

THE HIGH NEST



ROXANE VAN IPEREN

The true story of two Jewish sisters in the resistance, a hideaway villa and the unavoidable treason

**LEBO
WSKI**

'We were so sad, we were tired, we were cold, hadn't eaten in days, we were starving – we really didn't know whether we were hungry or not, because it passes, I don't know if you – Fortunately you will never experience it, oh my god, let it never happen to you.' Janny Brandes Brilleslijper

During the Second World War two Jewish sisters – Janny and Lien Brilleslijper – run one of the largest hideaways in The Netherlands: 't Hooge Nest (The High Nest), a villa in The Gooi area. While the last remaining Jews are being hunted in The Netherlands, the lives of dozens of hideaways kept going for better or for worse, right under the noses of their NSB (national socialist)-neighbours. Still, the nest is being exposed and the Brilleslijper family is put on the last transport to Auschwitz, along with the (Anne) Frank family. *The High Nest* is a blood-curdling book about courage, treason and human resilience.

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('t Hooge Nest)

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ARRIVAL

A safe place to get through the war was all they asked for. No one dared to predict how long this war would last. One more ask: that the rest of the family – especially the children – not be separated from them. Many of their friends and acquaintances had been forced to see this happen. Any shelter offering them this would do, whether it was a hay barn or a factory shed. They had expected everything, but not this.

It was dark when they approached the address they had been given. They had left the village of Naarden behind them five, perhaps ten minutes before; they drove across the heath for a while, through a forest, until according to the description they were almost there. They had been dead silent throughout the journey, exhausted by the fear of being stopped on the way. It had gone well so far. The paved road stopped and turned into a sandy path, and the forest was closing in on them. They did not dare to drive any farther; the rickety old moving van almost got stuck in the deep cart tracks. Bob turned the ignition key, and as the headlights cast their last rays of light on the road and the engine's hum drifted off between the trees, a thin calm descended on them. Bob was the first to move.

“Come on. It’s got to be here somewhere.”

Janny helped her mother out of the van before taking Lilo in her arms. Outside the rain beat down on their tired cheeks. Trees were cracking in the wind above their heads while the sound of their footsteps disappeared into heaps of leaves on the roadside. They walked until the path before them seemed to come to a dead end against a high black wall. The forest. Janny glanced at Bob, who was holding little Robbie by the hand, too tired to cry. He shrugged and they carried on. Jaap had offered Fijtje his arm and was holding his mother tightly. She was shivering with cold. The rest of the company was somewhere on the way – Eberhard with Father, Lientje with little Kathinka. Traveling together had become too dangerous.

Not until they reached the edge of the forest did they see the path that crossed theirs. It appeared from a bare patch of heath on their right and disappeared into the darkness between the trees on their left. Bob nodded and they went into the forest. As soon as Janny walked between the black trunks, a vaguely reassuring feeling came over her. The memory of her time in the *Rode Hulp* (Red Aid), the sense of freedom and safely hidden adventure, together in nature. She had felt at home there. Strange for a city child with the temperament of an Amsterdam street cat.

To the right of the narrow path loomed a gigantic shadow. Around them, branches groaned and trees rocked to the rhythm of the wind, but the house stood there, robust and unaffected as if it were not at all impressed. The rain had stopped and a faint moon pushed through the layer of

clouds above the open ground they had just left. The light could not reach them here, but it did offer better visibility. They stood still on the path and looked at the house. Janny's eyes traveled across the heavy facade, up to a white sign between the windows of the ground floor and the first. The High Nest it read, in black letters.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

And so the unusual household of the Brilleslijper family is established in The High Nest in February 1943. Unusual because it will serve as host family, hiding place, and resistance center combined. At that moment in time, desperate Jews throughout the Netherlands were searching for houses, for families where they could go into hiding to keep one step ahead of the Germans and the *Nationaal Socialistische Beweging* (NSB, the National Socialist Movement). Many courageous non-Jewish Dutch citizens will help their compatriots like this; sometimes one person, sometimes an entire family. Sometimes they are acquainted, sometimes they are perfect strangers. But the relationship is always distorted; the person in hiding is only too aware of the risk his presence creates.

People in hiding realize they eat from their host family's supplies and that they live in a space that was not meant for them. Hidden children, added to a family, feel they must not be troublesome; no crying, no complaining, always be grateful. The mercy of the host or hostess is a lifeline that can be cut at any moment. Some people in hiding can cover the cost of their stay by working for their host family, on farms for instance; others have to pay, reasonable or

outrageous amounts. Sometimes the dependent position of people in hiding is taken advantage of, from humiliation to sexual abuse. And then there are host families who, at some point, no longer can or want to bear the stress and betray their people in hiding, feigning horror when the police drag them out of their shelter.

