

4188 Buchenwald

37988 Dachau

5496 Natzweiler

99707 Dachau



Jacobus de Vries

10.12.1879 — 3.1.1945

The Netherlands: 6th of May, 2018

Ruth Wellema, the granddaughter of Jacobus (Jac) de Vries, sits in her home in the small village of Ezinge. Ruth was born eleven years after her grandfather was taken from his home and forced into the concentration camp system by the Nazis. Though she never knew him, she recounts how from a young age, her family came together once a year on the fourth of May, the Dutch National Remembrance Day in which victims of World War II are commemorated when the entire country simultaneously partakes in two minutes of silence. Ruth remembers how even for her as a little girl, oblivious to the fate of her grandfather, an overwhelming feeling of pain and sadness could be felt in the room.



Jac on the far right practicing sword-fighting at school.



Jac on the top right, with his mother and father, six of his siblings and two half brothers.

Five days war

While retired, Jac became a reserve major for the Voluntary Landstorm Corps, an auxiliary unit of the Dutch Army. This meant that he had to participate occasionally in training to be ready in case of a war. In 1939, after both their daughters had married, Jac and Mini moved to Heiloo. Although the Netherlands were neutral, the threat of war was increasing and the country mobilized on August 20th, 1939. Jac then returned to active service, was promoted to lieutenant colonel, and became the territorial commander of troops in Overijssel and Gelderland, eastern provinces of the Netherlands. On May 10th, 1940, without declaring war, the Nazis invaded. The Dutch army took up arms to fight, but when the city of Rotterdam was bombed the Dutch army capitulated. Jac was taken as prisoner of war along with his troops until the capitulation was official, then he was allowed to return to Heiloo. During the fighting, Jac sustained a head injury but was treated by a doctor while being held. After taking power, the Nazis wanted to ameliorate the Dutch people because they considered them to be "Aryan" and set forth measures to popularize the National Socialist government, which included releasing all the Dutch prisoners of war by June 1940.



Family portrait of Jac, Hans, Mini, and Katy.



Jac and Hans sitting together on the beach for a small picnic.

Military Career and Family

Jac was born to Reinier and Johanna de Vries in Meppel, the Netherlands on December 10th, 1879. He was the oldest of nine children and was raised as a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. Strict in both his beliefs and mannerisms, Jac enrolled in the army when he was 18 and was assigned to serve in the Royal Netherlands Indies Army - the KNIL. The KNIL was charged with colonizing the Dutch East Indies, modern-day Indonesia, in hopes of controlling its wealth of spices. After years of fighting, conquering and suppressing the indigenous groups, the Dutch East Indies were considered pacified in 1904. After his training, Jac signed to serve six years in the Dutch East Indies and set sail from Rotterdam to Batavia (now Jakarta) on July 28th, 1900 at 20 years old. Jac would be there to witness the transition from a turbulent time of war and resistance to a pacified state. As a Dutch soldier, he would become part of a privileged upper class. Moving to the Dutch East Indies was a brand new start for Jac, he left his family and possessions behind in the Netherlands and took out a loan to start his new life in the capital city of Batavia. His career advanced steadily. He moved back and forth between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies, training continuously as he rose through the ranks from sergeant to second lieutenant to first lieutenant. In March of 1914 Jac joined the topographical department of the KNIL. On March 20th, 1917, he married Wilhelmina Emilia (Mini) Kruijtbosch. The two had first briefly met in 1903 at an officer's ball in the Netherlands but lost contact thereafter. They met again in the Dutch East Indies, where Mini had moved with her first husband. After their divorce, she was living on her own with her young daughter and was working two jobs as a teacher. Jac and Mini started writing each other letters, and after she joined The Dutch Reformed Church, they married and Jac adopted her 10-year-old daughter Katy. A year later in 1918, their daughter Johanna was born, who was affectionately called Hans. Being the guarded person that he was, Jac was a very strict father and husband. He continued to be extremely disciplined in both his religion and career and was promoted to captain in April 1919. He was honored with a medal for serving 20 years in the KNIL in 1921. After 23 of years' service in the KNIL, Jac retired in April 1923. The family moved back to the Netherlands permanently and settled in The Hague.



Jac sits with Mini and Hans in their living room in The Hague looking at photos.



Jac with soldiers under his command in the Dutch East Indies.

