazi ideology, they were forced to stop promoting their political ideas or else leave Ceres. At Unitas, where middle class and lower middle class prevailed, a group more accepting the Nazi ideology in very general speaking, political views were more appreciated, so several Ceres members in the 1930's became Unitas members instead.

In October 1940, students and many other people, especially professors and teaching people at university were forced to sign an "afstammingsverklaring", which is a declaration of descent. Failure to sign would result in being fired from your job. Three Jewish professors were dismissed, and only two non-Jewish professors openly protested. They too were dismissed. This led to a growing concern about ethnic or religious identity on students and professors and the climate of fear and suspicion.

Then in October 1941, there came a prohibition for Jews to become a member of non-economic organizations, including student associations. As a result, members of most associations cancelled their memberships and the associations were dissolved, except Unitas.

Franciscus, the Roman Catholic society, was closed by the Germans for failing to put up the sign “verboden voor Joden”, no Jews allowed. About half of Unitas members cancelled their membership, the remainder did not decide to stop all activities, so Unitas was the only student association that went on.

By the end of 1942, mandatory labour, “arbeitseinsatz” in German, was mandatory for students too. This meant that students had to go to Germany to do forced labour or go into hiding. The universities had to give lists and addresses of their students, but they refused. A nationwide student strike was planned, but in Wageningen the university rector let the holiday recess start one week earlier, thereby annihilating the effect.

January 1943, when the year had just started, the resistance which mainly consisted of students, stole the population register from city hall to hinder the Germans. This was the first covert operation of this kind. Other cities followed the example. That was in the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January. Then five or six days later 20 students were arrested and taken to a camp in Amersfoort and later to Vught, which is near Den Bosch. One month later, there were raids in all university cities as retaliation for the assassination near The Hague of the collaborating Dutch general Seyffardt. Six hundred Dutch students were captured and imprisoned in Vught, among them 43 Wageningen students.

March until May 1943, all students were expected to sign the so-called declaration of loyalty to the German authorities, meaning they would not undertake any action against the German Reich. They had to sign before the 10<sup>th</sup> of April. If not, they would have to leave university. However, only 15.6% of all Dutch students complied and most students went into hiding. There was a real sense that taking sides would determine your fate, and even that of your relatives.

In May 1943 came a decree that students who did not sign would be deported to Germany to do forced labour and that parents, if they did not comply might even be assassinated. That resulted to 3800 of Dutch students who signed, partly out of fear what might happen to their relatives if they didn't. Among them were 150 students from Wageningen.

In January 1944 there were only 35 students left at the university in Wageningen; most of them were members of the National Socialistic Society. Only 13 professors were here to teach them.

September 1944 saw the beginning of the battle of Arnhem, which is the famous part of the film “A Bridge Too Far”. Wageningen again found itself in the frontline. The city was evacuated for the second time, this time by the Germans and in this order, and a lot of the city was destroyed again.

Then finally the war in Holland was ended in Wageningen, in this city, in this very room where we are now, where the act of capitulation, as it is called, was signed. If you are interested to see the original document, please do visit me and my colleagues at the city archive where we do have the original document. Thank you for your attention.”

## **Presentation by Mr. Van Diest**

“There were three important events during the war in which Wageningen was in the centre of attention for the whole country. The first one was the very first day of the war, when the German troops invaded Holland. The city of Wageningen and especially the centre of Wageningen was heavily destroyed by the fact that from the mountain about 7 km from here, which was very much fortified and where the Dutch troops had hoped to bring the advance of the German army to a halt.

From there on, the Dutch artillery anxiously wanted to destroy the church tower on the market square, and they did it. But at the same time they destroyed most of the centre of Wageningen and it took a few years before all this damage was repaired.

The second event, or actually the third event, in which the attention of the whole country went to Wageningen, was then at the end of the war, the German surrender was signed here in this very room. But in between these two there was an event that actually I want to spend the most of my attention to. That was the fact that the city register was removed from the town hall and was destroyed somewhere in the neighbourhood of the river Rhine. Such a city register in a town is always important. The city registers were of special importance during the war, because when you were registered, you were entitled to receive food and textile coupons. Most of the food that you could buy, you could buy in The Netherlands with the use of these food coupons. If you didn't have them then it was very hard to stay alive here in The Netherlands.

There was also a risk involved in having a city register, and in this case it was the risk that the Germans would claim information on certain sections of the population. This actually happened around November 1941. The Germans wanted information about the number of Jews, students and ex-military personnel living in Wageningen. This was actually something that could endanger these people to a certain extent.

The youngest employee at the town hall was a fellow by the name Bob Mebius, who was actually somebody who had finished high school and did not want to enrol in university because he did not want to sign the declaration of loyalty, so he found a temporary job at the city register in the town hall. When he saw the letter that had come in from the German commander in The Hague, he immediately realised the danger involved. This fellow Mebius was also a member of a group of students that was one of the resistance groups in Wageningen. There were several ones. These groups were rather small, four or five different people. He was a member of a rather particular group because most of these groups were homogeneous: all students or all non-students, all communists or all Protestant-Christians ones. But this group he was a member of consisted of only 2 students and 2 non-students. The headquarters was in a farm house that still exists. When you go to the harbour and take the road to the south, then close to the river you have it on your left hand side. That was the farm house, which was the headquarters of this resistance group, consisting of four people. Mebius was one of them and when he knew this letter had arrived he talked about it with the members and friends of the same group about what action to take, to prevent the deportation of these different groups that were endangered.

