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Conflicting allegiances: the stories of two ladies of German origin who lived in the Netherlands before, during and after World War II

I discuss here two recent publications, one historical and one fictional, dealing with the matter of conflicting allegiances. They are Hilda Kalshoven-Bresters *Ik denk zoveel aan jullie: Een briefwisseling tussen Nederland en Duitsland 1920-1949* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1991), and a novel by Tessa de Loo: *De tweeling* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1993).

The number of publications dealing with the Second World War is vast and still increasing. Many of those who lived through these difficult years feel the need to tell their story: first for themselves, to assess their memories in order to put the experience behind them, and secondly for those not yet born at that time, to help new generations understand what really happened.

Ik denk zoveel aan jullie (I think so much about you) is the true story of a German girl, Irmgard Gebensleben. It consists of a selection from more than 2000 letters written by Irmgard, her brother Eberhard, her parents and grandparents, and other relatives and friends. Irmgards daughter Hedda compiled the book, with her mothers help, since at first she could not read the many letters written in German, and indeed in the old handwriting.

Irmgard was born in Brunswick, west of Berlin. In 1920, like so many other children from Eastern Europe, she was sent to the Netherlands to regain her strength. There she was adopted by the Brester family, who lived in Utrecht. During her stay in the Netherlands she forged strong bonds of friendship and love. Visiting her Dutch host family for the third time in 1925, she fell in love with their youngest son August, a medical student, whom she married in 1929. In the meantime she herself worked and studied towards a career as a singer.

The book deals with Irmgards situation as she lived through the years of the depression and the Second World War in the Netherlands, while her parents and relatives experienced the ever-increasing power and appeal of National Socialism in Germany till the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945. Irmgards mother especially, but other family members as well, became very involved in the Hitler cult and the ideology of Nazism. In this correspondence you watch the movements development from an intimate family perspective.

Thus on October 13, 1931, Irmgards mother writes: "Next Sunday is the great day. Hitler will speak... twenty-five extra trains have been put on." (103) On the 18th she complains about the coverage of the rally on the radio, at the time still controlled by the socialist government: "No word about the 104,000 men in brown shirts who marched here today. Also nothing about the parade which Hitler took on the Schlossplatz and which lasted for six hours." She adds: "With all those Nazis here in the city it was quite a bit quieter than it is now.

Now the communists are coming out of their hiding places." (104-5)

On July 14, 1932 she writes: "If the Nazis had not been so fabulously organized, we would long since have had a big civil war." (129) In 1933: "I have great confidence in Hitler." (160) In 1934 she informs Irmgard; "Father and Eberhard have witnessed this week the great demonstrations of loyalty and the enormous enthusiasm which the German people feel for their Führer." (199) And in 1937: "On Saturday well have important stuff on the radio. At 1 p.m. there will be a meeting of the Reichstag and Hitler will make a statement which perhaps will surprise a lot of people. In any case I am going to listen." On that occasion Hitler declared that Germany would no longer recognize the treaty of Versailles.

In Irmgards mothers letters anti-Semitism surfaces. She writes: "The Jewish problem is a world problem just like communism, and if Hitler wants to solve it, just as he did with Communism, and if he succeeds, then Germany will once again be envied." (161) Irmgard meanwhile gave performances of songs by Heine and Mendelssohn in aid of persecuted Jews, and when the Nazis occupied the Netherlands she refused to become a member of the *Kulturkammer*, the approved organization for performing artists, just as her husband August refused to register in the *artsenkamer*, the similar organization for doctors. While her mother listened to Hitlers hate-rousing speeches, she sent money to a German student who, because he opposed the Nazi regime, had to flee to Switzerland in order to continue his medical studies there. While her brother fought and died as a member of the Nazi party, she was actively involved in the Dutch resistance and hid German Jewish children.

In April 1940, her brother Eberhard was wounded on the Eastern front. In the military hospital he fell in love with Herta Euling, who had a Jewish grandmother and therefore, according to Nazi laws, could not marry a member of the ruling party. In 1941 Eberhard received further medical treatment in the university hospital in Utrecht and visited the Brester family whenever possible, even though he and August Brester held widely divergent political views. August told him he was always welcome, but not in uniform, and asked him not to talk German on the street outside the house. Reluctantly Eberhard agreed (324). In 1943 Eberhard tried to obtain permission to marry Herta, who was expecting their child, but his request was denied - he had only endangered his membership in the party. To add to their misery, the child was stillborn. Soon afterwards, in September 1944, Eberhard was killed in battle in Belgium. A friend, Ursula Meier, wrote to Irmgard: "Too bad that Eberhard did not find a girlfriend of the same blood and left no children. But perhaps it is the will of fate." (365)

These letters show how Germany and the Netherlands went their different, deeply conflicting ways before and during the Second World War. On the personal level, we see Irmgard, the German girl who became a Dutch doctors wife and concert soloist, successfully resolve the contradictions in her past and present situations.

