

Edward J.C. van Hooetegem

## MY MEETING WITH THE UKRAINIAN INSURGENT ARMY (UPA)<sup>1</sup>

*The author of this memoir, Edward J.C. van Hooetegem<sup>2</sup>, began his military career in 1928 when he entered cadet school, from which he graduated in 1931 with the rank of second lieutenant. At the outbreak of World War II, Edward van Hooetegem was a first lieutenant in the Royal Guard. During the occupation of Holland, he was taken prisoner by the Germans. From 1942 to 1944, he was interned in a German prisoner of war camp in **Stanislau** (now Ivano-Frankivsk<sup>3</sup>) in Ukraine. In January 1944, van Hooetegem, together with several other Dutch officers, escaped from the German POW camp<sup>4</sup> and met up with a unit of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in the Carpathians. With the help of UPA, van Hooetegem and his companions made their way to Hungary, and from there, via the USSR and London, they returned to the Netherlands in November 1945. After the war, van Hooetegem became an instructor at the Staff College of the Netherlands. Several years later, he was promoted to the post of commander in chief of the Staff College and filled this position for many years. He reached the peak of his career when he became an Army Corps commander with the rank of lieutenant general. He retired from the Army in 1967.*

*While in Ukraine, van Hooetegem came into contact with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Here, among others, he met the late Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Butkovsky<sup>5</sup>, commander of the UPA's Fourth Military District, with whom he formed a lifelong friendship.*

*Learning of Ivan Butkovsky's death, General van Hooetegem wished to honor his friend's memory. He has done so by writing this memoir, which he has dedicated to Butkovsky and other soldiers and officers of UPA as an expression of gratitude for the assistance he received from them during the war.*

*The struggle of the Ukrainian people against enemy occupation is no less acute today than it was in the times described by this memoir. By publishing this work in the English language we wish to make it available to readers who have no knowledge of either the Dutch<sup>6</sup> or the Ukrainian<sup>7</sup> languages.*

## MY COMPANION'S NAME WAS PIET<sup>8</sup>

I wonder what thoughts occupied him as we “touched down” on the free soil of Galicia, the Ukrainian part of what had previously been Poland, a land which from that moment would become sacred to us coming as we were from a few years' forced stay in Hitler's inhospitable and poorly furnished “hostels” for captured Allied officers.

I myself felt like a young colt that leaps out into the open pasture after having been locked up in a cattle car, even though, I must confess, I did this in a way that would **have** been quite unusual for a colt.

---

<sup>1</sup> This annotated version was prepared in March 2014 based on the version printed in English in *Visti kombatanta. Ukraïns'kiy viys'koviy zhurnal. № 3-4. Toronto – New York, 1974., pp. 23-46*. The first version of this manuscript was published in 1972 in Ukrainian (See *Gotegem E. Moya zustrich z UPA / E. Gotegem. – New York : Ob'ednannya Kolishnikh Voyakiv UPA, 1972. – 24 c.*). Arguably, this first version was based on correspondence between Van Hooetegem and the editors, and on his earlier articles (see note 6) and it is uncertain if its author proofread the final English version. Minor (factual and linguistic) changes in the text are marked **in bold**.

<sup>2</sup> Eduardus Johannes Camilus (Edward) van Hooetegem ('s-Hertogenbosch, 13 March 1907 – Arnhem, 7 June 1996). Identification of the Dutch officers is based on De Hartog, L. (1983). *Officiëren achter prikkeldraad 1940-1945* (in Dutch), enriched with data from the Dutch population register (held at the Central Bureau for Genealogy in The Hague) and data from the Netherlands War Graves Foundation. (<http://srs.ogs.nl/>).

<sup>3</sup> From 1919-1939 the city was known as 'Stanisławów' (in the Second Polish Republic), in September 1939, after the Soviet occupation, the name was changed to 'Stanislav' (Станислав), which was transliterated to 'Stanislau' from June 1941 to June 1944 during the German occupation. On 9 November 1962 the city was renamed in honour of the Ukrainian poet and writer Ivan Franko. For the sake of clarity this annotated text will use 'Stanislau', which was the official name in 1944, where the original text used the anachronism 'Stanislaviv'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Stalag 371', which – unlike the name suggests – was a PoW-camp for officers (Oflag), not a Stalag.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Butkovskij (Іван Бутковський, Skole, 2 May 1910 – Munich, 5 August 1967), nom de guerre 'hutsul' (see [http://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Бутковський\\_Іван](http://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Бутковський_Іван)).

<sup>6</sup> See Amagon, S. (1951). *Volkeren achter het gordijn in 1944 en nu: I-VII Ons Leger* (35e jaargang) (in Dutch).

<sup>7</sup> In the preface on page 22, the editorial board emphasizes the need to publish this article in English in this Ukrainian language journal to reach a wider audience, and apologizes to its readers.

<sup>8</sup> Pieter Johannes (Piet) de Ruijter (Amsterdam, 18 September 1918 – Eindhoven, 21 August 1978).

Unfortunately, I could see very little of God's open spaces, and the pasture on which I landed was frozen hard as rock.

It was the beginning of January 1944 when we decided to engineer an escape from our prisoner of war transport while there was still time. The rapid advance of the Red Army to the West had forced the Wehrmacht to make arrangements to transfer some 2,400 Dutch officers from Stalag **Stanislau** to a new location "somewhere" in Germany.

The first thing that we did upon regaining our freedom was to attempt to use the compasses that we had so laboriously constructed while still in the camp. For Piet this proved to be the first disappointment of our long, long journey. In order to magnetize our compasses, he had been forced to cut off the electric power several times, thus leaving the entire prisoner community, as well as the German guards, in the dark. But the practical results of this experiment were hardly commensurate with the inconvenience it has caused, for while the razor blade fashioned into a magnetic needle on my makeshift compass pointed westward, his pointed eastward. In the end we decided to start our journey by using the moon<sup>9</sup> as our point of orientation, in the belief that we were walking in southwesterly direction.

We did not get very far, however, for just a few kilometers ahead we encountered our first water obstacle. As we learned later, this was the Dniester River. The river's other bank was not visible in the darkness. At first sight it appeared that the river was frozen over, but my first step onto the ice produced a crackling noise that could be heard at all around. At least three dogs in the vicinity started barking.

At that moment I suddenly remembered a wonderful and exciting game from my boyhood that consisted of crawling across the ice on one's stomach in order to distribute one's weight over a larger area. But my first attempt to do so was halted by Piet's very soft but nonetheless firm warning. Having climbed to the very edge of the **riverbank**, he commanded a far more strategic position, a fact which I came to realize when I joined him. Below me I saw a swirling current of the black river not a whole thirty feet away from us.

I am certain that Piet will be rewarded in the hereafter for having saved me from a soaking or even death in that half-frozen river. For he certainly received no reward for it in this life.

After following the river upstream for several hundred meters in search of some means of crossing it, we came to one of its old channels. But when in his wild enthusiasm Piet tried to cross it, he immediately sank up to his knees in the icy water. From that moment on he became considerably more cautious, for wet pants are a mighty discomfort in Galicia in mid-January, particularly at a time when one has to keep one's shoes and socks on.

Fortunately for Piet this did not last long, for no sooner did the moon disappear behind the clouds than a real snowstorm began. We immediately took refuge in a haystack near a small farm where we remained the rest of the night. Even though we were not interrupted by a single dog's bark, we found ourselves unable to sleep for the first few hours. To break the silence, Piet, who was normally a perfect gentleman, let go with a series of expressions that would have made a drill sergeant blush. But even without his outburst the memories of what we had experienced in the hours following our escape kept us awake for a while. There were many reasons for this.