Within the group they decided to make an attempt to remove the city register from the town hall and to destroy it. So at a certain day, that was during the Christmas holidays of 1942-1943, close to midnight,

these four fellows cycled to the town hall, climbed over a wall at the backside of the town hall and pushed in a window. The window had before been treated with green soap before in order to muffle the sound of falling glass. When the window was destroyed and they managed to open it, they went in and walked to the front door of the town hall. When they had opened the front door they put the four bicycles inside. Then they went to the room where the city register was kept. All four members had brought a sack with them and each one filled the content of one of the files of the city register containing all the cards, until the sack was filled. When that had been done they went back to the front door and waited until the policeman on patrol, who always came by at the same hour, had passed and opened the door, brought the bicycles outside and cycled back to the farm house. And there, in an abandoned chicken house, opposite the farm house, in an orchard they buried the city register.

This actually turned out to be a perfect crime, because nothing went wrong and nobody was arrested. But afterwards the Germans started to suspect the youngest fellow, the employee of the city hall. At a certain night they tried to arrest him, by trying to lift him from his bed, but Mebius knew he was one of the suspects so he didn't sleep in his own bed anymore, but he slept elsewhere. When he heard the next morning that the Germans had tried to arrest him during the night, he disappeared from Wageningen.

The second part of this talk is actually more devoted to the senior member of this group by the name of Henk Sijnja. He was somebody who had studied already a number of years and he had also been a soldier during the pre-war period. In the middle of 1943, he suspected that a pro-German Dutch infiltrator was trying to find a place in his resistance group. When they had certainty that this fellow tried to infiltrate the resistance group, it was decided that he should be eliminated. In the centre of the town he was shot by one of the members of the resistance groups but he was only wounded. He was taken to the city hospital, about 300 m away from here, uphill, where Wageningen had a hospital.

In the group it was decided that a second attempt should be made to kill him. It was decided that Sijnja should be the one to try to finish the job. Sijnja had been in military service before and after the war and knew how to handle weapons. Disguised in a German uniform, he went to the hospital with a bunch of flowers in which he kept a pistol. When he entered the room of the infiltrator he shot and killed him and managed to escape. It looked like this group had performed another perfect crime. But two days later it turned out that the Germans wanted to retaliate.

The director of the hospital was summoned to come to the police station and they asked him a number of questions. At a certain moment they let him go and he went home. But in front of his home he was ambushed by a several men that belonged to the so called Silbertanne commando. This commando actually ambushed and killed people, who were suspected to have done something, without any proof. The hospital director, dr. Boes, was killed in this way and that had such a traumatic impact on Henk Sijnja that after that event he never talked to anybody about anything he had done during the war. In 1946, when I became a first year student member of Ceres, which is the student association here next door, Henk Sijnja was a senior member. We got to know each other slightly, but not very closely. Then after inauguration I decided to become a member of the student rowing club in order to be able to participate in rowing regattas. To my surprise I was placed in a boat in which also Sijnja had a place. As a senior student he still wanted to row in regattas. He was a light weight fellow and got a place in front of the

boat. I was the one sitting right in front of him, so we got closely befriended. But even in that period he never told me anything about his war history. After a year or two he finished his study as a forester. Then he and his wife left to New Zealand. A number of years later, I finished my study and with my wife I went to the United States and it seemed like Sijnja and I would never meet again. But things went a little different. After 10 years in the United States with my family, I came back to Wageningen and got a job here and shortly after that time, a book appeared written by a fellow by the name of 'Marsoum', he was a Jewish student here in Wageningen. He was in hiding all the years of the war, here inside the town of Wageningen. He, as a classmate of Sijnja, had asked him to write something about his experience and what he knew about the killing of dr. Boes.

When I read this booklet and story written by Sijnja, I realised that he had actually had been a war hero without anybody knowing it. Two years later, my wife and I decided to spend our holiday in New Zealand and when we were there we visited the Sijnjas. Although the visit was very pleasant, it turned out that Sijnja did not want to talk about the war and the war deeds he had performed. When I asked him if he had ever received recognition for his war deeds, the answer was no and he said that he was not interested.

Back in Holland we still received another letter from him. The municipality later organised an event where the Sijnja couple was also invited to be present there. That was a reason for me, if the Sijnja's would be here, to try to get a decoration for him. They conceded it this time and I succeeded in organising a decoration. In September of 1994 the decoration was handed over to Sijnja by the mayor of Wageningen. When he addressed Sijnja, he also made mention to the fact that a few metres away there was the room where a number of years earlier the city register was removed and taken away to the farm house near the Rhine.