Ordedienst

Just after the end of the 5 days war, members of the Dutch army formed several small resistance groups. These men were still loyal to the Netherlands and to the Dutch crown. They wanted to find ways to resist the German Nazi power now that they were unable to actively engage in direct combat. They gathered military intelligence, carried out sabotage (which in the early days mainly consisted of cutting German telephone wires) and tried to collect weapons, ammunition and explosives. Many of these groups joined together in August 1940 to form a secret resistance organization called Ordedienst, OD. Originally, the OD was intent on preparing for the end of what they anticipated would be a fleeting Nazi occupation. They planned to assume power and restore law and order immediately after the Nazis were defeated so that a legal government could be installed. Jac was one of the first members of the OD and was given the command of the region north of Amsterdam, the same region where he was living with Mini in Heiloo. At this point in time the operations of the OD were not yet highly developed. Intelligence on the identities of the resistance fighters, including Jac, was compromised. Two officers from the SD, the intelligence agency of the SS, searched Jac and Mini's home in Heiloo on April 8th, 1941. Jac was not at home at the time so they ordered Mini to have him report to the SD office the next day. When Jac did go to the office, he was arrested for his suspected involvement with the OD and was taken to the Scheveningen prison on the coast of the Netherlands, the first of the many prisons and camps in which he was doomed to spend the last years of his life.

Scheveningen Prison and Amersfoort

The Scheveningen prison was used by the Nazis to hold Dutch resistance fighters during or while awaiting trial in the Nazi courts of justice, if they got a trial at all. Scheveningen was more popularly known as the "Oranjehotel", oranje meaning orange, the official color of the Dutch royal family, which represented the prisoners' loyalty to the Dutch crown. Prisoners of the Oranjehotel would either be released, sent to a concentration camp, or sentenced to death. The prisoners were kept in small cells and slept on wooden beds. Exposed pipes running along the walls of the cells served as a system of communication for some of the prisoners. In this primitive system, one knock stood for A, two for B, three for C etc. One of the Scheveningen prisoners, Bart van der Pot, remembers how when Jac arrived, he taught the other prisoners morse code. This way, communication through the pipes became much more efficient and effective. After spending nearly a year in Scheveningen, in March of 1942, Jac and other OD members were sent to a police transit camp called Amersfoort. Here they spent two months awaiting the results of their trials. The conditions in the Amersfoort camp were very bad at this time, the prisoners were treated very cruelly and suffered greatly from hunger. Mini and the families of the other OD members were desperately trying to find ways to help them. Writing to each other about the outcomes of the trials, Mini and other wives tried to get the men re-trials or some kind of mercy but it was all in vain. In what later became known as the "first OD trial" 72 out of 86 men were sentenced to death. Jac was in a group of 52 prisoners who, separate to the 86 men, were put on separate trials or sent to a concentration camp without any trial at all.

Buchenwald

On a cold April day, Jac and 15 other prisoners were loaded into two truck beds, they each received a slice of bread to eat for the duration of the ride. They were supposed to be transported from Amersfoort to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Germany over the course of two days, stopping in between at another camp to sleep. But instead, the SS officers in charge of their transport decided to skip the stop and drove through the night, so that they would have the next day off. Already malnourished and sick from his time in Amersfoort, Jac contracted bronchitis as they drove for hours through the night without any protection from wind and weather. After the arrival in Buchenwald, the 16 men were sent to a barrack where other Dutch prisoners were housed. As they walked through the door, the others from Amersfoort stepped aside to let Jac through first. It was a sign of respect for his age (62) and his high military ranking. The other prisoners were taken aback. They made it very clear to the new arrivals that in Buchenwald people didn't pay attention to status like they had in the outside world. The only thing that mattered was a person's position and status within the camp. After this point, life would be very different for Jac. The prisoners were assigned work, and it was determined that Jac was too old to do heavy forced labor. Instead, he was assigned to the potato peeling commando. Jac would have to sit inside a basement all day to do this job, but that meant he was protected from the harsh weather and had access to extra food. Later, he was assigned to the "Strumpfstopfkommando" stitching clothes. He was given these positions not just because of his age but also because he remained very weak. His body weight was at a mere 46 kg (100 lbs). In fact, for a large amount of the time that he was in Buchenwald, Jac was kept in the camp infirmary due to multiple medical problems. He was admitted for bronchitis just two days after his arrival from Amersfoort and would spend a total of two months there before recovering. He sent several letters to his family in code trying to let them know what was happening to him. They responded with packages of food and money, doing whatever they could to support him. After almost seven months in Buchenwald, Jac was sent to another camp: Dachau.

