

EHRI Online Course in Holocaust Studies
Yad Vashem Archives, M31/32
Persecution and Deportation in Western Europe
– Rescue and Survival of Jews in Occupied Western Europe – A Reappraisal
Translation: E01 Extract from Joop Westerweel memories

I feel partly to blame for any recrimination given, at least if I do not testify as openly of my distaste.

Menachem Pinkhof

The commemoration of Joop, of his character and of his work, should be done in total modesty.

In a sense, the person of Joop is typical of the illegal aid that the Dutch people offered to the Jews. He is also characteristic of how people came to adopt a marked and widespread resistance to the anti-Semitic actions.

Joop's most distinctive characteristic was likely his outspoken opposition to imposition of any and all artificial restrictions and segregation barriers, be it at the individual or at the national level.

His credo was a deep belief in the natural goodness of human nature and, above all, in the soul of the child, a soul not yet corrupted by compromises.

As an educator, he was always eager to help foster the seeds of human affection and warmth. He never declined to commit himself to fighting against any and everyone who, in untruthful ways, sought to raise separations between man and man.

And not so much in the humanities and religious faith; his main fight was against nationalism.

In his pedagogical work, there was significant emphasis on his students providing relief to children in need, anywhere in the world. They organized actions for the child victims of the Spanish civil war and of the war against Finland, and for the Jewish children who fled across the German border in the late thirties as refugees from National Socialism.

He galvanized his pupils to undertake, on their own initiative, effective assistance to children from other lands.

Despite his cosmopolitan setting, his spiritual life was deeply rooted in the traditions of his people and in the culture of previous generations.

He was gifted with a strong, natural poetic talent – and in this way he captured the "messages" of the past, which corresponded to his own fierce pursuit.

When we had our first meeting with him and explained to him our plans to take all the residents of the youth Aliyah home in Loosdrecht into hiding at once, he had only one reaction:

"This is what I have been waiting for all this time. At school I have lately had the feeling that I could not continue. I felt that, as long as I could not actually do anything against all the maliciousness, I am no longer able to bring something to the children. "

Later, that same evening, another problem was addressed. It was of course necessary to acknowledge the reality that the plan could, while it was in progress, leak out in one way or another and thus the "children" (as we called the pupils) would be arrested.

It was necessary for them to have a plausible story to tell in case they were ever caught, so as also to save them if possible from extreme punishment. They were to say – every person for him- or herself – that they had not desired to go into hiding but that they had been forced to do so by their leaders Shushu and me.

But, we wondered, in this case would there be no risk of reprisals against, for example, my parents, who were still living in Amsterdam?

It was Joop, who then quoted from the New Testament: (Matthew 10-39):

"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

It was in this and other such ways that we began to realize that night that Joop had in one stroke put the whole "work" onto another level, that he had taken the lead, and that whereas until then it had been doubtful whether it was doable, it would now, in any event, be implemented – that now there was no going back. "The die was cast."

Joop was a man with a warm love for life and especially for his fellow people. He loved his family and wanted to live. And yet, from the moment he had embarked on the path of the underground work, he knew what awaited him.

It was his deep awareness of what the dangers were – including for himself and his family – it was partly this realization that gave him such a major influence, including on his non-Jewish co-collaborators, who had voluntarily taken the same path with him. He had chosen this path himself – yes, he wished to take it wholeheartedly.

In one of his last letters from prison, he wrote that he so much wanted to be free again, in order again to participate in the "work."

And in his final farewell to his friends outside prison there resounds the happiness which he had found in the illegal work: "and if we never see each other again, let the work that we were able to do together remain a holy support for you through your whole life. "

The symbol that Joop sometimes quoted, and that we came to understand through him, was that of the Cross, which is carried, by the man, who follows a path and who knows that this time it is no ordinary path but a route that he will follow to the end.

(Much to our regret, the poem "The Cross is on the Mountain," which Joop had written in prison in Rotterdam, has, to date, not been found.)

Another motive that we remember is the Psalm verse (Psalm 91).

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty," which he mentions in one of his letters from prison – and he continues..... "such a broad, truly Eastern word"

It was, of course, not the case that during this year and a half of illegal work we had much time to talk about general things, it was still a year and a half full of taking care of all possible technical details. But I remember, for example, one time how Joop, at the end of a conversation said (as a rhetorical question) "but you believe as well in the unity of all existence."