When I listened to his I realised that it was very unsatisfactory that nothing in Wageningen actually reminded people of the fact that for the first time during the war a city register was stolen from the city hall and destroyed. So I decided to do something about it. I started to approach friends of my study year here in Wageningen and collected money from them. I also approached people from Sijnja's year and they also contributed. With the money I had collected I went to the stone cutter here in Wageningen and asked him how much money I still needed. But when I told him my idea he became so enthusiastic and said, forget about the money, I will make it anyway. When the city council heard of this, they asked if maybe two stones could be made, one for outside and one for inside. The stonecutter was willing to make two instead of one. So on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 1998, the two stones were unveiled and that was 55 years and 3 days after the city register had been stolen from the city hall. In Dutch we say: Beter laat dan nooit. In English: better late than never. Thank you for your attention."

### **Presentation by Mrs. Crijns-Herebrichs**

"Hello everyone! I'm delighted to be here this evening and to be able to share some of my memories and those of my husband Fons with you. I will start with my own recollection.

Wageningen students who had refused to sign the loyalty declaration, demanded by the Nazis, all went into hiding, 'onderduiken', as it was called. A group of students from Wageningen who didn't sign went into hiding. Several found shelter on the large farm 'Hoeve Wissengracht' in Hulsberg in Limburg, in the south of The Netherlands. There were many threats and pressure was put on the farming families to tell where the students were. One day in May 1943 the students came out of hiding to spare their families and those sheltering them, which meant that they had to go to a work camp. We went to see them off from the Maastricht railway station, thinking it would only be for some months.

After about a week they arrived in Germany, and were posted to *Durchgangslager Braunschweig*, a transit camp. Being agriculture students they had expected to do farm work, but this was not the case. The students were a very close group and relied on each other for support. They chose Fons to be their leader and he took his responsibilities very seriously. He made rules to see that everyone got the same amount of food. The students soon realised they would have to find more food if they were to survive. They started working on farms, replacing the local men who were at the front, in exchange for food, such as a cooked meal or eggs, bread or potatoes. Some boys received food in parcels from home. Remarkably, even though it was wartime, the postal service still functioned, which meant they had a little more food than other prisoners.

Fons' group was moved to Uslar, in the Harz Mountains. They were told that they would work in a furniture factory, but this was a lie. They had to make casings for bombs. They tried to work as slowly as possible. Then the Nazi captors had another idea: they might be able to reuse the bombs that the Allies had dropped but which had not detonated. The Wageningen students were put to work."

Now I will read an excerpt from the diary that Fons kept. This entry is entitled: 'A blessing in disguise'.

"By September 1944 it was clear that the Germans were having difficulty getting the raw materials they needed for the arms industry. Our work in the factory in Herzberg was increasingly interrupted and we would be lent out to other businesses from time to time. Air raid alarms were common. When they happened we would rush out of the factory or the camp and seek cover in ditches in the fields. When the weather was clear we would see whole squadrons of bombers flying over. A fantastic sight, for they were our liberators. The low rumble of the engines sounded like music to our ears. We thought far less about the victims of the bombing than the raids themselves.

In November we had to sign a declaration that we would not talk to others about the production difficulties. It seemed the Germans were worried about defeatism among their own people. We were reasonably well informed about the progress on the eastern and western fronts, which gave us extra courage, but the months passed slowly. Our camaraderie and friendships kept us going. We had a common enemy and a joint goal: liberation. We organised lots of leisure activities together; we formed a Latin and philosophy study group and more. We celebrated Christmas with an ecumenical service, which was a deeply moving experience, as for us it was the first time that we had prayed with people of other denominations. New Years Eve 1944 was also celebrated together, and everyone expressed the hope and conviction that we would regain our freedom in the coming year. After singing the Dutch national anthem 'Wilhelmus' and KSV's song 'Io Vivat' in the snow we were able to face the year ahead."

A few months later Fons wrote:

“We knew that something was up, and on Friday the 26<sup>th</sup> of February we knew for sure: thirty of the Dutch students were to be transferred, including the whole of our work team in the factory. This was bad news. The next day we learned that we would be going to eastern Germany, much further from home. We had got used to Herzberg and knew where to come by extra food when rations were low. Now our close-knit group would be broken up. On the Sunday we heard that we were heading for Glöwen, a village on the other side of the River Elbe, and that we would be leaving the next day.

The journey of nearly 250 kilometres was painfully slow, it took almost three days. Finally we stopped in the middle of a large forest, Forst Friedrichswalde. We had reached our destination. Before us was a big fence; it was an uncanny looking place. No one knew anything and no one was expecting us. Finally someone came and explained that Jos Meissner, a company evacuated from Lotharingen, had ordered new workers. Our first impression of the new camp was soul-destroying. Large hulls were spread over the grounds and there were piles of American and English bombs lying around; a sharp contrast with the peaceful woods surrounding us. It was the first time that we encountered a group of Jewish prisoners, men and women in concentration camp uniforms. They were kept strictly separate from us. We had no idea where we had ended up. Later we pieced things together and learned that most of them were Jews from Hungary. They were made to do the most dangerous work.