Another unusual thing about The High Nest situation is that Janny and Bob and their two children have moved to Naarden legally, while the rest of the party is illegal, wanted by the police, and thus people in hiding. Joseph and Fijtje Brilleslijper because they are Jewish and should have reported to the authorities in Amsterdam a long time ago. Jaap Brilleslijper because he is Jewish and because he is wanted for resistance work. Eberhard Rebling because he is a German deserter and guilty of *Rassenschande* (racial disgrace) by having a child with a Jewish woman. Lien Brilleslijper because she is Jewish and wanted in connection with the disappearance of Eberhard. Janny's good fortune is that she is not wanted – yet – for her resistance work, *and* she married Bob just in time when this was not yet forbidden. Bob is a non-Jewish man and therefore an “Aryan marriage partner”; their children, according to the Nuremberg Laws, were half-Jews: *Mischlinge*. This principle is the provisional protection against deportation for the children and for Janny. That, combined with her fearless character, enables her, a Jewish woman, to start her own hiding and resistance center at The High Nest at a time when the need for such places became increasingly urgent. Jew hate.

Since the deportations started, in mid-1942, tensions eve-

rywherein the country have risen every month, and host families are increasingly hard to find. Moreover, sadism is not reserved for Nazis or NSB members; the seed of Jew hatred finds fertile ground in other places too. In this third year of occupation, the inhumane treatment of Jews takes place, unrestricted, in all layers of Dutch society, both by confirmed anti-Semites and by ordinary citizens seeking power. Even without pressure from Germany, some people are happy to bring Nazi ideology to life. As the young police officer Arend Ruben from Groningen says in those days, "It ain't Sunday if we haven't beaten a couple of Jews to a pulp first." These are the circumstances when the Brilleslijper family takes up residence at The High Nest, with no intention of yielding to terror just like that.

*

The manor, run by Jews and full of people in hiding at this exact place in the forests of Naarden, is like a Trojan horse; 't Gooi, as the area is known, is a hotbed of fascists. In the residential areas of Naarden and Bussum in particular, they are overrepresented: twice as many as the national average. In Bussum many NSB members live in the residential area 't Spiegel, and the beautiful buildings of Naarden accommodate fanatic fascists too.

A large part of the Nazi Party electorate in the Netherlands is made up of the middle class, office staff, self-employed, and the upper class. Although NSB ideology is aimed at workers, the working class is underrepresented in

the party. Even before the German occupation, the NSB could count on strong support in the higher-class residential districts of Amsterdam and in well-to-do areas like 't Gooi. People living in comfort, afraid to be worse off, reluctant to share their wealth. On top of this there were anti-Semitic sentiments and an aversion to “foreign elements” – although most Jews were regular Dutch citizens. It was a fact that the more Jews a city had among its residents, the more NSB boxes were checked at election time. The Jewish community in 't Gooi, situated between Hilversum and Amsterdam (with a large Jewish population), was relatively large and in the late 1930s grew by a few hundred members within a short period of time, all refugees from Germany. In 1942 Dutch Nazis set up the *Vrijwillige Hulp Politie* (VHP, Police Support Volunteers), and this puffed-up fascist neighborhood watch operated in a dozen villages and cities in North Holland. It is no coincidence that 't Gooi is fully represented, with VHPs in Hilversum, Bussum, and Naarden.

Although Janny, when she moves into The High Nest, does not know where exactly the fanatical NSB members or silent sympathizers live, she knows based on intelligence from the resistance not to trust anyone in this area. With his infallible intuition, Father Brilleslijper had already warned them a few times. When the entire family is seated around the dinner table late in the evening, he bursts out again. Outside a waxing moon casts a faint light on the house from above the heath, shadows of swaying birches flit across the shutters.

“We have to watch out with those rich people here, mark my words. It’s for good reason Little Tony sought shelter in ’t Gooi of all places when the Germans invaded.” The condescending Little Tony refers to NSB founder Anton Mussert, who has since been appointed Leader of the Dutch People by Adolf Hitler. Nowadays they have to eat in two shifts, but even then, at least twenty people will sit around the sturdy walnut table in the living room. It is dark in the room and their hands and chins are lit by candle stubs. When Joseph speaks, everyone listens. In the dusk, Janny exchanges a sparkling glance with Lien opposite; they are delighted to see their father become his old self again.

“Of course, living in this nice area, you have become one of them,” she remarks dryly. Lien chuckles. But Joseph will not let his daughters put him off and sullenly shakes his head.