This time the preparations for our escape had been singularly simple. In spite of this, we had been much more certain of success than in our previous two unsuccessful attempts. Leaping from a moving train may be more risky from a physical standpoint, but it is no more difficult than digging an underground tunnel a few hundred meters long through dangerous ground or trying to crawl through four rows of barbed wire fence followed by a high medieval wall reinforced across the top with assorted pieces of broken glass, the whole setup carefully watched by armed guards and police dogs.

As usual the relocation of our POW camp was to take place on very short notice. The operation was to be conducted in three convoys. Very conveniently for us, the first convoy was to consist of older and physically weaker officers, incapable of causing the guards any trouble, which hopefully would make the latter less alert. This assumption **proved** to be correct, but soon the guards were forced to increase their vigilance, because as the convoy proceeded to its new location, more and more prisoners managed to escape. Upon arrival at Neu-Brandenburg it was discovered that no fewer than 142 officers had escaped from the last two convoys. We later learned that the German train commandant was punished by being sent

---

<sup>9</sup> The evening of 10 January 1944, on the eve of the journey, had seen a full moon.

to the Russian front and that he was supposed to have ruefully remarked that it was easier to transport a bag of fleas **than** a train full of Dutch prisoners of war.



Lieutenant General Edward J.C. van Hootegem



Colonel of the UPA Ivan Butkovsky



A group of Dutch officers<sup>10</sup> during stay with the UPA. The author of this memoir is standing fifth from the left (wearing the white fur hat).

Most of the escapees, however, had little time to relish their freedom, for in most cases it was of extremely short duration. It could not have been otherwise, since for the most part preparations for escape

---

<sup>10</sup> On the picture, standing left to right: Harm Lieneman, Frans Brackel, Kees Harteveld, Joop Singor, Edward van Hootegem, Piet de Ruijter, Leen Kranenburg, kneeling left to right: Geert Bijl de Vroe, Sieb van der Pol, Hans Bentinck.

had not been very thorough, and some who had never really had the intention of breaking away had simply joined others when they broke open their cattle cars. Most were recaptured almost immediately after they escaped from the convoy, while others were wounded by the guards' bullets or injured while leaping from the train. Actually these latter men were fortunate in comparison with the twelve lieutenants who managed to avoid capture for a longer period of time but who later fell into the hands of the SS and were deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp where they were liquidated<sup>11</sup> along with other Allied military personnel when the Russians began to close in.

### ESCAPE FROM THE TRAIN

The camp guard's inspection before our departure was routine: some prisoners were ordered to undress, others had their baggage searched, while others still were not bothered at all. An attempt was made to frighten the prisoners with threats of repression, adding to this a wholly new dimension, namely, that the German High Command (OKW<sup>12</sup>) had ordered that henceforth attempts to escape would be punishable by execution by firing squad<sup>13</sup>. Obviously we had not the Geneva Convention in hand, and time to protest against this breach of international martial law. However, this intimidation did not help the "Huns" in the least.

The first attempt at escape occurred on the way to the **Stanislau** railroad station. It was undertaken rather injudiciously and far too impulsively by a lieutenant<sup>14</sup> who jumped into a wide sewer main. He was seriously wounded by a wholly unnecessary shot fired by one of the guards. The wounded lieutenant was carried away never to be heard from again.

At the station our freight train stood in readiness, and we shrewdly headed for a freight car in which there was no brakeman's cabin. This had the advantage of removing us from under direct surveillance. At the same time, we carefully examined the car's outside, which impressed us very favorably. In the back on the left side within easy reach of a steel hook by means of which we could let ourselves down easily to the bumper beams, there was an opening large enough for a man to pass through. This opening had been nailed shut with boards covered on the outside with barbed wire. We did not expect this contraption to cause us much difficulty.

Our "escape party" consisted of six men, the remaining occupants of the car agreeing to give us all possible assistance. Because a group of six would be too conspicuous, we had agreed to make our escape in pairs. Harm<sup>15</sup> was to team up with Kees<sup>16</sup>, Jan<sup>17</sup> with Piet, and Gerry<sup>18</sup> with myself. We wanted to get away with all possible haste, for we knew that we were not the only ones planning to flee and that the prospects for escape would grow slimmer each escape. Being the oldest, I was to lead the way. Some ten miles out of **Stanislau**, the opening on the side of the car was wide open. Four of the men not planning to escape lifted me horizontally above their shoulders and shoved me feet first down the opening. Halfway through, I felt the floor of the car and lowered myself further. Of that moment I only remember the cold Ukrainian air hitting my **woollen** cap and the very rapid speed of the train.

With some difficulty I worked my way past the hook down to the bumper beam, where I was joined in a few minutes by Gerry and Kees. The emotion of that moment is very clear in my memory: I was possessed by a feeling of amazement.

We had agreed that I would give the signal for the **men** to jump off at a moment when the train would not be moving too fast, because the ground was frozen solid as rock and in view of the long trek ahead of us we were in no position to risk injuries.

The start did nothing to boost our morale.

---

<sup>11</sup> *De Hartog* and the Netherlands War Graves Foundation mention one of the twelve is missing in action.

<sup>12</sup> *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* ("Supreme Command of the Armed Forces").

<sup>13</sup> The so-called "Kugel-Erlass" was issued in March 1944, two months after the escape.

<sup>14</sup> Willem Albert (Wim) Young (Palembang, 15 March 1910 – Mauthausen, 23 February 1945).

<sup>15</sup> Harm Jan (Harm) Lieneman (Bloemendaal, 6 January 1914 – Eindhoven, 14 November 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Cornelis (Kees) Harteveld (Soerabaja, 2 September 1918 – Veere, 7 February 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Jan Willem (Jan) Eggink (Ter Apel, 15 January 1918 – Mauthausen, 2 May 1944).

<sup>18</sup> Gerrit Willem (Gerry) Boxman (Batoedjadar, 5 February 1919 – Mauthausen, 2 May 1944).

Gerry, who was getting nervous, ignored my warning not to jump and while jumping got caught on something, spun around and slammed the back of his head on the ice in a ditch running alongside the railroad tracks. He lay motionless on his back with outstretched arms.

Almost immediately the train roared onto a railroad bridge and I saw the guards flash by like shadows. I knew at that moment that we would never be able to come to Gerry's aid. This was indeed the last time we saw him, for he was one of the twelve lieutenants murdered at Mauthausen.

Meanwhile Harm had taken up his position on the bumper beam, and from that moment on everything continued as smoothly as in a controlled experiment. He and Kees jumped off at a small station and hid between the railroad cars that had been **side-tracked** and which concealed them from the watchful eyes of the station guards.

Then Piet and Jan joined me and when the train slowed down climbing a hill, Jan and I **leapt** from the train on **opposite** sides, Piet following Jan almost immediately. I was lucky enough to make the most fortunate landing: after jumping I ran a moment after the train and then flung myself behind a low bank which hid me from the passing watchmen in the brakeman's cabins. Nevertheless I broke out in a cold sweat when I saw the train gradually reducing speed. A moment later I no longer felt the cold: the last car stopped about 50 meters from the place where I lay hidden and the guards descended from their cabins. But my luck held out as it continued to do for another year and four months until the time we set foot ashore in England. Scarcely had the guards left their cabins, when the engineer gave the signal to depart and they all scrambled back on the train.