In the camp it was very clear that the German Reich was on the verge of collapse. Our daily work consisted of sawing the Allied bombs in half and emptying the contents for use in German bombs. Everything was in short supply and there were regular power cuts, so in the evenings we used candles and gas lamps when they were available. Food was scarce, and hunger our constant companion. The German guards also became unsure and we took advantage of this. Whenever possible we left the camp and sought work nearby. For a while I worked for a crane company with an unusual German foreman who would pick us up each morning. At our first meeting he introduced himself: *‘Ich bin Alfred aus das Rheinland. Ich bin ein Freund von Montgomery.’* Every day he would report to us the news he had heard at home from the BBC.

We also stayed in touch with our colleagues in Herzberg. On Sunday the 8<sup>th</sup> of April we heard that the factory in Herzberg had been destroyed four days earlier. It happened during the shift of the team that we had belonged to, Etienne, Pierre, Willy and I. In the team were also many French and Polish friends, and we didn’t know what had happened to them. Our departure had been a blessing in disguise.”

Fons added some additional notes in 2007 when compiling his memories.

“The cause of the disaster at the factory in Herzberg was never established for sure: it was either an allied bomb or a production error due to a shortage in raw materials. Twenty-nine people died and many were wounded. It wasn’t until 2007 that we learned that near Forst Friedrichswalde, where we were interned, lay an annex of the Sachsenhausen death camp. We weren’t aware of this at the time, but it was where the Jewish prisoners came from every day.”

An incident that I remember Fons talking about is the following:

“One day in 1944 the students were visited by a man from the underground who had plans to help them escape, but in the end it proved too difficult. At first there was an exchange of letters mailed from within Germany, but the Gestapo tried to intercept them. The Gestapo had been keeping an eye on the students, because Fons had received newsletters from the KSV student association, from the Netherlands. The Gestapo became suspicious when letters also started to arrive from addresses within Germany. They thought that the KSV was an underground-organization and part of the resistance, so they tried to intercept the mail at the local post office. A lady who worked there warned Fons and risked her own life by suggesting him to destroy the letters as soon as possible. On one occasion the Gestapo held the students for questioning about their KSV membership. Because Fons spoke good German he was able to talk his way out of the interrogation. Other young Frenchmen in the work camp did not return after being questioned by the Gestapo. In the second week of April 1945, as the Allied and Russian forces came closer to each other, the inmates of the camp were ordered to stop work, and to help with digging trenches near the River Elbe.”

This is Fons’ entry about the liberation:

“It was so humiliating: liberation was so close, but we were on the wrong side of the River Elbe. Across the water we could see white flags of surrender. After five days of digging trenches and the increasing chaos of attacks, the order was given to evacuate the camp at six in the evening. Taking only essentials we left. Now we too joined the swelling numbers of refugees heading in a westerly direction.

We soon made it to Glöwen, where houses were burning and everything was in ruins. Lots of people were on the streets. That night we found a place to sleep in a barn. In the morning it was glorious to wake up to the sound of cattle mooing, chickens cackling and the cock crowing. Finally we’d found the farming life. The farmer’s wife, Frau Jahnke, was very hospitable, and we were treated to a big breakfast.

Etienne, Pierre, IJsbrand and I spent a number of days on the farm, where we helped with planting potatoes and other odd jobs. Meanwhile the Russians were approaching. We heard the thunder of their cannons and ahead of them the stream of refugees from eastern Germany. It’s difficult to imagine more misery: people with wagons and carts, pulled by scrawny horses, handcarts, prams, bikes and on foot, carrying their few possessions.

Even though things were good on the farm, we couldn’t relax. The Americans and liberation were so close, but we didn’t know what to do. The Elbe was 200 m wide and German soldiers were still around. We took turns taking the watch to work out where the weak points were. After a few days we had a breakthrough. Johnny had been down to the banks of the Elbe: there were no German soldiers and their positions were empty. Hurriedly we gathered our things and Frau Jahnke made sandwiches for us. Four of us went: Etienne, Pierre, Willy and I.

As we got closer to the river we heard from people there that it wouldn’t be possible to cross the river at Quitzhöbel: the SS was lying in wait and shooting at everyone. Not such good news, but we continued and darkness fell. As we passed the last house, a soldier jumped out and pointed a gun at us. Another damn German we assumed. We decided to keep walking, but he challenged us: “You are Frenchmen? You have arms?” We looked at each other. It was an American, the first we had seen. I felt like throwing

my arms around him but confined myself to a firm handshake. "You're trying to cross the river?" And he told us where the boats were lying.