His deep affection for all that existed and in particular for people, was stronger, as he recognized in man the warm, sensitive, suffering man, the man who responded and came to meet him. Perhaps it is in his capacity for self-identification with his fellow man that we should seek one of the sources of his incredible vitality:

At one of our weekly meetings in late 1942, he said – not without pride – that in the preceding week he had slept no more than two hours a night on average.

It was around that time – a little later – that it came to seem to us that he was completely overloaded. The lessons at school lasted – as was usual in Holland – until around 4-5 in the afternoon. Afterwards, he would receive parents and teachers. It was only afterwards that he went home to his wife and small children. At home there usually awaited him many urgent "fire messages" concerning all the possible hiding places or other illegal matters, which were all very urgent: this and that one, who could no longer remain at his address and who urgently had to be transferred, or who suspected that the neighbors were beginning to become suspicious of something here and there, etc. etc.

Usually, after he had been at home for just a little while, he would set out on his way, and if he rested it was on the train and sometimes the rest of the night in a waiting room in one or the other station. The next day he would again be standing in front of the classroom, full of fresh energy.

It was around this time that we began to have the impression that it would be better, for various reasons, that Joop would give up his work at school; the situation was not tenable. The leadership of Joop was essential for us, and if maintaining the group that was in hiding was already costing this much, then if necessary we could also accommodate Joop's family. And it would not be difficult to officially find him another job. We decided to at least discuss this with him.

For this reason, I went to Rotterdam, and I remember that I arrived at half past five at Joop's school. He was in his office, receiving parents.

As he was showing someone out, he noticed me and asked me to wait.

I always had a wary feeling at such "legal" meetings with Joop. How, in God's name, was it possible that among all those many ordinary non-illegal people no one had noticed how he – Joop – was up to his ears in the illegal work. Joop, on the other hand, seemed completely unaware of this risk and considered the one just as the other as if it were the most natural thing in the world. So, he made me wait. Finally, it was my turn .. Without asking what I had come for – it could have been

something very urgent, after all – he excitedly started to show me the works of a certain class with whom he had visited factories near Rotterdam. And he became rather carried away with it and excitedly showed me still other notebooks, and, finally, when we alone remained in the room, he said: "the work at school is going so wonderfully now, I can now begin something with the children again. Before I had begun with 'the work,' I was at a dead end"

And so it was that I did not even touch upon the actual matter for which I had come.

Despite his aversion to nationalism, Joop was someone who was strongly rooted in the Dutch national tradition. A tradition, which is so strongly rooted in the event, which is at the origin of Dutch independence, namely, the revolt against the Spanish oppression and against the accompanying Catholic Inquisition, now more than three centuries ago.

One of the typical traits is how, since those days, people from some Protestant circles identified themselves with the children of Israel in the Old Testament, who were also oppressed – in Egypt – and who were also led by the hand of God to freedom and into His service.

This intimate sympathy with the Biblical history is something that lived on since then, and we see, in some letters from Joop, how strongly it also flourished in Joop's parents' home. The liberation war of the Dutch People (the 80 Years' War) was protracted and bitter, full of setbacks and defeats.

It was the spirit of the long years of struggle, which had in many respects marked Dutch intellectual life, which just then came to fruition.

It was during one of the first days of our illegal work, when it seemed that everything was beyond our power, that it was too dangerous and was doomed to failure – that Joop, on one of his visits to Loosdrecht, took from his pocket a slip of paper on which was a saying, written in his beautiful handwriting. It was a maxim of William of Orange: "Il ne faut pas espérer pour entreprendre, ni réussir pour persévérer" ["You do not need to hope to act, nor succeed in order to persevere"]. How appropriate was that saying to our situation then.

One of his most beloved figures was "Reynard the Fox," as he appears in the folktale from the late Middle Ages (before the establishment of the Dutch State). This fox is a sly rascal, who, through his mischievousness, knows how to extricate himself from every situation and who leaves his persecutors and oppressors (the nobility) looking ridiculous.

Joop had a special flexibility and was moreover very decisive – and partly from this he felt intuitively attracted to certain common people.

