

**“I will end up in a concentration camp, I feel it...”**



**January 24th 1908 - August 8th 1942**

On May 10th 1940 Johannes (Jo) Kapteyn was immediately confronted with the enormous impact of the Second World War. Since February 1939 Jo had been one of the two ministers of the Reformed Church in the town of IJmuiden. He lived with his wife and two children in a parsonage at the edge of the dunes. From May 10th IJmuiden experienced five hectic days of war. Being situated at the mouth of the North Sea Canal, which links Amsterdam with the North Sea, this seaport was of paramount strategic importance for the Germans.

In the early morning of May 10th German bombers threw magnetic mines hanging from parachutes into the canal and the harbour in order to prevent Dutch ships from leaving and escaping to England. Moreover German fighters carried out attacks on Dutch military positions. The Dutch anti-aircraft guns reacted immediately. There had been an army unit in the municipality of Velsen which manned the five coastal batteries north and south of IJmuiden since the mobilization in August 1939. Some German aircraft were shot down. French aircraft later appeared in order to defuse the magnetic mines.

#### **War and yet Pentecost?**

Under these severe circumstances Jo started the preparations for his sermon for Sunday May 12th, Pentecost, the commemoration of the coming of the Holy Spirit. But how could one now celebrate this with joy? Feast and war excluded each other, did not they? He submitted these challenging questions to the congregation that had come together that Sunday morning. The Bible text he preached from was Acts 2 verse 19 [God says in verse 18, “Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit (...).”], “I will show (...) signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and billows of smoke.” Based upon this, he showed that the coming of the Holy Spirit has not only glorious consequences but also dreadful ones: fire and smoke because of the unrelenting violence of war so that the earth becomes red with human blood. Till the end of the world

it will be so. But he also encouraged his audience and himself with God’s promise, “Along a path of wars shall come the perfect peace.”

In all the turmoil, the Kapteyn family forgot that their youngest son at the time, Kees, had his birthday on May 12th! Later that day Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhard boarded the British destroyer “H.M.S. Codrington” with their two young daughters, the Princesses Beatrix and Irene, in IJmuiden and escaped to England. Hundreds of Jewish people from Haarlem and Amsterdam also tried to flee to England with fishing boats, sometimes leaving cars and other possessions behind. Many, however, returned with nothing achieved.

In the afternoon of Tuesday, May 14th the Dutch military in IJmuiden received superior orders to break down all defences and put the anti-aircraft guns and other weapons out of action in view of the imminent capitulation. This caused so much noise because of explosions and gun (cannon) fire that the population almost began to panic; people thought that the Germans were bombing the locks. Between the piers of the harbour many ships were scuttled in order to block the harbour for the Germans. Many citizens fled into the dunes. Jo, also, spent the night with his wife and children in the dunes together with the Dutch soldiers. The street lights, which had been extinguished since May 10th, were turned on again in order to calm down the population.

The capitulation was officially signed on May 15th and from that day on the German occupation rapidly became more oppressive. On June 13th Jo wrote to his mother,

*“Here everything is all right. However, we are not entirely safe here because also after the war (i.e. since the capitulation) British planes have appeared over IJmuiden time and again [...], but the last week nothing has happened. Meanwhile, we are going through a time of grave tensions and in which there is unspeakable suffering.”*

### Love at first sight

Jo was only 32 years old at the time. He was born in 1908 in Giessendam where his father K. J. Kapteyn was the minister of the Reformed Church. In 1919 the family moved to Zwolle as his father started serving the church there. Early 1925 he suddenly died of a heart attack.

Jo completed his high school education at the Reformed Gymnasium in the town of Kampen (close to Zwolle) and started his theological studies there in 1926 at the Theological Seminary of "The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands". It had been his ambition to become a minister from a very young age. He was bright, quick-witted and had a great sense of humour. He was also very musical. During his studies he served as an organist in the "Plantage Church" in Zwolle and he composed music for some student songs.

In 1932 he graduated with a Master's degree in Theology. At the age of 24 he was asked to become a minister at the Reformed Church in Kralingsche Veer, a small village near Rotterdam. During the Depression of the thirties he developed into an enthusiastic, empathic and faithful pastor. His preaching was clear and penetrating, focused on the kingdom and the return of Jesus Christ.

