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David Koker's Diary: A Year in Vught, 1943-1944

"Eleven months today. Hurrah, hurrah. One year next month. And still in Holland. With my entire family. I am well satisfied."[1] With these words the university student and poet David Koker began his diary entry of January 12, 1944.

The source of this sense of satisfaction may seem strange. What David was celebrating was his family's stay in Vught concentration camp, known to the Germans as KZ Herzogenbusch. Seen in the context of "het Grote Verdriet (the Great Sorrow)," the poignant term used by the journalist and broadcaster Meyer Sluyser to describe the Shoah,[2] David's remark makes excellent sense. Staying in Vught meant not being transported to the camp at Westerbork and then deported to Poland. Even those who did *not* know what was happening in Poland – David found out only in November, 1943 – did not want to go there. As long as you stayed in the Netherlands, you were more or less safe, or so it seemed. Germany and Poland were countries where only bad things seemed likely to happen to Jews. The concentration camp at Mauthausen, for example, was held in great fear after hundreds of Jewish young men from Amsterdam, Enschede and Arnhem were sent there in the course of 1941. None survived.[3]

Something else is strange about the diary entry: the fact that it, along with the rest of the diary found its way into print. The number of surviving and published concentration camp diaries is small indeed. Renata Laqueur, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, mentions thirteen;[4] my friend and colleague Robert Jan van Pelt, who has made a study of this subject, has said that there are a total of fifteen from all the camps in Europe.[5] Half a dozen of these were written by Netherlanders, the best-known among them Etty Hillesum (1914-43)[6] and Philip Mechanicus (1889-1944),[7] both of whom kept diaries in Westerbork. Keeping a diary was forbidden and very dangerous; getting it out of a camp was prohibitively difficult. In discussing David's diary, therefore, we are dealing with a rare document. Not only does it have historical significance, it also has great literary importance, for David was a very unusual young man.

Born in Amsterdam, David was the older son of Jesaia (Jacques) Koker, who held a management position in the diamond industry, and Judith Koker-Presser. His younger brother Max was born in 1927. David studied at the Vossiusgymnasium, where his intelligence and his promise as a poet caught the attention of his teachers, among them the eminent historian Jacques Presser, best known for his history of the destruction of Dutch Jewry during the Second World War.[8] He also became close friends with his classmate Karel van het Reve, who would become a prominent figure in the post-war Dutch literary world.

Upon graduating in the spring of 1939, David entered the University of Amsterdam. At first he studied sociology but soon he switched to history and philosophy. His poetic development also continued. In 1940-41 he collaborated with Jo Melkman in publishing a selection of modern Hebrew poetry, in the original and in translation.[9] He apparently also managed to get a few of his own poems privately published at this time.[10] Life was, of course, becoming steadily more difficult for Jews. In 1941 Jewish students were excluded from the universities. David then obtained a position with the Jewish Council in Amsterdam, doing cultural work. This gained him a coveted *sper*, an exemption from deportation, at least for the time being. Because of the importance that the occupying forces attached to the diamond trade, Jesaia Koker also had a *sper*, so that the future looked somewhat less bleak for the Koker family than for many other Dutch Jews, constantly subject to being called up

or rounded up for transport to Westerbork and, at the rate of a thousand weekly, deportation to Poland. Given this frightening prospect, it is small wonder that a growing number of Jews became *onderduikers*, seeking to remain in the Netherlands by going into hiding.

David had an opportunity to become an onderduiker; he also had forged papers. However, neither he nor the other members of his family went into hiding, perhaps putting excessive trust in the two exemptions they possessed.

In the evening of February 11, 1943, two Dutch police officers arrived at the Koker apartment on Biesboschstraat in the Rivierenbuurt, a middle-class area in Amsterdam-Zuid. The Kokers' first stop was the Hollandse Schouwburg, a theatre on Plantage Middenlaan which served as the collection point in Amsterdam. They were then taken by streetcar to Central Station and by train to the railway station in Vught. After arriving in the middle of the night they walked to the camp. "After walking slowly for two hours, reached camp," David wrote: "Glad it was dark. It must have been a sad procession. Limping people, crying children."[11]

David could have tried using his *sper* to remove himself from the transport, but he decided to stick with his family. And this turned out to be of key importance. What emerges from the diary David began on the day the Kokers arrived in Vught is that his father, a somewhat unworldly man, had a hard time dealing with camp life. David's mother was much better able to cope with the near-chaos that was Vught. Max Koker also seems to have adapted fairly quickly, but as a teenager he was in more immediate danger of being deported than his older brother or his parents. One general rule of concentration-camp life – in so far as there were rules – was that camps did not exist to feed useless mouths, so that teenagers and children, as well as old people, were on the bubble. Although it is not clear whether, from the outset, David saw himself as protector of his family, he came to assume that role in the early summer.

