

# Loss, Perseverance, and Triumph: The Story of Gerd and the von Halle Family

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Duke University 2011

## **Introduction**

In kindergarten, I decided to write my last name as “Vonhalle” because it was “easier”. My father quickly corrected, “But that is not our last name.” The complex aggregation of the lower case V, the space, the upper case H, the Chicago-ized, German-American pronunciation (von Hall-EE) made it extremely difficult for friends, classmates, and coaches to ever fully grasp. People called me everything from the phonetic von Hail to van Halen, names I became accustomed to answering to. Between youth athletics, school, and hearing my mother effortlessly deliver, “V as in Victor-O-N-SPACE-Capital H-A-L-L-E” to delivery restaurants, my last name, von Halle, became a part of my identity. In truth, it was not until my grandfather slipped me a little piece of knowledge that I then developed a years long obsession with my last name and my family history. When I was 10 or 11 years old, my grandfather told me the reason why the V in “von” was lower case. In Germany, my grandfather explained, von signified a type of nobility. That little tidbit, I remember, stopped me in my tracks. Was I the long lost heir to a million dollar royal fortune? Was I a Duke, Prince, or maybe even a King? I continued to interrogate my grandfather, unfortunately confirming that I was not the German version of Anastasia Romanov.

Despite self-interested beginnings, the now irrelevant piece of information actually triggered my interest in uncovering, learning, and documenting my family’s nearly 300-year long story. My childhood obsession with finding my long lost fortune was replaced by a much deeper appreciation of both my last name and my family history. Before I was a teenager, I was reasonably aware that my grandfather was a Holocaust Survivor. Understanding what it meant to be a Holocaust Survivor,

however, did not fully hit me until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade English, students are required to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. My school was also aware that my grandfather was a Holocaust Survivor. A visit from my grandfather overlapped with our reading of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. My school, Francis W. Parker, asked my grandfather to share his remarkable story with my classmates. While I knew bits and pieces of his story, his visit provoked a new sense of awareness and appreciation of both my own life and my family's history. The auditorium was crowded; all 60 students, my family, numerous parents, teachers, and administrators came to listen to my grandfather speak. He described his modest German beginnings, how he shared the same neighborhood as Anne Frank in Amsterdam, and how he continually escaped Nazi persecution. As he recounted his story, the visceral reaction of the audience shocked me. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators were crying--something I never did when I had previously listened to my grandfather's story.

It was the first time that I formally heard his story, and subsequently the first time I knew I had to know more. Little by little, my grandfather mailed me newspaper clippings, photocopies of letters (mostly in German), and pictures. Soon, I had a manila folder full of documents, pictures, and a random assortment of newspaper clippings. During my Bar Mitzvah, my grandfather gave a speech I will always remember as cementing my self-appointed role as family historian. My grandfather, using the imagery of a tree, explained that Hitler nearly sheared off all the branches of the von Halle tree. After World War II, my grandfather was the last remaining male von Halle of the family. The birth of my father and my uncle were

the new buds on a nearly extinct von Halle tree. My grandfather explained that it was I, his first-born grandson, who breathed new life into the von Halle tree: the tree successfully weathered the Nazi storm and blossomed in America. Throughout high school and college, I catalogued, translated, and tried to locate all possible remnants of my grandfather and my family's life in Europe. The manila folders started to multiply, turning into binders, books, photos, and electronic scans. As I continue to lug the documents from home to Duke to the library and to the offices of professors and back, my drive to document my family's story only grew stronger as time went on and memories faded.

While my grandfather's testimony is undoubtedly the most important element in documenting my family history, the survival of both the cache of documents donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the family tree compiled by my great-great-grandmother, Sophie von Halle, make my family's story extremely rich in primary sources. The intended goal of this project, powered by both oral history and material archives, is to fully document my grandfather's story and family history. This project is broken into three distinct parts. The first will look at the von Halle family starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to my family's relocation in Amsterdam before the onset of World War II. The second chapter will look at my grandfather's life in Amsterdam, his experience during German occupation, and most importantly how the Dutch Underground facilitated his survival. Lastly, I will document my family's desire to immigrate to the United States. With the Eleanor Roosevelt-Summer Welles letters, I will be able to look at how the State Department dealt with the horrors of the Holocaust and my family's

desperation to escape from Europe. All three elements comprise a story that deserves to be documented, to its fullest extent, as a testament to sacrifice, perseverance, and triumph.

### **The von Halle Family to 1933**

When I was younger, I found it extremely frustrating that my Jewish (and non-Jewish) friends would declare their hatred for all things German. Believing there was nothing more oxymoronic than a German Jew, I had friends who refused to believe my German heritage. Whether they declared I was actually Israeli or I belonged to some commonly held Euro-Jewish heritage, I always held my ground—I am German. Some asked, “did your parents convert?” or even better, “are you *actually* Jewish?” While at times I felt attacked by the large Jewish population of my school, their confusion was somewhat understandable. On paper, my name looks anything but Jewish. My last name, in fact, is not Jewish—it is German. While I am *actually* Jewish, my paternal heritage (and last name) is *actually* German. We have been German Jews for nearly 300 years.

The von Halle family tree was compiled nearly 80 years ago by my great-great grandmother Sophie von Halle. The 57-page collection contains daguerreotypes, photographs, postcards, and letters from as early as the 1830s. In what my grandfather calls “meticulous German fashion”, the well-organized book managed to remain intact through a World War, an Atlantic Ocean crossing, New York City apartments, and multiple New Jersey homes. When I got my hands on the family tree, it was in an old, tattered manila folder. I was not even aware of its

existence until high school. The cover's bright, colorful pattern binds the vestiges of a formerly prosperous German family [Visual Materials cover]. The pictures capture my family members proudly showing off their furs and military regalia, all with a fairly aristocratic celebration of self. Even during the economic turmoil in Germany after World War I, my great grandfather and grandmother are captured happily taking a stroll while on vacation in Switzerland.

The original family historian, Sophie, best exemplified the pre-World War II von Halle lifestyle. Even in 1930, the 69 year-old Sophie von Halle (born Löwenhaupt) was captured in her fur, nice dress, coifed hair, and jewelry. [VM 27] The family tree was compiled in 1933, the same year Hitler was appointed chancellor. In 1933, Sophie was 72 years old and one of the last von Halles to flee Germany. Meticulously documenting our history, Sophie rightly forecasted a darker period for our family and our country. Despite her old age and the increasing anxiety over Hitler, the creation of the family tree suggests a woman trying to preserve a legacy that otherwise would be forgotten.

## **The origins of the von Halle Family**

The first von Halle, Abraham von Halle, is referred to as a “leader and chief” on his intricately inscribed tombstone. [VM 4] Abraham, the son of Jacob Levin, is originally from Halle, Germany. While I am unable to establish a birthday, the family tree explains that Abraham arrived in Altona, a suburb of Hamburg, around 1680. Altona was a hub of Jewish life in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, containing a healthy population of both Portuguese Sephardic Jews and German Ashkenazi Jews. The restrictions on the number of Jewish people allowed to live in Hamburg encouraged many Jews to settle in Hamburg’s surrounding suburbs. Sophie’s initial research found that it was common for Jews to pay the king for protection and permanent residence. According to her research, on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1733, the two elder Jews, Abraham von Halle and Abraham Rothschild wrote to King Christian VI of Denmark and Norway about the amount of protection money, or *schutzgelder*, they needed to pay to the Crown. According to Meyer’s *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, “protected Jews enjoyed certain legal privilege.”<sup>1</sup> This legal privilege enabled them to exercise more political and legal control over their community.

Despite being located in what today is German territory, Altona was formerly under the jurisdiction of the crown of Denmark and Norway.<sup>2</sup> According to Meyer, in 1641, Christian VI “issued a general charter of rights allowing the Jews to develop regular communal life in the town.”<sup>3</sup> Although Christian VI was more lenient

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Meyer and Michael Brenner, *German-Jewish History in Modern Times: Emancipation and Acculturation: 1780-1871* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Altona, throughout its 400-year history, was transferred between the Danish, the French (during the Napoleonic wars in the 1800s), and the Germans.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, 84.

towards Jews, his benevolence came at a price. Since it is rare for a Jew to have a title of German nobility, it was uncertain whether the “von” was an actual indication of German nobility. Sophie confirmed its authenticity by locating a letter by Christian VI. In the letter, the King uses the title “von” when he referred to Abraham. King Christian VI quoted the protection payments as 1200 Dukaten, or gold coins.

Abraham was one of the richest people in Altona. According to Werner Sombart's *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (and verified by Sophie's initial research), Abraham's wealth was valued in 1725 at 150,000 Thaler, a currency used throughout Germany for nearly 400 years.<sup>4</sup> Sophie's research, found in the Hamburg State Archives, explained that Abraham was an important political figure in Altona. He eventually became the chairman of the Altonaer Community. Abraham was also one of the highest taxed people of Altona, paying 1,561 Thaler. Sophie writes that Abraham was appointed to help oversee the stock market and help regulate the behavior and “morals” of the traders. This suggests Abraham must have been a respected and trusted leader. In 1719, Abraham and another elder Jew, Zacharias Daniels, bought property so the Altona community could establish its own synagogue in Hamburg. Max Grunwald's *Hamburgs Deutsche Juden bis zur Auflösung der Dreigemeinden*, also verifies this claim, explaining that Abraham helped petition the municipal council to establish the synagogue.<sup>5</sup> The synagogue was never completed, but it was eventually turned into the Prayer Room of the Altona Community in the Old Town. Abraham and his wife Breine had 9 children, all of

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<sup>4</sup> Werner Sombart, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*. (New York: Harvard University Press, 1913),187.

<sup>5</sup> Max Grunwald, *Hamburgs Deutsche Juden Bis Zur Auflösung Der Dreigemeinden 1811*. (Hamburg: Alfred Janssen, 1904), 203.



whom married. Abraham died on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1736. Breine died on February 11<sup>th</sup> 1743.

The Altona cemetery, one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Germany, contains nearly 9,000 Jewish graves dating back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The cemetery is known for its tombstones, some of which are etched in Portuguese--a testament to the Sephardic origins of Altona. It was nearly destroyed by the Nazis when they expropriated the land from the Altona municipal government. Fearing the total annihilation of the cemetery, in 1942, Hans W. Hertz began to photograph all the tombstones. Hertz, although not Jewish, sought to preserve Altona's history by documenting all the Altona Cemetery tombstones.<sup>6</sup> While searching for the pictures, I also uncovered photographs from 1912. The 1912 photographs are located in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, but they give no indication as to why they photographed 5,000 of the 9,000 graves. [VM 4-5]The Salomen Ludwig Steinheim Institute of German-Jewish Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen digitized nearly all of the Altona Cemetery tombstones. The Institute also compiled all images of the various tombstones, with translations in both Hebrew and German. Below are the translations of both

Abraham and his wife Breine (from Hebrew to German to English):

Here is buried/  
The chairman and director, the honored master, Mr. Yitzhak/  
Abraham, son of the Master, Lord Avraham Yaakov, the memory of the righteous a  
blessing,/  
From Halle, distinct and buried/

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<sup>6</sup> Struan Robertson, "Buildings Integral to the Former Life And/or Persecution of Jews in Hamburg," A History of Jews in Hamburg, accessed January 20, 2011, <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/rz3a035//koenig1.html>.

Day 3, 18 Shevat 496 of small count/  
His soul is bound in the bundle of life.

Here is recovered,  
An aged woman,  
A capable wife, the chaste woman/  
Sara Breine, daughter of the honored /  
Samuel Elb, wife of the chief and leader/  
Of the Supreme Master, Mr. Abraham Halle/  
Business 11 Day 4, Adar/  
And Buried day 6, 12 same 503 of the small count/  
Your soul is bound in the bundle of life.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from the epitaphs that Abraham was an important figure in the Altona community, having received the titles of chief, leader, and even supreme master. My family continued to live in Altona for another three generations. My great-great-great grandfather, Moses von Halle was the first to to be born in Hamburg. Moses, my thrice great grandfather, the first to live in Hamburg, and my grandfather, the last to live in Hamburg, bookend the century the von Halle's would live in Hamburg.

### **Other Descendants**

Other descendants of the von Halle family are mentioned in numerous German historical texts. Abraham's son, Wolf (Wulff) von Halle, was also a prominent figure in the Altona community. [VM 8] Wolf served as chairmen of the Altona community. He married Merle (born Wiener), the daughter of the President of the Jewish Hamburg council, Elias Levy Wiener. Merle von Halle also was the niece of the noted female memoirist Glückl of Hameln. Glückl was a mother of 12 and one of the first German-Jewish female writers. She wrote about her ability to

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<sup>7</sup> Steinheim-Institut, "Hamburg-Altona, Königstraße," Hauptseite - Salomon Ludwig Steinheim-Institut Für Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte an Der Universität Duisburg-Essen, August 1, 2009, accessed September 12, 2010, <http://www.steinheim-institut.de/>.

profitably run her deceased husband's business and raise her family in *The Memoir of Glückl of Hameln*.

According to the Hamburg State Archives, Wolf was involved in the infamous Amulet controversy. The amulet controversy was the Three Communities' (comprised of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbeck) biggest scandal. The scandal involved Rabbi Jonathon Eybenschutz, a Cabbalist and Talmudist. Eybenschutz allegedly issued inscribed amulets to residents in the community. His main opponent, Jacob Emden, believed Eybenschutz was a follower of the Sebbatian movement: the followers of Sabbatai Zevi, a self-proclaimed Jewish messiah who was forcibly converted to Islam by an Ottoman king.<sup>8</sup> Wolf came to the defense of Eybenschutz, and undersigned letters to both the Hamburg Senate and the King of Denmark. The committee eventually excommunicated Emden from the Three Communities.

Other notable descendents include one of Abraham's daughters, Bella, who married the treasurer of the Altona community. Abraham's granddaughter, Hanna Kleve (born von Halle), died with more than 40,000 Thaler and established the now defunct Kleve-Halle foundation. Christian convert Emanuel Anton von Halle, born Emanuel Aron von Halle, was a business partner of Salomon Heine, uncle to Heinrich Heine and the Heine banking family. Emanuel married into the wealthy Popert and Hesse banking families. Joel von Halle, Emanuel's brother, also converted to Christianity. Joel von Halle is the most well known von Halle in

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<sup>8</sup> Moses Samet and David Fachler, "Eybeschütz, Yonatan," YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, 2010, accessed September 5, 2011, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Eybeschutz\\_Yonatan](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Eybeschutz_Yonatan).

Germany. Joel von Halle became a wealthy banker, also working with the wealthy Heine, Popert, and Hesse families. At the time of his death in 1868, his wife Friederike inherited, in present US dollars, nearly \$25 Million.<sup>9</sup> If she received that money today, it would be valued at nearly a quarter of a billion dollars. Friederike established the JA von Halle Non-Denominational Rent Subsidy Foundation, which still exists today. The foundation provides support for the elderly, the unemployed, and people with long-term illnesses. Conversion to Christianity would become more common throughout the late 1800s and up to the 1930s.

### **The von Halle family, 1870-1930s**

In 1912, the German government published a book about the von Halle family. The anonymous author researched the legitimacy of my family's choice to use the "von" title. The author documents the marriages of Abraham's children and grandchildren into other well-known German Jewish families like the Oppenheimers, Heines, and Poperts. Coinciding with a fresh wave of anti-Semitism, the author sought to prove that the "von" did not indicate nobility. However, along with the author's research, there are pages and pages detailing which von Halle family members married into other notable German Jewish families. While the author was determined to remove the "von" from our last name, the author implied that the title, or lack there of, was superfluous considering the prosperity of the von Halle family.

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<sup>9</sup> Irmgard Stein, "125 Jahre J.A Von Hallesche Miete-Unterstützungs Stiftung," *Hamburgische Geschichts-Und Heimatblätter* 12, no. 3 (October 1993): 50.

Sophie did an incredible job piecing together the records, graves, and documents to create a fairly complete genealogical record through the mid 1930s. While her research is integral to the actual documentation of our family history, the pictures and postcards she preserved give an extraordinarily rare view into the lives of my family members. The invention of photography added a visual component to my family history, allowing inferences based on clothing, location of the photograph, and even the expressions on the faces of those being pictured. One of the first photographs in the family tree is of Sophie and Siegmund's home, a beautiful apartment building in Hamburg. The photo of their home was taken from afar in 1901, and captures a couple on the porch and a man sticking his head out the window.

Most of the photographs range from approximately the 1860s to the 1930s. Since Sophie married into the von Halle family, she saved many photographs of the Löwenhaupt family. The Löwenhaupt family was also quite prosperous. Some of the photographs come from as far away as Liverpool and Chicago. Whether it is a von Halle, Löwenhaupt, or another distant relative, everyone is dressed, coiffed, and styled elaborately. The oldest looking photograph, possibly a daguerreotype, is of Nachmann Steinman and his wife. [VM 3] It looks like they are from the American Wild West; the wife has on an elaborate head wrap, a huge dress, earrings and necklace. Nachmann is dressed in a traditional tuxedo. The wife (whose name is illegible in the family tree) is nearly covered head to toe. While I am no longer religious, my more orthodox ancestors explain the excess of clothing. As the years progress, however, the clothes get less restrictive and more "fashionable".

This progression asks questions about my family's relationship with Judaism. None of the photographs capture anyone or anything stereotypically "Jewish-looking". Even today, many friends or classmates use the phrase "Jewish-looking". Looking at my family, especially my parents and grandparents, only my grandfather really *looks* Jewish, something he even admits. Most of the photographs, on the other hand, look similar to photographs of non-Jewish Germans around the same time period. It is hard to determine whether my family members, to their contemporaries, looked Jewish, or whether "Jewish" physical characteristics are adjusted according to the times. The photographs also lack any religious symbols or signs. Religious ornaments are quite common among Christian people, but there is neither a yarmulke nor a shawl in any of the photographs. Considering the tenuous history between Germany and Jews, these pictures suggest either a desire to look "German" or an effort by Jews to obscure their faith out of fear of anti-Semitism. It seems as though when my family became more prosperous, religiosity was replaced by banking and business. The combination between typically Jewish first names and our German surname seemed to be a proxy for my family's Jewish faith. The assortment of Jewish and German first names is quite interesting. For instance, Abraham had 9 children: Samuel, Lewin, Wolf, Elias, Hirsch (or Hartwig), Simon, Bella, Reichel, and Feibelman. Most of their first names do not indicate their Jewish faith, but rather their German heritage. Very few family members were given historically Jewish first names.