His marriage with Thelma Versendaal was a very happy one. She was an American of Dutch origin, having emigrated to the United States in the twenties, with her father. In 1934 she made a holiday trip to the Netherlands and there, while staying in Kralingsche Veer with an old friend, she met the village pastor who was still single at the time. It was love at first sight. They married in 1935 and they got a daughter in 1936 and a son in 1937.



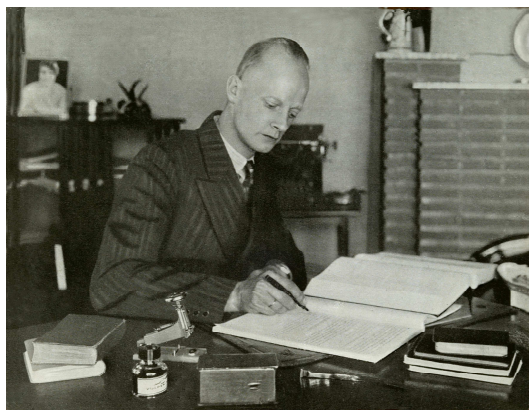
Thelma was a great help to her husband. Later, in 1942, when he was imprisoned in the House of Detention in the city of Groningen, he wrote to her,

*"You have always been my 'fellow worker in the Gospel' [...] Now my heart is overflowing with joy about you and longing for you."*

### Spiritual Resistance

In 1939 they went to IJmuiden. Here - probably during the winter of 1940-1941 - Jo was contacted by a resistance (underground) group headed by Han Stijkel. The organization assembled data about military installations, anchorages, airports and munition depots and secretly passed that information on to the Dutch government-in-exile in London. They also tried to approach mayors, chiefs of police, lawyers

and pastors. Their aim was to organize a core of "prominent (leading) patriots" in every municipality. As soon as the war would be over, these people would be able to take over the local government thus ensuring law and order. Jo was most presumably designed for the latter part.



Where others actually resisted National Socialism and the German occupation, Jo did this mainly "spiritually" from the pulpit and in his speeches at meetings. As a Biblical prophet he warned the believers against the anti-Christian assault by Nazism on church, school and society. And what he foresaw soon came true. For example in January 1941 the consistory of the Reformed Church in IJmuiden received a letter from the Police Commissionership in Velsen. By order of the Department of Justice in The Hague the consistory was demanded in this letter to "submit" to the Police Superintendent "a half-yearly plan of offertories accompanied by a declaration of to what end the collected money would be used". And on May 28th 1941 the editorial staff of the Church Bulletin of the church in IJmuiden was requested to report to the "Union of Dutch Journalists" in the Hague. On behalf of the editorial staff Jo rejected that request both on formal and on principle grounds.

Jo realized very well that his life was in danger. In the above mentioned letter of June 13th 1940 he wrote to his mother,

*"Maybe very, very far reaching changes are approaching in the lives of nations and in our own. These things and the thought about them can, at times of course, make us afraid, but yet I think, that it is very well this way. [...] For in this present world, with regard to our wellbeing, we were getting along so well, that as far as we narrow-sightedly could realize for ourselves, there was very little to be desired. Possibly all this now becomes totally different and fundamentally much better. I, at least, have actually only profited from the history of the last months and am still doing so daily. Why should we in fact look astonished at this course of history? The entire church history throughout the ages is full of suffering and oppression. Many generations have lived and battled in constant anxiety, why should not we also have our part in it? And now we can well yearn to be spared from it ourselves; but should we not first of all be glad that the Word of the Lord is being fulfilled to the last smallest letter and least stroke of a pen [...] Our Lord Jesus Christ has also said that, when these things begin to take place, we have to lift up our heads, knowing that our redemption is near."*

A half year later Jo said to his friend K.C. van Spronsen, "I do not believe that I will be spared, I will end up in a concentration camp, I feel it. But I have prayed to God to let me stay with my wife and children until the child we are expecting will have been born [...]."

That child, Arie, was born in February 1941. After Jo had passed away the name Arie, still during the war, was officially changed to Johannes (Jo).

### Unbroken in the House of Terror

In July 1941 Jo became a minister in the city of Groningen. There also during the church worship services and in other meetings. Jo took a clear stand against the German interference in church and school. He prayed publicly for the return of Queen Wilhelmina who had escaped to England. That was a thorn in the side of the German authorities. For they knew only too well that behind such prayers there resided an attitude of resistance against their domination of the entire life in the Netherlands. Time and again, by order of the SD (i.e. the German Security Service), members of the NSB (i.e. the Dutch National Socialistic Movement) were in the pews in order to find out whether Reformed ministers were inciting the church members against the Germans. They secretly passed that on to the SD in its headquarters, the "Scholtenhuis" at the Central Marketplace in Groningen, and already in November 1941 Jo was summoned to appear at that infamous "House of Terror". There he was told that he was carrying out a smear campaign against the Germans. It was forbidden to pray openly for the return of the royal house. They would keep a close eye on him.