Only Piet responded to my soft whistle. He had lost contact with Jan when the two of them had been running together through the darkness. We looked for him but in vain, and I had to assume that he had decided to **go** alone, perhaps because Piet had the reputation of not being too clever a fellow, even though this opinion was probably unjustified. Whatever the cause was, we never saw him again, and after the war I received a notification of his death — in Mauthausen.

Many things occupied my mind that cold January night in 1944 while lying in that haystack somewhere in Galicia.

Next to me I heard Piet snoring until fatigue got the better of me as well.

The next morning, just as the first rooster crowed, the farmer woke up and began walking about the yard. Since our plan of operation was actually based on making contact at the earliest opportunity with the local population, which we knew to be anti-German, we thought it best to do so immediately. Our efforts to draw the farmer's attention to our presence were motivated by the best intentions, but the farmer became so terribly frightened that we thought he was about to drop dead on the spot. But finally he invited us to come inside, and soon his friendly and pretty wife prepared us a meal. While Piet was trying to win over the children by generously distributing chocolate from POW parcels, the farmer asked him whether he would consider selling his artillery boots.

We stayed only about half an hour in the house, since we wanted to get as far as possible away from the railroad line. As we were leaving, our host advised us to cross the Dniestr some three miles further upstream, where a reliable ferryman would help us across. At that time we were unaware that the entire local partisan organisation had been alerted to be on the lookout for escaped POWs wandering about the countryside, and we ourselves were being shadowed every step of the way. The ferryman refused to accept even our good Virginia cigarettes as payment and instead pointed silently in the direction of Hungary.

In the meantime the sun had broken through the clouds and revealed a deep blue sky. It seemed to us that we had already been adopted by the Ukrainian climate.

An unforgettable landscape stretched forth endlessly before us, quite similar to the flat spaciousness of our own native countryside in the Netherlands, except for the Carpathian mountain range silhouetted completely white against the clean, distant horizon. The Carpathians seemed to us a safe beacon guiding us toward the first goal of our journey...

For five hours we were able to revel in the beauty of the Ukrainian landscape, unhampered by anything or anybody. I am ashamed to confess that we almost forgot our actual goal. To those we met on the road in our fantastic outfits and with our well-filled rucksacks we must have looked like well-to-do vagabonds. A farmer who caught up with us from behind suddenly seemed to be in twice as much of a hurry. A shaggy looking dog made a wide arc around us with its tail between its legs. We had been naïve to think

that we would not look too conspicuous in this area, but later I would not have been surprised if people had taken us to be a couple of apes recently escaped from a zoo.

And then, quite unexpectedly, just as we were about to enter a village, two men wearing German uniforms jumped out from behind a thick hedge with carbines at the ready and asked us if we too were escaped Dutch officers from the POW transport. Since we knew that Holland was no better known in Ukraine than Ukraine in Holland (and we certainly knew very little about it), we realized that other groups of escaped **POWs** had been intercepted in the area and that there was little **sense** in denying our identity. In response to my affirmative nod, the well-built blond fellow in his early twenties, who looked very Germanic, extended his hand saying that we were indeed unbelievably lucky to have run into them instead of into a patrol of real German soldiers. He added that they had already taken in two of our companions, who were now in hiding with civilians in the area. According to his description, one was dressed completely in leather and the other had only one eye. This description could only apply to Harm and Kees. Half a year later, Kees was to become notorious throughout the Balkans for his predilection for leather jackets and jackboots.

Over a period of several years preceding this moment, I had met other “Germans” who had been friendly to me, but whose friendliness in the end always resulted in pure misery for me. For this reason I thought it better to postpone the handshaking for a while. As it turned out, this reserve on my part did not make such a bad impression, for later it became clear that these Ukrainians trusted us just about as much as we trusted them, which, during those first hours was not very much.

Our morale rose considerably when the Ukrainians marched us ostentatiously past a German guard, the muzzles of their carbines in our backs. But our morale reached its culmination point when we were **taken** to a farmhouse where Harm received us with a cry: “Boys, we made it! These are Ukrainian partisans and they have already promised to take us across the Hungarian border!” Kees did not say a word, but there was a definite sparkle in his one eye.

This is what had happened to Harm and Kees. As they were crossing a bridge over the Dniester and nearing the far side, two armed policeman appeared out of nowhere and arrested them. “This is the end!” they thought.

The policemen led them at gunpoint to the guardhouse at the river’s edge. They were taken into a room where they saw two more policemen in blue uniforms. One of them glanced up and asked: “Who are you?” Realizing that escape was impossible, they told him the truth — that they were fugitives from the Dutch POW transport. To their great surprise, he replied: “I am very aware of that!” So ended the official interrogation. Nothing was recorded, nothing more was asked. Harm and Kees learned that the men in blue uniforms were members of the Ukrainian police in charge of protecting cities.

The prisoners were then taken to a darkened room and left alone. A few minutes later the policemen who had questioned them entered the room and said to them: “Relax, you’re safe! We will not hand you over to the Germans. You will be taken to the Ukrainian partisans”. Five minutes later, they were on their ten-kilometer journey to the partisans. They were escorted by two policemen.

Upon hearing Harm’s and Kees’ story, I paid off my **debt** to our new friends — one seemed to be called George (Yuriy) and the other Mike (Mykhaylo) — in such a way that they **were** probably unable to use their right hands for the next ten minutes.

As it turned out, we had made contact with the underground movement we had heard about while still in our POW camp. Two of our fellow prisoners who had escaped earlier and had been caught and returned<sup>19</sup> had told us about this movement. This was the well-organized Ukrainian Insurgent Army — the UPA.

In 1938 a foreigner was torn to shreds in the center of Rotterdam when a bomb exploded in his pocket. At the time I, like most of my compatriots, had simply skimmed over this news item. The name Konovalts<sup>20</sup> had not meant a thing to me then, although I had been intrigued by the sensational and romantic aura with which the press had surrounded his personality. He had been hailed as the president of a nonexistent republic in Eastern Europe, but by the following day I had forgotten all about him. Little did I know that some six years later and under the most unusual circumstances I would run into his followers. These were the people who were to help me and nine other Dutch officers escape from Hitler’s henchmen

---

<sup>19</sup> According to on *De Hartog* (p. 208) these were Scheepstra and Westland.

<sup>20</sup> Yevhen Konovalts (Zashkiv, 14 June 1891 – Rotterdam, 23 May 1938).

by providing us with an armed escort clear across southern Galicia and through the Carpathian Mountains to a hospitable Hungary.

Our first contact with these people had been unquestionably cordial and our relationship with them remained this way until the moment when **the** last of the partisans, a mountain guide, pointed to the boundary post indicating the border line between his country and that of the Magyars and showed us the way into Hungary.

At the end of 1943, the situation in occupied Ukraine was such that the Germans could use only the main roads and the railroads, and even these came under frequent attack. Even the headquarters of Hitler's personal representative, Koch, finally was captured by the UPA.

When I jumped out of the train in Galicia in early 1944, the balance of power was rather one-sidedly in favor of the UPA. Thus the last German I saw face-to-face in Galicia was the man who locked the cattle car behind me and the next one I saw weeks later in Budapest. During our entire journey through the Carpathians, our contact with the enemy was limited to a few shots back and forth when crossing the railroad between Dolyna and Bolekhiv, and there we also lost our sole hand grenade that had been given to us by the partisans' commander as a kind of "token of recognition".

On the other hand, during those seventeen days in southern Galicia, we were enriched with invaluable experience for plotting the next stages of our escape, something from which we benefitted greatly when we were in Budapest. Our experience was certainly not devoid of humorous elements for, whatever the circumstances, the Galician retains his easygoing nature and his **light-heartedness**.