“Opportunists, that’s what they are! How else do you think they got those nice jobs and houses?” He sniffs, pointing his fork. “You can’t fool a merchant when it comes to people. I tell you: the nicer the suit, the meaner the man.”

Fijtje, walking around the table with a large dish of steaming potatoes, calms her husband down.

“It’s true,” he grumbles, “I much prefer those surly fishermen from Huizen; they take care of themselves and want nothing to do with anyone. Not with the fascists either.”

Fijtje makes herself small and wriggles onto a chair next to her husband; when she speaks, the rest must stop chewing to hear her soft voice.

“The rich always turn their heads towards the sun. They have too much to lose to offer resistance.”

The clattering of cutlery on the plates is resumed while everyone chews on the words mother Brilleslijper just spoke.

What they do not know is that The High Nest is literally surrounded by National Socialists. In the same nature reserve where they live is the Oud Bussem estate, owned by affluent NSB member Pieter van Leeuwen Boomkamp. It's at Flevolaan 96 in Naarden, just a short walk across the heath away. The infamous *Reichsmarschall* Göring, often referred to as *der dicke Hermann*, stayed at Oud Bussem when he spent some time in the Netherlands in 1940. In addition, large numbers of German soldiers are stationed within four kms of The High Nest, in the *Weeshuiskazerne* (Orphanage Barracks) in Naarden and in the *Kolonel Palmkazerne* (Colonel Palm Barracks) in Bussum. At the start of the war, Anton Mussert himself gave a speech at the Yellow Hut beside the gate of Naarden-Vesting where you enter the fortified town beneath the majestic arches of the Utrecht's Poort. But the proximity of NSB members goes further than that. The wild nature reserve a stone's throw from Amsterdam is not just the perfect location to hide Jews; it was also selected by the NSB to keep its most important leader safe. It would not have done Joseph's heart any good had he known that Little Tony, whom he so deeply despised, had been hiding in a ditch literally three hundred meters from The High Nest when all this trouble began. From his window, Joseph could have hit Mussert in the ass with an air rifle.

Mussert knew it was coming. War. He also knew that any resistance by the Dutch would be short-lived. In the run-up to the occupation in May 1940, he begins to worry that in those first chaotic days after the German invasion, a battle between the Dutch and the NSB members will break out. And so he says, in a meeting with his party leadership in The Hague, seeking shelter for about four days might be a sensible thing for him to do. The Dutch resistance will, he thinks, not last very much longer than that. Everyone agrees that the safety of the party leader is of the utmost importance; after the capitulation the people will very much need him as the architect of a new future for the Netherlands.

For weeks, Mussert stays with various NSB comrades around the country, looking for the best hiding places for a week each before a potential German occupation. He also gives his adjunct, Comrade Kessler, orders to search, and it is he who eventually comes up with the perfect location. Tonny Kessler is from an upper-class The Hague family and was a well-known cricketer and footballer when he was young; he even played several international matches for the Dutch national team. Kessler is bright – holding both an MA and a doctor's degree in Law – and financially independent; his family is immensely rich making him the ideal right-hand man for the great leader. Kessler himself has visited the intended hiding place several times, has spoken with the owners of the house, the confirmed NSB Comrade Gooijer and his wife, and has asked them the key question: would you be willing to hide eighty kilos of illegal documents? Their answer is so clear that he would stake his head

on it that these people fully understand the future of the NSB is in their hands. The only thing they don't know yet is that it is eighty kilos of Mussert he was talking about.

It is a beautiful summery evening, 9 May 1940, when Anton Mussert leaves the NSB headquarters at Maliebaan 35 in Utrecht after the party meeting. He gets into the Pontiac convertible waiting for him, and his driver, H. Hartke, starts the car and drives to Bilthoven where Mussert is staying. That night, in the early hours of May 10, Mussert, like many Dutch people, wakes up to the thundering sound of war above his head. He listens to the radio and waits until eight thirty in the morning when the businessmen of Bilthoven are about to get on the road. He calls his chauffeur who takes him straight to the home of Adjunct Kessler in Naarden, and from there he will go to his hiding place: the remote house of Comrade Gooijer. Even Mussert's wife does not know where he is going into voluntary exile. On the way, soldiers at checkpoints stop the car three times, but each time they are allowed to pass. The Pontiac stops in Naarden, they say goodbye to the driver, and from there Mussert and Kessler continue their flight on foot.

