

# A tale of three tongues

*Aletta Stevens reveals some of the linguistic challenges that presented themselves as she researched a story from her Dutch family history*



Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch mother-tongue translator and founder member of ITI. She is the author of *Looking for Uncle Joop: A Long-Lost Story from Nazi-Occupied Holland*, set in Friesland and to be published in April (Ashgrove). See [www.alettastevens.co.uk](http://www.alettastevens.co.uk).

The research I have on paper is entirely in the Frisian language. I don't know if you will be able to read it.' This was the language conundrum that made me realise my investigation into the fate of my Dutch uncle in the Second World War was going to be a linguistic as well as a personal challenge.

Inspired by the BBC programme *Who Do You Think You Are?*, in October 2007 I decided, finally, to find out what happened to my mother's only brother. No one in my family spoke about it, but as a child I had overheard that he was killed in the war, and later I learnt this was in the north-eastern province of Friesland when the Netherlands was under Nazi occupation. As it so happens, the date of his death – 4 August 1944 – is the day on which the Gestapo arrested Anne Frank and her family after storming their secret annexe in Amsterdam. By another coincidence, Anne Frank and my uncle, Joop Schweitzer, shared the same birthday – 12 June – although they did not know each other and he was eight years her senior. They also both went into hiding – Joop because he refused to respond to the call-up for forced labour in Germany as part of the *Arbeitseinsatz*. The fatal date is indicative of a point in the war when the Germans knew they were losing and, aided by Dutch collaborators, stepped up their raids to root out thousands of people in hiding, the so-called 'onderduikers' (literally those who 'dive under').

The task I had set myself was to find out why, how and where my uncle had died, and what his life had been like. On the internet, I found a

reference to a Frisian radio programme which had mentioned him (for information about the Frisian language, please see my article 'Frisian futures', *ITI Bulletin* January-February 2017). The presenter was a local amateur historian by the name of Jan Geert Vogelzang, who was writing down the history of World War II in Gaasterland, the region where my family had lived. The opening sentence of this article is a line from his first email, when it dawned on me that we would have to work in three languages: Dutch, because it is my mother tongue and the

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language in which Jan Geert and I communicated; English, because it is the language in which I was going to record my uncle's story, so my children would be able to pass it down the English side of our family; and Frisian, because it is the first language of the local people who would help us in our search. Thus I embarked on my longest and most absorbing translation job ever.

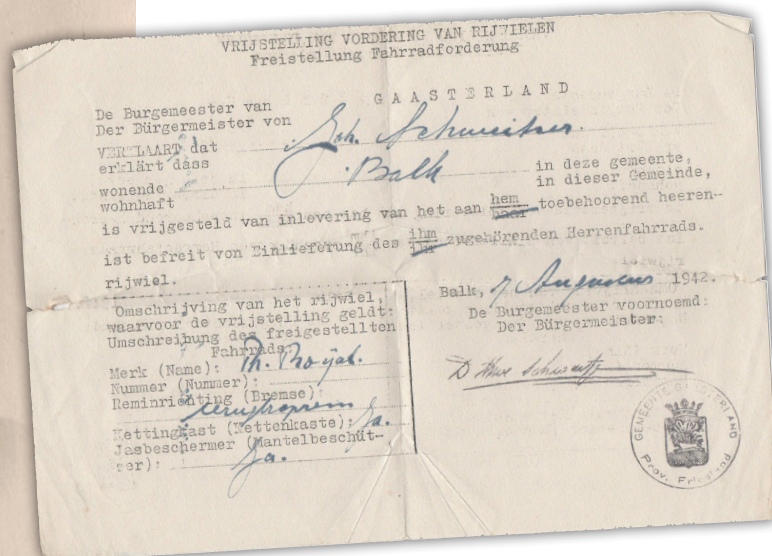
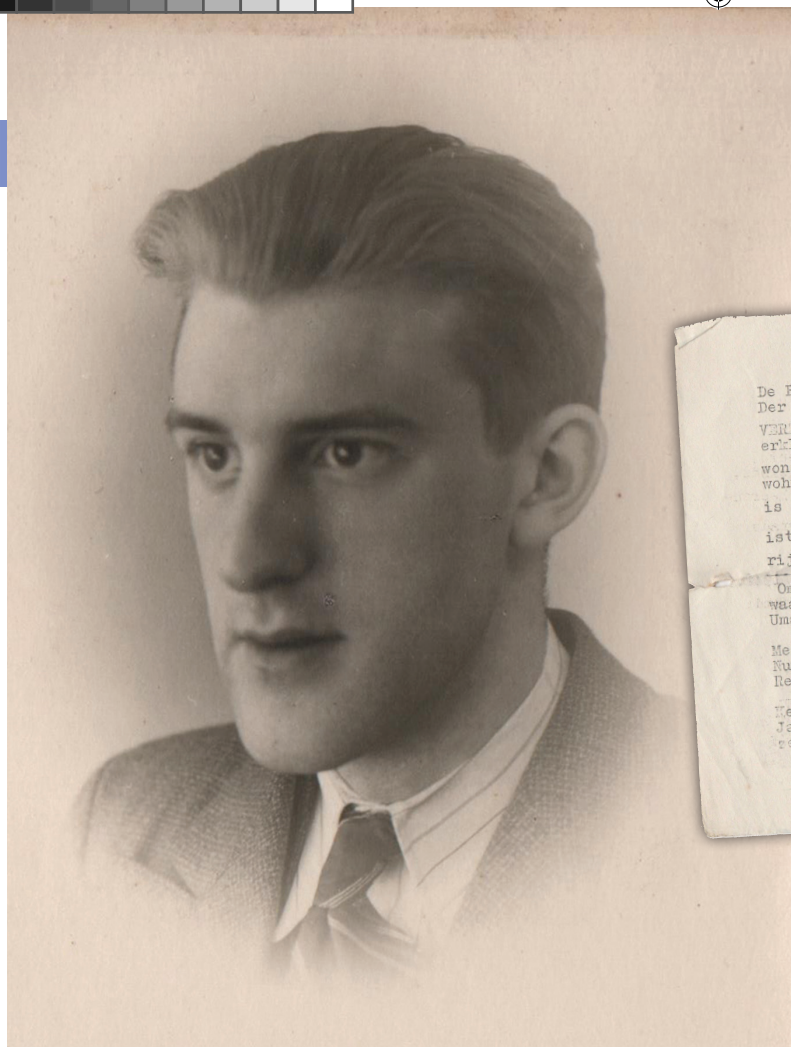
To my surprise, Jan Geert was not himself a native speaker of Frisian. He had acquired complete fluency from the age of 21 after moving from the neighbouring province of Groningen for work reasons, showing