### AMONG THE UKRAINIANS

The importance of experience lies principally in the lessons to be drawn from it. In retrospect, the means used by the Ukrainians to establish our identity as bona fide Dutch officers instead of Russian agents who had been parachuted behind the lines — as we were suspected to be at first — served us as a testing lesson. To start with, we quickly learned that a nation like ours, which had lived peacefully for a century, is at a great disadvantage in comparison with nations that have had to carry on a constant struggle for their existence and hence produce born conspirators. From the beginning of the last war, our flaws manifested themselves in our lack of toughness, in our gullibility and indiscretion. This last flaw must be seen as the result of our tendency to show off. The recent underground movement in our country also suffered from these flaws. Many of its members and their friends became needless victims because they allowed notoriety to take precedence over secrecy.

In the field of intelligence gathering, we were, in comparison with these Ukrainians, nothing more than rank amateurs who still had to learn the tricks of the trade. Small wonder then that we fell open-eyed into each and every trap set for us. The Ukrainians we met after the war were too polite to laugh at us when we told them of our experiences.

Our later Hungarian adventures further strengthened our belief that under the prevailing circumstances even the simplest questions had been asked with an ulterior motive in mind. The numerous visitors to the farm where we were initially quartered had not come merely to satisfy their curiosity. They had been sent mainly with the intention of getting us to talk at the same time in order to make it impossible for us to communicate with each other and influence each others' answers. We were especially questioned about conditions in the Netherlands and in the POW camp. We were also questioned concerning the relationship amongst ourselves and our dealing with the German camp authorities. All were matters with which they themselves had long been familiar, since the camp was situated in the heart of Galicia. They put on a real show when we informed them that another contingent of prisoners was to be transported, and they acted as if they were planning to intercept the train. In reality, they were only interested in verifying our reports. In 1947, when I asked a Ukrainian **émigré** in Holland a point-blank question about this, he told me that they would have had no idea what to do with at least 700 officers of all ages who were completely unprepared to face the hardships of the partisans' life. Besides, it would have been impossible to lead such a large group across the Hungarian or Rumanian borders.

This same Ukrainian told me that in the beginning they had believed us to be Soviet parachutists because of our peculiar uniforms. After Kiev fell to the Soviet army, the underground command expected parachutists to be dropped any day behind the German lines, and for this reason small details of Ukrainian

partisans were stationed to intercept and liquidate them. The first fact that we were totally unarmed certainly worked to our advantage, but on the other hand, they also had to take into consideration the possibility that they were dealing with German agitators or spies. In the final analysis they were fighting anyone who was against an independent Ukraine. At the same time, they were convinced that after the war Ukraine could benefit from having a number of people abroad with whom they were on good terms, and who could serve this purpose better than the Allied officers whom they had helped to escape?

It was therefore important for them to determine beyond any doubt our real national identity. The fact that under our civilian clothing we wore Dutch uniforms did not really mean much to them, nor the fact that we were in the possession of POW tags and the food we had with us was packaged in American Red Cross containers. They were not even impressed with Piet's lengthy prayers before every meal, which always made his soup get cold.

It was not until 1947 that I learned that the teacher who carried on an animated conversation with us in broken German could have just as well talked to us in quite respectable Dutch, having lived for several years in Amsterdam.

Apparently during our stay at this first farmhouse we met Ivan Butkovsky, though on this particular occasion he did not introduce himself as the UPA battalion commander. This I learned only a few years later when he contacted me again in Holland, but more about this in the second section of this memoir.

And in the meantime the teacher just listened in on our conversations whenever we were talking among ourselves...

The farmhouse in which we were staying was becoming progressively more crowded. When I looked out of the window, I saw an armed partisan standing in the farmyard keeping watch over the only road leading to the farm. The women and girls were busy making preparations for a meal, when suddenly the door opened and, as if in a dream, two more of our colleagues made their entrance into the room: Leen<sup>21</sup>, a villager from near Rotterdam, whose favorite expression was "let the fur fly, I don't care," and an exceptionally gifted artillery officer called Rooie<sup>22</sup>, whose name had been changed in the course of the war to "Red", Dutch not being exactly a commonly spoken language among the Allies<sup>23</sup>. The dinner we were then served was the first normal meal we had enjoyed in years and everything tasted so good that we wanted to go on with it forever. But there is an end to everything, and when our hosts noticed that we were dead tired, they quickly assigned bed for us. I wound up together in one bed with Piet. The man is now happily married, but I will never understand how any woman could possibly share her bed with such a "live wire". Harm and Kees were quartered with neighbours.

It was already dark when we awakened, but there was a lot of action in the farmyard. Ivan Butkovsky told us that we would be transferred to a more remote location, where we would meet with the highest UPA authority in the area. Moments later we were sitting in open sleighs, dashing across the snow in bright moonlight. It dawned on me that we were not going in the direction of the Carpathians, but straight westward. Our companions did not miss a single opportunity to put our military skills to the test, obviously a stratagem designed to find out if we were not too well trained and physically in too good a shape to pass for a group of ex-POWs. We felt like real amateurs when our guides ran over slick, ice-covered tree trunks placed across a creek and we followed them only hesitantly, having first tossed our baggage to the opposite bank. But actually we would have generated suspicion had we been more adept at it.

After having travelled a distance of some 35 kilometers, we stopped at the first house in the nearest village. After lengthy negotiations, we were guided through a completely darkened room into a sparsely furnished bedroom where two women immediately began stirring up the fire. Two sleepy-eyed children

---

<sup>21</sup> Leendert Arie Dirk (Leen) Kranenburg (Klaaswaal, 6 November 1916 – Apeldoorn, 17 February 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Frans Joseph Gerard (Frans) Brackel ('s-Gravenhage, 14 October 1914 – Arendonk (B), 20 May 2007).

<sup>23</sup> As a matter of fact four men successfully escaped from the second train: Leen Kranenburg, who fits the description given here in the narrative, fled with Hans Bentinck (see note 28) while Frans Brackel fled with Gerard Christiaan (Geert) Bijl de Vroe (Batavia, 25 November 1914 – Leusden, 10 July 1988). Hence the two who arrived at this point were probably Brackel and Bijl de Vroe. It was actually Bijl de Vroe who had enabled the escape from the train by sawing a hole in the wagon with the help of a small saw he managed to smuggle out of the camp in his boot. See the interviews ([http://youtu.be/nNrZ1Tzgt\\_o](http://youtu.be/nNrZ1Tzgt_o), <http://youtu.be/l7GPsi9Fa7g> and <http://youtu.be/WLmmyN2Sj9k>) with Kranenburg, Bentinck and Brackel by Petro Potichnyj on 24 August 1989 and *De Hartog* (p. 271).



stared at us from their recessed bed. Nobody said a word, and our companions, whom we did not even know, left after telling us that this was the headquarters of the area commandant who would come to see us later that evening.

Since the women acted like nuns in a convent, we started discussing current affairs and the general situation, our main topic always being our plan to continue in a southwesterly direction across the Carpathians. We were speaking freely for the simple reason that we had nothing to hide. After all, the saying that even walls have ears applies only to those who have something to say that cannot stand the light of day! But for our counterparts the matter had not yet been completely cleared, and, as I was told later, the teacher who could speak Dutch and who had arrived before us, was sitting in the dark room next to ours listening in on our conversation word for word.