They walk in silence through the vast heath for a while. Behind them lies Naarden, far ahead of them the village of Huizen, and they take the old connecting road between the two villages, the Naarderstraat. Since both the tramline and all the car traffic have been moved to a new road, the Nieuwe Bussumerweg that runs parallel to this one a bit further along, there is not a living soul here. The road gets

rougher and narrower, on its verges tall trees with thick foliage rise to the sky. They pass the old tollbooth for the steam tram on the right side, out of use since 1930. A little farther, on the left, is their destination. The adjunct and his distinguished guest stop at an isolated house along the deserted road, a simple farmhouse with one floor and an attic, hidden by foliage. It is Friday, 10 May 1940, the German invasion has started, and Anton Mussert has taken himself to a place of safety.

In front of the house is a small garden with a hedge that hides the house from view in the flowering season, and there is a wild garden, at least a hundred meters deep, in the back. The edge of the nature reserve forest is two hundred meters away. Hidden around the corner in the woods lies a country house, but otherwise it is completely deserted here. On one side of the house there is a bicycle path that leads to the forest and then the IJsselmeer; on the other side there is nothing but farmland. Furthermore, the garden is bounded at the rear by a wooded bank under which, in the First World War, a trench was dug, which is now overgrown with shrubs. Mussert is very pleased with the location.

Gooijer and his wife have diligently prepared their small attic for their distinguished guest. But Mussert is not at ease; radio news reports say that houses of NSB members throughout the country are being searched and hundreds of arrests have already been made. Instead of barricading himself in the attic, he hides in the trench at the back of the garden, following the instructions of Comrade Gooijer – a woman of German descent proudly fulfilling her role as

patron saint of the leader. While the Netherlands is turned upside down and the police are fanatically hunting for NSB members during those first days after the invasion, Mussert catches a bad cold, hidden under the shrubs, his stomach pressing against the cold ground as he waits to see if this day will mark the end of his career or his entrance into the history books.

No less than two house searches by local police officers follow. They are looking for Comrade Gooijer and Mrs. Gooijer's brother, who lives with them, both loyal members of the NSB. After the second search, they take Gooijer with them. They turn the whole house and the adjacent barn upside down, but don't bother checking the garden where the great leader of the NSB is counting worms in a ditch. When Gooijer is released that night and goes looking for Mussert at home, he cannot, to his horror, find him. In the dark, he sneaks through his own garden along the wooded bank, hissing at Mussert as if luring a lost cat. He softly begins to whistle the NSB song "Soldiers in Black," the words singing through his mind.

*The fight has flared up, discord must go away
from our beautiful land, oppressed still today,
but new spirit breaks new ground. We are all ready.
Let the united front fight. On the streets we are steady.
Come comrade, come take a stand,
For us people and for our Netherland!
Soldiers in black we all are
supporting Mussert in this war.*

After a while, Mussert's sandy nose appears above the soil and Comrade Gooijer explodes with joy. While the Netherlands is on the eve of five years of death and destruction, Mussert takes a seat at the table inside and is served a delicious meal of baked potatoes with salad and a fried egg.

The next day is Anton Mussert's birthday; he is now 46 years old. He considers it safe enough to stay in the attic where Mrs. Gooijer kindly brings him some flowers and a nice meal. The Dutch hold out one day longer than he had predicted, but on Tuesday afternoon, 14 May, he hears on the radio that they have capitulated. He puts on his best suit, leaves the house of the Gooijer family in Huizen, and hoists the flag at the NSB headquarters in The Hague. The dark red-black, with at its heart the golden lion in its triangle, flies triumphantly on the Maliebaan.

The story of Mussert hiding like a coward at the supreme moment is soon picked up and mocked in anti-fascist circles. All sorts of possible hiding places buzz around, from covered wagons to haystacks, and in the years to follow it

remains a popular topic for cartoonists. Comrade Gooijer's simple farmer's cottage becomes a place of pilgrimage for NSB members, hundreds of them flocking to see where their leader was saved for the people, proudly adding their name to the guest book, *Faithful to the Leader*. Without any sense of irony, Mussert will boast that he was the first person in the war to go into hiding.

When the Brilleslijper family goes into hiding in Naarden, Mussert is again staying very close by. Although he is officially stationed in The Hague, he will spend large parts of the war living around the corner from The High Nest at his mistress's house. Mussert has a particular fondness for women of his own family. He is married to his aunt, his mother's sister Rie, much older than he is (in her sixties at that time). In order to get married in 1917, they, being relatives, had to ask the queen for a dispensation. Not just his supposed hiding place, but Mussert's relationship too becomes the subject of ridicule within the resistance. "For those who are desperate to keep the race pure, marrying their aunt is the perfect cure" is an often-heard joke.