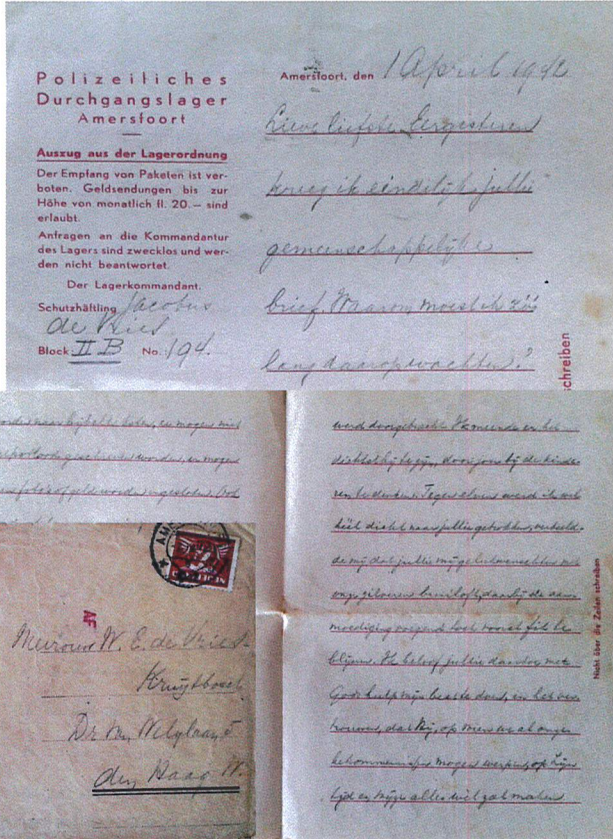


Above: The house and street where the family lived in The Hague.

Left: Jac and his first grandchild, Hein, who was born in July of 1940 just a year before Jac was arrested, sitting together by the Christmas tree.

4.1.1942 a letter from Jac telling Mini about how he celebrated their 20th wedding anniversary in Amersfoort. The other prisoners congratulated him and surprised him with a gift of food that they had collected. He spent the whole day thinking about her and the family, and felt that it brought him closer to them. He

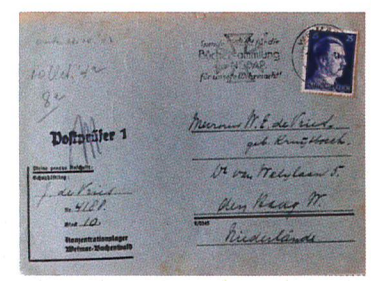
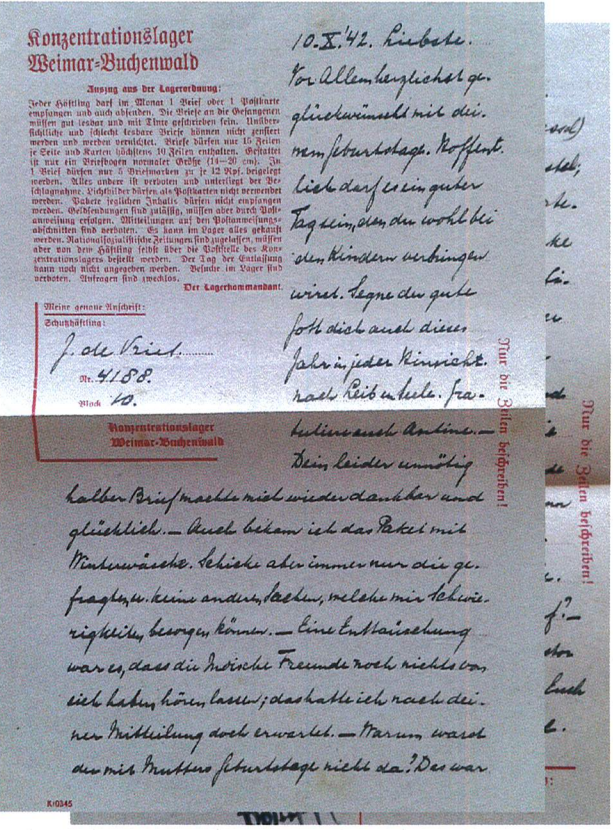
thanks Hans for putting the anniversary announcement in the paper and says that she deserves „extra kisses“.