About a half hour later, the door opened and in came Ivan, accompanied by two other partisans whom I shall not easily forget, and not just because they were our guides throughout our entire journey. One was a tall man with a very long and pointed nose, actually more a Western European **than** a Slavic type. We never did learn his name, which really did not matter too much because any name we would have been given would have been an alias anyway. So we called him, rather irreverently but nevertheless quite applicably, the Nose. The other was a sloppy-looking type who came hobbling into the room wearing one shoe and one slipper. He immediately began telling us how he had been wounded in action, but after a few words he was interrupted by the Nose, who completely deflated his heroism by laconically telling us in good German that his friend had accidentally shot himself in the foot when there was no action going on at all. Both were armed with Russian submachine guns, and the Lame One took out three hand grenades and two pistols from his pocket, ostentatiously placing them on the table in front of him. By civilized standards, he handled them rather recklessly until Ivan ordered him to put them into his pockets. Thereupon, after remarking, "I write letter" ("Ich schreiben Brief"), he began scribbling on an unsightly, small scrap of paper while holding his pencil more in his mouth than on the paper. As the Nose and Ivan looked on grinning, he rolled up his "letter" into a microscopically small tube and **started** boasting about his skills as a courier. During the following twenty days, we had the privilege of witnessing the same ceremony at least another twenty times.

Another three-quarters of an hour later, someone else entered the room. During the whole time we had been busy telling the story of our escape, this time specifically for the Nose and the Lame One.

The new visitor was actually the area commandant<sup>24</sup>. A gigantic man, whose impressive entrance could hardly have been **rivalled** by Hitler himself. There was much clanging and jingling of weapons, and his bodyguard, consisting of two men armed to the teeth, stood to attention in a corner of the room during the remainder of the evening.

\*\*  
\*

The area commandant was a true child of his people. As was the case with almost all of his compatriots, good-naturedness radiated from his face. But never underestimate these fellows if they have anything against you! From time to time we saw his good-naturedness combine with a resoluteness that left no doubt whatsoever in our minds. He wore heavy leather boots, a heavy leather jacket, and was equipped with a complete arsenal of weapons. If he had laid down all his arms and given his bodyguards a sign to do likewise, the room would have resembled an armory on the day recruits are issued military stores.

There were handshakes all around, and in order to improve our moods and probably also to make us more talkative a bottle and a glass appeared on the table. A drinking ritual then ensued that did not stop at one liter of whisky. The ceremonial observed in Ukraine at that time was as follows: All the men sit around a table and a bottle and one glass are placed in front of the oldest or highest in rank. He pours a drink, tips and empties the glass, whereupon he shoves the bottle and glass toward his neighbour on the right (or is it the one on his left?) who loyally repeats the ritual, meanwhile toasting the generous donor. After that he moves the whole thing farther down the line and this continues until the bottle and glass again reach **the** point of departure. Whereas in most countries the number of drinks imbibed is usually determined by the number of

---

<sup>24</sup> Until 26 January 1944 the area commander of UPA-West was Oleksandr Luts'kyi (Bondariv 1910 – Kyiv, 13 November 1946), who until March 1944 was also a member of the leadership of OUN-B, the Bandera faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

people present, in Ukraine this depends on the contents of the bottle. This merely means that the bottle is not put away until it is completely empty. Then follows an intermission during which the people eat a hearty meal in order to start a new bottle with renewed vigor.

The national beverage<sup>25</sup> which we were so lavishly honoured was a mixture of alcohol and honey with no admixture of water to dilute it somewhat. Of course, one can drink this stuff quite easily, but it just as easily puts one under the table, especially if one had been out of practice for as long as a POW.

Sure enough, halfway through the second bottle, it became necessary to give Kees a good kick under the table, because, as usual, he began to talk too much and one could never be sure what this might lead to. He had just begun praising the Russian soldiers who had been assigned to serve us in the POW camp. Under these circumstances, such a hymn of praise could only be considered inappropriate and hardly designed to serve our cause, because it had become quite clear to us that the Ukrainians despised the Russians even more than the ancient Greeks scorned the barbarians.

After we finished drinking the second bottle, the area commandant began pacing up and down the room with a face that would have inspired a sculptor like Rodin. The silence that fell on the room only served to further underline the great importance of the moment. This lasted about five minutes, then with a broad grin the area commandant sat down again and reached for the third bottle that had appeared out of nowhere.

The uproar that now broke out among the Ukrainians was the clearest proof possible that we had been recognized “de jure”. Even the children were dragged from their beds and, decorated with revolvers, ordered to sing the partisans’ hymn<sup>26</sup>. We were shown weapons from all the surrounding countries, their mechanisms were explained, and as a token of our hosts’ confidence I received a Russian-made hand grenade with apologies that they could not afford to give me a submachine gun, since they themselves needed them. We were also told that two more Dutch officers had been found near Stryj, but that they had refused all aid from the partisans. One of them was a naval officer<sup>27</sup>.

At the same time they made us an exciting proposal. We were asked in the name of the commandant if we would be interested in joining the partisans instead of attempting to join the Dutch armed forces that were after all so far away. But in war it is hardly possible to fight against one’s own allies, and this was what the Russians still were at the time. Furthermore, in a worldwide BBC broadcast, our Queen had declared that it was the duty of every Dutchman abroad to join his own armed forces as soon as possible. And when we also assured them that after our safe arrival in England we would conduct propaganda for an independent Ukraine — something we later in fact did very gladly — our hosts promised us armed escort to the Hungarian border. That this procedure was not an unfamiliar one to them was borne out by the fact that we were shown a map on which our route to the border was clearly marked. This route made a wide arc around those German fortifications and outposts which could not be avoided altogether. The suggested **route** passed through a more accessible part of the Carpathians, a part which — as we soon discovered — was still rough enough for us.

Before we set out for the next village by night, a messenger arrived with a note for the commandant informing him that contact had been established with two more Dutch officers and two cadets belonging to the Air Force.

### IN THE CUSTODY OF UPA

That very night a couple of sleighs took us to another village. For two days nothing important happened. We spent our days sleeping and our nights travelling.

---

<sup>25</sup> Possibly medovukha (or ‘medukha’ in Ukrainian).

<sup>26</sup> “*Oy u luzi chervona kalina*” (<http://youtu.be/xzF172DC2K0>), the anthem of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen, a Ukrainian unit within the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First World War, was also sang by UPA in World War Two.

<sup>27</sup> These were probably Rutger (Rudi) Stuffken (Rijswijk, 11 May 1910 – Mauthausen, 2 May 1944) and Hendrik Cornelis (Henk) de Heer (Rotterdam, 27 January 1912 – Mauthausen, 2 May 1944), who were arrested near the Hungarian border and sent back to Stanislau, see *De Hartog* (p. 249).

The third day brought us a surprise: the sudden arrival of two colleagues — Hans Bentinck<sup>28</sup> and Leen Kranenburg<sup>29</sup>, who had jumped off the train the same day as we.

The next day our group grew to ten persons, a number which from then on remained constant. This latest addition consisted of two Air Force cadets: **Sieb** van der Pol<sup>30</sup> and Joop **Singor**<sup>31</sup>. Their escape had been very different from ours. The following is **Sieb**'s account:

“At the end of 1943, several fellow prisoners and I were busy digging an escape tunnel. Since we were cadets, we had been billeted in a separate camp. The work on the tunnel had almost progressed to the fence, when we were notified that our camp was to be vacated and moved elsewhere. Even though we pushed our digging pace to the limit, we did not succeed in **completing** our undertaking. We, therefore, decided that seven of us would crawl into the unfinished tunnel and there wait until the retreat of the camp guard detachment. However, a temporary thaw caused the tunnel to be partially flooded, making this plan too risky. We then found another hiding place under the stage, which was situated in one of the annexes of the camp building. In the space under the stage, which was situated on the second floor of the annex, above the ground floor ceiling, two men constructed an imitation wall out of blackout paper about one meter from the rear wall. The stage was approximately eight meters deep and sufficiently raised off the floor to let someone crawl underneath. During the night preparations were made for a long, drawn-out stay in the shelter and our final flight.