When the Kokers arrived there, the concentration camp at Vught had been in existence for just a month. It was conceived in 1942 as a double-purpose camp, a concentration camp for non-Jews, to replace the inadequate facility at Amersfoort, and a transit camp for Jews, different from the camp at Westerbork in that Jews would be staying at Vught somewhat longer. The important thing from the point of view of the occupying administration was that Jews should disappear from Dutch society as quickly as possible, even before they were deported to Poland. Westerbork had insufficient room to accommodate additional thousands, and the tempo of removal, as the historian Loe de Jong writes, could not be increased at will:

> A *Judenlager* in Vught had the advantage that for the time being one could gather many thousands of Jews there; if one could claim, moreover, that the camp would have the character of a genuine work camp, and that employable Jews would be allowed to remain there, then one could initially count on the cooperation of the Jewish Council, and one could also gain the objective that many Jews, once summoned, would make their way to Vught on their own; that saved effort.[12]

The promise that Jews would be able to stay in Vught was, of course, empty.

The first inmates were *Strafhäftlinge* from Amersfoort, a mostly non-Jewish group of starving and maltreated men who arrived on January 13, 1943, and were put to work completing the construction of the camp. The rations were minimal, the water supply was tainted so that dysentery was rife, there was no heat in the barracks, the toilets did not yet function, there was no provision as yet for the sick, no medical equipment, and no medicines. Small wonder that some two hundred of the prisoners died during the first six weeks.[13]

This was characteristic of two central aspects of the concentration camps: their chaotic organization, which itself was part and parcel of the mish-mash of conflicting centres of power that was Nazi Germany, and their contempt for human life where perceived enemies of the *Reich* were concerned. From an early stage David commented on the dismal condition of the prisoners, whether they were resistance fighters, political prisoners, common criminals, or *gijzelaars*, hostages. They lived *aan de overkant*, on the other side, as he called it, a section of the camp that was strictly separated from the part where Jewish inmates were housed. Conditions in the Jewish part were tolerable when the Kokers arrived but quickly deteriorated as the number of internees increased. The death rate was high, especially among the old and even more among young children.[14] A March 30, 1943, order by Hans Rauter, the *Höhere SS-und Polizeiführer* for the Netherlands, that Jews must leave all provinces except North and South Holland and Utrecht and go to Vught, led to an influx of thousands, so that by May 2, 1943, the camp held some 8,700 Jews.[15] This led to serious overcrowding. Furthermore, the rations became even more inadequate than before. The Kokers were fortunate in that they had friends in Amsterdam, chiefly David's school friends Karel van het Reve and Frederika Samson and their families, who sent them parcels with food in which, as a bonus, illicit letters were cunningly hidden.[16] When there was an interruption in the delivery of parcels for any reason, hunger was the immediate result. Food became an obsession to David and to many others.

Another even more compelling obsession focussed on deportation. Transports to Westerbork began on February 28, 1943, but before May 8 they were few in number and relatively small, only once exceeding 300. Most of those who left were old and sick people, as well as pregnant women and families with very young children. On May 8 and 9, however, approximately 2,500 people left in two transports, bringing the cumulative total to almost 4,000.[17] "This last week we've been living in one great abiding fear," David wrote on May 10. "In fact, almost in a certainty. I'm preparing myself for deportation.."[18] This state of high anxiety continued, for on May 23 another large transport, totalling 1,253 men, women, and children, left the camp. David's parents were almost part of that transport, but their names were removed at the last moment. David was greatly relieved, yet wrote: "Anyway, I think we'll all go soon. Am fully prepared for it."[19]