Apparently we had taken the wrong path, for when we reached the Elbe we found no boats. Three German soldiers were there, and they also wanted to go to the other side. All soldiers were trying to stay out of the Russians' hands. That evening we signalled with our lamps, and at one point a flare was launched from the other side. They had seen us and would come to our aid. But nothing happened. It was cold. There was nothing to do but to wait for the morning to come. We got up at five and I packed my blanket into my rucksack, my diary was under it. We went off in groups of five. After half an hour we found a rowing boat, with a hole in the front. We set to work, repairing the hole with pieces of clothing that were lying around. Four of us got in, one steered and the others rowed. Our journey to freedom had begun. We beat the current and made it to the other side where we jumped out. Pierre and I embraced each other: we were liberated. Our joy was indescribable. It was 7 o'clock in the morning on Sunday the 29<sup>th</sup> of April, just like this year. I felt I could breathe again. No more slavery, I thanked God.

Everyone in the group managed to cross the Elbe that day, and we were taken to Seehausen by the Americans. After our identity papers had been checked, we were disinfected one by one with a DDT spray to get rid of lice. Then the long wait started, there was no transport. I recall that I went to a dentist. Germans had changed from screaming at us and had become subservient. As a foreigner I was given priority and the first thing the dentist said to me was that he'd never been a member of the Nazi Party. We often heard this refrain, people's conscience was beginning to play up.

On Friday the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, we heard on the radio that all German troops in The Netherlands and Denmark had surrendered. I went with Jan Hylkema to the Evangelical Church in Seehausen, where he played the Wilhelmus on the organ as loudly as he could. The Netherlands was free after five long years.

That wasn't the only good news. By chance I met Wim van Zantvoort, the son of a baker from my home village of Brunssum, on the Saturday evening in Seehausen. He was working as an interpreter for the Americans. For the first time in eight months I received news from home: everything was alright, and there was no war damage there. My friends teased me that Miek would have found a nice English officer by now, but Wim took all the wind out of their sails by saying "Fons, we know better than that. You don't need to worry about leaving a girl like Miek on her own."

The really big news came on Sunday the 6<sup>th</sup> of May. Early the next morning a train would be leaving for the west. All the Dutch, Belgians and French who had done forced labour were allowed to ride on the open goods trains. We didn't mind. The journey went slowly, and we often stood still for long periods, but the main thing was that we were heading home. We rode through the industrial Ruhr area, where everything was completely destroyed, razed to the ground – I'll never forget it. Smoke rose from cellars, a sign that people were still living there. It was awful; the German people would have to pay dearly for the crimes of their Führer.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May we reached the Dutch border: shouting and cheering. Our forced stay in Germany had lasted exactly two years and four days. We got off the train in Heerlen, where our papers were checked and we were given a medical examination. Then our parents were re-united with their 'lost

sons'. The reunion was emotional. From my parents I heard that Miek was on her way. Seeing her again exceeded all the dreams and imaginings I had had in Germany. Now we were really together again."

Again, Fons looked back in 2007.

"The horrors of war were over, but the consequences would leave their mark. Many carried these for the rest of their lives. The best remedy was to resume work, forget about the war, as much as possible, and make the most of the life that lay ahead. Miek and I did that together and continued to do so until the present. Thank you."

### **Presentation by Mr. Bolt**

"In 1942, two years after the start of the war, I finished high school in nearby Arnhem and registered as a 17 year old freshman at Wageningen University. You realize the difference with the other speakers; I was just old enough to get into Wageningen before they were troubling people with the loyalty declaration. So I came here and my parents in Arnhem told me to take the bus, because it was a hard time to find a living space as the student corporations were not active. Therefore I travelled up and down and there wasn't much direct contact between senior students and us, because they were a bit away from us as we were only freshmen. I enjoyed the lectures and practicals that were given very much. As a freshman group we gradually learned what exactly had been happening already and building up in Wageningen and other university towns, that the Germans interfering with the student life.

As the local student associations had all closed down because of German interference with student clubs. Aside from the early rising necessary because of the bus leaving, the lecturing activities concerning the rather fundamental approach to science underlying the uniform university entrance level program in those days, plus afternoon practicals, felt to me like entering real science after high school. Nevertheless I (and with me other first-year students) remained somewhat isolated from the clouds building up at the universities due to the Nazi occupation. We were usually with approximately 4 first year students together on the morning bus, so during day-time and practical periods there were ample opportunities for discussions with fellow students. On the bus I also befriended a young Wageningen Student who ended up later in the resistance in Friesland; our paths would cross again in later years.

Now we come to the second point, the teaching that was suspended. That is now the story that we come up to. Because December '42 and April '43 was the dangerous period where everything happened. And the end of the whole show in that period was the loyalty declaration: you sign it or you don't. That was a difficult situation. Let me put it this way: finally the situation rounded in such a way that the signing or not signing the declaration was a problem of the students, so they tried to talk to the professors and the professors kind of said "you better decide yourself" or they went their way. One thing I remember very well was that these people, grouped together with the rector magnificus Mees. He was a German friendly, but gentleman liked him around, that's what I remember him. And then as a kind of solemn expression on his face, he spoke to a group of students, and I was one of them, and he said "all I can tell you that if you sign before April 10 then you assure that students can proceed with their study". After