We expected that the final check for the POW transport would take place in the courtyard of our camp. During the early morning hours several fellow prisoners who were helping us brought our baggage and bottles filled with water to the stage. At about 6:30 a.m., one of our lookouts gave the alarm that the Germans were entering our camp, whereupon we raced to the stage and in no time squeezed under it through the prompter's hatch. Our accomplices just managed to pass our baggage down to us and to disappear before the Germans entered the theater hall. The first German was kind enough to close the hatch without looking inside. They were puzzled by all the bottles of water standing on the stage and wondered what idiot had put them there.

After this the checking of the POWs took place right above us and lasted the rest of the day. Under the cover of the noise and make-believe quarrels staged by our accomplices who pranced around above our heads, we managed to inch our way behind the imitation wall. Here the seven of us lay in two rows, squeezed together like sardines in a can: Air Force cadets van der Pol, Singor and Verhage<sup>32</sup> (+), Navy pilot Popelier<sup>33</sup> (+), cadets **von** Seydlitz Kurzbach<sup>34</sup> (+), and Ligtermoet<sup>35</sup> who had been taken prisoner in 1940 yet, and Ernst<sup>36</sup> (+), a reserve officer in the artillery who intended to become a professional.

That evening it became evident that the disappearance of the seven men from the cadet camp had been discovered, and a large-scale search was launched. A German sergeant, notorious for his talents for discovering escape attempts, came to the firm conviction that the seven of us were hiding under the stage. But his opinion was contested by a captain who, judging from the conversation carried on above us, was also in charge of the POW transport. He doubted very much that seven men could succeed in hiding in the camp and therefore assumed that we must have escaped earlier. Encouraged by this assumption, we were not terribly impressed by the command: “Come on out, or I'll shoot”, although one shot would have been sufficient to force one of us to cry out in pain. The

---

<sup>28</sup> Johannes Adolf (Hans) baron Bentinck (Djakakarta, 13 May 1916 – 's-Gravenhage, 20 January 2000).

<sup>29</sup> See note 21.

<sup>30</sup> Sijbren (Sieb) van der Pol (Wieringen, 9 December 1917 – Leiden, 7 August 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Johan (Joop) Singor (Bussum, 19 July 1920 – Leidschendam, 1 December 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Adriaan Wisse (Ad) Verhage (Vrouwenpolder, 17 June 1915 – Mauthausen, 23 February 1945).

<sup>33</sup> Carolus Marinus (Carol) Popelier (Gorinchem, 29 October 1918 – Mauthausen, 23 February 1945).

<sup>34</sup> Hans Robert (Hans) von Seydlitz Kurzbach (Tjimahi, 12 October 1917 – Lemberg, 17 September 1944).

<sup>35</sup> Ary Gustaaf Leonardus (Ary) Ligtermoet (Tjimahi, 15 April 1919 – Odessa, 31 October 1948).

<sup>36</sup> Albert Eduard Gustave (Albert) Ernst (Heerlen, 24 February 1919 – missing in Eastern Europe 1944).

sergeant wanted to have that stage torn down, but this was refused on the grounds that SS troops were to be billeted in the barracks. Undaunted, the sergeant tried to crawl under the stage, but failed owing to his excessive girth. Moreover he mistook the imitation wall for the real one. Finally the Germans decided to push a dog under the stage. Although the animal must have practically fainted from body odor, it just yelped and whined, probably because it could not move about.

After dark we started scouting around. It appeared that the camp guard had been reinforced. The next day the stage was scrubbed with water, which at least provided us with something to drink. In the evening a Soviet prisoner, who worked as a janitor, informed us that the guards, with the exception of those stationed at the entrance and on the towers on the side of the old cavalry camp, had been removed. We also found out that the camp was still being swept by searchlights.

Realizing that the camp would soon be occupied by SS troops, we hastily made our final preparations for leaving. We wound strips of blankets around our shoes in order to deaden the sound of our steps. All the barricades were still in place and the gates locked. Our plans called for an "advance party" of two men to investigate the possibilities of getting out while the others waited. But since this would not have helped us, we decided to choose one man to keep an eye on the watchtower while the others made their gateway two by two. We had two large obstacles to overcome: a three-meter high barricade containing loose coils of more barbed wire in it and a four-to-five meter high wall with barbed wire and glass on top. Joop Singor and I succeeded in scaling the inner barricade by first throwing a couple of blankets over it and then jumping off it, tearing our clothing in the process. Passing by an unmanned watchtower situated between the inner and outer barricades, we managed to get outside the camp.

It later turned out that the others had not been as fortunate. Two were recaptured and shot to death by a firing squad and two died in a Soviet prison camp, and one vanished without a trace<sup>37</sup>.

Bypassing villages and main roads, and guided by our compass, we moved in a southwesterly direction, first through a forest and then across a plain with intermittent glades. It was too cold to take and extensive rest. After having covered some 70 kilometers, we were intercepted in a forest by Ukrainian partisans whom we persuaded through sign language and by showing American Red Cross articles not to shoot us on the spot. Instead they escorted us to their main encampment, where we were subjected to a thorough interrogation.

Later we were told that at first we had been taken for Russians, but then, they added with a grin, the fact that we turned down the girls was **taken as** decisive proof that we were not.

The partisan camp was pitched in a forest around a large camouflaged campfire. Its strength was some two hundred men. Their commander helped us to reach Hungary, after first trying to persuade us to fly their own plane, a Fieseler **Storch**. After a few adventures encountered during our trip by sleigh accompanied by an armed escort, during which armed clashes with the Germans at times seemed inevitable, we got here, and we believe that from here on in we stand a good chance". Such was the story of **Sieb** and Joop's escape.

We soon saw that in those days the Germans had very little power in Galicia. Usually our escort consisted of no more than four men, while here and there sentries had been placed along the highways. The only time that the German occupation forces resembled a regular army was when we had to cross the railroad tracks between Dolyna and Bolekhiv. The Germans patrolled this area to prevent sabotage. Here we were given some twenty partisans for an escort and they protected us from all sides. A few shots fell from time to time on our right flank, but that was all. On the fifteenth day we reached the Carpathian foothills.

Judging by the extensive and **thoroughgoing** preparations being taken upon our arrival at the foot of the Carpathians, we realized that our most formidable task lay just ahead. Because food supplies were hard

---

<sup>37</sup> Actually Ad Verhage and Carol Popelier were caught, brought back to the camp, then transferred to Mauthausen where they were killed. Hans von Seydlitz Kurzbach and Ary Ligtermoet joined the ranks of the Ukrainian insurgents, where Hans married a local girl, after which Ary moved further east to the Soviet Allies. Hans got wounded and died from sepsis near Lemberg (now Lviv). Ary was arrested by the Soviets and put in a Soviet POW camp. In 1946, when he was in the repatriation prison in Sighet, about to be released, the Soviets suddenly stopped the repatriation of Dutch POWs, after which he was transferred back to Odessa, where he died of exhaustion. The fate of Albert Ernst is unknown until today.

to come by in the mountains and because no one knew for sure when we would be able to reach the border, we were once again loaded down with meat and lard and enough bread to last each of us a week.