The oldest photographed von Halle was Moses von Halle and his wife Elise von Halle, born Aron. [VM14-15] Moses, the last to carry a traditionally Jewish first

name, was born in Hamburg on December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1829. While he was the first of my direct ancestors to be born in Hamburg, Elise's family was also from Altona. Moses and Elise named their children Philipp, Amalie, Siegmund, Sophie, Herline, John, Flora and Julius. The birth of their children in the 1850s and 1860s overlapped with the beginning of German Unification and the rise of Otto von Bismarck. With increasing military strength, Moses and Elise may have predicted an increasingly powerful German nation and wanted to be perceived as more German than Jewish.

While not much is known about the life of Moses and Elise, the pictures of them are quite telling about the life they lived. The picture of Moses, taken around 1865, may be the most modest of all the pictures. Dressed in a tuxedo with a thin bow tie, the photograph captures Moses looking away from the camera. Faded around the edges, it is difficult to tell if that was intentional or the product of improper care. Moses, like most of his relatives, was a merchant. The photograph of Elise, on the other hand, is more elaborate. Her long hair is braided and formed into an elaborate bun. She is seated in a leather chair, wearing a huge dress detailed with frills and lots of fabric. She has on a long, thin necklace, and a choker with an ornament attached to it. All signs point to the fact that this family cared about their appearance and went to great lengths to take so many photographs throughout their lives.

The best evidence to help illuminate the life of the von Halle family during Moses' generation is anecdotal. By this time, the von Halle family grew fairly large. The seemingly high marriage rate and large number of offspring helped the von Halle family multiply from a mere ten to nearly 100 people. David Halle, a distant

relative and fellow amateur genealogist, recently was able to locate and reconnect with my family. David found my grandfather about 15 years ago. David Halle is related to Moses' uncle, David Philipp von Halle, the twin brother of Moses' father Philipp Phillip von Halle. David's family came to America before the Civil War. David explains that his family dropped the "von" to better assimilate into American society. Arriving in Memphis, the newly christened Halle family arrived with plenty of capital and soon started opening businesses throughout Tennessee. One of the businesses, Halle Brothers, became a successful department store chain throughout the Midwest, based in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup> It should also be noted that David Halle is not Jewish, nor were his parents or grandparents. The financial success and longevity of the American and Christian von Halles starkly contrasts with the fate of the German Jewish von Halles.

### **My Great Great Grandfather through my Grandfather (1855-1933)**

The next three von Halle generations experienced both success and despair. One of Moses' sons, Siegmund (and wife of Sophie), was born in 1855. An 1875 photograph captures a stern looking Siegmund in an intricate military uniform and cap. [VM 16] Numerous family members served in the German/Prussian military. One family member is captured in full military regalia, holding a sword and a wearing decorative sash.

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<sup>10</sup> Halle Berry, a Cleveland native, was named after the department store. *The Drew Carey Show* was also filmed in the Halle Brothers building.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Zimmerman, "Cleveland's Halle Building," *Cleveland Architecture Examiner*, February 6, 2010, accessed January 12, 2011, <http://www.examiner.com/architecture-in-cleveland/cleveland-s-halle-building>.



Sophie and Siegmund had five children: Gertrud, Alice, Oscar, Manfred, and Carl Sylvester, who died as an infant. From the photographs, it is clear that Sophie and her family were well off. All the pictures of Sophie and her family display extravagance. [VM 18-19] They are always wearing fancy dresses and jewelry; even the little kids are formally dressed. One of the most unique photographs was taken in 1899 of Sophie, Siegmund, and their four children. It is one of the few candid photographs in the entire book. Captured on the side of a brick building, the entire family seems visibly happy. The smiles and goofy-like nature of the figures contrasts with the nice clothes the family is wearing. [VM 18] The daughters have on elaborate dresses, Siegmund and Oscar are in tuxedos, and even young Manfred has his own suit and leather boots. Sophie was always exquisitely dressed. A photograph of a young Alice, Gertrud, and Oscar shows the three kids in matching white outfits, leather boots, and sashes. The girls, no older than eight or nine, were already wearing jewelry.

Both Oscar (my great grandfather) and Manfred served in the German Military during World War I. Oscar and his platoon are photographed in full uniform with their rifles. [VM 21-23] Manfred is also captured in his military regalia, but he is in a hospital or infirmary. From the photograph, it looks like Manfred injured his arm, possibly losing it. [VM 22] The patriotism shown by German Jews in World War I, in contrast to Nazi oppression and anti-Semitism, highlights the rapidity with which Jews could no longer identify as both German and Jewish. My grandfather explained that he thought of himself as German first and Jewish second. The Nazis, however, would revoke the "German first" option. World War I proved to be an

economic catastrophe for Germany. Having lost the war, Germany was forced to pay billions in reparations. Additionally, the Treaty of Versailles sought to ensure Germany would never again pose a threat to Western powers. The German economy tanked and inflation skyrocketed.

Oscar, after serving in World War I, became an architect. Interestingly, Sophie writes Oscar's middle name as Nachmann (probably as a tribute to the aforementioned distant relative), yet on nearly all other documents he listed his middle name as Louis. I find no explanation for why he changed his middle name. Despite the economic turmoil, Oscar was a successful architect. Oscar designed numerous buildings in Hamburg and throughout Germany. Specializing in the construction of department stores and commercial buildings, some of his buildings still stand today.

Oscar married Henriette Cohen in the late 1910s. Henriette was born in Berlin in 1896. During World War I, Henriette served as a nurse on the Front. Coming from a religious family, her parents disapproved of her involvement in the war, believing it to be "not lady like." [VM 21] They had two children, Hans Jürgen and my grandfather, Gerd Seigmund. Hans Jürgen was born in 1921 and my grandfather a year later in 1922. Oscar, Henriette, and their children lived in the upper-middle class neighborhood of Eppendorf in Hamburg. While most of my grandfather's memories are from Amsterdam, he remembers his time in Germany in a generally positive light. The high inflation that occurred in the Weimar Republic after World War I made things difficult for most German families. Gerd remembers buying a bottle of milk for one million Deutsche Mark. Despite the depression,

Gerd's family was able to stay afloat. Oscar became a popular architect, working long hours. [VM 23] Henriette, after giving birth, was a stay at home mom during Gerd's time in Germany.

While Oscar rarely had a big smile on his face, Gerd describes his father as "sweet and nice." [VM 26-27] Like most of Gerd's friends' fathers, Oscar was strict and required total obedience. Because of Oscar's popularity as an architect, he spent a lot of time away from home. Henriette took on the bulk of the child rearing responsibilities. Henriette was a loving, caring mother, according to Gerd, who was over-protective. In what some might describe as a "Jewish Mother Syndrome", Henriette incessantly worried about her kids, whether they were riding a bike or going down the stairs. Because of Oscar's success, their family was able to vacation when many families struggled to make ends meet. Oscar and Henriette often took solo vacations to Switzerland, a place they thoroughly enjoyed. One photograph shows Oscar and Henriette strolling hand in hand on one of their Swiss vacations. Oscar, dressed in a suit and wearing a huge smile, walked with a cane. Oscar was not the healthiest individual. Always fashionable, Henriette wore a knee length dress, jewelry, and even a fur coat. [VM 25] From the pictures, it is very hard to infer any sort of economic crisis. After each trip, Henriette would deposit the left over Swiss Francs into a Swiss bank account to avoid exchange rate fees. The small sum collected after their vacations in Switzerland was the only money left after the war.

Close in age, Gerd looked up to his older brother. According to Gerd, Hans Jürgen was his hero. Gerd jokes that his brother was the complete opposite of him; Hans Jürgen was tall, handsome, and popular with the ladies. [VM 27] Hans Jürgen

always had numerous girlfriends, and was a skilled athlete. Unusual for Europe at the time, Gerd's older brother played baseball, something Gerd always admired. Hans Jürgen was also a gifted swimmer. Hans Jürgen steered Gerd through much of his childhood, serving as both a protector and guide. Gerd trusted his brother, and always listened to his advice. Little did Gerd know, his brother's acumen would be one of the main reasons he survived the holocaust.

Gerd and Hans attended a public elementary school, and in 1931, they went to an international junior high school in St. Moritz, Switzerland. It was not long after their year abroad that Hitler came to power. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1933, Hitler was sworn in as the Chancellor of Germany. One of Gerd's first experiences with Nazism was being trained how to properly give the Nazi Salute, the Sieg Heil. Gerd and his fellow classmates were marched around the gym and instructed how to salute in the proper technique. He also remembers his family being required, either by choice or by fear, to hang the Nazi flag and German flag on any public holiday. Hitler's fierce anti-Semitism, conjoined with his oratory and rhetorical skills, was not kept secret. Unable to fully operate under Nazi codes, Oscar realized the situation in Germany could potentially turn dangerous. In 1933, Oscar started to look for other options.

My grandfather is often asked why they did not try to immigrate to the United States at that point. Unfortunately, in 1933, the United States was at the height of the depression. Immigration was difficult and employment opportunities, especially for a foreign-born, German-speaking architect, were bleak. Oscar decided Amsterdam was the best option for his family: Oscar's sister, Alice, lived in Amsterdam. In December of 1933, Oscar, Henriette, Hans Jürgen, and Gerd moved

there. That same year, the Franks, another German Jewish Family, also moved to Amsterdam. Anne Frank and her family moved into the same neighborhood as my family. In fact, pictures show a young Anne playing in the same childhood park where my grandfather and his brother played. [VM 29] The similarities and differences highlight two different strategies used to avoid the Nazis.

In less than a year after seizing power, Hitler was able to uproot almost all of the von Halles from their homeland. Sophie, now the oldest von Halle and the original family historian, was one of the last von Halles to remain in Germany. While her son fled to Amsterdam, Sophie remained in Germany for another three years, collecting and documenting our rich family history. Without Sophie's work, most of the records would have disappeared. Sophie remained in Germany until 1936 when she fled, with the family tree, to Amsterdam to live with her daughter. Sophie died in 1939.

My German Jewish family, forced out of a city they helped build, gave up their former life, possessions, and even profession to avoid the Nazis' deadly grasp. Not only did the Nazis hate Jews, they specifically hated German Jews. The German Jews that found refuge in other European nations would be some of the first Jews rounded up after German occupation. The Nazis' systematic, thoroughly constructed plan to erase the Jews from Europe nearly succeeded. The Dutch, the civilians of an accepting, liberal nation, showed more support for the Jews than nearly any other nation during World War II. Many Dutchmen gave their lives to help save the Jews; they created an underground network that facilitated the food and safe houses required for my grandfather and other Jews in Holland to survive the Holocaust. If

my family had decided to stay in Germany, the outcome would have been dramatically different.

### **Amsterdam, Holland: 1933-1941**

After moving to Amsterdam in 1933, Oscar and his family settled into Merwedeplein, a predominantly German Jewish neighborhood located in the southern part of the city. Gerd describes his experience in Amsterdam as the most “idyllic time” in his life. With beautiful canals and architecture, Amsterdam was an ideal backdrop to grow up in. However, there were profound differences between Gerd’s life in Hamburg and his life in Amsterdam. With Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, the Nazis enacted a string of anti-Semitic policies designed to limit Jewish business activity and their role in public service. Gerd explains that during his time in Amsterdam, his father was unable (and not allowed) to work as an architect. According to Mallgrave’s *Modern Architectural Theory: a Historical Survey, 1673-1968*, most German architects were technically employees of the state.<sup>12</sup> In April 1933, prior to the family’s emigration from Germany, Hitler enacted the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. This law effectively severed ties with all “non-Aryan” employees and severely limited their ability to work for the Government. The inability to work siphoned off a chunk of the income needed to stay afloat. Instead, Henriette rented out a bedroom in their apartment to help

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<sup>12</sup> Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: a Historical Survey, 1673-1968* (Cambridge [UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 306-307.

supplement the family income. Despite reduced earnings, the von Halles were happy to be safe, for the time being, from the grasp of Nazi Germany.

Gerd and his family began assimilating into Dutch society. Because Hans Jürgen and Gerd were relatively young, they learned Dutch quickly. Within a year or so they spoke fluent Dutch, almost without a German accent. Gerd and his brother attended public school, repeating a grade due to divergent educational standards between Holland and Germany. Because Gerd was 11 years old when he left Germany, most of his childhood memories are from living in Amsterdam. Within a couple years, Gerd viewed himself as a typical Dutch boy.

Gerd's neighborhood was also home to Anne, Margot, Otto, and Edith Frank. There are numerous parallels between the Franks and my family. The Franks lived in Frankfurt and emigrated from Germany the same year as the von Halles in 1933. Both Anne and my grandfather share similar sentiments about growing up in the "cozy" city of Amsterdam. However, in 1938, the increasing militarization of Nazi Germany prompted both my family and the Franks to apply for Visas to immigrate to the United States.<sup>13</sup> Oscar reached out to his brother-in-law Dr. Felix Charles (née Cohn, changed when he immigrated to the United States). Dr. Felix Charles married Marjorie Charles (née Shuler), a prominent women's rights activist and editor at the Christian Science Monitor. Marjorie Shuler Charles was a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Leonard, "America Closed Its Doors to Anne Frank," Telegraph Online, February 15, 2007, accessed January 15, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1542772/America-closed-its-doors-to-Anne-Frank.html>.

and tried ceaselessly to help facilitate the immigration process.<sup>14</sup> [VM 30]

Unfortunately, strict immigrations quotas made it a long and tedious procedure.

Holland was rattled by the news of Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939. My grandfather, now close to 17 years old, was stunned to learn about the swiftness of the Nazi's conquest of Poland in fall of 1939. The invasion of Poland signified a turning point in Europe. Despite signing a non-aggression pact in 1934, Hitler divvied up Poland with the help of the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin. Stalin and Hitler signed a pact in August of 1939. A secret protocol of this pact allowed Hitler and Stalin to break up Poland into two separate spheres of influence: one controlled by the Soviet Union and the other by Germany.<sup>15</sup>

The invasion of Poland, in conjunction with the German-Austria Anschluss, sent shockwaves throughout Europe. France and Great Britain tried their best to control Germany's aggressive political and military strategy. Most of the Dutch, however, believed nothing would happen to Holland. The country had remained neutral during World War I, and believed once again she could remain apart from the chaos in Eastern Europe. But, on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1940 Gerd and most of Amsterdam awoke to the sound of airplanes flying overhead. Germany was invading Holland.

According to Gerd, he and his family were nearly granted United States Visas before Germany invaded the Netherlands. If the war had broken out six weeks later, Gerd and his family would have been in the United States.

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<sup>14</sup> This story will be discussed later on.

<sup>15</sup> "German-Soviet Pact," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, January 6, 2011, accessed February 1, 2011, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005156>.



As it turned out, the Dutch were extremely ill equipped to handle the force of Hitler's army. The day of the invasion, the Nazis leveled Rotterdam, demonstrating their complete disregard for "neutral" nations. The Dutch had a very small army, microscopic in comparison with the German army. My grandfather remembers stories about the Germans dropping soldiers dressed in Dutch uniforms behind Dutch lines, wiping out what few soldiers they had. Three days later, the Germans nearly captured all of Holland. The Dutch royal family, headed by Queen Wilhelmina, was devastated by Germany's invasion. It is even said that Queen Wilhelmina's German-born son-in-law Prince Bernhard rushed to his private machine gun to fire at German planes.<sup>16</sup>

The Queen, facing increasing danger, was advised to flee the Netherlands. Resistant, Queen Wilhelmina said she would rather die with her troops than leave her country. However, the Germans were rapidly moving towards the royal family, hoping to capture them and dissolve the rest of the Dutch government. On May 13<sup>th</sup>, Queen Wilhelmina and the rest of the royal family were forced to flee to the United Kingdom. They remained in exile for the remainder of the war. Many Dutch residents, including my grandfather, felt abandoned. Their departure signified the end of Dutch rule and complete uncertainty about the future of the country. It was not till much later that my grandfather realized that the royal family's escape from Holland was for the better. Nevertheless, Queen Wilhelmina remained actively involved in the War, establishing Radio Oranje (Radio Orange), the voice of the

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<sup>16</sup> "The Royal Family," Waroverholland.nl, January 22, 2011, accessed January 25, 2011, <http://www.waroverholland.nl/index.php?page=the-royal-family>.

Dutch government in exile. In a few years, the radio would become Gerd's only access to the outside world. On May 14<sup>th</sup>, the Dutch government capitulated, only 4 days after the invasion began.

While Gerd and his family remained in Holland, the German invasion sparked widespread fear among the Jewish communities throughout the country. Many Dutch Jews, as well as German and Austrian Jews, fled to coastal towns hoping to catch a boat to England.<sup>17</sup> Dr. J Presser's comprehensive book about the German occupation of Holland, *Ashes in the Wind*, writes that one Jewish family drifted at sea for nearly a week, luckily making it to English coast. Unfortunately, thousands of refugees were turned away from England and forced to return to Holland.<sup>18</sup> For the Jews who remained in Holland, they did their best to try to resume their daily lives. The immediate effects of the German occupation, though, were surprisingly limited. Gerd explains that the first year of Nazi occupation was uneventful. In *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940-1945*, author Bob Moore concurs that initially there was no dramatic change in laws or lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> Gerd believed this was a tactic to prevent the Jews living in Holland from fleeing. One difference Gerd had noticed was the abundance of German troops marching through the streets of Amsterdam. For the first time in his life he noticed soldiers wearing unusual light green uniforms. Unbeknownst to Gerd, the uniformed soldiers were a part of the infamous Gestapo. The Gestapo was Hitler's secret police, carrying

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<sup>17</sup> Jacob Presser, *Ashes in the Wind: the Destruction of Dutch Jewry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Presser, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: the Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940-1945* (London: Arnold, 1997), 51.

out any and all orders from Nazi leaders. The Gestapo had numerous duties, including running concentration camps and maintaining order in occupied countries.