During a prayer service and a lecture to the Reformed School Federation in February 1942 there were spies present again. Soon thereafter, on February 26th, three members of the SD arrested Jo at home. In the Scholtenhuis they subjected him to prolonged interrogation. He was allowed to pray for the wellbeing of the members of the royal house but not for the return of the Queen to the Netherlands. If he would promise he would not do that again they would let him go home unmolested. But according to one of the German interrogators Jo must have said literally, "Die Stimme Gottes sagt mir, 'Du hast mit deiner Gemeinde laut für die Rückkehr der Königin zu beten', also tue ich es auch!" (i.e. "The voice of God says to me, 'You have, together with your congregation, to pray aloud for the return of the Queen', and thus I do so!"). Then they imprisoned him in the House of Detention at the Hereweg. The following days he was interrogated for hours at the Scholtenhuis.

From short notes he made in his cell it shows that he often felt troubled, especially in the evenings. The fact that his wife was ill when he was arrested weighed extra heavily upon him. But he took comfort in the promises of God to his people, as in Isaiah 49 verse 24-26, "[...] Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children [...]."

A sympathetic guard smuggled letters from Jo to Thelma out of the prison. With the help of the same man Jo could arrange to visit her in the hospital - for, meanwhile, she had been admitted there - under surveillance by a German soldier. It was the last time they saw each other.

### "Móre we don't have, but that is also enough."

On April 10th 1942 Jo was transferred to Scheveningen and the following day to Camp Amersfoort. The regime there was known to be particularly severe. Especially Russian captives and Jews experienced that firsthand. Jo was registered as number 107 and assigned to Block 2B (i.e. Barracks 2B). Due to his height

and upright posture he immediately drew attention and also for that reason he was often the victim of the atrocities of his guards. For the slightest 'injustice' the prisoners were beaten and kicked immediately. A fellow prisoner, Dirk Willem Folmer, wrote in his diary, "There came Rev. Kapteyn. He was limping a bit. The man has a hard time, for he is [...] in an outer commando, but still he always remains brave and cheerful. A splendid character! 'How are you doing, Kapteyn?' I asked him. 'Excellent, man, only my ankle bothers me a little. They gave me a flick on it', he said. A man of integrity - this Kapteyn - always of an even temper, a sun for his environment! A very strong body that will break down suddenly, nevertheless, for he is losing too much weight. It is his spirit that at this moment is still in charge. What a loss for his congregation a man like him must be."

In that period a whole group of ministers were imprisoned in the camp, including J. Overduin, K. G. Idema, J. de Geus and M. Hinlopen. They were mutually supporting one another but also others. They encouraged one another and on Sundays they held a religious service in a small group, which had been forbidden by the Germans. Idema wrote about Jo, "Even in the camp he did not keep silent. Sometimes a small group assembled around him between the bunks and you could hear his loud voice emphatically [...] This was most likely detected and reported. Anyway, Kapteyn came in the punitive commando where he had a hard time lugging stones." He participated also in discussions about political and social subjects, for example about the question of how to fill in the freedom after the war (for which the resistance group Stijkel had asked his cooperation).

A very special friendship started flourishing in Amersfoort between Jo and Titus Brandsma, a Roman Catholic priest of the Order of the Carmelites. They held intensive conversations and prayed together. Jo regarded Titus, who was twenty-seven years his senior, as a sort of father figure. On Tuesday, April 28th both of them, together with a number of other prisoners, were transported to the Orange Hotel, the prison in Scheveningen. Titus was placed in cell 623. Where Jo was placed is unknown. The only remaining official document from that prison in which the name of Jo appears states, "Für Gruppe IV D aus Amersfoort zurücküberstellt, für Transport nach Deutschland vorgesehen.", translated, "For the group IV D from Amersfoort transferred back, destined for transport to Germany." Neither do we know at which day he has been transported from Scheveningen to the prison in Cleves (Germany). Presumably it was on May 16th the day that Titus was transferred there together with others. According to the almoner in Cleves the two friends (Jo and Titus) came to live in the same small cell. They conversed with one another about God and faith in spite of the fact that each of them had his own religious conviction. On May 27th Jo wrote in a letter to Thelma,