We had to deviate from our originally marked route by about thirty kilometers. It was impossible to travel the whole stretch by sleigh, so that very night we would have to journey an additional fifteen kilometers on foot in order to reach the last stopping place before Hungary.

The trip by sleigh started in a rather unpleasant snowstorm. The wind managed to penetrate even through the extra clothing we had received for our journey. Travelling cross-country, we were happy when now and then we came to a patch of woods where the trees protected us a little from the cutting wind. At the end of the sleigh ride near a farmhouse, the Nose and the Lame One (I-Write-Letter) said good-bye in a deeply touching way. As keepsakes they gave us a few tie pins and signet rings, all bearing the Ukrainian coat-of-arms<sup>38</sup>.

Two guides were going to take over from here. The journey on foot started enthusiastically enough along a country road. However, this did not last very long, for our guides felt that it would be safer to leave the beaten roads as soon as possible, since here near the Hungarian border the Carpathian foothills crawled with German lumbermen's settlements. We had now reached the periphery of the Ukrainian empire. The way ahead of us was anything but comfortable. It consisted of a narrow-gauge railroad track<sup>39</sup> covered with snow; its ties were visible here and there under the snow. In order to leave as few footprints as possible, we walked single-file like a group of Indians on the warpath. Everyone can remember from the days of his childhood having followed a railroad track by jumping from tie to tie. But one should attempt this in the dark, carrying a lot of baggage on one's back, jumping from tie to tie hidden in the snow.

The situation deteriorated even further when two members of our party began feeling of injuries sustained earlier when jumping from the train. Since the journey so far had not demanded great physical strain, they had not been previously bothered with the aftereffects.

After limping along for a few hours, to the point where we all agreed that things just could not get any worse, we began that portion of our trip that since then we have always called the "kilometer conspiracy". The little railroad track dead-ended right in the center of one of the settlements, so our guides maintained that it would be better to circle it in a wide arch, the best way along a creek that turned off to the right some thirty meters from where we stood. Further on we would come to a country road at the other side of the settlement. In view of the fact that the Germans hardly ever ventured outside their mountain settlements, we could follow that creek without running too much of a risk. The descent went easily enough. The creek was frozen and the ice was covered with a heavy layer of waist-deep snow. The first guide blazed the trail in such a way as to enable the fourth and fifth man to make their way through a sort of gully. But even so, our column grew longer and longer. The crisis was finally precipitated when the Ukrainian who led the column suddenly fell through the ice without so much as uttering a sound and disappeared up to his neck in the snow. Of course, this was an excellent way of camouflaging our movements, but I can also assure every winter sport enthusiast that walking up to your knees in the water of an icy Carpathian mountain stream in the middle of February and up to your neck in the snow is definitely no fun. And so it was not surprising that here and there certain powerful and unquotable expressions could be heard.

After we had waded several hundred meters, our guide once again felt firm ice under his feet. We continued a bit further through the snow, and by the time we had climbed up the sloping bank our pant legs were frozen stiff, and we definitely had no water in our shoes. While our column stopped for regrouping, one of our guides went ahead to prepare a temporary but warm bivouac for us a few kilometers down the road. The other guide told us that as far as possible encounters with Germans were concerned, the most dangerous part of our journey lay behind us. We now moved into the intermediate altitude regions of the Carpathians. From here on the road climbed continuously, although at first rather gradually and slowly.

---

<sup>38</sup> The 'Tryzub', or trident symbol, was adopted in February 1918 as the coat of arms of the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1921) and serves as the coat of arms of Ukraine since 19 February 1992.

<sup>39</sup> The Vyhoda Forestry railway was founded in the 1870s by the Hungarian Leopold Freiherr Popper von Podhragy, the largest entrepreneur of the Habsburg Empire specialized in logging, processing and sale of wood. Subsequently its exploitation and ownership pretty much followed that of turbulent history of Galicia itself. See: *Wendelin, Wolfram: Karpatendampf, Band 3, Die Waldbahn Vyhoda, L'viv, 2006*. In January 1944 the Dutch officers followed the tracks somewhere between Vyhoda and Senechiv, possibly in the valley of the Mizunka river.

The expected warm bivouac proved to be something unforgettable — that is to say, an unforgettable disappointment. It was a dugout shelter for lumberjacks built from logs and covered by a sod roof. Our minds searched in vain for a proverb that could best describe the scene. Smoke there was in abundance, but fire and heat remained a pious wish. In addition to the heat being conspicuous only by its absence, almost every imaginable stench was represented. The sole result of our rest period was that within five minutes every one of us was just about dying of thirst. To make matters worse, we discovered that each of us had finished his last drop of water a long time ago in the hopes that the other fellow would save a little for him. The only available liquid was a little whisky left in the bottle of the guides. The latter took no chances. Before letting the flask make the rounds, he himself took a hearty swig.

And this brings us to the melted snow episode. This luxury does bring some relief if one continually indulges in it. But the moment one stops, a terrible thirst results. When one begins eating snow, Mother Nature responds quickly and effectively with an unpleasant feeling in the abdominal region.

By the time we reached our destination — a cluster of **farmhouses** — each and every one of us felt like a little Napoleon who has just crossed a miniature Berezina. Our leader motioned us to halt and told us to wait a moment while he arranged for a place for us to stay. In anticipation of the warm stove that would unquestionably be awaiting us, some of us just collapsed and stretched out in the snow.

We have yet to see that warm stove. About ten minutes later our guide returned with the information that on that very day Germans had been seen in the vicinity. To be sure this was a stroke of bad luck, and we had no choice but to move on deeper into the mountains: “Only three more kilometers. This will make the final stretch that much shorter”.

I might as well start by saying that it took us more than two and a half hours to walk those three kilometers. It was not so terribly difficult to get everybody to stand up. Nor was it the most hopeless task in the world to reform the column and start it moving. But our enthusiasm dropped considerably when our guide left the road we had been following, apparently remembering the ancient proposition that a straight line constitutes the shortest distance between two points. Sinking up to his waist in the snow, he began inching up a forty-five degree slope.

This slope was completely white and as bare as the bald head of an old man who has spent his entire life thinking hard. There was not even the smallest shrub to give the minimal support necessary for the ascent. The first five hundred meters were not too bad, especially as a promising shadow beckoned at the top. But no sooner did we reach the top, that our path turned right and on up an equally steep slope. Halfway up, I looked back and saw that the last man was at least three hundred meters behind and that one hundred meters behind me someone was lying in the snow. This signalled the first of numerous rest stops. At the next roll call Kees was missing. It turned out that we were looking in the wrong direction, for he was perched fifty meters higher up on a fence, whistling patriotic songs and looking down at us with a certain degree of contempt.

There is little sense in going into greater detail concerning this journey. The rest stops succeeded each other at 200 meter intervals for the simple reason that at about this distance somebody collapsed exhausted in the snow with the strong urge to fall asleep. Our rate of progress slowed down more and more all the time, and, now and then, we actually had to carry one another. Piet walked all the way at the column's tail and near the rear guide. He looked like a mother hen chasing her chicks to the safety of the nest. In addition to his own heavy rucksack, he was lugging someone else's, equally as heavy.