The Germans installed a Pro-Nazi government in Holland. The leader of the new administration was Austrian-born Arthur Seyss-Inquart. *Reichskommissar* Seyss-Inquart reported directly to Hitler. The former Reich governor of Austria, Seyss-Inquart was born in 1892 and served in the Austrian military during World War I. Initially unresponsive to questions over Jews in Holland, Seyss-Inquart would prove to be a ruthless leader, responsible for the deportation of 120,000 of the 140,000 Dutch Jews.<sup>20</sup> After the war, Seyss-Inquart was tried at the Nuremberg Trials and found guilty of crimes against humanity, crimes against peace, and war crimes. He was executed by hanging in October 1946.<sup>21</sup>

The initial months of inaction were quickly replaced by a string of decrees targeting Jewish employment. Seyss-Inquart banned Jews from the Dutch military (July 1940), dismissed all Jewish civil servants (August 1940), forced German Jews to register with the Aliens Department (August 1940) and eventually forced registration of all Jewish businesses and individuals (October 1940).<sup>22</sup> These measures magnified the feeling of unease for the Jews living in Holland. In November 1940, all Jewish teachers and professors were dismissed, enraging many Dutch students. Students tried to protest, but the Germans responded by

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<sup>20</sup> "Seyss-Inquart," Avalon Project - Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, 2008, accessed February 2, 2011, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/judseyss.asp>.

<sup>21</sup> "Seyss-Inquart"

<sup>22</sup> Presser, 15.

temporarily closing schools and universities.<sup>23</sup> Seyss-Inquart and his Dutch Nazi administration seemed to be sizing up the Jewish community in Holland. They wanted to see how many Jews were living there, what their professions were, and what businesses they owned. Unfortunately, this information would later facilitate the mass deportation of Jews living in Holland.

The anti-Jewish measures enforced by Seyss-Inquart and his administration was accompanied by the “Aryanization” of Dutch society. The Nazis attempted to remove Jews from all positions of influence or power in Holland. This included the forced dismissal and expurgation of all Jewish journalists, authors, and actors, and also the censorship of textbooks and historical texts written by Jewish authors.<sup>24</sup> The Nazis ordered colleges to remove “all writings hostile to the German people, the Führer, the Nazi Party, the German State, the German Government, and the Germany Army.”<sup>25</sup> This included censorship against my distant relative, Heinrich Heine, despite the fact he had converted from Judaism to Christianity to further assimilate into German society in the early 1800s.<sup>26</sup> Around this time, Nazis began to require all Jewish businesses and establishments to display a sign reading “Jewish Business”. Additionally, other anti-Semitic practices like separate Aryan and Jewish benches, parks, and restaurants were encouraged.<sup>27</sup>

These acts were not met with public approval. While other nations under Nazi occupation generally complied with Nazi demands and pronouncements, the

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<sup>23</sup> Presser, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Presser, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Presser, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Presser, 42.

<sup>27</sup> Presser, 44.

Dutch fought back. In a rare example of Nazi dissent, the Dutch went on a full-fledged strike in February of 1941. The reason for this inspiring chain of events was due to the historical relationship between Jews and the Dutch. Written during the last months of German occupation, *Five Years of Occupation* was initially published by the secret press of D.A.V.I.D. The authors vividly describe life under Nazi occupation. Boolean and van der Does explain that despite past anti-Semitism in Germany, “in Holland this enmity did not exist...Jew and Christian lived harmoniously side by side.”<sup>28</sup> Confirming Gerd’s initial sentiments, Jews reluctantly complied with the measures, hoping to placate Nazi aggression. Jews living in Holland felt that “more was meant than met the eye; but they did not as yet recognize the true meaning [behind the decrees].”<sup>29</sup> Also suspicious, when the Nazis initially tried to require “Jewish Business” signs posted in Jewish owned businesses, the College of Secretaries-General twice vetoed this measure.<sup>30</sup>

The Nazi’s most forceful decree came in January of 1941. It required the identification of all Jews living in Holland. Utilizing the information collected during registration, all Jews were told to carry identification cards, stamped with a “J”, with them at all times. For the Jews in Holland, this brought the first palpable feeling of isolation and ostracism. Tensions continued to rise with increased violence from Dutch Storm Troopers (WA) in the Jewish neighborhoods of Amsterdam. The WA destroyed Jewish property and stores, and provoked Jewish residents. They concentrated most of their destruction in heavily Jewish neighborhoods, clearly

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<sup>28</sup> J. J. Boolean, *Five Years of Occupation* (Holland: Secret Press of D.A.V.I.D., 1945), 22.

<sup>29</sup> Boolean, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Boolean, 22.

trying to send a message to Jewish residents. The WA's violence, however, was not met with docility. Jews fought back, and at times, with deadly force. On February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1941, one of the WA-men, Henrik Koot, was fatally injured. The Nazis reported that a "Jew had ripped open the victim's artery with his teeth and then sucked the blood."<sup>31</sup> The Nazis used this imagined and sensationalized report to start barricading the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, turning it into a quasi-prison.<sup>32</sup> The rapid transformation from Jewish quarter to Jewish prison spurred the creation of the Amsterdam Jewish Council. The Jewish Council was responsible for carrying out orders from Nazi officials, while also trying to shield the Jewish residents of Holland from direct and aggressive Nazi action. While it may have protected Jews from some Nazi hostility, the Council was essentially a Nazi puppet organization. The Nazis forced the Council to carry out actions the Nazis would otherwise have done. One of the first acts implemented by the Jewish Council was to collect all weapons owned by Jews.<sup>33</sup>

Another violent clash came seven days later in what is known as the "Koco Affair". Koco, a popular ice cream parlor located near my grandfather's neighborhood, was popular with both Jews and non-Jews. Two German Jewish refugees owned the ice cream parlor. Because of its popularity among different religions (and "races"), it was an easy target for the Nazis.<sup>34</sup> In order to protect Koco, some of the regular patrons set up booby-traps to ward off potential danger. When Nazi soldiers entered the establishment on February 19<sup>th</sup>, the booby traps

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<sup>31</sup> Presser, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Presser, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Presser, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Presser, 50.

(including a 20-inch ammonia flash, gas pipes, and pocket torches) set off, spraying them with irritant fluids.<sup>35</sup> The Nazis were enraged, executing the owners after they refused to divulge the names of the conspirators. In an act of retribution, on February 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> the Nazis “descended on the Jewish quarter en masse...arresting some 400 Jewish ‘hostages’ between the ages of twenty and thirty-five years.”<sup>36</sup> The indiscriminate and violent round up of Jews horrified the Dutch. Led by the illegal Dutch Communist Party, the Dutch responded to the call for a city wide, and soon, nationwide strike, against the German violence towards Jews.

Originally planned only for municipal workers, the strike quickly spread to other business sectors.<sup>37</sup> Metal workers and shipyard workers left their jobs and ferryboats and trams stopped running.<sup>38</sup> The protest soon spread to numerous towns around Holland. The reaction by the non-Jewish Dutch population shocked the Nazis. In turn, the Nazis responded by threatening to round up more Jews. Yet, the Dutch continued to protest.<sup>39</sup> On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the Nazis deployed WA, German Police, and SS troops. The Nazis opened fire on protesters, killing at least seven people.<sup>40</sup> By the night of the 26<sup>th</sup>, the strike had mostly dissipated. While short-lived, it remains one of the only instances of public dissent to Nazi control. For the Jews of Holland, it was a moving reminder of the overall attitude of the Dutch people. While this was the last of any major public displays of dissent, an extensive network of

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<sup>35</sup> Presser, 50.

<sup>36</sup> Presser, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Moore, 72.

<sup>38</sup> "The February Strike," Verzetsmuseum, accessed February 3, 2011, [http://www.verzetsmuseum.org/tweede-wereldoorlog/en/kingdomofthenetherlands/thenetherlands,may\\_1940\\_-\\_february\\_1941/the\\_february\\_strike](http://www.verzetsmuseum.org/tweede-wereldoorlog/en/kingdomofthenetherlands/thenetherlands,may_1940_-_february_1941/the_february_strike).

<sup>39</sup> Moore, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Moore, 73.

dissidents formed the Dutch Underground--a loose organization of Dutch men and women that helped thousands of Jews escape Nazi persecution and murder.

The 425 Jews carried off during the Nazi round up were transported to Schoorl internment camp and then sent to Mauthausen concentration camp. Nearly all of the Jews died in Mauthausen, an Austrian labor camp. According to Presser, the Nazis decided to send the hostages to Mauthausen "as a punishment for the tone used by the Jewish Council when writing on the subject of the hostages." The route between Schoorl and Mauthausen was an early template for future Nazi raids, or razzias, that would entrap both Gerd and Hans Jürgen. While it was hoped the strike would impede Nazi decrees and persecution, the Dutch Nazi's introduced even more measures directed against Jews.

Between February and June 1941, the Nazis continued to isolate the Jews of Holland. Jewish newspapers were disbanded; Jews were removed from universities and public parks; and Jewish doctors and lawyers were prohibited from working with non-Jews.<sup>41</sup> It was around this time that Oscar looked once again for other immigration options. In a letter dated January 1941, Oscar received permission from the government of Siam (now Thailand, formerly under French occupation) to live there. [VM 31] Gerd explains that this plan never came to fruition. The increasing isolation and discrimination sparked even more underground resistance similar to the Koco Affair. In June 1941, the Nazis again descended on the Jewish community, this time singling out German Jews. According to the Nazis, in May (a year after Dutch capitulation) they discovered a bomb plot directed against a German

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<sup>41</sup> Moore, 81.



officer's club.<sup>42</sup> A few weeks later, saboteurs blew up the German Luftwaffe telephone exchange at Schiphol Airport. One member of the SS was seriously injured. The Nazis believed the German Jewish refugees were responsible for the violence, allegedly claiming they "had been trying to incite anti-German feelings."<sup>43</sup>

The Germans retaliated by singling out the German-Jewish community in Amsterdam. Instead of the public display of aggression that occurred in February, this time around the Germans were more discreet. On June 11, a German officer approached a Professor helping to train a group of German Jewish boys for emigration to Palestine (a short-lived Nazi solution to the Jewish problem). The officer explained that the Nazis were resuming the training and needed the names of all the boys involved with the program. Under false pretenses, the professor happily divulged the names of nearly 300 German Jewish young adults (aged between 16-21) to the German officer. The Nazis believed people associated with this program were behind the violent acts of sabotage from weeks earlier. The Germans initially targeted the names on the list, but they also carried off anyone in the vicinity or buildings they stopped at.<sup>44</sup>

On June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1941 Gerd and Hans Jürgen had just arrived home from work. They locked up their bicycles and went inside their apartment. While Hans Jürgen was in the bathroom, Gerd heard a knock at the front door. Without thinking or looking through the window to see who was there, Gerd opened the door. Two German-speaking men, dressed in leather jackets, pushed passed Gerd and into the

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<sup>42</sup> Mentioned by Gerd, and Moore, 81, and Presser, 70. Responsibility could be attributed to the Dutch Underground, especially since it coincided with the one-year anniversary of German occupation.

<sup>43</sup> Presser, 69.

<sup>44</sup> Presser, 69.

apartment. The men, not in uniform, asked if he knew a Hans Jürgen von Halle. Just as the officer asked, Hans Jürgen came out of the bathroom. When the German asked for a Gerd Herbert von Halle, Gerd replied that his middle name was Seigmund. The men did not care about the difference and placed Gerd and Hans Jürgen under arrest. The men did not explain the reason for the arrest or even allow the boys to contact their parents.

Not in uniform, Gerd explains that the men walked a few paces behind, only speaking to tell them which way to turn. This was probably an effort to hide the round up from the eyes of the general public. Gerd, Hans Jürgen, and approximately 300 other similarly aged boys were taken to Gestapo headquarters. Lined up against the wall, the 300 boys were instructed to remain completely silent. They were not even excused to use the bathroom. Gerd remembers the Nazi commandant bursting into the room, tossing out insults like “Jew-pig” and other slurs. One of the first questions the commandant asked was whether anyone had a contagious disease like tuberculosis. Hans Jürgen, Gerd’s childhood protector, whispered that Gerd should raise his hand. Gerd was dumbfounded by his request. Growing up, Gerd suffered from bronchitis, but nothing close to T.B. Yet, Gerd trusted his brother, and despite the commandant saying anyone who lied who would severely punished, stepped forward and whispered that he had tuberculosis.

Around midnight, one boy, aged fifteen, was released from the headquarters. The Nazis, always exact and meticulous, released the young boy because he was not within 16-21-age range. The young boy was an acquaintance of Gerd and was confused about why Gerd stepped forward. Before going home, the boy stopped at

the von Halle apartment to inform Oscar and Henriette of Gerd's bizarre announcement. Unfortunately, the boy did not know what exactly Gerd had said to the commandant. Oscar and Henriette, according to Gerd, miraculously picked T.B. out of the blue. Oscar and Henriette understood that they needed to verify Gerd's T.B., so they approached a Dutch physician named Dr. Hertzberger who was willing to write an affidavit in support of Gerd's claim. At the time, Gerd was completely unaware of the affidavit obtained by Oscar and Henriette. [VM 33-34]

Around 1AM, the remaining boys were sent to Schoorl internment camp in northern Holland. Schoorl, while an internment camp, was not anywhere near the barbarity of Auschwitz. Each barrack had 40 men with double bunks. Luckily, Gerd and Hans Jürgen were placed in the same barrack. Gerd was randomly assigned the first bunk, making him the head of the barrack. Gerd remembers the officers forcing the internees to do pointless labor-intensive projects around the camp. The officers were somehow always able to find something wrong with the barrack. Gerd utilized ego-inducing tactics to help calm some of the officers' anger. Since most of the officers were just privates. Gerd would always refer to them as lieutenant, informally giving them a higher rank.

Gerd and Hans Jürgen stayed at Schoorl for about 6 weeks. Because Schoorl was built between two dunes, some parents would come to catch a glimpse of their children. Gerd remembers that the internees would help the parents see their child by walking away from him, allowing the parents to see him in plain sight. One day Gerd was called into the commander's office. Standing in front of the desk, Gerd noticed the affidavit. The commander asked, "What's with you, Jew Boy?" Gerd

simply responded, "I suffer from T.B." Without any hesitation, the commander exclaimed, "Get the hell out of here!"

Gerd returned to his barrack, said goodbye to his brother, and left the camp. Gerd was now alone in the middle of rural Holland. For the first time in his life, Gerd had to hitchhike back to Amsterdam. Unbeknownst to Gerd, the same day he was released from Schoorl, the remaining internees were shipped off, just as in February, to Mauthausen concentration camp. The internees who were sent to Mauthausen faced barbaric conditions, repressive restrictions, and cruel execution techniques.

Back in Amsterdam, Gerd and his family were extremely concerned for Hans Jürgen's wellbeing. Not long after Gerd returned, the family received a pre-printed card informing them that Hans Jürgen had been transferred to *Konzentrationslager Mauthausen* on June 23, 1941. In July 1941, the parents of the hostages from the February raid received death notices. Nearly all of the "hostages" had died in Mauthausen. Soon, obituaries flooded the Dutch newspapers. There were so many obituaries that the Nazis demanded an end to the abundance of obituaries in the newspapers.<sup>45</sup> Oddly, the causes of death listed for the "hostages" were "sunstroke, dysentery, heart-failure, [and] nephritis," a thinly veiled lie to cover up the murder that had taken place.<sup>46</sup> Oscar and Henriette did their best to help Hans Jürgen, although the Nazis kept their prisoners cut off from most of society. Thankfully, Gerd and his family received a letter from Hans Jürgen dated August 3, 1941. The front of the postcard listed numerous restrictions and rules for contacting the

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<sup>45</sup> Presser, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Presser, 54.

“prisoners”. Hans Jürgen, once called a hostage and an internee, was not listed as a prisoner.

The front of the postcard: [VM 35]

*Concentration Camp Mauthausen, Oberdonau*

*When writing to prisoners, the following rules have to be observed:*

- 1. All protective custody prisoners are allowed to receive and send two letters or two postcards from/to his/her relatives. The letters to the prisoners must be legibly and ink-written and can only consist of 15 sentences on each page. Only one piece of normal size letter paper is allowed. Envelopes should not be lined. In one letter, only five 12 Rpf (Reichspfennig) stamps can be included. Everything else is forbidden and liable to confiscation. Postcards can have 10 sentences. Photographs cannot be used as postcards.*
- 2. Sending of money is allowed, indicating the exact name, first name, date of birth, prisoner's block and cell.*
- 3. Newspapers are allowed, but can only be delivered by the post office of Concentration Camp Mauthausen.*
- 4. Parcels are not allowed to be sent, because the prisoners can buy everything in the camp.*
- 5. Release requests from protective custody to the camp management are pointless.*
- 6. Speaking time with and visiting of the prisoners is constitutionally not allowed.*

*All mail not in conformity with these rules will be destroyed.*

*The Camp Commander.*

The rules for contact reflected the Nazis' desire to maintain secrecy over Hitler and Heinrich Himmler's early stage of the final solution. The Nazis tried to cloak their measures, laws, and restrictions in ambiguous language to prevent hysteria or violent acts of sabotage that had occurred in previous circumstances. With ten sentences per letter and only two letters permitted, the amount of written information from the prisoners was severely limited. Nevertheless, the way the letters were written, their word choice, and their attempts at non-censored communication revealed a dire need for help. The Nazis required the prisoners to

begin their letters by saying they were healthy and okay.<sup>47</sup> Gerd remembers Hans Jürgen's letters being very odd. Hans Jürgen's opening phrase "Liebe, liebe Eltern, liebe Onkel Gerd" (translated to "Dear, dear Parents, dear Uncle Gerd") caught Gerd off guard; Hans Jürgen was not the most affectionate person. His sincerity seemed to reflect the abominable conditions of the concentration camp. Additionally, calling his younger brother uncle was an attempt to hide Gerd's identity and age from the Nazi officers who read and censored their letters. A close reading and inference of these letters is to help dissect the underlying despair of the letters. [VM 36-38]

*Mauthausen, 3 August 1941*

*Dear, dear parents, dear uncle Gerd,*

*Gratefully received your money order. I am in good health and hope the same goes for you. Please take the following into account: we cannot receive photographs and newspapers. We can buy newspapers in the camp. When addressing, you must clearly indicate my prisoner's number, date of birth and block number. All mail should be written in German. When you see uncle Paul, give him my warmest regards. Usually he finishes work at 6.15 so that would be the best time to catch him. Also regards to Rita, Inge, Renatka, Elly and especially to Lilo (Teddy), who also thought of me in Schoorl. Perhaps old uncle Gerd can take over my business interests. I really hope to get a long letter from you. How are our loving relatives and friends doing?*

*Please pass on my best regards to all those mentioned and for yourselves a warmest kiss from your faithful son, Hans.*

Hans Jürgen's letter, restricted to a mere ten sentences, contains numerous efforts at non-censored communication. When I first received the letters, I was confused about Hans Jürgen's reference to an "Uncle Paul". Because space was so limited, whatever he wrote in those ten sentences must have been extremely

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Woelfl, "Concentration Camp," Mauthausen Memorial, Letters, accessed March 30, 2011, <http://en.mauthausen-memorial.at>.

important. When I asked my grandfather about Uncle Paul, he explained that Uncle Paul was actually not an uncle, but a friend of Oscar and Henriette. Paul was a German non-Jew. While it was unclear what Paul could actually do to help Hans Jürgen, either out of desperation or conviction, he believed Paul could do something to help him. The next sentence lists his many girlfriends. As Gerd explains, their family was not sentimental and for Hans Jürgen to conclude in such an affectionate manner was enough for them to imagine his despondency.