The other book, *De tweeling*, is Tessa de Loos third novel and her fourth book. It tells of the accidental reunion, after many years, of German twin sisters, Lotte and Anna. Both now in their seventies, they meet in a Spa in Belgium, where they are seeking relief for their arthritis in the warm healing baths. Anna asks in broken French: "Cest permis que nous buvons cette eau?" Lotte is annoyed by the

question and, recognizing the German syntax, answers in perfect German: "Ja, das Wasser können Sie trinken." "Ach so," Anna exclaims, "you must be German." Lotte explains that she was born in Germany but is now Dutch. And so the twins are reunited after so many years. They begin to tell each other their life stories in daily instalments, while they drink coffee or have dinner after their peat baths and massages.

By means of the old pictures of a magic lantern, we are informed about the twins early life. Born around 1920, first they lose their mother, then when they are seven or eight their father dies of tuberculosis. His brother Heinrich, a farmer, takes in Anna, who looks strong enough to help on the farm. An aunt living in Amsterdam takes in Lotte but passes her on to her son and his wife, for the child has TB too. Lotte grows up in a Stalinist family, while Anna is initially taught by her uncle and the village priest to be very critical of the rising Nazi ideology. During the war Lottes family becomes heavily involved in the resistance movement and hides a number of Jewish friends, who make it through the war thanks to Lottes courage and hard work. Lottes Dutch father — for she calls her uncle and aunt father and mother — is a great admirer of classical music.Through him she meets and marries Ernst Goudiaan, a Jewish violin maker, a hard worker who dies of a heart attack when Lotte is in her sixties.

Anna is treated miserably as a teenager on her uncles farm, but finally she escapes and ends up in the massive mansion of a steel magnate. During the war this family moves to eastern Germany for safety reasons, and here Anna finds a husband. Martin is an Austrian SS officer serving in logistics, which is supposed to be quite a safe job. He survives Russia, Italy and D-Day, but at the very end of the war he is killed by a bullet from a low-flying English plane while sitting in his truck, having allowed his crew to pick a few apples.

As the two widows tell each other their story, it becomes clear that they have a completely different view of what happened during the Second World War. Time and time again they get annoyed with each other, and yet every day they spend most of their time together, bickering and reconciling. It is this feature in particular that makes the novel such a sensitive, deeply moving and fascinating story of conflicting allegiances. I will conclude by presenting a page from this no-holds-barred discussion that never ends (p.401).

Anna has just mentioned that her husband Martin was buried in Luxemburg. The lady who told her about the grave said: "What I dont understand is that the SS buried them and put crosses on the graves, but our priest refused to bless the grave since they were members of the SS. Is that Christian?"

Anna is not prepared for Lottes sharp answer: "At least you had a grave to visit." Lotte is clearly not moved to sympathy by Annas story.

Thinking deeply, Anna looks at her sister, asking: "What do you mean?"

"Well, in [the concentration camp at] Mauthausen there was no cemetery," Lotte explains.

Anna, suddenly feeling the pain in her legs again, remembers her visit to Auschwitz a few years before. She says: "I was in Auschwitz. There every day some 6000 people went to the gas chamber. I stood at the place where they had all gone and I remembered the beautiful summer of 1943. Martin had come home from the war on a short leave and we went

swimming in the lake, we found a hiding place on the island, we had a most enjoyable time, just the two of us - but I did not know that it was the last time. When I realized that at that time, when I was enjoying lifes happiness, so many people had gone this way to die, I could not stand it, it was so terrible..." She massages her sore knees. "But whether I was happy or not... was of no help to them..."

This is a truism [*een waarheid als een koe*]. Lotte remains silent.

"At first I did not believe it," Anna goes on. "During the 50s I saw for the first time the pictures on the TV. Do you know what I thought at that time? I thought that the Americans had gathered together all the corpses from the cities they had bombed and had piled them up in a concentration camp. I could not believe it had really happened."

"So, and when did you finally find out?" Lotte says snappishly.

"It began with a big exhibition entitled The Jews in Cologne since the Roman Empire. Then slowly the truth penetrated my brain. You have to understand, I was not interested in politics. I lived for my work, there was nothing else."

"Oh sure, wir haben es nicht gewusst, we didnt know, we had something else to do," Lotte scoffs.

And so it goes on.