that date it would still be possible to sign, but he could not guarantee this would ensure the acceptance. Then in the meantime the German Higher SS and police commander Rauter, very well known, because he was one of the few people caught by the Dutch after the war and put to death, as they still did in those days. A week later, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, all ex-students had to show up with the local Nazi Security Forces officers and the ones that did so were transported via Ommen to Germany. That was the choice that was offered to the students. They said: 'If you sign, you can study, if you don't sign, you have to report. And if you report, you go and help out the German army etc to work in Germany.' So that was not a very good choice for people. The result I will summarize, I got the numbers out of a book of our student dean, who made part one of the book. He said that the final result for Holland was, that in round numbers the total students in Holland in the academic year of 1942-1943 was about 15 000. Those were divided over one quarter that submitted a signed loyalty declaration, one quarter left Holland to join the 'Arbeitseinsatz', forced labour as it was called for the Germans, and half of all students managed to avoid participation in this ghastly German exercise. Half of Dutch students had found some way to avoid it. That depended very much on the background of the student, as students from Wageningen quite often had some connections in the countryside so they tended to go back to the farm. The student population was dispersed all over Holland and a part joined the Arbeitseinsatz in Germany.

After the middle of May 1943, the whole thing was over, people had made their choice, you might say. I can only tell you what I did. So after the middle of '43 I simply stayed home and ironed for a while. Following the advice of the more senior students, I started this period of self-study, with the help of some lecture stencil-texts and relevant books. Recalling this "post-loyalty declaration" period, which lasted to about September 1943 for me, I actually have rather pleasant memories. Presumably the fear and uncertainty of the previous period, as to 'what would happen next/what would the Germans do next?' had more or less subsided. Now I was just sitting at home and nothing much happened. There was one bad sign and that was a letter delivered to my home address, signed by general Rauter, indicating that both my parents and I would be held responsible for me not reporting at the indicated place. As I recall, a former teacher helped me to write a letter to the "Rauter office" explaining that this could not apply to my case.

As no further correspondence occurred on the matter, I felt free, and in the favorable position not to have reported for the 'Arbeitseinsatz'. As I heard through the 'grapevine' that some Wageningen professors as a form of protest and rejecting the Nazi occupation would allow private oral exams to be taken by students no longer registered by the University, I booked four of the six exams assigned to the first part of the official Propaedeusis Exam. I remember very well, because of the later significance to me, the closing remarks made by prof. Prins after my barely successful physics exam. So he said at the end: "If you are interested and available, I will contact my colleague Edelman, who is in need of some more student help for his soil-mapping project in the Bommelerwaard." To me this was the best that could happen: it felt like having started on a defined beginning of a future career! And indeed, I ended up as a soil scientist, which was induced by this way.

Coming home that day, a discussion with my parents indicated that they felt less assured about developments after finishing my physics exam. For without my registration with Wageningen University, I had nothing to show for recognized employment, so I would be liable to be put into forced labour in

Germany if they got hold of me. But by coincidence, the Germans had a sharp division between the birth year of 1925 and earlier. People born after 1925 were treated easier, because I think they had a feeling they were not full grown people that could really work in Germany. People born in 1924 and before had the difficulty to be recognized as unregistered university students, or had proof that they were working with a Dutch factory of importance; they would be picked up and put into forced labour.

Aside from this, the newly established 'Nederlandse Arbeidsdienst', as a kind of mandatory pre-military service training for young males, opened its first camps by calling up unemployed youngsters from the 1925 generation (like myself). Fortunately, anyone already engaged in a study at a regular institute for learning would be exempt from this mandatory service, until they had finished their programme. The above formulation then led to a clever pathway for 'non-loyal' university students to avoid forced entry into the 'Arbeidsdienst', because as a pre-university high-school graduate they could claim a direct admission to the second grade of the Advanced Technical Schools (MTS). Having heard through the grapevine about this opportunity I immediately went in person to Deventer in August 1943, where I could register for entering the 2<sup>nd</sup> year courses at the Advanced School for Colonial Agriculture (MKLS: Middelbare Koloniale Landbouw School). That sounded like something that had the future, so I went up there. In fact, the director of the school in Deventer welcomed some four students from Wageningen University who all saw this as a way out of the threat of forced labor in Germany. They were an appreciated addition to the group of students composing the new class.

About three weeks after my entry at this MKLS, now as a student travelling daily in one hour with an Arnhem-Deventer steam-train, a complication arose. I received a letter from Prof. Edelman, who said he had heard from colleague Prins that I would be willing to come to the Bommelerwaard (which is a floodplain agricultural area near to Zaltbommel) where I would be trained in soil mapping. What to do? My preference was clearly to go mapping as part of the University crowd. Luck was with me again: the empathizing director of the Deventer School told me that in view of the suggested benefit for a future graduate of the MKLS to have a thorough understanding about soils, he was willing to let me make a belated entry into the class, with the strict understanding that I would catch up with the missed lectures and would have to pass the term-exams (after Christmas). I was very grateful indeed for his decision on my request so soon after entry. This was the end of 1943.