The very day that David wrote this, something happened that would ultimately postpone his deportation, and that of his parents and brother, for a year. He managed to get his name on the reserve list for the workshop that Philips Gloeilampenfabrieken, N.V., had established in the camp. This eventually led to his being put to work there. He was one of 496 Jews who worked for Philips in the camp; 382 survived the war as a direct result.[20]

The story of the Philips Commando in Vught is fascinating but can be described only briefly here. About the origins of the commando little is known. The initiative to establish a Philips factory workshop in the camp came from the German authorities; Philips responded positively to that initiative, provided a certain number of conditions were met that would serve to improve the lot of the prisoners who would be working for Philips. (The SS, which ran the camp, never fully met these conditions and ended by ignoring them completely.) By the end of February, 1943, Philips began to organize a workshop in the camp.[21] It was operative by June, 1943, producing radios, vacuum tubes, electric razors, and hand-cranked flashlights (some readers may remember the oddly-named *knijpkat*). Initially it used only non-Jewish prisoners, but soon it began to use Jewish inmates as well, in part to

offer them a measure of protection. This was a departure from the policy in which Philips sought to protect its existing Jewish employees but undertook no responsibility for Jews not already in its employ.[22]

David went to work for Philips on July 5, three days after yet another transport that threatened the integrity of the Koker family. This time it was Max who was in mortal danger. David and his mother, aided by David's friend Alfred Spitz, tried to pull strings all day long, waiting for hours first at one desk and then another, in a determined effort to get Max off the transport list. "I'm very close to crying," David wrote: "Max is very grim, has packed everything, but also wept up a storm. We can already see him going by himself: a small, determined boy on his way to Poland."[23] Late that day David got the news that Max had been taken off the list. "I congratulate everybody, go to the hut, throw myself on my bed and immediately fall asleep."[24] He later realized that Max had benefited from favouritism, but this did not trouble him: "No fiddles took place that day. And that people favored their friends is perhaps indefensible, but it certainly can't be challenged."[25]

After this, life became a bit more settled for the Kokers. There were only four transports of Jews between mid-July and mid-November, the largest consisting of 327 people. David's mother also went to work for Philips, and Max soon followed, while Jesaia found work in the camp administration.

There were important changes. In mid-July the Jewish internees had to surrender their civilian clothes and henceforth wore the black-and-white striped outfits that the prisoners had been wearing all along. And in mid-October, after the arrival of new camp commandant, all male Jews had their heads shaved, so that in this way, too, they came to resemble the KZ prisoners. David did not like the change in clothes, but he did find it reassuring that the Jews were now addressed as *Häftlinge*, prisoners,[26] apparently in the (vain) hope that this made deportation less likely.

By October 1, 1943, more than 11,000 Jews had been shipped to Westerbork. The number still in Vught was down to roughly 2,500.[27] As the odds of being on the next transport shortened, it was unsurprising that resentment towards the Philips Jews grew. On October 10, David wrote that the Jewish camp leadership, personified by Arthur Lehmann, was very annoyed with Philips and with the Jews who worked there. A number of young people who worked for Philips, and who had been selected for a transport scheduled for October 18, had been excluded after Philips had complained to the camp commandant that this would interfere with production. To Lehmann this seemed unwarranted and unfair.[28] The tension and distress became particularly marked during the week before the last major transport on November 15, 1943, which sent 1,152 men, women, and children directly to Auschwitz, leaving fewer than a thousand Jews in Vught. In order to protect the interests of the Philips commando, David was personally involved in the selection process, and he found this very hard.[29] He was fortunate in that he did not yet know what would be the fate of those who were leaving. But the way they were robbed of their meagre possessions before they left, and the reports of the conditions in which they travelled, were signs of worse to follow. "For several days, the feeling: our concentration-camp existence has become very much for real," David wrote: "We're standing at the edge. Often I think that thought from the early days: at a certain point death, too, can be thought of as possible. And thus it is possible."[30]

After the transport of November 15 and a further very small transport (19 people) on November 20, no more Jews left Vught until March 20. That transport of 317 male Jews included Jesaia, David, and Max Koker, but representations by Philips led to the return of 89 of them to Vught a week later.[31] Among them were the three Kokers. They would end up staying in the camp until June 3, 1944, when all the Jews employed by Philips were deported directly to Auschwitz.