*"My dear wife, I am so glad that I am finally able to let you hear from me. [His last letter to her from Amersfoort was from more than a month previously]. Circumstances have caused that I haven't been able to send you an earlier message. [...] As you see, I am now in Cleves in Germany. Let me add immediately that I am doing very well. Physically and spiritually I am fine. Believe me. If it wasn't like this I would be silent about it. Yet time and again I am consumed with longing for you and the children, but my faith remains firm and unshakable in that God, our Father in heaven, also determines the duration of my imprisonment. Let us hold on to that together. Móre we don't have, but that is also enough."*

What he repeatedly told himself was the Gospel of his salvation by Jesus Christ, as he wrote on the first page of his Bible in Cleves on June 3rd,

*“My only comfort in life and death is:*

*That I am not my own,  
but belong with body and soul,  
both in life and death,  
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.  
He has fully paid for all my sins  
with his precious blood,  
and has set me free  
from all the power of the devil.  
He also preserves me in such a way  
that without the will of my heavenly Father  
not a hair can fall from my head;  
indeed, all things must work together  
for my salvation.  
Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me  
of eternal life  
and makes me heartily willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.*

*Amen.”*

#### **Put to death but not overcome**

On Saturday June 13th 1942 Jo and some thirty others were put on transport to Dachau. Jo's right wrist was chained to Titus's left for their last, one-way train journey in the "Zellenwagen" (i.e. the "cell car", a special railway car consisting of prison cells at the end of a long train). They were in a cell which was just large enough for both of them, but into which another three clergymen were squeezed later. After a number of nights in Frankfurt and Neurenberg they arrived in Dachau on the evening of Friday June 19th. Jo received number 30493, Titus was numbered 30492. They were marked as political prisoners by a red triangle on their camp clothing. During their first weeks in the camp they were placed in the "Zugängerblock" (the barracks for the newly arrived prisoners), Block 17, in order to be drilled in the rigid rules of the camp. After that they ended up in Block 28, room 3, at the time one of the most-feared barracks. Here Jo saw a colleague and friend from his years in Kralingsche Veer, Herman Knoop, again. The latter wrote after the war, "When I first met Jo in Dachau, I was shocked by his appearance. He looked terribly emaciated. [...] When he was imprisoned, his Thelma, to whom his whole heart belonged, was seriously ill. And he longed for a message that had been sent to him, but that had been withheld from him by the camp authorities. [He only received the empty envelope!] [...]. The uncertainty vexed him, of course. [...] On top of that grave agony came his physical suffering."

Jo was set to work in the "Plantage" just outside the camp, where extremely heavy ground-work had to be done. The prisoners were bullied extremely hard for every "offense". Jo had deep wounds on his hands and feet which grew worse due to the grave maltreatments. Four times a day he had to make the journey to the Plantage and, while walking, he was forced to sing (!). The obligatory song "Der Mensch lebt nur einmal, und dann nicht mehr" (i.e. "Man lives only once and then not anymore") the clergymen stealthily changed into, "Der Mensch lebt nur einmal, und dann noch mehr" (i.e. "Man only lives once and then even more"). Jo did not complain, he believed and carried his cross.

The deep conversations with Herman Knoop in the last week of July gave him strength to hold on till the end. Even then Jo did not live for himself but for others: he still shared his extremely tiny bread ration with his friend. He followed the example of his Lord Jesus Christ. Jo swayed on his feet, totally exhausted. Twice he tried to be admitted to the infirmary. To no avail. Eventually, on August 5th he was admitted with "intestinal catarrh", an inflammation of the bowels. His condition worsened and, when on August 8th "cardiac and circulatory weakness" emerged, he died in the evening around 11:00 p.m.. His emaciated body was thrown with other corpses in order to be burned in an oven in the crematorium.

According to the song cited above, Jo didn't live anymore: they killed his body and burned it up. They thought they had won, but how wrong they were. For they did not see that when Johannes Kapteyn died in "the hell of Dachau", angels came who carried him into the heavenly paradise to live with his Lord forever.

Written by Kees Kapteyn (1937) and Jo Kapteyn (1941) in loving memory of their father.

#### **Main sources:**

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Dachau, March 22nd 2013

Kees Kapteyn

Jo Kapteyn