Hans Jürgen's next letter on August 31<sup>st</sup> paints a similar picture. Interestingly, the original date on the letter seems to have been doctored. [VM 39-42]

*Mauthausen, 31 August 1941*

*Dear, dear parents, dear uncle Gerd,*

*Received your card from 21 July and I am happy to read that you are all in good health, which I can also say about myself. That Roman is helping Gerd is praiseworthy, hopefully it pays off. When you see uncle Paul, please pass him my best regards. The best time to catch him is 6.15 when he gets out of work. It's Lilo's birthday on August 19<sup>th</sup> and I would like to congratulate her sincerely and wish her all thinkable good. I will hand over a gift later. Dear Mum and Dad, stay healthy and don't worry. My best regards for Elly, Jo and especially Lilo and uncle Paul. Please write a long letter really soon.*

*With warmest regards and kisses from you loving and faithful son, Hans.*

The fact that Hans Jürgen wrote that he would give a gift to his girlfriend is extremely thoughtful and optimistic. Undoubtedly facing the worst of conditions, it was amazing that Hans Jürgen was able to maintain this type of outlook. Again, Hans Jürgen asks for Uncle Paul and ends his letter in the same affectionate manner. It is my understanding that Oscar and Henriette sent numerous letters to Hans Jürgen,

but it is unclear how many were actually delivered. In the surviving documents from this time period, only one letter was saved from Oscar and Henriette.

*Hans J. von Halle, Nr. 2978, born 7/5/21, block 15, cell A*

*Concentration Camp Mauthausen-Oberdonau*

*My dear Hans!*

*We are happy to write to you today on 17/9/41. Many thanks for your lovely letters from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of August. We hope you are healthy. We are doing fine and we think of you with love all the time. We often meet with uncle Paul and Leonhard and they send you their best regards. The business is going well. Your friends still visit us often and Elly, Teddi and Carry especially give you their regards, as well as the family. Also Renate's friend Leni visits us more and more often and we have some nice conversations. Uncle Paul does everything possible to coach his Bubi as much as possible in his school work, hopefully with success. Up till now, we have sent you 5 money orders, to which, among others, aunt Gerty has contributed. We hope you will get all this soon and expect to receive some dear and elaborate writing from you very soon together with a confirmation that you received our money orders and two letters. Stay in good health and we three send you all our love.*

*Your loving and faithful Mother and Father.*

Despite having only this one letter, Oscar and Henriette tried their best to aid Hans Jürgen. Although it was unclear what Paul could do to help Hans Jürgen, his parents reached out to Paul and their overly optimistic cousin Leonhard. According to Gerd, Henriette's cousin Leonhard always predicted positive outcomes, in contrast to the typically hard-nosed Oscar and Henriette. It is also notable that Oscar and Henriette were able to procure enough funds to send five money orders. Increased restrictions on Jewish employment and daily life made it extremely difficult to access money. Oscar and Henriette were explicit in their request for confirmation that Hans Jürgen received the money orders and the letters. Rightfully



suspicious, it was impossible to know for certain that Hans Jürgen had actually received anything.

In late September/early October, Oscar and Henriette received a letter asking them to report to Gestapo headquarters. Gerd explains that although the Gestapo headquarters was the “one place you don’t want to go voluntarily,” he refused to allow his parents to go. Gerd bravely entered the headquarters and was given a list of nearly 300 boys, all of who had been arrested with Gerd in June. Every boy had died. According to the list, Hans Jürgen died on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1941, 10 days after Oscar and Henriette sent their letter. Stunned, Gerd could not believe that his hulky, six-foot tall brother had died from pneumonia.

As in July, the Nazis listed falsified causes of death. It was around this time that Gerd learned of Hans Jürgen’s true cause of death, something called “parachuting”. According to Gerd, and verified through other accounts of Mauthausen, in 1941 the camp had not yet received gas chambers. To expedite murder, the Nazis developed a method called “parachuting”. Mauthausen was located on a stone quarry and affixed with an uneven and poorly constructed 186-step staircase called the “staircase of death”. Prisoners were forced to carry huge granite boulders on their shoulders and climb up the “staircase of death”. Often, after prisoners would make it to the top, camp officers would push them off the ledge to their death 300-feet below.<sup>48</sup> In his description of Mauthausen, author James Waller explains that in 1941, Mauthausen had a 58 percent mortality rate,

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<sup>48</sup> James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002),3-4

compared with 36 percent at Dachau and 16 percent at Buchenwald.<sup>49</sup> The officers called the prisoners thrown off the edge “parachutists”.

Recently uncovered documents indicate Hans Jürgen underwent an operation while he was imprisoned in Mauthausen. In the “Operation Buch” (Operation Book) of the camp, it notes Hans Jürgen was put under with anesthesia to remove an abscess. [VM 43] During this time the Nazis would perform medical experiments on Mauthausen inmates under extremely vague pretenses. Unfortunately, we will never know what exactly the Mauthausen doctors did to Hans Jürgen. After Hans Jürgen’s death, however, Dr. Aribert Heim handled medical operations. Heim became known as “Dr. Death” for his inhumane medical experiments on inmates. Having escaped Europe, Heim became one of the most sought after Nazi criminals.<sup>50</sup>

Gerd then had to break the tragic news of his brother’s murder to his parents. Gerd remembers his stern father breaking into pieces. While his mother kept her composure, Gerd remembers feeling her utter devastation on the inside. The smallest of decisions helped Gerd evade the same fate as his brother. If it were not for Hans Jürgen’s risky advice, the selflessness of that 15-year-old boy, and Dr. Hertzberger’s affidavit, Gerd would not be the only boy to survive the June 11<sup>th</sup> razzia. Of the nearly 300 young men taken to Schoorl with Gerd, none lived past February 1942. The majority died in August, September, and October of 1941.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Waller, 3-4.

<sup>50</sup> "Aribert Heim," Jewish Virtual Library, 2011, accessed April 20, 2011, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Aribert\\_Heim.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Aribert_Heim.html).

<sup>51</sup> Henny E. Dominicus, *Mauthausen: Een Gedenkboek* (Amsterdam: Stichting Vriendenkring Mauthausen, 1999), 188-192.

The death of Hans Jürgen increased the feeling of helplessness and despair. The situation in Amsterdam and Holland was both dangerous and terrifying. Oscar, Henriette, and Gerd recognized their grim situation, and with the help of Marjorie Shuler Charles, tried their best to secure asylum in the United States.

### **Eleanor Roosevelt, Sumner Welles, and the von Halle family**

By 1941, Oscar and his family had tried numerous times to secure Visas for entry into the United States. Historically, the ability to immigrate to the United States fluctuated with the prevailing racist and xenophobic tendencies of American politicians and citizens. The National Origin Act of 1924 sought to severely limit the number of eastern and southern Europeans allowed to enter into America by imposing specific quotas by country. For instance, the total quota for all immigrants was only 152,000 people. Over 50 percent of that figure, however, was reserved solely for people of English or Irish origin.<sup>52</sup> Italians, Russians, Poles, Jews (indirectly), and other eastern and southern Europeans were left with the remaining 70,000 spaces. Additionally, in times of economic depression, particularly during the Great Depression, labor insecurity fanned anti-immigration sentiments.

Oscar, as previously mentioned, understood how the Great Depression impeded his family's chances of coming to America. Oscar and many other Jews who immigrated to Amsterdam did not foresee the hasty capitulation of the Dutch government, or the unconcealed brutality of the Nazis. The invasion of Holland in 1940 prevented the von Halles from securing a safe passage to the United States and

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<sup>52</sup> David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: New Press, 1998), 6.

ultimately resulted in the death of Hans Jürgen. His death solidified the real danger of Nazi brutality. No one was safe.

There is still a lot of debate surrounding the Roosevelt administration's treatment of the Jews of Europe. Some authors like David S. Wyman highlight the overt anti-Semitism and xenophobia of the State Department. In his book *The Abandonment of the Jews*, Wyman explains that "in 1938...four separate polls indicated that from 71 to 85 percent of the American public opposed increasing quotas to help refugees." In addition to increasing quotas, 66 percent of Americans "objected to a one-time exception to allow 10,000 refugee children to enter outside the quota limits."<sup>53</sup> This initial resistance to altering immigration quotas ultimately reflected the presence of xenophobia in American culture. However, I would also argue that it demonstrated a lack of intelligence, from both the media and the government, in regards to Hitler's plan for the systematic murder of the Jews. Most Americans were not aware of Hitler's concentration camps. In fact, it was not until 1942 that the United States had definitive proof of Germany's plan to exterminate Jews. While Wyman criticizes Roosevelt and the US government for their treatment of Jews during WWII, author Robert N Rosen believes Roosevelt was an ally of the Jews. In his book *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust*, Rosen contends that Roosevelt did act appropriately in regards to saving the Jews, particularly at a time of public ignorance of Hitler's murder machine.

While Oscar's immediate family remained in Germany after WWI, Henriette's family scattered throughout Europe and America. Her brother, Dr. Felix Cohn

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<sup>53</sup> Wyman, 8.

immigrated to the United States prior to the restrictive quotas established in 1924. Wanting to sound more American (and considerably less German after World War I), Felix changed his name to Felix Charles. Felix fell in love with an American woman, Marjorie Shuler, an editor for the Christian Science Monitor. Married shortly afterwards, Marjorie generously offered to help Oscar and Henriette obtain proper forms and documentation for immigration. Marjorie tried numerous times to secure visas for her sister-in-law's family. After the invasion of the Netherlands, Marjorie wrote a personal letter to the Chief of the Visa division A.M. Warren. Marjorie was a well-known editor of the Christian Science Monitor, at times featured on the front page. Marjorie wrote to Warren on May 22, 1940, a few days after the Dutch government had capitulated. Rightfully predicating a grim outcome, Marjorie appealed to Warren for more information regarding my family. [VM 45]

*My Dear Mr. Warren*

*It is possible that you may remember me from the work I have done in Washington and abroad for the Christian Science Monitor. During my years on the staff the State Department was kind to me on many occasions.*

*I am writing now on a more serious topic. My husband's sister, Mrs. Oscar von Halle with her husband and two sons is in Amsterdam, all of them German refugees having left their country legally. Through your department we had forwarded affidavits for them during April and they expected to be called on their quota applications before the end of that month. They filed early in October 1938.*

*Your department must be under great pressure for many reasons at this time, but you will understand how very anxious we are about their position now and how*

*eager we are to take any steps which will aid them in leaving Holland and entering the United States.*

*I am an American of many generations in this country and my husband applied for his second papers on February first.*

*The von Halles leave [spelling] at 18 Herculestraat, Amsterdam. We are concerned not only about the von Halles generally but the documents forwarded through the State Department to the Consul-General at Rotterdam, which we can only hope have been burned if they are not unstable at the present time.*

A few things stand out in this letter. First, Marjorie tried to demonstrate her “Americanness” multiple times throughout the letter. She was in all likelihood trying to alleviate any xenophobic fears in letting German refugees enter America. Second, she was justifiably paranoid about the information transmitted to the Dutch government. Marjorie’s fears were definitely warranted considering the violence that occurred in February. Despite her pleas for more information, Mr. Warren wrote back a few weeks later on June 3, 1941, and had no good news to deliver. [VM 46]

*My dear Mrs. Charles,*

*...The consulate at Rotterdam where the von Halle family registered for immigration into this country has found it necessary, in view of the situation in the Netherlands, to suspend temporarily consideration of the immigration visa work. At such time as the consulate finds it possible to resume visa work Mrs. Von Halle and the members of her family may again take up their cases and you may be assured they will be accorded every possible consideration.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*A. M. Warren, Chief, Visa Division*

Less than eight days later Gerd and Hans Jürgen were rounded up during one of the first Nazi raids. That event likely spurred Marjorie to try harder to find different avenues to help get my family out of Europe. A respected feminist, Marjorie Shuler Charles was a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. Marjorie invited both the President and Eleanor to her and Felix's wedding. Initially scheduled to attend the wedding, according to my grandfather, the visit of a royal member from Europe forced Eleanor to cancel at the last minute. Despite missing the wedding, Eleanor sent Marjorie a wedding gift. Writing in May of 1941, Marjorie Charles began a chain of correspondence with some of the most influential people in the United States government.

These letters help shed light on the activities of the state department, their sympathy (or lack thereof) for the Jews of Europe, and the unpredictability of war. The first letter was written in November of 1941 from Marjorie to Eleanor Roosevelt. First thanking Eleanor for her wedding gift, the letter quickly turns more somber. Marjorie briefly explains the recent history of the von Halle family, including moving to Holland and Germany's invasion. Interestingly, the letters add information that even my grandfather cannot account for. Marjorie notes "there is little cause for laughter in our house these days," and mentions a plan for my family to immigrate to Cuba. Although Cuba was a place many Jewish Refugees sought as a temporary safe haven, my grandfather was completely unaware of any attempt to immigrate to Cuba. Most importantly, Marjorie explains the death of Hans Jürgen.

Most World War II/US scholars point out that the federal government was not fully aware of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. The US government made the genocide public in November of 1942-- nearly a year after this correspondence took place. While there is proof that the US government was aware of the atrocities before making them public, these letters prove that some of the most high level officials in the US government were aware of the murder.

In November 1941, Marjorie Shuler Charles wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt: [VM 47-49]

*During the summer, they [Oscar and Henriette] asked us to get Cuban visas. The older boy was taken by the Germans to a stone quarry and this last month was killed. The Cuban plan has been almost impossible during these months that we have been trying it, and is now absolutely closed.*

*We now had cables with what they call "their last request". They want so much emergency visas to the United States. We would take them in our home. There is no suspicion of their becoming public charges, nor about their loyalty to this country. Mr. Warren [Visa Department] tells me that visas can only be given if they can appear before an American consul, but of course they cannot leave their home in Amsterdam, without visas. It is a circle in which so many people are trapped...*

*...I have hesitated to burden you, who have so many similar requests, and yet you are my last hope and I must ask. Is there anything that can be done?*

*With my deepest respect and admiration for you and a certain sense of comfort that you make it possible for those of us with troubled hearts to bring you our troubles.*



Marjorie's heartfelt letter reflects the serious barriers that prevented the rescue of thousands of Jews. The combination of strict immigration laws and America's reluctance to alter quotas made it feel like a fruitless effort to obtain US visas. Marjorie's letter, riddled with typos and errors, signifies a rapidly escalating situation in Holland, as well as her overall comfort with Eleanor Roosevelt. Interestingly, Marjorie also points out my family's long history, explaining that Oscar "comes of an old family, with a von since the 17<sup>th</sup> century" in addition to being a "well known architect" and serving on the city council of Hamburg pro bono as "his gift to the city". Additionally, Marjorie notes that Henriette is the niece of "Hugo Heimann, of who I am sure you know and has various cousins now on the staffs of American Universities, and one at Corpus Christi, Oxford." Hugo Heimann was a German politician specializing in education and a member of the German Reichstag, but immigrated to the United States in 1939.<sup>54</sup> Heimann was made an honorary citizen of Berlin (of only 116 to date) but was removed in 1933 by the Nazis. It was not till 1947 when he was reinstated as an honorary citizen. The fact that Marjorie chose to include such information demonstrates how important a role family history (and prominence) plays in the immigration process. I believe Marjorie included my family history to differentiate my family from any other prospective Jewish refugees. My family's history makes us "special," or just special enough to potentially work around the rigid quota system.

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<sup>54</sup> "Hugo Heimann," Abgeordnetenhaus Von Berlin, accessed February 2, 2011, [http://www.abgeordnetenhaus-berlin.de/pari/web/wdefault.nsf/vHTML/G11\\_6-00026?OpenDocument](http://www.abgeordnetenhaus-berlin.de/pari/web/wdefault.nsf/vHTML/G11_6-00026?OpenDocument).

Marjorie's letter paints Eleanor Roosevelt in a very similar manner to how many Americans view her today: compassionate, a champion of human rights, and powerful. This prevailing notion of Eleanor, however, was not always true. Many authors debate whether Eleanor was anti-Semitic. Rosen in *Saving the Jews* uncovered a series of letters between a young Eleanor and her mother-in-law Sara Roosevelt. Written in 1918 about a party, Eleanor explained "the Jew party [was] appalling...I never wish to hear money, jewels, or sables mentioned again."<sup>55</sup> There is a lot of evidence that both Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt shared anti-Semitic views when they were younger, but seemingly curtailed or changed those views as time went on. Eleanor replied to Marjorie's letter, as well as forwarding her request to the State department. [VM 50] Eleanor wrote,

*My dear Mrs. Charles:*

*I am glad to know that we are to be neighbors and I shall hope to see you and your husband. I will be delighted to go to lunch with you at the Woman Pays Club and could do so on November 8 if that would be convenient for you?*

*I will see if there is anything can be done to help the von Halle family. I cannot do much about such things since I left Washington but I will inquire.*

*Very Sincerely yours,*

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

Unfortunately, the State Department, particularly Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long, had well-known anti-

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<sup>55</sup> Robert N. Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 9.

Semitic tendencies. Cordell Hull, the winner of the 1945 Nobel Peace Prize was one of the biggest impediments to saving and rescuing Jewish refugees from Europe. Secretary of State from 1933-1944, Cordell Hull had long feared that his wife's mixed Jewish heritage would prevent him from obtaining certain positions in government.<sup>56</sup> It has even been asserted that Hull halted saving Jewish refugees in order to prevent criticism from anti-Semitic organizations.