His account of his first trip across the Belgian border to Antwerp (in late '42) was costly. On the train he had keenly observed all the smugglers, how they behaved. With one of them, a certain Lelièvre (the hare) – a pub owner from Antwerp – he committed himself to special connections. However, this meeting would prove to be fatal for both of them.

The smuggler Lelièvre took it upon himself to bring two of our people to the Spanish border, and was apprehended in the South of France – and did not return. Joop afterwards used the identity of Lelièvre, and when he (Joop) was finally caught, this made things go from bad to worse for him, for it turned out that the real Lelièvre stood accused of murdering a German and of many other crimes.

Until 1942 the leading Chalutsiem in Holland had not yet taken a clear stance about going into hiding or about illegality in general.

The administration of the Hachsjava was in the hands of various committees within the framework of the Jewish Council. The active members of these committees were in general good Zionists, who considered the Chalutsiem to be a very positive element.

Afterward, when the transports [i.e., deportations] began, they did everything in their power for the benefit of the Chalutsiem to retain them as long as possible in Holland.

Within the Hechalutz, going into hiding was the subject of heated discussions. They themselves knew that there were smuggling routes to the neutral countries. But this was something that was possible for at most only very few, and even then only for wealthy people.

The forces of the madriechem remained primarily directed towards maintaining the spiritual resistance of the chaweriem, in the face of the trials that they were awaiting. They were opposed in general to individual attempts at escape – especially as they feared the demoralizing effect it could have on the remaining chewra (community).

It was in July 1942 – even before Joop had come to us – that we tried to organize our first illegal action, namely, the removal of chaweriem from deportation on a collective scale. Initially, however, it seemed to us that not much of this would succeed.

Yet when Joop first joined us, this changed. Joop, who brought with him his great organizational skills and likewise his absolute negotiating of every solution [presumably, “negatie” (“negation”) is a typo, and should be “negotie” or “negotiatie” = negotiation of, careful consideration of], which was in line with the possibilities presented within the framework of the Jewish Council. And the latter contributed not a little to the consolidation of our direction in this regard.

Henceforth the hiding was more than just an attempt at rescuing – it became a goal in itself, a means by which one’s own dignity could be fought for, a revolt against the oppressor.

Joop’s attitude found deep resonance with the Chalutsiem, and soon there emerged strong mutual ties – ties that endured to the end.

Joop initially showed a certain reserve towards Zionism, in which he saw the danger of a new nationalism. However, it was our pioneering spirit (Chalutsioeth), which finally overcame his doubt and even made him excited about the idea of building a new, just society. Joop’s last years were a continuation of his struggle in the preceding period. In the twenties and thirties he became ever increasingly opposed to the rise of fascism.

His illegal work was a logical continuation to this.

His keen sensitivity to the falsehood and hostility towards life, which were inherent to fascism, ensured that he was entirely focused on the ultimate confrontation.

And when it finally came, he went out to meet it with open eyes.

Oh, how I wish I found a true friend among the Jews, one who did not leave me mindful of my Aryan

niche...

Mirjam [Miriam] Pinhof

Joop was born in 1899 in Zutphen into a very pious family, a particular Protestant sect which accepted the consequence of the pious duties in their everyday life. This rigorously pious upbringing demanded that followers live according to the view that no difference should be made between theory and practice.

Despite this piety, the children still received a broad, general education. But sports and entertainment were restricted to Sundays: as other children went out or participated in competitions or other sports, the Westerweel children had to stay home and immerse themselves in studying the Bible or go to church.

The boy Joop accepted this puritanical upbringing to faith without compromise. Yet this being trapped with his family on Sundays and castaway from entertainment and sports also brought about rebellion.

Joop's special sensitivity against the immorality of coercion and denial of rights, his emergence in every struggle for equal rights to freedom of all people, these are rooted in his childhood, in his parents' home, they are the ones who preceded him in his heroic way that he pursued to the end.

In the years that preceded the First World War there were many socialist movements, and many were the people who adhered to one kind or another.

Joop, the boy, was also attracted to the sublime in socialism, and especially to the more moral-spiritual movements therein.

The main motifs in his socialism were the un-

translated by Jeremy Schreiber