A few days later I boarded the train down South into the region of the big rivers Rijn, Waal and Maas. I checked in at the village-Hotel in Zaltbommel, where I was expected. When at the end of the afternoon the Edelman group returned from their fieldwork I realized that I did not know any of the participants. All were obviously senior students at different levels in their previous study programmes and they correctly graded me as a freshman student-pupil, accepting me with a pleasant goodwill. In the following weeks they took me along to different field locations, explained the soil types around, discussed how these had been formed, and properties for different use applications etc. I soon learned to handle the soil auger, in particular the type developed by Edelman. As expected, during the actual work, walking through the fields, making sample borings and making notes, many discussions arose about the cause of the lay-outs of the fields, former usage etc. Also local problems arising from inheritance of grounds were mentioned, things I knew very little about as a town-boy. Many details of my stay in the Bommelerwaard have escaped me in the course of time. However, the sight of the often foggy fall in the green landscape

with above it all the squadrons of American 'flying fortresses' returning from bombing missions over Germany, following the big rivers and sometimes suddenly attacked by German fighter planes, is still in my mind. In fact I have a vivid memory of the crash of a delayed bomber plane with at least one parachuting crew member reaching ground somewhere as we watched from afar.

At the evening meals I followed discussions between participants, often including prof. Edelman, with great interest. It gave me a more mature picture of life at the university, especially the happenings after the entry of the Nazis a couple of years earlier. The occupation and the chaos were topics at the table. In total the stay at the Bommelerwaard proved invaluable to me and became later decisive for me in selecting my field of study. No wonder that I regretted very much the sudden rumour about an impending razzia towards the middle of November by the Nazi security forces looking for students that had gone underground. Edelman felt the weight of his responsibility in relation to the youngsters in his team and decided to stop the soil mapping project and advised the participants to leave and go into hiding. So that was over again.

Thus after some two months I returned to be a student at the MKLS, with again the daily train trip from Arnhem to Deventer, until Christmas 1943. Following the term-exams thereafter, we had to prepare for our external practice period belonging to the second year of study. In accordance with my request to be allowed to arrange this in the field of forestry, this led to a two months stay in Hoenderloo where I worked at the Kröller-Müller park, which is later called our first National Park De Hoge Veluwe. This arrangement turned out to be of great interest to me and it also provided later a then much needed foothold in Hoenderloo at the time of forced evacuation of the town of Arnhem, following the Battle of Arnhem in September 1944. The third trimester of the school year '43-'44 covered my last part of study at the MKLS before the imminent ending of the war, we thought. Many schools in Holland were cutting short in June, the last school term that year, because of the turmoil following retiring German troops from the several Allied fronts formed in Africa and South Europe and eventually the D-day Front.

I returned to Arnhem, where I met again the companion-student that I had joined in the bus Arnhem to Wageningen in autumn 1942. He told me that after the closing down of Wageningen University in December 1942 he had gone to the Northern Province of Friesland, where later he joined the underground movement. His team was eventually rolled up by the Nazi Security Forces and he had gone into hiding until his name became too well known in Friesland. My friend had acquired a new ID card, *persoonsbewijs* in Dutch, with a new name and had decided he would go back home in Arnhem, where he stayed with his parents and a younger brother. Talking about what we should do in Arnhem while waiting for the end of the war, I proposed we might perhaps attempt to make a soil map of the woods, heather fields, plus a few small farms. So we would be in the field, learn about the technique of soil mapping, and possibly would make a useful map for future developments of the town of Arnhem. Both of us became very enthusiastic about the plan, and we decided to prepare for such an undertaking. Indeed I managed to obtain support from the Edelman lab, including the use of an appropriate soil programme. My companion took care of setting up camping requirements and together we talked to a town official who after warming up to our plans, gave official permission to start mapping the grounds belonging to the city of Arnhem. In short, thus equipped we spent a number of very pleasant weeks in the woods at the north eastern edge of Arnhem. This was starting around the first of July. Admittedly the

results of our efforts showed a bit naive approach, but hopefully it had served at least to give us some feeling about the difficulty to define the different visual characteristics to be used for distinguishing between soil profile types. About the middle of August my friend informed me that he had to quit our undertaking, because he had been asked by his former friends to come help with some business in the underground. As he told me two weeks later in a hasty visit, the business concerned the collection of allied droppings of arms at night over the empty regions of the Veluwe. This was the last time I saw him, as he was caught by the nazis and executed. The information about this was very shocking to me when it reached me after the end of the war some eight months later.

The ending of the war looked imminent to us by the middle of September 1944. And there they came, dropping out of the air, the British and Polish airborne division, on September 17<sup>th</sup>. Thus the Allied Operation Market Garden started in the heather fields midway between Wageningen and Arnhem. Much literature has been published about the following Battle of Arnhem. Some of you might know the book and film 'A Bridge Too Far'. This was a huge military operation that unfortunately failed.