himself to be a natural linguist. Although he was not trained as an interpreter or translator, his role as such was vital for our project. After we put out an appeal via the local newspaper and radio to find people who remembered my family, reactions began to come in. Some people phoned or wrote to me in Dutch; others – often those more advanced in age – approached Jan Geert in Frisian. He explained that if you want Frisians to speak from the heart, you have to engage with them in their mother tongue, the language used at home and with friends, in which they feel they can best express their deepest emotions. And so Jan Geert would note down their memories in Frisian and translate them into Dutch for me.

## Intense research

During an intense research period of some eight months, I visited all the people and places in Friesland that had an association with my family. Many locals remembered them, as my grandfather had been the minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in the village of Balk. There were plenty of surprises, not least that Joop was shot dead aged 23, and had been involved with the Resistance. I had the privilege of being there when, on Holland's national day of remembrance, 4 May, the eve of the liberation, the people of Gaasterland organised a silent procession to Joop's grave, which has become a symbol of the local Resistance. To conclude my visit to the Netherlands, I visited the National Archive in The Hague, where, as my uncle's closest living relative, I was granted special permission to view classified dossiers about the person who shot him.

Back in England, I began to write down the story, but progress was slow due to lack of time and experience. I put the file aside and it remained untouched for nearly four years. Then my father passed away, and after clearing the family home, my brother and I unexpectedly came upon objects and papers belonging to Joop. Suddenly the past came to life



**Joop Schweitzer (left) and his bicycle exemption in Dutch and German**

again. Realising the story must not be lost, I decided to start writing again and was determined to see it through this time. I re-examined all the findings and began to translate some of the testimonies into English in order to rewrite them for my book. During this process, something magical happened. Things which had been fuzzy before, or had not properly sunk in, became clear to me through the act of translation. I believe this is because any text in one's mother tongue needs to be read only once to be understood instantly. But a text for translation needs to be scrutinised by the translator several times. Translation shows up the cracks in the original, and so it became an invaluable tool for testing the strength of the personal testimonies submitted. If someone's account did not add up, the translation would reveal it and prompt me to ask one of the numerous questions that furthered the research and shaped the story.

### Obsessive fascination

The book that has emerged is the story of how I discovered my uncle's story. It is largely based on local written and oral sources, including ear- and eyewitness accounts, and unpublished memoirs, letters and a war diary. The narrative alternates


between the present (2007-2016) and the past (1937-1945), culminating in a reconstruction of the killing and a summary of the trial and imprisonment of the murderer. It tries to convey my obsessive fascination with the search, as well as the uncertainties and emotions of finding out the truth, such as the details of the murder and its effect on Joop's immediate family, as well as the surrounding villages. The local story is also placed in the wider context of the Second World War, showing year by year how a rural, God-fearing region changed from a relatively safe place into an area targeted for raids by German and Dutch Nazis. The book also looks at links with Britain, such as Queen Wilhelmina and her government-in-exile in London; a Dutch spy trained by MI6 and dropped into Gaasterland to report on preparations for the invasion of

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Britain; the broadcasts of Radio Orange through the BBC; and the RAF planes brought down over Friesland by the nearby German-built radar station.

### Crossing borders

Why did I not write the story in Dutch? In many ways this would have been the easiest option, but in my view not the most interesting one. It would have remained a story confined within language barriers and national borders. As a translator, I wanted to cross those borders and make it accessible to more people than Dutch readers alone. After all, it came out of a world war. Ironically, people in the Netherlands are now asking whether there will be a Dutch edition. The question is: if a Dutch publisher were to purchase the translation rights, who would be the translator? If, as some people have suggested, it were the author, this would require a strange kind of translation process in reverse. It remains to be seen whether the author is the best person for the job or perhaps too close to the subject matter.

Writing this book was a slow process that enabled me to reflect on the past over an extended period of time. Translation added another dimension to that process: it lengthened and deepened it, revealing connections I would not otherwise have made. 

*Looking for Uncle Joop: A Long-Lost Story from Nazi-Occupied Holland* by Aletta Stevens will be published by Ashgrove Publishing on 20 April and is available for pre-order from Amazon now. You can read a preview on [goodreads.com](http://goodreads.com).