

The Netherlands, 9–15 May 1940

A small number of determined individuals are moving ever closer to their destination, unaware that their paths are about to cross: Eli Prins, Alfred Goudsmit, Bertus van Loosen, Ben van Hasselt and Frouk Tromp, Loe Woudhuijsen and Loes Spaander.

Thursday 9 May, the eve of war

Blaricum, 20 miles south-east of Amsterdam, shortly after 10 pm

ALFRED GOUDSMIT

Through the moonlit streets, a well-dressed, 53-year-old gentleman is walking home. He is Alfred Goudsmit, managing director of the beloved Dutch department store, de Bijenkorf, known for its quality goods. Alfred can look back with pride at his twelve years in charge of the business. Who would have thought that it would grow into a chain of luxury stores, with a staff of several thousand? A Jewish family firm with many Jewish employees.* For a moment, Alfred stops. Smoothing down his moustache, he looks up at the sky. Under the starry firmament his small stature – neatly presented in a three-piece suit, white starched shirt collar and shiny cravat – seems diminutive. His mind ponders the fact that this beautiful evening is marred by only one prospect.

Alfred continues on his way through the wide, leafy avenues, past large, old houses and well-kept gardens. This affluent village offers comfortable country living with a touch of the bohemian. He reflects on his conversation with the dinner guest he has just accompanied home, 48-year-old Mrs Gertrude van Tijn.* Since her divorce three years ago, she continues to live with her teenage son and daughter at the 'Houten Huis', close to the woods. The house has a chic interior with antique furniture and an impressive library, whilst the exterior

* Asterisks indicate textual notes which can be found commencing on page 227.

THE REMARKABLE JOURNEY OF MR PRINS



Alfred Goudsmit.

boasts a tree-lined driveway and a tennis court. Alfred knows Mrs Van Tijn from the Stichting Joodse Arbeid, a Jewish foundation of which she is the Secretary and he is the Treasurer. The foundation supports the Nieuwesluis 'labour village' in the new Wieringermeer polder in North Holland, a farm complex where young Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and Austria receive training in agriculture and trades.

During their walk they talked about the possibility of war in the Netherlands. Thus far, the Netherlands has maintained its policy of neutrality, as it did before, during and after the First World War. To Mrs Van Tijn, a German-born Zionist and leading light in the Committee for Jewish Refugees in Amsterdam, the prospect of a German invasion is not only abhorrent, but also suffused with a cruel irony. For seven years since Adolf Hitler came to power, she and the Committee have been helping thousands of German-Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied territory cross the border into the Netherlands

to look for permanent settlement or onward travel to Palestine or the Americas. With Denmark and Norway under German occupation since last month, does the Netherlands await a similar fate? And what should they, as Jews, do then?

Enschede, a Dutch city close to the German border, evening

BEN VAN HASSELT

28-year-old secondary school head teacher Ben van Hasselt is meeting family friend Tammo Wolt. Tammo works at the nearby border crossing near Glanerbrug, a small place between Enschede and the border with Germany. The border post is closely guarded by military police. Despite closing the border with Germany on 17 December 1938, the Dutch authorities are still trying to curb the huge influx of refugees. To accommodate them, the Dutch government built Westerbork Central Refugee Camp a year later in a remote corner of Drenthe, a province in the north-east, near the German border. Since then, Jews from Germany, Austria and Sudetenland – the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia – entering the Netherlands illegally will be treated as ‘undesirable aliens’.

Tammo and Ben discuss the chances of war breaking out. It is difficult to imagine, as there has been no fighting on Dutch soil for more than one hundred years.*

Ben has become involved with refugee work. There is a network of Dutch people who rescue Jews from the Nazis and smuggle them across the border into the Netherlands. Recently, such a network was discovered at Glanerbrug, which was using the convent gardens for its purposes. People who harbour illegal refugees are liable to prison sentences, and any refugees who are caught will be sent back. By talking to refugees, Ben has become aware of the terrible things that are happening in Nazi Germany. Being Jewish himself, it is even more frightening. Ben has heard stories about the immense difficulties