Dachau

Jac arrived in Dachau on October 30th, 1942. There, he continued to struggle with his health. He was sent to the infirmary in May 1943 and stayed for five months until October. Gerard Bouman, a minister, was also in the infirmary at this time and remembers how Jac would come to his bedside every day to talk about the homeland, the Dutch military and the political situation there. After being released from the infirmary, Jac continued to visit Bouman and others at the priest block, looking for spiritual support. Other prisoners were not supposed to visit the priests' barracks, which were sectioned off by barbed wire. Occasionally prisoners were let in but never without the risk of punishment. Jac's family continued to send packages and letters including a bible from Mini that would give him solace. However, Mini never knew if he received them. The last letter the family ever received from Jac was from October 10th, 1942 when he was still in Buchenwald. This was because Jac had been labeled a "Nacht und Nebel" (Night and Fog) prisoner. These prisoners were not allowed to have any contact with their families, who could not know where they had been taken, or even if they were still alive or not. This extra harsh punishment for prisoners who had been active in the resistance was designed as a warning to people back home not to do the same. To Mini, it was as if Jac had fallen off the face of the Earth. Mini tried to contact the Nazi officials in the Netherlands about her husband's whereabouts but was turned down in a letter telling her they had no further information. However, the family did receive two indirect messages from Jac. The first came from a minister who had been released from Dachau. He told the family that Jac was doing well and that the treatment in the camp was reasonable. The second was a letter from July 1943, from another prisoner who was able to write to his wife because he was not a Night and Fog prisoner. The message included a few lines written by Jac sending his love and that he was happy to hear that he has three new grandchildren. The money transfers Mini made to Jac were still accepted, which was a small sign that he was still alive. However, in October, 1943 these transfers were refused. From then on there were no further indications that he was even alive.

10.10.1942 Jac tries to get a coded message to his family about his bad health. He writes about a sick family member „Dokus“ which is the name he uses as code for himself in several messages. He asks for help from Mini and their extended family. A money transfer from Mini of 20 Reichsmark, the largest amount prisoners are allowed to receive, followed shortly after.



Natzweiler

On October 23rd, 1943, after a year in Dachau, Jac was taken to Natzweiler-Struthof, a concentration camp in the French Alsace. The SS sent Night and Fog prisoners to Natzweiler in order to completely isolate them. No one around them was able to contact home, so there was no hope of getting a message out at all. The prisoners had a large NN painted in red on the back of their uniforms. Natzweiler was infamous for the grueling work that prisoners had to carry out in the quarry. Jac was still so weak that he was exempt from this work. This was called "Schonung" (rest) and it would save his life. Jac was assigned first to the Strumpfstopfkommando stitching clothes, then worked in the weaving mill, and finally in administration. In small acts of passive resistance Jac, among others, would spend long amounts of time staring into space instead of doing the administrative work in order to slow down the process. There was a time when prisoners were allowed to read newspapers, and Jac would always follow the military developments and comment on them to the other prisoners. Jac's time in Natzweiler came to an abrupt end when the camp was evacuated due to the allied front advancing from Normandy. Some prisoners report that the fighting was so close, they could hear it and were convinced that liberation was upon them. However, instead of being liberated, Jac was loaded onto a train going to Dachau that was so full that people could not move their arms from their sides. The prisoners of this transport spent three days like this, with no water. In the night, the train was passing through the town of Karlsruhe when an air attack took place and bombs started to fall. The SS men ran for cover, leaving the prisoners in the locked up train cars. Not one car was hit by a bomb that night and the SS returned to carry on with the journey.

Dachau

Jac's transport from Natzweiler arrived to the already overcrowded Dachau concentration camp on September 6th, 1944. Many had not survived the transport. The surviving prisoners were taken into quarantine for several days in order to recover from the terrible ordeal. The conditions in Dachau were already much worse than they were when Jac first arrived in 1942. In November of 1944, a Typhus epidemic broke out. The elderly along with the sick were sent to the invalid blocks closed off from the rest of the camp. When Jac was sent to invalid block 30, he was not sick himself but was now trapped with people who had typhus and eventually contracted it too. In Block 30, the conditions were terrible. Many of the beds did not have mattresses, and there was no one taking care of the sick and dead. The prisoners would have to walk outside in the cold to the shower room in only a shirt and underwear because there were not enough clothes in the overcrowded camp. Only very few who were in Block 30 survived until liberation. Bouman, the same minister who Jac had met his first time in Dachau, was able to visit block 30 because of his job as a mattress repairman. Noticing that Jac was undernourished, he with the help of some others, tried to bring him what food could be spared. For Jac's birthday in December, they gifted him with a small package of food. As his health deteriorated, Jac had to wear bandages around his head because of sores, which were common among the undernourished in the camp. On January 1st, Jac was transferred from the invalid block to the infirmary in block 15. Rothkrans, a Dutch priest who Jac knew well, was working there. He remembers Jac coming to the infirmary in the evening, skeletal and shivering with a high fever. There was very little medication available and Jac died a few days later on January 3rd, 1945 after nearly four years of imprisonment. Almost four months later, on April 29th, 1945 Dachau was liberated.