The 45-degree incline continued the last few hundred meters. Then came a short but even steeper descent, completely overgrown with large fir trees. We covered this distance in record time. We all simply slid and rolled downhill, and in the process the fir trees saw to it rather roughly that the tempo of our descent did not become too rapid. One of the guides told me later that this had been the only portion of the entire trip during which he had actually fallen behind. Our final destination was an isolated farmhouse whose owners had already been notified of our arrival by an inhabitant of the village we had recently passed. The farm lay in the most picturesque surroundings imaginable, some seven kilometers as the crow flies from the Hungarian border. But we did not discover this natural beauty until the next day and then it did not profit us much, since we were forbidden to set foot outside the house for any other reason than our human-all-too-human purposes.

In spite of everything, we had gained some experience and we made use of it while covering the last section of our journey. When we set out again, each of us, without exception, had a self-made mountain cane.

While we were all in complete agreement about the miserable impression we must have made upon our Ukrainian guides, the two men gave our morale a tremendous boost by maintaining that we had managed much better than they had expected. They had anticipated far more difficulties with a group of newly escaped POWs, who, without any training, had to make this arduous journey through the mountains. In answer to our questions, they told us that we were now at an altitude of approximately 1400 meters and that the highest point to be taken lay at about 1550 meters right on the border with Hungary. But between these two points lay three valleys and three mountain ridges!

---

### EPILOGUE<sup>40</sup>

After they crossed the border between the General Government and Hungary in groups of two, the ten Dutchmen were apprehended by border guards and gathered near Toronya (now Torun', Ukraine). From there they were brought to Ökörmező (now Mizhhirya, Ukraine) and finally via Huszt (now Khust, Ukraine) to a Prisoners of War camp at Balatonboglár.



**Point where the Dutch officers crossed the border in 1944 (picture taken 27 June 2013).**

Indeed, as they had expected, Hungary was neutral and respected the Geneva Conventions, which meant that the Dutch were given a certain room to move<sup>41</sup>. A few months later, another Dutchman<sup>42</sup> who had escaped from the transport, but had waited to cross the border until after most of the snow had melted, was unlucky to cross the border when Germany had already occupied Hungary, hence he was arrested and sent back to the POW camp where the others had been transported to in January 1944.

---

<sup>40</sup> Based on Hootegem, E.J.C. van. 'Een hele grote omweg' in: *De Schakel*, 13e jaargang nr. 51 (okt. 1991), pp. 16-23, *De Schakel*, 14e jaargang nr. 52 (dec. 1991/jan. 1992), pp. 25-31, *De Schakel*, 15e jaargang nr. 53 (apr. 1992), pp. 15-17 (in Dutch) and *De Hartog*, chapter XV

<sup>41</sup> See Kapronczay, K. (1999). *Refugees in Hungary: shelter from storm during World War II*. pp. 198-206.

<sup>42</sup> W.H.C. (Willem) van der Grinten ('s-Gravenhage, 2 November 1907 – unknown after the war).

Soon after their arrival the ten contacted the Dutch colony in Budapest, and were reunited with two other POWs, who had escaped still in 1943, and who had also managed to reach Hungary with the help of Ukrainians. Once in Budapest, these two, Ger van der Waals<sup>43</sup> and Wil Püchel<sup>44</sup>, joined a Polish-Hungarian-British resistance group<sup>45</sup>, which was also in touch with Tito's partisans and the Hashomer Hatzair<sup>46</sup>. One of the liaisons of the group was Dutchman Lolle Smit<sup>47</sup> (codename PETERS), the director of Philips on the Balkans, who was active there for the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). The Dutch were given quarters (sometimes with Dutch families) and were given employment or took up studies, which was a mere cover for their activities in the resistance. Van Hootezem, the highest in rank, was asked to become the leader of the Dutch soldiers in Budapest. Besides liaising with other groups and conducting industrial espionage for the Allies, the group specialised in producing fake documents for Allied soldiers, Jews and others who needed protection and shelter. The Dutch in Budapest stood under the protection of the Swedish legation, where at the time Raoul Wallenberg was trying to save the Budapest Jews.

When Germany invaded Hungary on 19 March 1944, the Dutch themselves went underground. On 28 April Frans Brackel and Joop Singor were arrested during a dinner at a Dutch family<sup>48</sup>. They too were transported to the POW camp in Neu-Brandenburg. Now life was getting more complicated, different escape routes were tried. Wil Püchel had made various attempts to flee to Yugoslavia, and after Romania switched sides Geert Bijl de Vroe and Hans Bentinck tried their luck into that direction. Every time they were returned to Budapest. The first successful escape was made by Sieb van der Pol, who reached London via Bucharest. The second to escape was Hans Bentinck, who managed to fly to Italy in a Heinkel He 111, stolen from the Germans, together with a group of Hungarians.

The Red Army was already closing in. The same day that Bentinck left Budapest on his way to freedom, also Ger van der Waals got out of town. He had been asked by one of the SOE liaisons in Budapest, Gábor Haraszty (codename ALBERT), to deliver information to the Red Army at a farm in Csiribpuszta near Lake Velence. Instead of being welcomed by his Allies, he and his companion Károly Schandl were arrested on 8 December by SMERSH, the Soviet counter-intelligence, and they were finally flown to Moscow, where they were put in prison, accused of being British spies<sup>49,50</sup>. Van der Waals and Schandl were tortured in an attempt to make them confess. Ger van der Waals could not handle the physical and psychological pressure and tried to commit suicide in 1946. His health then deteriorated, after which he died on 11 August 1948 in the Butyrka prison in Moscow. Not until 1955 did the Soviet authorities confirm his death to the Dutch authorities. His case resembles that of Raoul Wallenberg, which has never been clarified.

The seven remaining officers were in Buda when the Siege of Budapest started at the end of December 1944. Four of the officers were captured and held for almost four weeks in several farms around Budapest, after which they were released. They returned only to find a ravaged house, where in the weeks of their absence no woman had been safe from the Soviet soldiers. Only on 13 March did the Soviet commander give them (and some of their newly wed wives) permission to leave the town. Finally they reached Odessa via Arad, Ploiești, Iași, Kyiv, Moscow, and Kyiv. In Odessa, while waiting for the ship that would sail them to freedom, they met the staff of the Swedish legation, Lars G. Berg<sup>51</sup> and Per Anger<sup>52</sup>, at the Opera. On 15 April 1945 the Dutch officers went on board the SS *Nieuw Holland*, which brought them to Glasgow on 4 May via Naples and Gibraltar.

You can contact the author of this annotated version by e-mail at: [jstienen@hotmail.com](mailto:jstienen@hotmail.com)

---

<sup>43</sup> Gerrit Hendrikus Maria (Ger) van der Waals (Soerabaja, 24 April 1920 – Moscow, 11 August 1948).

<sup>44</sup> Wilhelm Arnold (Wil) Püchel (Batavia, 25 July 1918 – Eindhoven, 31 May 1992).

<sup>45</sup> See Howie, C. (1997). *Agent by Accident*, and Szántó, D.V. (1946). *With God Against Hitler*.

<sup>46</sup> See Palgi, Y. (2003). *Into the Inferno: The Memoir of a Jewish Paratrooper Behind Nazi Lines*.

<sup>47</sup> Lolle Smit (Sneek, 25 August 1892 – 's-Gravenhage, 22 September 1961).

<sup>48</sup> See Jones, F.S. (1978). *The Double Dutchman*. pp. 118 ff.

<sup>49</sup> See Schandl, C. E. (2007). *The London-Budapest Game*.

<sup>50</sup> See Schandl, C. E. (2011). *Swedish Gold*.

<sup>51</sup> See Berg, L.G. (1990). *The Book That Disappeared: What Happened in Budapest*.

<sup>52</sup> See Anger, P. (1981). *With Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest: Memories of the war years in Hungary*.