In addition to Hull, Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long was an outright xenophobe who purposefully slowed granting US visas to immigrants. According to Wyman, Long was an "extreme nativist" and indifferent to the rescue of European Jews.<sup>57</sup> Although no records definitively reveal his anti-Semitic tendencies, Long opposed numerous calls for rescue missions in Europe.<sup>58</sup> Wyman suggests that the "responsibility for American rescue policy fell to Long and his subordinates. Instead of sensitivity to the human values involved, Long brought his strongly nativist attitudes to the situation."<sup>59</sup> In 1940, Long wrote a memo to State Department officials that the Department, with the help of the Visa Division,

Can delay and effectively stop for a temporary period of indefinite length the number of immigrants into the United States. We could do this by simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way and to require additional evidence and to resort to various administrative devices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas. <sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Beschloss, *The Conquerors Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler's Germany* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 53.

<sup>57</sup> Wyman, 190.

<sup>58</sup> Wyman, 153.

<sup>59</sup> Wyman, 191.

<sup>60</sup>David A. Harris, "AJC Testifies in Congress on U.S. Failure to Save European Jewry," American Jewish Committee, March 19, 2009, accessed February 12, 2011, <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=846743&ct=6851853>. And "Long Outlines Ways to Obstruct Granting of U.S. Visas," Jewish Virtual Library, 2011, accessed February 15, 2011, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/longvisas.html>.

Even scarier was Long and Warren's specific plan to limit German refugees by "simply raising administrative obstacles."<sup>61</sup> The combination between anti-Semitism and anti-alien attitudes prevented the rescue of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of refugees. During the 12-year period between 1933-1945 only 200,000 Jews were admitted into the United States.<sup>62</sup> The bureaucratic obstacles developed by the State Department made it extremely difficult to loosen immigration restrictions and help the Jews. Long was particularly deceitful when he spoke to congressmen about the proposed Rescue Resolution in 1943. Long reportedly told congressmen that he and the State Department were doing everything necessary to help the Jews of Europe.<sup>63</sup> This exaggeration, bordering on fabrication, effectively nixed the Rescue Resolution. This was just another example of the hurdles put forward by the State Department.

Eleanor Roosevelt, however, personally helped secure admittance for numerous Jewish refugees, although most of her successful efforts occurred prior to 1940. One of the few State Department officials who understood the dire need to help the Jews was Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles. Sumner Welles was the second most powerful person in the State Department. While a close confidant of Eleanor Roosevelt, he encountered many enemies in the State Department. Both Hull and Long admired Welles abilities as a diplomat, although they believed he personally undermined Hull's decisions and tried to assume control of the

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<sup>61</sup> "Long Outlines Ways to Obstruct Granting of U.S. Visas"

<sup>62</sup> Harris, "AJC Testifies in Congress on U.S. Failure to Save European Jewry."

<sup>63</sup> Wyman, 195.

Department.<sup>64</sup> Welles soon became one of the few allies Eleanor Roosevelt had in the State Department.<sup>65</sup>

After reading Marjorie's letter, Eleanor immediately wrote to Welles. [VM 51] Eleanor attached Marjorie's letter, explaining, "The enclosed letter, from an old friend, is self-explanatory. Can anything be done?" Most importantly, in a footnote, Eleanor adds "requests visas for husband's sister and one son (18 years of age). Another has already been killed by the Germans." Eleanor forwarded Marjorie's letter the day she received it, demonstrating her loyalty to an old friend. Sumner Welles, with all his duties, found time to forward Eleanor and Marjorie's letters on. Unfortunately for my family, the letters landed in the hands of A.M. Warren-- the same person who prevented immigrants from obtaining US visas and had already rejected Marjorie's plea in June.

Writing to Warren (a day after Eleanor sent him the letter), Welles expressed his concern for the human right violations in Europe. Additionally, at a time when most officials were silent, Welles challenged the status quo within the State Department. Upon attaching Marjorie and Eleanor's letters, Welles writes, "I am getting increasingly concerned about cases of this kind." Welles was quite aware of the obstacles designed to prevent desperate refugees from immigrating, but tried to persuade Warren to make an exception.

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<sup>64</sup> Benjamin Welles, *Sumner Welles: FDR's Global Strategist : a Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 274-275.

<sup>65</sup> Irwin F. Gellman, *Secret Affairs: Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, and Sumner Welles* (New York: Enigma Books, 2002), 229.

Welles wrote A.M. Warren, Chief of the Visa Division, on November 18, 1941: [VM 52]

*It is, of course, obvious that as a matter of proper procedure visas cannot be issued in regions where there are no American consuls to issue them. On the other hand, in order to take care of thoroughly deserving, bona fide cases where we can obtain all of the evidence that is absolutely necessary to assure us that the applicants are desirable, is it not possible to conceive of some exception to the general rule so as to make it possible for these people to get exit permits? I wish you would give your early consideration to this possibility since the postscript to Mrs. Roosevelt's letter is undoubtedly indicative of what great many important people in this country are now thinking.*

This letter sheds new light on the climate of the State Department prior to the disclosure of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. While many historians note the tension between Sumner Welles and other high level officials, this letter indicates that Welles continued to press for easing immigration restrictions, especially in “thoroughly deserving, bona fide cases”. It seems that a major problem was whether applicants were “desirable” or not. I find this extremely unsettling as it is unclear what exactly determined desirability. Was it my family’s connection to Eleanor Roosevelt, our titled heritage, or the mere fact Hans Jürgen had already been murdered? Regardless, it was painfully apparent that it would be difficult to obtain visas for my family, in spite of have some of the most influential and powerful people on their side

While Marjorie's plea circulated around the Visa Department, external factors greatly affected the ever more slim possibility of obtaining emergency visas. Writing to Eleanor, Welles offered on-going support to help my family obtain visas. "In view of your personal interest in the relatives of your friend," Welles writes, "the Department is exploring the possibility of obtaining permission from the German government for the von Halles to leave occupied territory." While Welles did not make it sound likely that my family would be issued visas, he tried his best to assure his friend that he was doing everything within his power. Welles ends his letter writing: [VM 53]

*I shall not fail to let you know the outcome as soon as possible and make such further suggestions as may then seem appropriate.*

*Believe me,*

*Yours very sincerely,*

*Sumner Welles*

As unlikely as it was for Jews to obtain the necessary paperwork to escape Europe, Welles wrote this letter on the eve of the one of the most tragic events in United States history. Dated December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the day before the attacks on Pearl Harbor, this letter testifies to the complete surprise and astonishment of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The attack on Pearl Harbor essentially erased whatever hope there was for my family to immigrate to the United States. The attacks ignited a fresh wave of xenophobia and fear, and resulted in America declaring war on Japan. Consequently, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, effectively ending any semblance of a diplomatic relationship with the German government.

In addition to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Welles became a target of an ugly, yet partially true, rumor over his sexuality. A minority among a majority of xenophobes, Welles aggravated numerous people in the State Department and congress. Sumner Welles' son, Benjamin Welles, explains in his biography *Sumner Welles: FDR's Global Strategist* that Welles had made improper advances on two African American male Pullman train workers as well as a Filipino male attendant.<sup>66</sup> Blaming his indiscretions on alcohol, Welles, for the time being, was able to sweep the accusations under the rug. Nonetheless, however, these rumors definitely tarnished one of the few people working to secure asylum for the endangered Jews of Europe.

Welles, working to save his career and fight off his enemies, had a lot on his plate. The attack on Pearl Harbor slowed immigration to a standstill and ultimately prevented my family's chance to immigrate to the United States. There was never a follow up to the letter dated December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Marjorie likely understood it would be near impossible to secure visas for my family. Additionally, rumors over Sumner Welles homosexuality would haunt him from the rest of his tenure as Deputy Secretary of State. In 1943, Welles was forced to resign from his position after pressure mounted against him from Hull and Long.

The von Halle family, after learning that the possibility of immigrating was near zero, made the decision to go into hiding. Like many Dutch Jews and German Jewish Refugees, the von Halles relied on the Dutch Underground to help locate a place to hide. The next three years would be a risky game of tiptoeing around the

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<sup>66</sup> Welles, 272-273.



Nazis and Gestapo. Without the Dutch Underground's benevolence and courage, it would have been impossible for my family to remain safe from the Nazis.

### **Amsterdam, 1941.**

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, all hope ended to secure emergency visas to the United States. Additionally, conditions in Amsterdam became significantly more tenuous. By the end of 1941, the Germans expedited the "call-up" process; more and more Jews were being instructed to report to Gestapo headquarters. In order to avoid widespread panic, the Nazis would specify certain groups, for example, German Jews or unemployed Jews. Gerd explains that this created a "that was them, thank god it is not us" mentality. Additionally, the overall knowledge of Nazi concentration camps was limited. While most Dutch Jews were aware of the concentration camps, they were unaware of the existence of gas chambers and crematoriums. Once a person or group was called, there were two options: report to Gestapo headquarters or go into hiding.

At the time, Gerd had a 19-year-old girlfriend named Carrie Vogel. The Germans called for unmarried, single women to report to the Gestapo headquarters. Gerd offered to marry her on the spot to save her from reporting to the Gestapo. Unfortunately, it was too late and Carrie was forced to report to the headquarters, having not sought out the help of the Dutch Underground. Gerd never heard from her again. She is presumed dead.

When Jews were called up, they were instructed to bring "only a minimum of clothes with them; the rest of their possessions they had to leave behind; these were

stolen by the Germans.”<sup>67</sup> Gerd started noticing his friends disappearing more rapidly. Luckily, Henriette’s job as a nurse kept their family safe for the time being. During this time, certain occupations kept you safe from the Nazis. The safest jobs, according to Gerd, were ones that were integral to maintaining the isolated Jewish community. The Nazis had to maintain the Jewish community, Gerd believed, in order to “keep them there.” If the Nazis indiscriminately called up people, the Jewish community would fall apart, thus further increasing paranoia and civil unrest like the strike of February 1941. If they could prop up the Jewish community, for the time being, it would allow the Nazis to pick and choose which Jews to send to the labor and extermination camps. This is not to say the Nazis did not try to further isolate the Jews from the rest of Dutch citizens. In the late 1941s, the Nazis passed numerous decrees that “filled the Jewish population with forebodings.”<sup>68</sup> In Decree No. 198, the Nazis established the ability to control which jobs Jews could perform; Jews would be forced to obtain special permits or were simply banned from certain occupations altogether. Additionally, the Nazis allowed Dutch citizens to fire Jewish employees with only a day’s notice.<sup>69</sup>

Gerd was already forbidden to attend a University. In addition, Jews were banned in September/October of 1941 from gathering freely in public venues (Dance halls, clubs, fraternities, etc.). The Nazis intended to create a virtual Jewish ghetto within Amsterdam. By isolating the Jews from the gentile Dutch citizens, the Nazis hoped to keep their plan of mass extermination hidden from the Non-Jews.

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<sup>67</sup> Boolen, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Presser, 88.

<sup>69</sup> Presser, 89.

The Germans believed this would decrease the activity of the “terrorist organizations” that fought the German occupation of Holland and their persecution of the Jews.<sup>70</sup>

### **Amsterdam, 1942**

The once picturesque and quiet city of Amsterdam started to feel more like a prison. Increased restrictions on transportation made traversing the city very difficult and dangerous. Gerd describes Amsterdam as incredibly depressing. One of his most painful memories was seeing two children, around five or seven years old, being marched by two bulky agents in uniform (in a similar fashion as Gerd and Hans Jürgen were marched to the headquarters). This “horrible sight” is permanently etched in the back of Gerd’s memory, reminding him of the utter inability to help friends, neighbors, or even Jewish strangers. Restricted to few occupations, Gerd became a shoemaker for the Jewish community. This would protect him, for the time being, from deportation.

The Nazis’ continued isolation of the Jews of Holland made it both extremely difficult and risky to find sympathetic non-Jewish Dutchmen. By the end of 1941, Jewish life in Holland was extremely debilitating, causing “severe economic hardship. Freedom of movement had been drastically restricted and a series of repressive measures had begun to dog [the Jews] at every step.”<sup>71</sup> Jews were forced to carry identity cards with them at all times. It should also be noted that in November of 1941, the Nazis issued the famous Eleventh Decree that stripped

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<sup>70</sup> Bollen, 34.

<sup>71</sup> Presser, 93.

German citizenship from all Jewish German citizens living outside of Germany. Having “been German” for nearly 300 years prior to this decree, Martin Dean of the USHMM, explains, “The new decree ordered the mass confiscation of property of emigrants and deportees via denaturalization from the moment they left the Reich’s territory.”<sup>72</sup>

Between January and July 1942, the Nazis became more brazen in their persecution of Dutch Jews. In February 1942, the Nazis required that all identity cards be stamped with a Jewish star and the letter “J”.<sup>73</sup> In March 1942, Seyss-Inquart ordered the remainder of the Nuremberg and Protection of German Blood and German Honor Laws to be implemented in Holland. While the bulk of these two laws had already been enacted, the remainder prohibited Jewish-Non-Jewish marriages and sexual relations. Finally, in early May 1942, the Nazis issued Decree No. 13 by the Generalkommissar for Public security requiring all Jews to wear the yellow Star of David in public. Presser outlines the most important provisions of the decree:

1) All Jews appearing in public must wear a Jewish Star

...

3) The Jewish star shall be a black, six-pointed star on yellow material, the size of a palm, and bearing the black inscription Jood. The star should be clearly visible and affixed to the outer clothing over the left breast.

4) Jews are debarred from wearing orders, decorations and other insignia. People who were found to be disobeying these orders would be subjected to the “usual fines” of six months imprisonment and a monetary fine.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Dean Martin, "The Development and Implementation of Nazi Denaturalization and Confiscation Policy up to the Eleventh Decree to the Reich Citizenship Law," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 231.

<sup>73</sup> Moore, 89.

<sup>74</sup> Presser, 120.

The Jewish Council, however powerless, was still completely outraged by this demand. Nevertheless, The Jewish Council was ordered to distribute the 569,355 yellow Jewish stars.<sup>75</sup> Not only were Jews forced to wear the stars, but they also were required to purchase four separate stars from the German government.<sup>76</sup> Gerd was deeply disturbed by the deterioration of his once peaceful life in Amsterdam. In an interview with the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum, Gerd reacted to his new life in Amsterdam,

Jews were not allowed to go on the streetcar. Jews were not allowed to have radios. You had to turn them in. Jews weren't allowed to have silver. You had to turn it in. Then came the yellow star [in 1942]. Everybody had to wear the yellow star. And I'll tell you, quite frankly, wearing a yellow star, even though I was certainly very proud to be a Jew, but going out into the street with a star about the size...this big [size of a "Saucer"], with the word "Jew" or in Dutch "Jood," J-O-O-D, printed on it, is a very, very strange feeling. Very strange indeed. It's not the kind of a thing that...if you've never experienced it, it's like going out on the street today and saying "I have..." you know, "I...I'm a prisoner" or going out on the street with a prison uniform. That's almost the same comparison.

Gerd's imagery reaffirms the threat of reaching out beyond the Jewish community. If a person violated Nazi orders, he or she faced serious, if not fatal, repercussions.

As deportations increased, the Germans tried numerous times to call up Gerd. The combination between his new profession as a shoemaker and his falsified lung condition (corroborated by Dr. Hertzberger) kept Gerd exempt from deportation. Luckily, in early May 1942, the Jewish Council was able to secure exemptions for a select number of Jewish workers. Those exempt from

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<sup>75</sup> Presser, 121.

<sup>76</sup> Presser, 122.

deportations included “Skilled workers employed in the metal, textile, and fur trades working under the orders of the Wehrmacht.”<sup>77</sup>

Unfortunately, those exemptions proved to be short lived. In early July 1942, Gerd was notified he was to be deported from Holland. Oscar, Henriette, and Gerd once again sought the help of Dr. Hertzberger. Dr. Hertzberger wrote on July 6<sup>th</sup>, “Undersigned declares that Gerd von Halle, Herculesstraat 18, is bedridden due to a lung hemorrhage which has occurred as result of chronic lung tuberculosis. He is not allowed to get up now, until perhaps in a few weeks time.” [VM 56] It cannot be stressed enough how risky it was for Dr. Hertzberger to write this letter. If he were caught, he would undoubtedly face serious punishment. This action was a direct testament to the character of the Dutch citizens. They risked their own lives to help their friends and colleagues in their time of need.

With this letter, Oscar and Henriette submitted the affidavit to the Amsterdam Association Fighting Against Tuberculosis. [VM 57-58] The organization miraculously provided more tangible evidence in support of Gerd’s “lung condition”. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, the organization wrote “The undersigned declares that G. von Halle, born 2 December 1922, has taken a sanatorium course for lung tuberculosis in former days. He is under permanent observation of welfare services.” It remains unclear how Oscar, Henriette, or Gerd were able to fool the organization. However, I believe the intense fear of tuberculosis, particularly its ease of communicability, was enough to warrant such a rapid decision. The organization submitted this letter to the *Zentralstelle* (Central Jewish Emigration Office). The *Zentralstelle*, lead by Adolph

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<sup>77</sup> Presser, 122.

Eichmann (who famously was captured in Buenos Aires, Argentina by Israeli Mossad and Shin Bet agents) was responsible for deciding who was to be deported and who was exempt. This organization played a large role in facilitating the mass murder of European Jews. Within three days of receiving the Tuberculosis Organization's letter, Gerd received the following letter from the Jewish Council, "Herewith we inform you that we received a message from the Central Jewish Emigration Office...stating that you have been excused from your obligation to perform labor in Germany." [VM 59]

This was extraordinary news for Gerd and a huge relief for Oscar and Henriette. If it were not for Gerd's hero, Hans Jürgen, who encouraged him to claim he had TB, Gerd's fate would have likely been grim. While Gerd's falsified condition kept him safe for the time being, this ordeal proved too close for comfort. Gerd knew his family was running out of options and decided that his family must go into hiding. This decision, however, was easier said than done. As I previously mentioned, it was extremely risky to reach out beyond the invisible wall the Nazis built around the Jewish community. Gerd explains that it was difficult to find someone to talk to, as well as the tremendous risk involved for both parties. If Gerd asked the wrong person, he or she could report him to the Nazis. If that person slipped up, Gerd and his family, as well as any Dutch parties involved, would be punished or deported. Gerd had to do a lot of thinking about who to ask, as "this was not just a favor."