Above: The family graves in Amsterdam. Jac's name is included, although they will never know where his true final resting place is.

Left: Mini sits in her home next to a photo of Jac. After his death, she always hung a small flag alongside his portrait.

Post war

When the Second World War ended in Europe in May of 1945, Mini still did not know what had become of her husband. His last known whereabouts were in Natzweiler. Mini found a list of liberated prisoners from Natzweiler, and hoped that Jac was among them. She wrote to several survivors whom she knew had a connection to Jac, trying to get some information on his whereabouts. She received a letter on June 4th, 1945 from a fellow prisoner, priest Francois Guillaume, who told her of Jac's death. He explained that Jac was already weakened in Natzweiler and that the severely limited food supply in Dachau had only weakened him more. Mini tore the letter apart and put the announcement of Jac's death in the newspapers the next day. On June 21st, Mini received a letter from Bouman recounting what he could remember. He wrote that he could always recognize Jac through the window of barrack 30 because of the way he held himself, tall and unbroken. On June 6th, Mini received a letter from Van Dongelen, a catholic priest. He told her how Jac was still a very reserved person even in the concentration camp, which was at times a very heavy burden for him. However, he writes that Jac took strength from his religion and firmly believed that the suffering he endured brought him closer to Christ. Mini also tracked down one of the few survivors of block 30, Martin Zandwijk. He wrote to her that Jac treasured the Bible she sent him and that he had asked Zandwijk to keep it for him. He did so as long as he could, but it was taken from him by the SS shortly before liberation. It is still unknown what happened to it. Mini persistently continued to search for more information about what exactly had happened to Jac. She found out that the crematoriums in Dachau had run out of coal in the winter and had stopped working. This gave her hope that Jac had not been cremated but instead buried somewhere. When she received news that he had died when the crematorium was still in operation, she tore that letter up too. Mini and her daughter Hans collected hundreds of documents and letters about Jac and carefully saved them all. In 1965, they travelled together to visit Dachau for the 20th anniversary of the liberation. Mini continued to believe strongly in God as Jac had, until she passed away on December 16th, 1970. Today, Jac's grandchildren all hold parts of Mini's careful documentation of Jac's life and death.



Jac, third from left with other soldiers in the Netherlands.

Authors note

My name is Maja Lynn. I am 19 years old and come from Philadelphia Pennsylvania, where some of Jac's family members live today. I had the pleasure of writing this Remembrance Page as part of my year of voluntary service with the Remembrance Book project and the Evangelical Church of Reconciliation at the Dachau Memorial Site through the organisation Action Reconciliation Service for Peace. I would like to thank a former volunteer, Sandra Usselman, for her help with translations. I would also especially like to thank Jos Sinnema, the project leader in the Netherlands, who helped me so much with my research and during my trip to Holland. And of course, Sabine Gerhardus, the Remembrance Book director.



Main Sources:

Private collections of Ruth, Marjan and Hettie Wellema: letters and documents Jac and Mini de Vries

ITS Bad Arolsen, 1.1.5.1.; 1.1.5.3.; 1.1.6.1.; 1.1.6.2.; 1.1.6.7.; documents Jac de Vries Nationaal Archief, the Netherlands: 2.1304, 642 and 414, documents Jac de Vries Private collection Paul Ritter: Bart's boek, 1972, handwritten memoirs of Bart van der Pot, typed over by Paul Ritter

Interviews with Ruth and Marjan Wellema, May 2018

Photos:

Private collections of Ruth, Marjan and Hettie Wellema, except for the picture of the gravestones of Jac and Mini: online-begraafplaatsen.nl

March 2019

Maja

Ruth Wellema (granddaughter)