According to Max, David continued adding to his diary until that day in June. The final entry known to us is dated February 8, however, the day the last surviving part of the diary was smuggled out. (Other parts had been smuggled out earlier and delivered to friends in Amsterdam.)[32] The later entries do not seem to have survived. What has survived, however, is 214 pages of commentary on camp life, the occasional poem, and David's reactions to the people he met in Vught. Occasionally the sharp contrast with life in Amsterdam, augmented by his memories of people he knew there, came to the fore. Prominent among those people was his girlfriend, Nettie David, who had gone into hiding and survived the war. While in Vught, David became infatuated with Hannelore Hess (she, too, survived). She did not reciprocate the intensity of his feelings, which caused David a good deal of mental anguish and soul-searching. He grew close to Spitz, also from Amsterdam and employed in the Philips Commando (he died in Dachau in April, 1945), and developed a great admiration for a co-worker at Philips, J.H. (Henk) van Wijk, who had been active in the Resistance and had a prominent post-war career as a lawyer, pacifist, and politician.[33]

David's diary is highly readable and, to an adult, considerably more interesting than Anne Frank's much better-known diary. The reader will find many shrewd insights and arresting turns of phrase, and a willingness to acknowledge that even bad people can have a good side. Several passages stand out. One is a deeply moving account of the infamous small transport of small children and at least one of their parents that took place on Sunday, June 6, 1943, and one for somewhat older children that happened the following day.[34] A second describes at some length the visit that Heinrich Himmler, the *Reichsführer-SS*, made to Vught on February 3, 1944.[35] Here is David's description of Himmler: "A slight, insignificant-looking little man, with a rather good-humoured face. High peaked cap, moustache, and small spectacles. I think: If you wanted to trace back all the misery and horror to just one person, it would have to be him."[36] The third and perhaps most shattering passage deals with David's realization that his naive optimism about Poland had been unfounded:

> The morning of my birthday: Spitz reads an excerpt from a letter from Poland. Three people (his fiancée and her parents) are living with Moves [Dutch Yiddish expression for "they are dead"]. And Moves's business is working overtime. And then a reference to letters from M.[authausen?]. I read it over and over. Seldom have I seen anything set out so clearly in writing, and yet I seemed to have forgotten it as soon as I had read it. Our optimistic messages from Poland are not incorrect. They have simply been incomplete. A (probably relatively small) group is working and doing reasonably well. And the rest: wiped out. The world has changed.
>
> Now we know where we're at. We: Spitz, Roland, van Wijk, de Wit, M., H., and I. The others don't know anything. Don't suspect anything either. And if they say anything in that vein it's simply a manner of speaking. In all conversations in which people make guesses [about Poland] we're bound to keep a straight and noncommittal face.
>
> But this too: the feeling I got after the transport: we're standing at the edge. In the middle of life. But we can't move a step, because before us is an absolute void. And this wouldn't be so important if another feeling hadn't settled in. I feel bigger and stronger with this knowledge.[37]

David had looked into the abyss and was determined to assert himself as far as possible.

In mid-June of 1943, David wrote that he often thought of a line of poetry by Rainer Maria Rilke: "Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles (Who speaks of victory? Survival is everything)."[38] Alas, David did not get through; he did not survive. After the Philips Jews were deported to Auschwitz, they enjoyed special status at first. However, in July the men were put to work doing heavy physical labour. One day, Max remembers, David courageously approached the *Arbeitsdienstleiter*, to point out that they were a special case and should not be assigned work of this kind.[39] Later that summer they were put to work for Hagenuck, a firm making electrical equipment, in a satellite camp of KZ Gross-Rosen called Langenbielau. Although Hagenuck supplemented the thoroughly inadequate rations with one nutritious meal a day, the twelve-hour workdays, the hunger, and the inadequate clothing given the intense cold of that winter, all took their toll. Jesaia Koker died on February 4, 1945, sick and exhausted. David became ill soon after and, with the Russians approaching from the east, was one of fifteen sick Philips Jews to be evacuated by train on February 22. When it arrived in Dachau six days later, David was among those who had frozen to death on the way.[40]

It was a sad end to the life of someone who, had he lived, would surely have made a major contribution to Dutch post-war cultural life. But he had helped to save the lives of his mother and his brother. And he left us his diary as an abiding monument to his humanity and his willingness to look for it in others. Jacques Presser writes:

> To one source in particular we draw attention; to the diary of David Koker, one of our former students, without doubt an extraordinarily sensitive man ... Some of its features are bound to stick in every reader's mind; we are aware of no other camp document that sounds so subdued; a superficial reading may suggest that Koker did not see the horrors surrounding him, with a more attentive reading one discovers them all right, even if they are indicated rather than described. Nor do we know a second source in which so much justice is done to the enemy, the camp guards, in which the humanity of these people, generally exhibited to us as monsters and all too often behaving that way, has been sought – and found.[41]

David Koker was indeed a very unusual young man. He was a gifted writer and a mensch. I'm honoured to have had the opportunity to translate his diary into English.[42]

NOTES

1. David Koker, *Dagboek geschreven in Vught* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij G.A. van Oorschot, 1993 [1977]), 216. Hereafter referred to as *Dagboek*. This and all other translations from Dutch are mine.

2. Meyer Sluyser, *Er groeit gras in de Weesperstraat* (Amsterdam: N.V. Het Parool, [1962]), 5.

3. L. de Jong, *Het koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de tweede wereldoorlog*, deel 4, *mei '40- maart '41* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 892-5; deel 5, *maart '41 - juli '42* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 550-3.

4. Renata Laqueur, *Schreiben im KZ: Tagebücher 1940-1945* (Bremen: Donat Verlag, 1992).

5. Communication from Robert Jan van Pelt, May 23, 2010.

6. Etty Hillesum, *Het verstoorde leven: Dagboek 1941-1943* (Haarlem: Den Haan 1981).

7. Philip Mechanicus, *In dépot: Dagboek uit Westerbork* (Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep, 1964).

8. J. Presser, *Ondergang: De vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse jodendom 1940-1945*, twee delen ('s-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, 1965). David's brother Max says that there was no family relationship between the historian and Judith Koker-Presser. Conversation with Max Koker, Santpoort Zuid, July 9, 2010.

9. D. Koker en J. Melkman, *Modern-Hebreeuwse poëzie* (Amsterdam: Joachimsthal's Boekhandel, 1941).

10. Information supplied by Robert Jan van Pelt.

11. *Dagboek*, 24.

12. De Jong, deel 6, *juli '42 - mei '43* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 330.

13. P.W. Klein en Justus van de Kamp, *Het Philips-Kommando in Kamp Vught* (Amsterdam en Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Contact, 2003), 18.

14. Presser, deel 2, 400-1.

15. De Jong, deel 6, 334.

16. In his introduction to the diary, Karel van het Reve describes the technique of concealing letters that Frederika's father, the engineer Frederik (Frits) Samson, developed and perfected: "Inleiding," *Dagboek*, 10.

17. Klein en Van de Kamp, 322.

18. *Dagboek*, 112.

19. Ibid., 120.

20. Klein en Van de Kamp, 63.

21. Ibid., 61-2.

22. Ibid., 75-8.

23. *Dagboek*, 138.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 139.

26. Ibid., 148.

27. Klein en Van de Kamp, 323.

28. *Dagboek*, 177.

29. Ibid., 193-4.

30. Ibid., 197.

31. Klein en Van de Kamp, 154-5.

32. Van het Reve, "Inleiding," *Dagboek*, 5.

33. A brief diary by Van Wijk, his "kroniek" as he called it, is located in the Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdokumentatie (NIOD), Amsterdam. Van het Reve quotes from it in two footnotes to the *Dagboek*. Klein en Van de Kamp quote a long passage, dealing with the *kindertransport* of June 6, 1943, to form a short chapter in their book, 255-7.

34. *Dagboek*, 127-30.

35. Ibid., 234-6.

36. Ibid., 234.

37. Ibid., 201-2.

38. Ibid., 126. The line concludes Rilke's poem "Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth" (1908).

39. Max Koker, "Nawoord," *Dagboek*, 244.

40. Van het Reve, ibid., 11; Max Koker, ibid., 245-6.

41. Presser, deel 2, 382.

42. Publication of the diary, which has the provisional title *Concentration Camp Diary: Vught 1943-1944*, is expected by Northwestern University Press late this year or early in 2011.