Having spent one year in engineering school to please Oscar (who wanted Gerd to follow him into architecture), he remembered a professor, Dick In't Hout,

who for some reason stood out in his mind. Despite having never taken a class with Professor In't Hout, Gerd recalled him being an extremely patriotic Dutchman. Additionally, he hated the Germans. Gerd's decision to reach out to professor In't Hout, whom he barely had a relationship with, reflects just how desperate a situation Gerd and his family were in. After working up the courage to call Professor In't Hout, Gerd immediately explained his situation. As he finished describing the death of his brother, the professor, without even asking his wife or showing an ounce of hesitation, told Gerd and his family to come to his apartment.

The professor, his wife, and their two teenage children (one boy and one girl) lived in a small two-bedroom apartment. As it turned out, near miraculously, Professor In't Hout was a member of the Dutch Underground resistance movement. This amazing coincidence was another lucky break for Gerd and his family. The professor, through the Underground, was able to provide Gerd, Oscar, and Henriette with fake identification cards. Gerd chose the name "Gerard Post" for his new identity. Gerd explains that he kept his same birthdate in order to "snap to it" if ever asked personal questions about his life. In addition to the fake identification cards, Professor In't Hout was also able to get the stamped "J" removed from Gerd and his parent's identification cards. [VM 54-55] Gerd remembers being in awe of how the underground was able to remove the stamp, "it was unbelievable, like a work of art." False identity papers were highly desired by the Jews of Holland. According to Presser, some people charged 350 guilder, but Gerd and his family were one of the lucky few that received them for free.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Presser, 384.



The von Halles stayed in the small apartment for two nights. The professor's brother-in-law agreed to take in Gerd's parents. While the professor showed unequivocal generosity, the current situation could not last forever. Professor In't Hout, through the Underground, was able to find another place for Oscar, Henriette, and Gerd to stay. Gerd and his family would have to find a way to Landgraaf, a small farm town in the southern region of Limberg. Just getting to the hiding place was an incredible hurdle. By this time, Jews were forbidden to ride the trams, as well as own bicycles. The only way, Gerd recalls, was to walk without the yellow star, armed only with their false and doctored papers. This was an incredibly risky decision, as Gerd believes he and his father looked "very Jewish." Many Jews tried numerous methods to cover up their appearance, reaching out to beauty parlors to dye their hair or in some cases seeking plastic surgery.<sup>79</sup> Thankfully, Gerd, Oscar, and Henriette made it safely, via train, to Landgraaf.

Upon arriving in Landgraaf, the von Halles found the small farmhouse owned by a middle-aged married couple. The farmhouse was very modest; the von Halles had one rooms upstairs with one double bed for Oscar and Henriette and a smaller bed for Gerd. The situation was surprisingly comfortable: the food was good, despite a rudimentary bathroom. Considering the circumstances, Gerd and his family were extremely fortunate. They stayed there with the farmer's family for two months. In October 1942, another Jewish couple, Mr. and Mrs. Kahn, arrived at the farm. According to Gerd, Mr. Kahn, an accountant, was extraordinarily boring, and a "Mr. Milky toast." Conversely, Mrs. Kahn was quite attractive and flirtatious. Within the

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<sup>79</sup> Presser, 385.

first couple of weeks of the Kahn's arrival, Gerd remembers Mrs. Kahn trying to "start something" with him. Oscar and Henriette promptly told Gerd to "not even dare think about it." The would-be affair between Gerd and Mrs. Kahn never came to fruition. Mrs. Kahn's coquetry, nonetheless, found another target: the farmer hiding them.

Mrs. Kahn and the farmer engaged in an extramarital affair for nearly two months while they continued to hide Gerd and his family in the farmhouse. This made the von Halles quite uneasy. In order to be prepared for the worst, Oscar, Gerd, and Henriette had to decide what to do if the Gestapo ever came to the farmhouse. Oscar, being an architect, believed the attic was the safest place to hide. Gerd adamantly disagreed with his father, but nonetheless Oscar chose it as his hiding place. Gerd made the decision for his mom to hide in the closet in their bedroom. Gerd chose the bathroom, a rudimentary structure with a small ledge behind it, as his hiding place. As the affair continued, the farmer's wife started to seem increasingly troubled. The farmer and his wife had numerous kids and the wife grew noticeably more distraught. Eventually, unbeknownst to the five Jews living in the farmhouse, the wife sought out the Gestapo and told them they were hiding Jews.

One day, near the end of 1942, everyone was sitting down at dinner when Gerd saw a car pull up to the house. The car doors opened and four uniformed Gestapo agents emerged. Instantly, everyone bolted from the table. Gerd, Oscar, and Henriette ran to their hiding place, Mrs. Kahn ran out the door (never to be seen again), and Mr. Kahn ran into another bedroom. Within two minutes, Gerd could

here the Gestapo agents speaking with his father. Gerd, although angry that he previously warned his father about his hiding place, was forced to remain silent. Soon, Gerd also heard Mr. Kahn speaking with the agents. As the agents continued to search the house, Gerd had to remain absolutely motionless: the slightest noise or creak could reveal his hiding place. From his hiding place, Gerd could see the Gestapo agents searching, but luckily the agents could not see him. The agents finally exhausted their search with Henriette still in the closet and Gerd behind the toilet. With three prisoners, Oscar, Mr. Kahn, and the farmer, there was not enough room for their suitcases in the Gestapo's car. They would have to come back later to collect (or steal) their property. The Gestapo decided to take all Jewish belongings in the house and put them in the room where Henriette was hiding. After piling the luggage in the room, the Gestapo barricaded the door to keep it permanently shut. As Oscar was taken away, without saying goodbye to his wife or son, he removed his gold wedding band and threw it by the barricaded door holding Henriette captive. This would be the only remaining possession of Oscar's that survives today.

When the Gestapo drove away from the house, Gerd emerged from his hiding place and went to find his mother. He quickly noticed that his mother was trapped in the room. Henriette asked Gerd what to do. Gerd was faced with two very difficult options, something he calls "the hardest decision of his life." Since it was impossible to get his mother out of the second story room without knowing when the Gestapo would return, Gerd had to decide whether Henriette would remain in the closet or hide under the bed (the only other potential hiding place). Gerd had to make a decision, and ultimately decided for his mother to hide under the bed. He does not

really have any logical explanation for his decision, except instinct. I believe, however, it was based on the assumption the Nazis would look for more property to sift through, located in the closet.

Two Gestapo agents returned around two hours later in a smaller car than before. Gerd returned to his hiding place and Henriette got into her place underneath the bed. The Gestapo immediately removed the barricade from the door and began divvying up the goods. Henriette had to remain still and silent as agents on either side of the bed rummaged through her family's belongings. The Gestapo agents would say to each other, "This dress would be perfect for your girlfriend," or, "This watch can be yours." Gerd even remembers hearing his new Phillips electric razor being turned on, an amusing new invention for the agents to steal. For nearly an hour and half, an eternity for Henriette, the agents divided up the "loot". Throughout the hour and half they spent in the bedroom, the agents would periodically exclaim, "Look here!" Each time it would nearly stop Gerd's heart, but always it was their excitement over a new article of clothing or Jewelry. The Gestapo had taken so many things they could not fit it all in their car. The Gestapo loaded up what they could and told the farmer's wife they would be back in the morning for the rest of the stuff. Before leaving, the agents resealed the door. My grandfather remembers feeling like the entire farm town, approximately 800 people, was watching the commotion by the farmhouse.

To ensure their safety, Gerd waited till the middle of the night to try and figure out how to get his mom out of the sealed bedroom. Gerd was able to find a ladder and began to coax his unathletic mother down from the second story

window. According to Gerd, this was no easy feat and took a lot of energy to get her safely on the ground. Gerd instructed his mother to try and close the window as best she could to not tip off the returning agents. Gerd and Henriette then walked over to a near by haystack and just sat. Having no idea where Oscar was taken and no idea what to do, they felt completely hopeless. Gerd knew they had to make a decision where to go, sooner rather than later. Luckily and perplexingly, a man on a bicycle appeared with a message from the Underground: the Gestapo found out there was two more Jews, possibly three, in the house and were coming back shortly. With this news, the decision was essentially made for them. They had to leave immediately. The only place Gerd felt comfortable going back to was Amsterdam. While there was a train station in town, Gerd knew it would be one of first places the Gestapo would look. There was a train station in the next town, but the only way to get there was through the woods. Gerd convinced his mother, and they began, in the dark of night, to trek through the woods to the next town.

Hours passed as Gerd and Henriette hiked through the near pitch-black woods. Henriette was struggling through the entire hike. At one point she sat down and begged Gerd to leave her there. Gerd refused to leave his mother behind. By dragging, carrying, and coaxing, Gerd was able to push his mother through the woods. Feeling lost, they ran into a random man who helped point them the right direction. After numerous hours in the dark, Gerd and Henriette arrived at the next train station. As I previously mentioned, Gerd was aware he “looked Jewish”.

Henriette, however, did not have traditional Jewish features and could pass as a non-Jew. Gerd and his mother boarded the train, without any of their belongings,

and only a little bit of money. Although they chose the same train compartment, they sat separately. Gerd believed this would at least keep his mother safe if anyone tried to question him. During the train ride, Gerd bought a newspaper to hide his face behind. Thankfully, Gerd and his mother arrived safely in Amsterdam. Gerd immediately called his professor. The following is from Gerd's interview with the Holocaust Museum:

When I got back to Amsterdam, I got on the phone and I called my, my teacher, it's the only person I knew. Not the only person I knew, but the only person I knew who might be able to help us. And the teacher...I called him on the phone and I said, "Here we are. This is what happened. My father was arrested, my mother and I are here." And again without, without thinking for one second, he says, "Come right over." So this is 1943. We are walking ...clear across Amsterdam from the railroad station, and we wind up...we wind up...back at Mr. In't Hout's home.

Once again, Professor In't Hout was extremely sympathetic toward Gerd and Henriette. He moved his children into one room to allow Gerd and his mother to have one of the bedrooms. Despite his generosity, the living conditions were still rough.

Here again, this little...this little apartment--it's a, it's a city apartment--we were there and, we stayed in one room. My mother and I stayed in that room for two and a half years. Never left the room. Never saw...never saw fresh air. And it's, it's a strange feeling. You know even a prisoner is allowed every day to exercise.

Literally trapped in their room, Gerd and Henriette did not want to risk ever getting caught. They would do whatever it took, whether that meant never exercising, walking outside, or speaking to anyone besides the professor and his family.

With In't Hout's connections to the Dutch Underground, Gerd and Henriette were finally able to receive word on the whereabouts of Oscar. Oscar sent a letter to

a former upstairs neighbor that the professor was able to obtain. Once again, the Nazis specified a strict set of rules for contacting “patients and prisoners”: [VM 60-61]

*READ THIS!*

*When corresponding with patients and prisoners surname and name must be indicated at the top of the letter. The name is not allowed to appear in the address. The address is: TO NUMBER K-771*

*House of detention*

*Unfranked letters to patients and prisoners will not be accepted. Stamps and coupons cannot be sent. The sending of money should be done by means of money order. The convicted can, before release, only in certain cases and as a rule NOT for purchase of cafeteria articles, have sent money at their disposal.*

Throughout the series of letters, Oscar addresses them to various people, usually Madam, Colleague, or even People, but the content of the letters clearly shows he was writing to Gerd and Henriette.

Oscar writes on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1943: [VM 60-61]

*Dear Madam,*

*Today I have the opportunity to write to you and to let you know that I am doing fine and hope it will stay that way. As you know, I left without luggage. If possible, could I ask you to prepare only some of most necessary clothes and blankets I left behind in a parcel and send it to the address I will give you in my next letter. I hope that you and your children are doing fine.*

*Best regards, your O.L. von Halle*

It turns out Oscar was sent to Vught concentration camp (Konzentrationslager - KL Herzogenbosch). This camp, although not known as an

extermination camp, still had its own crematorium and gallows.<sup>80</sup> Arriving soon after he was found in the attic, Oscar only had what he wore on his back. Less than a week after the first letter, Oscar again wrote to his family. Since the Gestapo had already confiscated most of their belongings, I am sure Gerd and Henriette had very few items they could send. I also presume it would have been extremely difficult to find a way to send something. Oscar's sincere desperation comes across in the following letter.

*Den Bosch, 30 June 1943*

*Dear Madam,*

*First of all, I hope that you and your children are all in good health and that you are all doing well, which I can say about myself. You know that I left without luggage. If you can, could I please ask you to prepare my luggage such as underwear, coat, 1 pair of shoes, goggles, medication etc, comb, hairbrush, toothbrush. I would really appreciate this. I hope to be able to inform you in a timely manner about the address where to send my luggage. This has to be done directly and as quickly as possible and in the fastest possible manner. Thank you very much in advance for your efforts and my best regards for all of you.*

*O.L. von Halle*

Oscar's requests reaffirm the intolerable conditions of the concentration camp.

Lacking even basic necessities, Oscar's repeated pleas for blankets, medicine, and

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<sup>80</sup> Hans Vanderwerff, "Concentration Camp Vught," The Holocaust: Lest We Forget, July 22, 2009, accessed January 30, 2011, <http://www.cymppm.com/vught.html>.



even underwear suggests he was without a lot of basic items. Oscar wrote again, his first sentence revealing the true intent of the letter.

*Den Bosch, 7 July 1943*

*Dear Madam,*

*Today I have the opportunity to give you a sign of life and let you know that I am doing well. I would like to ask you, provided you have my luggage at your disposal, if you could please prepare the most necessary items for me like braces, medication, shoes etc. and to send it to me at my new address\* as quickly as possible. I think about you all so often. So please, dear Madam, pass on my best regards to your children. Hoping you are all doing fine and that I will receive a short letter from you soon, my best regards to you and all,*

*O.L. von Halle K-771*

*\* which I will send to you*

While these letters may seem repetitious, they firmly establish that Oscar was desperate for basic necessities. Oscar clearly did not want to burden his wife and son, but he had no other option. Within a month, Gerd and Henriette, presumably with the help of Professor In't Hout, scraped together a parcel for Oscar. The parcel included "a winter coat, woolen cardigan, scarf and a piece of soap." Oscar was extremely grateful, but noted, "There should also have been delivered woolen gloves and other things, but I have not seen them yet. That's why I would like to ask you to have 1 blanket, 1 pair of shoes, medication, 1 pair of slippers, 1 pair of braces, 1 hair brush, 1 toothbrush and things like that." It seems odd that Gerd and Henriette would be able to procure a coat and clothes but not a toothbrush

or shoes. The camp's guards searched all the packages before delivering them to the detainees. It was highly possible the Nazis confiscated the missing items. This would be the last letter Gerd and Henriette received from Oscar for nearly two months.

The next letter they received was on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Gerd remembers being extremely worried because the letter was written in someone else's handwriting. His father was too sick to even write his own letter. Oscar writes on September 1943: [VM 64-65]

*Dear colleague,*

*I have been here since 11/8 and hope you are all doing well, which I can say about myself. I find it difficult, but still I would like to ask you at this time to send me a parcel with provisions and a money order of about 25 Guilders. You know that I don't usually have requests like this to you or anyone else. You can be assured of my everlasting gratefulness for being prepared to help me in this exceptional case. I would appreciate it very much if you could visit my sister in the Rijnstraat 169 and pass on my best regards. We would be thrilled to get a letter (a few lines) from you. With best regards to you and all others, I am your colleague O.L. v. Halle*

*1-10-86*

*Number 6907 Block 15B*

This letter is by far the most alarming in regards to Oscar's health. Not only is it written by someone else, it notes his sister's address (who is Jewish). This letter also seems to be written on a different type of paper from the rest of the letters, which may suggest it was smuggled out or sent through a different method than the camp's mail system. I have no idea how Gerd and Henriette would be able to get money, considering most of their belongings had already been confiscated. It was

my understanding that it was too risky for Gerd and Henriette to write to Oscar. If they did send a letter it might tip off the Nazis about their location or the people in Dutch Underground helping them.

Oscar's next letter was written on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1943. Fortunately, it was Oscar who wrote the letter. However, the stationary it was written on contains bleak messages from the Nazis. At the top of the page, the Nazis printed, "Release date cannot be indicated yet. Visits to the camp are forbidden. Requests are pointless." Oscar again asks for more money, and thanks his "colleague" for the "delicious provisions" that were sent to him. The letter refers to a Mr. Stengel, whom I can only assume is a fake name, possibly referring to the professor. The last letter Oscar sent was written on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943. This letter undoubtedly provides the best insight into the mind of Oscar, having spent close to a year in the camp. This time, and the only time, Oscar addresses the letter to his family. [VM 66-67]

*Vught, 15 November 1943*

*Dear family,*

*I have to thank you and especially Geer for the parcel, which was a very welcome parcel for me. You can imagine how careful I am with the contents. On 6/11 I received it in good condition. Now, I want and have to draw your attention to the fact that you should not send a parcel or money before I write to you again. I am in good health and hope the same goes for you all. When will be the day that I will see you again. I still keep hoping that this day will come and that I will live to see this day. Please accept my warmest thanks for your kindnesses and attention, special regards for .... and Henrik. From me, the best regards from your,*

*O.L. von Halle, Number 6907, born 1.10.86*

On the same day the letter was written, Oscar was sent via Westerbork to Auschwitz concentration camp. Little is known about what happened to Oscar after he was deported from Vught. The Red Cross, which controls much of the Nazi-era documents, explains that Oscar was “deported for racial reasons and because of his Jewish Ancestry from Westerbork to Auschwitz.” Westerbork was a transit camp/detention center. Anne and Margot Frank also followed this path from Westerbork to Auschwitz. Oscar would have passed under the infamous “Work Liberates” iron sign at the gates of Auschwitz. Oscar died on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1944.

## Living in Hiding (1943-1945)

While Gerd's father was imprisoned in Vught and Auschwitz, he and his mother remained in a cramped room for nearly two and half years. While Oscar was officially considered a prisoner, Gerd and his mother were unofficially confined to the professor's crowded apartment. The entire time Gerd and Henriette were in the apartment, they never went outside or took a breath of fresh air. The Germans called the Jews in hiding "*onderduikers*" or 'people who go underwater'.<sup>81</sup> According to a survey of young *onderduikers*, the average number of different hiding places they occupied was four and half, with the most being 37.<sup>82</sup> In a complex equation involving luck, connections, and timing, the "majority of those who lived through the war did so by going into hiding."<sup>83</sup> Having narrowly escaped from the farmhouse, Gerd wanted to take no chance in risking their current hiding place. Hiding in an urban environment was a lot different than the farm. While many believe Anne Frank's attic was the status quo in urban hiding, it was far from the norm. Most *onderduikers* utilized upstairs rooms, bare attics, and cupboards.