The German Command back in position at Arnhem decided that the civilians had to evacuate Arnhem within days. The same happened here in Wageningen. Mind you, some 80 000 people of all ages had to walk away with whatever things they wanted and could take with them. It was quite a sad group, with old bicycles, wooden tires on it, loaded with a few suitcases and within days they had to walk away. As the river Rhine was likely to remain a front line over at least the coming winter, the same fate was given to the people of Wageningen. In short, some 100 000 people of all ages walked or rode one of the few available horse-carts towards the north, attempting to find a place to lodge. In this respect our family with some neighbour friends decided to leave a bit early, already after a week, with the hope to obtain lodging close by. The mentioned pension at Hoenderloo at which I had been living the spring before was indeed willing to accommodate us, which made it a lot easier, because you had some place not too far from Arnhem, in case Arnhem would be liberated. Others from the Arnhem area left so late that they had to move to villages some 50 km to the north. Others had family ties with people living in Friesland and went there.

A considerable fraction of the population between Arnhem and Wageningen north of the river was forced to wait for the war's end away from their previous housing. This amounted to live in privately arranged shelter in mostly small villages for about eight months. The accommodation varied widely in type and duration, in cases in vacated chicken coops, but also in regular vacation facilities. As the winter of '44-45 was quite a cold one and the evacuees had often been forced to leave without facilities to take along their belongings, discontent and also suffering was part of their fate. Nevertheless in retrospect it appears that fate was light in comparison to that of a considerable share of the Dutch living in the West provinces. There, hunger and lack of heating in combination with disease and old age caused numerous victims. Turning back to the situation at Hoenderloo: broadly speaking this was relatively good, albeit that within days the population of Hoenderloo had increased with a factor three.

Total supply of potatoes and grain crops (particularly rye) was relatively high, and also fire wood was easily found from the Veluwe. Thus one survived rather easily with the help of a central kitchen facility brought along from Arnhem. This facility was rebuilt next to the building of the grade school, that also

took care of supplying night lodging for the passing crowd of famished people from West-Holland hoping to trade some of their valuables for foodstuff, at the small farm houses in the east side of the Netherlands. Then on midday 17<sup>th</sup> of April 1945, after a rather quiet night, suddenly a lone Canadian soldier on a heavy motorcycle appeared at the roadblock right in front of the bakery shop where we had lived since our coming to Hoenderloo in September 1944. This was the east end of the village and everyone had expected the liberation by the British army compound lodging and firing nightly rounds of heavy guns from Arnhem some 15 km to the South. So the local men of the underground units had all convened at the roadblock on the highway from the South, providing me with the opportunity to talk to our first liberators. Before I could reach the lone motorcyclist, he turned around and went back. About half hour later a jeep (I had never seen one before) arrived and from it a captain disembarked. He told me that we (the local population that joined the meeting) should "please remove the roadblock so we can pass through." He then said "any Gerries around here?" I then told him that I knew about two German uniformed men. Next the Canadian officer said: "Can we walk there?" and when I confirmed this he said "you walk with me". So we did and I remember vividly how I walked proudly at high pace with the first liberator I met to the school at the other end of the village, about one kilometer away. He had taken a gun in his hand and when we reached the school he kicked in the door, to return a bit later with the two disguised German soldiers and handed them over to his followers with a truck carrying a handful of his own men. By then the Underground men had reached the school too and took over as the local bosses. Later on I was told that the Canadian officer I accompanied into Hoenderloo was captain Swinton of D-company, Seaforth Highlanders. That night a continuous series of war vehicles, including also the then famous Ducks passed through Hoenderloo to Otterloo. We were told later that there some heavy fighting took place with locked-in SS-units of the Germans.

About a week later I had the opportunity to return to the empty (except for the British army units) town of Arnhem. Then my liberated life took a start. Summarizing here my return to student life at Wageningen University per January 1946, I mention only the points:

- 1) My return to Deventer per June 1<sup>st</sup> 1945, after an early call for taking a crash-course at the MKLS to obtain the diploma of 'Planter' per ultimo December 1946, meant to help start the recovery of plantations in The Netherlands India.
- 2) My subsequent entry per January 1946 into the second half of the Wageningen crash-course of September 1946, making use of my clandestine exams in 1943 when I was doing the soil mapping project in the Bommelerwaard, I could obtain the propaedeusis Diploma per June 1946.

So my studies consisted of two half completed crash courses, but anyway, nobody noticed afterwards. Thank you for listening."

### **Post script**

In the post-war period, the remaining Dutch elite reflected on how to re-build and strengthen Dutch society. The Reinink Commission was installed to reflect on the role of Dutch universities during the Nazi

occupation. Especially the Dutch universities' positioning with respect to the loyalty declaration - imposed by the Nazi occupiers – gave rise to a wider discussion on the role of academics in society and their social responsibility. The Reinink Commission responded with the creation of Studium Generale to shape young university professionals with broad social consciousness, civilian responsibility and a wide pallet of academic development. This was considered to be essential in shaping future generations. Fixed in the law – Studium Generale was born as a nation-wide entity through which universities could offer cultural development, insight in the unity of sciences and awareness of their social responsibility. To this day Studium Generale remains dedicated to broadening personal, profession and societal horizons with reflection, dialogue and knowledge so that individuals can meaningfully take part in the world around them.

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