Trapped in the bedroom, Gerd and Henriette were far too paranoid to risk being seen leaving the apartment. At first, Gerd thought all day and night about what to do if the Gestapo or a Nazi official suddenly arrived. The ability to hide from the Nazis was a life or death situation. Where as rural life allowed for an easier escape, should a Gestapo agent arrive at the apartment, there was little Gerd and Henriette could do to avoid arrest.

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<sup>81</sup> Moore, 146.

<sup>82</sup> Moore, 155.

<sup>83</sup> Moore, 146.

The son of an architect, Gerd began examining the apartment building and thinking of places that could stow him and his mother. The professor's apartment was on the top floor of a three-story apartment building. From outward appearances, Gerd believed there was an attic above the apartment. With permission from the professor, Gerd went into a closet in the hallway and sawed a small square in the ceiling. Gerd climbed through the cut out and looked out on to a plain, empty attic enclosed by bricks. Gerd climbed back down, and placed the square cut out back in its place. Gerd found a screwdriver and a hammer and climbed back up to the attic. Gerd chiseled one of the bricks from the wall. To his surprise, a similar attic space existed behind the wall. Gerd began removing brick after brick, carefully numbering each brick until there was a space big enough for him and his mother to crawl through. In case of emergency, Gerd envisioned being able to climb up to the attic, placing the cut out back over the hole, entering through the removed bricks, and reassembling the bricks to make it look like the plain, empty attic it was. Henriette's unathletic capabilities required a lot of practice to make her effort as quick, noiseless, and efficient as possible.

Day after day, with very little to entertain them, Gerd and Henriette practiced this routine. They were not going to repeat what happened to Oscar and Mr. Kahn. They also tried their best not to be burdensome to the professor's family. This included remaining in their bedroom for the majority of the day, only exiting to use the bathroom and to practice entering the attic. All day, minus the time spent practicing, they sat in that room, usually thinking about what they would do if the Gestapo found out about their location.

Unfortunately, Mr. In't Hout's wife died of natural causes in 1943. She was well liked by the Amsterdam community, so Gerd and Henriette had to prepare for many family and friends coming and going from the apartment. This was an extremely tense time, as Gerd and Henriette's status was kept from all of Mr. In't Hout's friends and family. Despite the passing of his wife, not once did the professor ever ask Gerd or Henriette to leave or change their accommodations. Mr. In't Hout, deeply immersed in the Dutch Underground, had to maintain both his duty as a leader in the Underground and as a father to his two children. The funeral and mourning period were limited due to scarce resources during the war and Mr. In't Hout's frequent underground missions.

Even after his wife's death, the professor was routinely gone on secret missions. Gerd was never in the loop about their missions and never knew where the professor was. The professor's children, a little younger than Gerd, were also involved in the Underground; the professor's son helped distribute underground newspapers throughout Amsterdam. Because of the professor's secret occupation, Gerd had access to a radio transmitter. All day, Gerd would sit by the transmitter, listening to cryptic and undecipherable messages from England to members of the Underground all over Amsterdam and Europe. In their room they had a map of Europe. As news filtered in from the BBC, Gerd would mark the progress of the Allied forces on a map hung the wall.

In Amsterdam and the Netherlands, other Dutch families took in Jews, often times at no cost. However, there was still a controversy over whether or not families should consider taking in Jewish fugitives. Presser, an *onderduiker* himself,

explained “there were the perennial excuses...it would make the house too noisy, the neighbors were untrustworthy, the servant wouldn’t hold her tongue, the postman was inquisitive or the husband irritable.”<sup>84</sup> Many Dutch families, whether out of fear, lack of resources, or even anti-Semitism, refused to help desperate Jews looking to escape labor and concentration camps. Presser also recalls one of the underground Newspapers, Het Parool, noting that “it was often most the people in the poorest homes who threw them open to the hunted.”<sup>85</sup>

Presser, who was one of the first historians to document the war years, explained that it was very difficult to estimate the number of Jews who went into hiding. Most authors put the number between 25,000-30,000 Jews with only 8,000-10,000 surviving the war.<sup>86</sup> One common theme among all *onderduikers* was their sincere appreciation for everything their hosts did for them. Professor In’t Hout, in spite of everything that happened throughout the war, always graciously provided for Gerd and Henriette “Those they helped and sheltered,” Presser writes, “remember above all the small but infinitely welcome kindnesses, the tact, the sympathy, the understanding.”<sup>87</sup>

The Nazis were extremely explicit in the penalties involved for harboring Jews. Amsterdam was plastered with warning signs. Germans routinely raised the price on Jewish heads and sent hunting parties throughout Amsterdam and the rural towns to unearth the *onderduikers*.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, according to Presser, the Nazis

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<sup>84</sup> Presser, 388.

<sup>85</sup> Presser, 388

<sup>86</sup> Presser, 383.

<sup>87</sup> Presser, 388

<sup>88</sup> Presser, 389.



“came down far harder on those who helped from conviction than on those who did it for money.”<sup>89</sup> The slightest slip up could cost the lives of both the *onderduiker* and their host: a loud noise from accidentally dropping a plate, an unexpected visit from a neighbor, or even a squabble with the host family.

The professor and many other hosts, paid or unpaid, risked their lives daily. Finding a host willing to take even a single Jewish person was extremely difficult, especially when dealing with complete strangers. While many Dutch hosts acted out of conviction, it must have been difficult to accommodate a family or even a person for weeks, months, and even years with no end in sight. Family life would never be “normal”; time alone was nonexistent, and the constant threat of punishment added to the stress of the situation. Many *onderduikers* were exposed to a new set of experience. Many host families exposed Jews to the Christian faith. Some Dutch families, including the devoutly religious In’t Houts, believed harboring Jews was an act of Christian mercy. Gerd recalls reading the bible every day at the behest of the In’t Houts. The intersection between the Christian faith, Dutch values, and the *onderduikers* is particularly interesting as many apprehensive Dutch citizens, even some with anti-Semitic tendencies, harbored Jews despite personal reservations. Presser quoted one artist as saying, “They’re a lousy lot, but of course we must help them.”<sup>90</sup> Another Dutchman said, “Of course, you can’t let them be burned in concentration camps, but I don’t much like them, that’s a fact.”<sup>91</sup> I believe that if it

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<sup>89</sup> Presser 388

<sup>90</sup> Presser, 388.

<sup>91</sup> Presser, 388.

were not for the fundamental values of human life instilled in the Dutch citizens, the ability to find hosts willing to harbor the fugitive Jews would have been hopeless.

Gerd had reoccurring feelings of despair while in hiding. Gerd and Henriette, as well as all *onderduikers*, had no idea when they would finally be free, or *if* they would ever be free. Cooped up in cramped hiding places, never exercising or going outside, *onderduikers* suffered a great toll on their emotional and physical lives. Finding things to pass the time, like practicing entering the attic, was essential in maintaining sanity. Gerd began to practice sketching and drew both Mrs. In't Hout and her daughter--the only surviving remnants describing the In't Hout family. As weeks turned into months and months into years, some Jews could not withstand the despondency created by the repetition, restrictions, and uncertainty of hiding. According to Moore, "One of the greatest problem for the *onderduiker* was trying to maintain a sense of stability in an alien environment with an uncertain future."<sup>92</sup> Because of this, "there are accounts of Jews succumbing to depression and even suicide as a result of their prolonged incarceration."<sup>93</sup> Day after day, without any change, Gerd and Henriette sat in their room, simply waiting.

Having access to the radio was both comforting and painful. As the war raged on throughout Europe, Gerd and Henriette listened as the Allies made progress against the Axis. By the end of 1943, the Allies had made impressive strides in Italy, started bombing Hamburg and Berlin, and pushed back Nazi advances in the Soviet Union. As they heard reports of Allied advances, Gerd prayed to hear more about the status of Holland. Month after month, there was still no mention of their liberation.

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<sup>92</sup> Moore, 158.

<sup>93</sup> Moore, 158.

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944 the United States finally invaded northern France and set their sights on Paris. On August 25<sup>th</sup>, Paris was liberated. Although reassuring, the news still provided no insight about the impending liberation of Holland. Finally, in September, Gerd got wind of battles being fought in the Dutch countryside. With the success at Normandy and the liberation of Paris, Gerd believed their time had finally come. Unfortunately, the Battle of Arnhem, the title given to the military engagements in the Dutch countryside from September 17-26, proved to be a failure for the Allied forces. The Nazis decimated British troops and ultimately defeated the Allies.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the loss, pressure mounted against the Nazi regime. By the winter of 1944 Belgium, France, Greece, and Italy were all liberated. The Dutch, eager for liberation, began cooperating with the Allies. Supported by the Dutch government in exile, the Dutch again launched a rail strike aimed at preventing German troops from moving to battle areas.<sup>95</sup> The fear of German retribution kept rail workers away from their jobs, severely limiting rail service into and out of Holland. The Nazis, bombarded from all sides, refused to “guarantee food and fuel supplies for the big cities, usher[ing] a winter of scarcity and starvation.”<sup>96</sup> The winter of 1944 became known as the “*hongerwinter*” or ‘hunger winter’. The Dutch Famine of 1944 affected the entire Dutch population. Unfortunately, Holland’s urban population bore the brunt of the famine, and by proxy, the *onderduikers* who survived from

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<sup>94</sup> Charles Brown MacDonald, *The Decision to Launch Operation MARKET-GARDEN*(Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990), 419-442.

<sup>95</sup> Moore, 226. And Nel Mondo, *Anne Frank in the World*, 4th ed. (Amsterdam: Anne Frank Stichting, 1992), 120.

<sup>96</sup> Moore, 227.

their host's ability to provide their food.<sup>97</sup> Gerd, in his USHMM interview recalled the Dutch Famine:

I hope nobody has to go through hunger the way we did. Hunger is... so painful. I would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat and jump up in bed. Why? Because I was dreaming I saw a potato. That was something that...that was like a nightmare. I saw a potato and I thought I could eat it. When I woke up it wasn't there. Just a potato. Not...not a meal. A potato. Uh...the hunger was unbelievable. We were...it, it was...we had nothing to eat. Absolutely nothing to eat. It was...it was...in fact, I remember our Mr. In't Hout one day, he was on a...he was coming home with one or two potatoes. He found them somewhere on the road. But let me tell you, he came home with these two potatoes. You thought he had found two diamonds in the street. They were just two plain, uh, potatoes. The whole...the whole family, we were all excited about those two potatoes. You can't... you cannot believe what it means to be real hungry.

Gerd, Henriette and the In't Houts were desperate for food. During this time they lived off something called "pulp"-- a sugar beet after all the sugar had been extracted. What remained was a disgusting mush typically fed to cows. Dutch citizens were desperate for food and fuel, "Everything that [could] burn [was] used for heat...everything edible [was] eaten, even tulip bulbs."<sup>98</sup> The Dutch were distraught; everyone was starving. Moore recounts Dutch citizens "on hands and knees sifting through piles of clinker to find what little coal remained, or digging up the cobbled streets to remove the wooden sleepers from abandoned tramlines. Houses were gutted for fuel...in the attempt to keep warm."<sup>99</sup> As weeks passed, the situation in Amsterdam became worse and worse. The lack of food began to take a serious toll on Henriette and Gerd's bodies. Their stomach's distended, Gerd could not recall a more painful time in all of his experience during the war. Henriette's feet

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<sup>97</sup> Moore, 227.

<sup>98</sup> Mondo, 120.

<sup>99</sup> Moore, 227.

swelled from the edema. There have been numerous studies regarding the effects of the Dutch Famine on the civilian population. Audrey Hepburn, who lived in the Netherlands, faced similar conditions and attributed her lifelong battle of depression, anemia, and physical deformations to this malnutrition.<sup>100</sup>

All the while, the professor continued to run missions for the Dutch Underground. The Germans, despite facing an imminent collapse, ramped up their “pursuit of resistance workers” despite the decreasing voracity of the “Jew-hunters”.<sup>101</sup> It was in April 1945, only a month before liberation, that Professor In’t Hout was captured during a mission. The Nazis murdered him on site. This left the two In’t Hout children, now orphans, unable to care for Gerd and Henriette. Luckily, through the Underground, they found Gerd and Henriette another professor willing to take them in. Leaving the apartment, the first time in two years, Gerd and Henriette switched housing in the middle of the night.

The last four weeks of Nazi occupation were almost ironic. Berlin had already fallen, Hitler had committed suicide, and yet Gerd remained imprisoned inside a stranger’s home. Finally on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the Germans surrendered unconditionally to the Allied powers. After five years of occupation, walking outside a free man was unbelievably overwhelming. As it turned out, the Canadian Army, specifically the Jewish Brigade, liberated Gerd and Henriette. Gerd recalls,

When I saw, after five years of being called a Jew bastard, a Jew pig, the swastika, and everything that we went through in five years, to finally be face

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<sup>100</sup>Lesley Garner, "Lesley Garner Meets the Legendary Actress as She Prepares for This Week's Unicef Gala Performance," *Sunday Telegraph* (London), March 26, 1991, accessed February 25, 2011, <http://classic-web.archive.org/web/20050117094236/http://www.ahepburn.com/article6.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Moore, 227.

to face with a human being, with a Jewish Star. I cannot tell you. I absolutely broke down. I cried like a little baby. It was the first time I cried out loud.

### **Liberated, Poor, and Stateless, Amsterdam 1945**

Following liberation, Gerd and Henriette were overjoyed with happiness. Being free for the first time in five years was an experience unlike any other. As happy as they were, the reality of their current situation started to sink in. By the end of the war, Gerd and Henriette were penniless, had no belongings, and no idea about the status of their friends and family. The first place Gerd and Henriette returned to was their former apartment in Merwedeplein. Their neighbors, who helped communicate with Oscar while he was imprisoned, had the key to their apartment. Most of the apartment had been completely looted. However, their neighbors had taken a few possessions from the apartment. The neighbors saved Gerd's bicycle and the family tree. Reunited with his bicycle, Gerd was finally mobile after nearly five years of occupation.

The next step was to find a place to stay. They were able to secure a room, more like an attic, "under the roof somewhere" to transition them back into post-war society. The death, fear, and uncertainty that accompanied Gerd and Henriette for the duration of the war finally began to dissipate. For three weeks they enjoyed the basic freedoms denied to them: walking outside, talking to friends, practicing their religion, and trying to locate what was left of their belongings.

Since Gerd and Henriette lived with members of the Dutch Underground, they had at least minimal knowledge about the whereabouts of the family members. They knew Oscar died while at a concentration camp, though unaware it was

Auschwitz until nearly 40 years later when Nazi records became more accessible. Most surviving Jews had little information about the whereabouts of their loved ones. Some Dutch Jews were liberated from camps as far away as Poland and had to get back home. Sometimes walking miles to the nearest checkpoint run by the Allies, many survivors had to take numerous trains or boxcars to return back to Holland.<sup>102</sup> For many returning survivors, the Dutch authorities set up check points for survivors “to obtain medical, security and customs clearance before being allowed to go on his or her way.”<sup>103</sup> With nearly 75% of the Dutch Jewish population murdered during the war, most returning survivors came home to tragic news of their loved ones.<sup>104</sup> Those who went into hiding faced way better odds than those who were deported to camps. According to Presser, of the 110,000 people deported, less than six thousand returned.<sup>105</sup>

The first three weeks felt like a rebirth for Gerd and Henriette. It was hard to express the difference between hiding in one room for nearly two and half years and immediately being free. In Presser’s epilogue, he writes about the transition to from captivity to freedom:

Many Jews reflected and talked about this subject, even during the war, wondering whether, after the experiences they had already had or that were in store for them, they would ever be capable of behaving like normal human beings again—a question that many answered in the negative.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Moore, 228.

<sup>103</sup> Moore, 229.

<sup>104</sup> Mondo, 122.

<sup>105</sup> Presser, 539.

<sup>106</sup> Presser, 536.

Many Jews, upon liberation, were confronted with a rush of emotion, both pleasant and haunting, which were forcibly repressed during the war. There was not time to properly grieve the loss of loved ones when it could cost you your own life. Recalling Gerd and Henriette's trek through the woods, it was almost unthinkable they were able to carry on while Oscar's arrest was seared permanently in their memory. Presser continues, "After all the fears, all the threats, all the shocks, the panic, the losses—home, family and even name—how could they hope to find their way back to everyday life, without mental anguish, suspicion, nameless terrors and nightmares."<sup>107</sup> Every smile, laugh, and joy felt because of liberation was a direct result of the torture, murder, and paranoia experienced during Nazi persecution.

Gerd noted important differences in his life after liberation. First, they possessed no passports. The Germans, years prior, revoked German citizenship for all German Jews living outside of Germany. Oscar, Henriette, Hans Jürgen, and Gerd never applied for Dutch citizenship. This, in turn, effectively made them stateless. Without a passport, it would be very difficult to move or assert control over certain belongings. Second, the newly liberated Dutch society had to prepare not only for the high number of refugees returning home, but also the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens forced to work for the Third Reich.<sup>108</sup> The Dutch feared the millions of displaced Jewish refugees, "many assumed to be sick or diseased, who might find their way into the Netherlands unless proper controls

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<sup>107</sup> Presser, 536.

<sup>108</sup> Moore, 230.



were enforced.”<sup>109</sup> The Dutch government tried their best to reassert control over their newly freed nation.

One problem the Dutch government faced was distinguishing the victims from the persecutors. Only three weeks after liberation, Gerd and Henriette heard a knock outside of their room. Upon opening the door, to his dismay, two officers from the Dutch police stood waiting. Confirming their last name, the officers told Gerd and Henriette they were under arrest. Unable to provide a passport or any other means of identifying themselves as Dutch residents, they were forced to go with the officers. The officers placed Gerd and Henriette in a cell full of men. It turned out everyone in the holding cell were German Nazis that the Dutch police had arrested. Only three weeks after liberation, they found themselves in the same cell as the people who killed Oscar and Hans Jürgen. For around eight hours, Gerd and Henriette remained in the holding room, desperately trying to explain their situation. The Dutch police finally let them go after realizing the error. It was our last name that ultimately ended up being identified as German, and not Jewish.

The irony of the situation was self-evident-- a ten-generation German Jew placed in a cell with German Nazis who wouldn't even consider Gerd German. However, this situation was not unique. According to Moore, it was “Dutch policy to treat all Germans as enemy aliens and incarcerate them...this did not take account of the fact that many of the ‘Germans’ coming back were Jews who felt [bound] to the Netherlands.”<sup>110</sup> Additionally, Gerd and Henriette had been stripped of nearly all their belongings. They no longer owned their house. All their money was either

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<sup>109</sup> Moore, 231.

<sup>110</sup> Moore, 232.

spent or confiscated by the Nazis. Without anything tying Gerd and Henriette to their former home, they came to the realization that their future no longer involved Holland, Germany, or any other European country. Gerd wanted to go where they tried so hard to go year's prior: America. With the help of Marjorie Shuler Charles, the von Halles renewed their attempt to immigrate to the United States.

Charles, having spoken numerous times to the State and Visa departments when she tried to secure their passage into America, once again wrote an affidavit in support of Gerd and Henriette. In September 1945, Marjorie wrote,

*...Not just for ourselves, their only close relatives in the United States, we consider it not only a duty to them as individuals, but as well as brave survivors of a war to do all in our power to help them establish themselves in this country. We therefore implore that they be given a place on the quota list.*

Her words highlight an important sentiment not immediately felt by Americans or Europeans. So many countries lost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of soldiers and citizens during the war. Information about the extent of the Nazi extermination of Jews was not realized until years later, particularly beginning with the Nuremberg Trials in 1946.

Charles also called on Eleanor Roosevelt to help facilitate the immigration process. Writing only a few months after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor once again came to the aid of her friend. She personally wrote Ugo Carusi, the commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, asking what could be done to help Gerd and Henriette. America, despite winning the war, was not ready to

shed the xenophobia ingrained in our society. Quotas that had been in place prior to the war still remained intact. Carusi responded to Eleanor:

*October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945*

*Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,*

*...As it does not appear that Mrs. von Halle or her son have any American citizen relatives in close enough degree of relationship to entitle them to a nonquota or preference status, it will be necessary for them to obtain visas chargeable to the quota of the Netherlands....*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Ugo Carusi*  
*COMMISSIONER*

Carusi concluded his message by suggesting Charles speak with the Visa division, once again, to secure visas for Gerd and Henriette.

The war officially over, the State Department was somewhat less rigid about immigration quotas. They were, however slowly, accepting refugees from Europe. The only problem was that Gerd and Henriette lacked a passport or documentation demonstrating their permanent residency in Holland. Gerd had to apply for an Identity Certificate for Aliens in Holland. Issued in July of 1946, Gerd wrote, "Issued for traveling to *U.S.A. and all over the world.*" President Truman, in December 1945, released an executive order allowing 16,000 Jewish refugees to be admitted between 1946-1948.<sup>111</sup> Gerd finally obtained the necessary documents that would

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<sup>111</sup> "United States Policy and Its Impact on European Jews," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011, accessed March 1, 2011, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007652>.

permit him to apply for US immigration. In the fall of 1946, Gerd secured all the documents required to leave the Netherlands and enter the United States. Gerd was able to secure a spot on an all-male Dutch troop carrier. The carrier was traveling to America to pick up replacements for Dutch merchant vessels destroyed during the war. Since it was an all-male ship, Henriette would have to stay behind in Holland until Gerd believed it would be okay for Henriette to join him.

Gerd, now 23-years-old, set sail for America, not only leaving behind the devastation of the past 5 years, but also his family history. He would enter America without any of the privileges, recognition, or legacy once had in Europe. Gerd was a typical immigrant; he sought a better life in the land of opportunity. With only five dollars in his pocket, Gerd arrived in Hoboken, New Jersey. He was then able to make his way to New York City to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise's refugee center on the upper west side of Manhattan. Stephen Wise was a fervent advocate for Jews during the war. He organized marches, protests, and spoke several times with the Roosevelt administration about reports of genocide committed by the Nazis. The refugee center was extremely generous to their residents. They fed and housed Gerd free of cost. Gerd remembers his first few days in America being a big adjustment. Walking around Manhattan, Gerd saw a sign that caught his attention. Gerd walked into the store, Van Heusen, speaking completely in Dutch. The employees were dumbfounded. Gerd thought the Dutch sounding store was actually owned by Dutch expatriates.

Gerd knew that one of the first things he had to do was get a job. With his education cut short because of the war, Gerd knew little English. From word of

mouth, Gerd knew the one thing to buy in the United States was the New York Times. With just a few dollars left in his pocket, Gerd paid the five cents for the newspaper. Gerd remembers being completely lost among the pages and pages of newspaper. He had never seen such a big newspaper, but he understood the New York Times contained the advertisements for jobs. With his newspaper, Gerd found a bench in central park. Gerd was completely confused; all the ads were full of abbreviations and slang. Gerd tried to find someone to help him read the indecipherable ads. He soon realized every person he asked was just like him: they couldn't speak English and couldn't read the paper either. Finally, Gerd located a job opening at Gimbels department store on 34<sup>th</sup> street.

Gerd walked into the employment office and was asked what job he was interested in. He responded, "Whatever job pays the most." Close to Christmas, the department store needed help wrapping toys. Gerd accepted the job and began working at Gimbels, wrapping presents for Christmas. Gerd was happily employed for only a few weeks when he accidentally dropped a porcelain doll. His boss transferred him to the rug department. Lugging the huge rugs was a difficult task for someone who weighed only 130 pounds. Soon, however, Gerd learned his first American lesson. One day he was called into his boss' office and given his paycheck and a pink slip. His boss explained, "Your services are no longer needed."

Unemployed again, Gerd decided he wanted to become a dentist, a desire he had entertained even before the war. He walked into a dental laboratory and was able to find someone to teach him the trade. Gerd would help create dental molds and plastics for dentists. He would be paid 25 dollars a week, a far cry from the five

dollars in his pocket. He was initially promised a raise within three weeks, but sadly it never came. Still, he was able to learn the trade and save enough money to pay for Henriette to come to America. By the end of 1946, he was able to persuade his mother to come to New York City. For the first time in her life, Henriette boarded an airplane and flew to New York City

Henriette's arrival was both joyous and economically beneficial. Henriette would add needed income to help support their family. She had previous training as a nurse. Since Oscar could not work in the Netherlands, Henriette had to support the family by renting out a bedroom in their apartment and working as a nurse. Despite not working for the past 5 years, Henriette sought a job as a baby nurse. With the help of her sister-in-law, Henriette became an infant nurse for future Senator Jacob Javits and for an assistant to the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Henriette and Gerd soon reconnected with the growing number of German Jews in Manhattan. Gerd was able to meet former friends and associates who had escaped Germany before the War. His childhood friend, Eric Rosenbaum, owned a furniture store in Manhattan frequented by many other German Jews. Rosenbaum grew up in the same building as Gerd in Hamburg, but was able to secure visas for immigration to the United States before the war broke out. Through Rosenbaum, Gerd and Henriette were able to once again reconnect with other German Jews who survived the war.

New York City was the epicenter for German Jewish refugees that left Europe after the war. Oscar and Hans Jürgen were only two of the many von Halle relatives who perished during the Holocaust. Before the war, Gerd had numerous cousins and

distant relatives all over Germany. After the war, Gerd was either unaware of surviving relatives or believed they had been murdered. Unfortunately, the latter proved to be the truth. The Nazis decimated the von Halle family. Very few relatives survived the war. In a 1993 journal article about the JA von Halle foundation, author Irmgard Stein listed thirteen relatives who died during the war, not including those who died shortly thereafter from health complications.<sup>112</sup>

Despite lacking familial connections, Gerd relied on the growing German Jewish population for support. Not ready to talk about his experience, Gerd tried to move on with his life. He clocked long hours, still making minimum wage, at the dental laboratory. Henriette was able to earn a relatively decent paycheck as a nurse. Within a few years, Gerd was able to move out of his mother's apartment and into his first apartment—a one-bedroom studio apartment on West End Avenue and 85<sup>th</sup> Street. Four years after arriving in New York City, Eric Rosenbaum set Gerd up on a blind double date with Gerda Freudenberg, a German Jew who was lucky enough to emigrate shortly after the breakout of the war.

Born in December of 1931, Gerda and her parents arrived in New York City in 1939. Only seven years old when she arrived, Gerda had a far different childhood than Gerd. Growing up during the war, Gerda does not have distinct memories of events from World War II. She was quite young during the war and was unaware of the destruction and death that ensued. However, Gerda remembers distinct instances of anti-Semitism in New York City. Enrolled in school without knowing any English, her Irish Catholic classmates were not too fond of Jews. During a game

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<sup>112</sup> Stein, 50.

of leapfrog, a classmate purposely tripped her and broke her wrist. After, Gerda learned English very quickly. As an only child, Gerda aspired to be a lawyer, but her traditional father believed it was not appropriate for women to work in such occupations. Upon graduating from High School, Gerda struck a deal with her father to pay for junior college. Gerda tried to get a job as a court stenographer, but it required a four-year degree. At 19, Gerda was able to persuade her father to pay for night classes at NYU.

Shortly after enrolling in night classes, Eric Rosenbaum asked his family friends if he could give Gerda's number to Gerd. With Gerda's father's permission, Rosenbaum gave her phone number to Gerd. In 1951, Gerda and Gerd, along with another couple, went on a blind date. When they saw each other, they quickly realized they had met once before a few years earlier. Gerd had once been set up on a date with Gerda's cousin. Her heavier set cousin had a somewhat bad reputation and was not Gerd's type. They met, briefly, at a party. According to Gerd, as soon as he saw Gerda again, he knew he wanted to marry her.

With Gerd's busy work schedule, he tried to see Gerda as much as possible. Gerda described Gerd as a complete gentleman. After only seven dates in four weeks, Gerd proposed to Gerda. Gerda accepted. The whirlwind engagement, Gerda explains, was not uncommon at the time. According to Gerda, the close-knit German Jewish community facilitated such unions in an attempt to rebuild the decimated German Jewish population. Gerda then moved into Gerd's cramped studio apartment. Both Gerd and Gerda were making minimum wage and simply tried to make ends meet. Nine months later, Gerd and Gerda married. Despite the quick



engagement and marriage, Gerd never recalled his story and experiences to Gerda. Gerda was aware that his father and brother had died, but she never knew what Gerd went through during the war. After they were married, Gerd finally told Gerda his story.

As soon as Gerd arrived in America, carrying with him the memories of the war, he knew he wanted to become an American citizen. After waiting nearly five years, Gerd was finally granted American citizenship on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1952. In addition to the certificate of naturalization, Gerd also changed his name to Gerald.

Gerald and Gerda's next step was to try and find a new apartment. At the time, there was apartment shortage in New York City. Gerda's imposing mother, Herta, got word of an open apartment near her home. Herta took the apartment sight unseen for Gerald and Gerda. Fortunately, the apartment turned out to be quite decent, except for the three-flight climb up to the apartment. The one-bedroom apartment cost \$58 dollars a month. This was a hefty sum at the time and Gerald and Gerda had to work hard to earn enough money to cover their rent. Shortly after moving, their refrigerator broke down, forcing them to buy a new one. This added another \$4 dollars a month. Gerald also had to pay for laboratory space. In Manhattan, these costs added up very quickly. Gerald and Gerda realized that the cost of living in Manhattan was too high and decided to look elsewhere.

In 1953, Gerald found a house in Teaneck, New Jersey. Gerd calculated that the cost of the mortgage was far less than the cost of an apartment and laboratory space in New York City. Gerald could also build his own laboratory space in the basement of the house. Gerald made the decision to move out of New York City to

their new home in New Jersey. Gerald also answered a new job advertisement in the New York Times. First Investors Corporation was looking to expand its sales force. Gerald answered the ad and was hired as a salesman. For the time being, Gerald put his dental laboratory on hold. Without any sales experience, especially in his third language, Gerald had a rough start in the sales industry. He simply was not making enough sales to support them.

The lack of sales experience forced Gerald to reenter the dental fixture business. Thoroughly disheartened, however, it did not take long before sales suddenly “clicked” with Gerald. Gerald started to make more money and was able to give up the dental fixture business. During this time, Gerald used his salary for all expenses and they banked Gerda’s salary. After a couple years working for First Investment Corporation, Gerald and Gerda finally felt financially stable. Henriette, who had been working as a nurse, made enough money to support herself, easing the pressure on Gerald. Henriette continued to live in New York City, close to the German Jewish community. Unfortunately, Gerda’s father passed away in 1953. Her father’s death forced her to take care of her mother, a very stressful job. In between working and caring for her mother, Gerda became extremely run down. At the recommendation of her doctor, Gerda stopped working. Luckily, Gerald was making enough money to support them both.

Gerald continued to build sales experience and found success working for First Investors Corp. In 1954, Gerda also obtained her American citizenship. It was in 1956, ten years after arriving in America with only five dollars in his pocket, when Gerald learned Gerda was pregnant with their first child. As the last remaining

male von Halle, Gerald was overjoyed on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1957 with the birth of Robert Harold von Halle. Out of the death and destruction of the Holocaust came his son, a born American citizen. The von Halle family tree, once nearly extinct, had a new budding branch. Having lost his father, his brother, and nearly all of his close family members, the birth of Robert seemed like a miracle, beyond comprehension. Only 12 years earlier, Gerd had been wholly uncertain about his future. Robert symbolized not just the revitalization of the von Halle family tree; he also represented the result of perseverance, determination, and at times what felt like divine intervention. For everything that happened throughout Gerald's life, he could have never imagined feeling this type of happiness.

## **Epilogue**

After the birth of Robert, Gerald and Gerda had another son, Peter, in 1960. With two male offspring, Gerald felt certain the von Halle family would live on. My father, Robert, grew up in New Jersey and graduated from Duke University in 1979. Peter graduated from Northwestern in 1982. In July 1984, Robert married my mother, Robin Wohl, in Chicago, Illinois. Four years later in October 1988, I was born. Growing up, my grandfather always called me his number one grandson. Not out of favoritism, but rather I was his first-born grandchild. I symbolized a newly revitalized branch of the von Halle family tree. In what seems like another act of divine intervention, between 1988-1995 four more grandchildren, all males, were born. Initially having dwindled down to one remaining male, the von Halle tree had accumulated five more name-bearing males. The von Halle family tree was officially reborn.

I first started this project when I was in high school. Growing up in an environment the polar opposite of my grandfather's, I started to realize I owe nearly everything to my grandfather. Every decision, every lucky break, and every person who helped my grandfather is responsible for everything I have today. I eventually applied to Duke University, my father's alma mater. My grandfather will be responsible for two Duke graduates, three Northwestern graduates, a Michigan graduate, and an undetermined college bound high school student. For someone who was forcibly prohibited from attending a university, this project serves as a testament to my continued understanding and appreciation for everything my grandfather had endured.

My interest in his story differs from that of my father or my uncle. My grandfather only started speaking about his experience in the early 1980s after both Robert and Peter were in college. Travelling mostly on cruise ships, vacations provided a perfect medium for Gerald to begin telling his story. In the early 1990s, Gerald was asked by both the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Survivors of the Shoah Project (funded by Steven Spielberg) to record his testimony. He eventually started to speak more regularly, even filling in for Miep Gies when she became ill. A few years later, it was his speech to my 6<sup>th</sup> grade class that changed my life forever. For the first time in my life I felt special; I felt like there must have been a reason for everything that had happened to him.

In high school, I began actively recording his story. I started collecting all the documents that were scattered throughout museums and bank safes. I wanted to know everything about his life. When I finally received Sophie's collection of family photographs and genealogical research, I began to understand that my grandfather's story goes much deeper than just World War II. Between the photographs of my family members fighting for Otto von Bismarck and the Germans during World War I, I was shocked to see how rapidly most of my family was erased from German history.

When I arrived at Duke University, I knew I wanted to continue my research and documentation of my grandfather's story. Freshmen year, I obtained documents from Bad Arolsen, Germany—the home to millions of recently released German records. It was with these documents that I could firmly establish what happened to both Hans Jürgen and Oscar. Having come to Duke as an aspiring Economics major, I

soon realized my interests lay elsewhere. I always enjoyed history, but I never considered it as a possible academic path. I showed my documents, photographs, and letters to nearly every one of the history professors I ever had. It was second semester of my freshman year when a professor recommended that I pursue my interest in my both my grandfather and family's history as a thesis project. I had never even considered that as a possibility, nonetheless a thesis topic.

By the end of junior year it was time to start applying for the history thesis seminar. Professor Chafe, who taught my Modern America course, met with me numerous times and encouraged me to apply for thesis seminar. With his support, I applied for the seminar. Unfortunately, I was not accepted. But though I was fairly devastated, I understood this project was more than just an attempt at receiving honors. My grandfather, the safeguard of our family story, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease during my sophomore year in college. As the disease progressed, his memory and speaking abilities declined. By the time I applied for the thesis seminar, I was going to have to rely solely on taped interviews, anecdotal stories he told me as a kid, my grandmother, and the plethora of documents, photographs, and letters that I gathered throughout the years.

I was told I should instead concentrate on learning the history of the sources I obtained, particularly Sophie's collection. Yet every time I asked my grandfather about how these documents survived, he explained it was typical "German meticulous fashion" to save and organize important papers. Very little is known, and will ever be known, about how the family tree survived the war. It is presumed that Henriette and Gerald's former neighbors saved the documents, but this is only

speculation. Henriette passed away before I was born, and with her, the answers to all my questions about Sophie's collection. Gerd, only a teenager, concentrated more on surviving the war than taking care of the family tree. It was Henriette who must have been responsible for saving and recovering what few possessions were left after the war. I can only be grateful and blessed that such a rare collection of documents survived the war.

I was given the documents that survived and I inherited what stories I could retain. Since the earliest recorded testimony of my grandfather was not taped until nearly 50 years after liberation, his story is littered with gaps and holes. Placing his story within the context of the bigger picture of World War II enabled me to fill in many of these gaps and discrepancies.

While my grandfather's memory of his experiences during the Holocaust is obscured by the progression of Alzheimer's disease, this project serves to establish a permanent account of a story that would otherwise disappear. It is my intention to eventually donate all the documents, photographs, and letters, attached with this account, to Duke University—the Alma Mater and soon to be Alma Mater of his first-born son and first-born grandson.

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