In the early days of the occupation, Anton meets Maria Mijnlieff, daughter of Helena Mijnlieff-Verburg who is his wife's niece. He falls madly in love with the young girl and is more than happy to lend mother Helena the purchase price of a beautiful villa in Naarden in symbolic exchange for a diamond necklace. In November 1942 Helena and "Marietje" move into *Eik en Linde* (oak and lime tree) at Amersfoortsestraatweg 36, near the famous guesthouse Jan

Tabak, and this becomes Mussert's wartime love nest. He often stays there and when, in 1943, his own house in The Hague is evacuated due to defense measures, he sets up his command post at *Eik en Linde*, much to his wife's dismay. While Joseph Brilleslijper at The High Nest is fuming about the injustice done to his country and his family, the great leader himself lives within a stone's throw. Quite how close they are to their enemies will soon become clear.

One day when Japie checks the traps he has placed in the woods around the house hoping to supplement their frugal diet, he does not return with pheasants for his mother's pot but with the limp body of a huge cat.

Fijtje is horrified and orders him to bury the poor beast in the back of the garden right away, hoping no one will come looking for it. The day after the cat murder, Janny unsuspectingly returns, early in the evening, having been on the go for the resistance all day. From the station she takes the steam tram, nicknamed the Killer of 't Gooi, and gets off at the Nieuwe Bussummerweg. From there she walks the familiar route along the Ericaweg that ends at the path to The High Nest. After walking a few minutes, she suddenly hears a woman's voice, a little bit ahead of her. She quickly leaves the path and ducks into the bushes on the side. Stooped down, she carefully moves on as the sound of the voice grows louder and louder.

“Puss, puss, puss, puss!”

At less than twenty meters from Janny, a woman is calling out into the void, her face turned towards the forest, shaking a bowl in her hand.

“Puss, puss, puss, puss!”

It sounds as if she's begging for her own child to return and she looks around desperately.

Janny presses her back into the prickly plants and holds her breath. She curses her brother – they have killed this lady's cat and now of course that woman is looking for it. She quickly disappears deeper into the forest and through bushes and thorns makes her way home, where she explains what happened. Jaap bursts out laughing when he hears the story, but their father immediately cuts him off. Joseph forbids his son ever to use the traps again. Jaap must stand guard at the grave in the back of the garden – after all a dog had dug up the cat body once before – and someone else will be on the lookout on the first floor. All residents are instructed to stay in for a few days and not to make music or noise until they are certain that the danger has passed.

A week later, Janny learns through her contact in Huizen that the lady who lost her cat is known to be one of the most fanatic NSB members in the area, a sort of aunt to Mussert. Weeks later, when it has become unlikely that the woman will turn up at their doorstep to ask about her cat, they can finally laugh about it. But even then not really.

THE CHINESE VASE

Bob and Janny have gotten up early; the house is still peacefully quiet, from some of the rooms muted rumbling rises, a wooden floor creaks as footsteps make their way to the toilet. In silence they drink a cup of coffee together in the kitchen and eat a crust of bread. The heavy walls retain the cool of the night, but when Janny opens the kitchen door to the garden, she feels the pleasant air against her skin. It will be another warm day. They give each other a kiss. Bob leaves for the office, and she has a special assignment in Amsterdam.

Robbie is skipping cheerfully at her side, holding her hand. She has brought him with her because a child offers a certain protection during checks. They take the train from Naarden-Bussum to Amsterdam and then go first to the city registrar's office, where a number of identity cards are waiting for her. Her contacts there apply for new, real IDs in the names of people who have died – they do not register those deaths. They will sort it all out after the war. IDs are so difficult to forge that this is the safest way, and since the occupying forces are becoming more and more aggressive as they become more and more strained, the resistance can no longer afford to do things by halves.

With the IDs hidden in her bra, she continues her journey to the Roelof Hartplein where she has an appointment with her close friend Trees Lemaire who also works for the *Persoonsbewijzencentrale* (PBC, the ID center). Trees will take the documents from Janny and pass them on, further along the underground network.

Holding Robbie by the hand, Janny stands in the square where the Van Baerlestraat, Coenenstraat, and Cornelis Anthoniszstraat converge, and she waits. She has a good view of all of the streets, but Trees is nowhere to be seen. Robbie is getting impatient and begins to whine, pull her skirt. Janny is starting to get nervous. Trees is never late. None of them is ever late, out of the question with these kinds of highly dangerous meetings. Seconds creep by and nothing happens. There is no one else in the square and she feels unprotected. The sun steadily climbs to the highest point above the city and her head starts pounding under her hot crown. The IDs are sticking to her chest. She peers across the street at the imposing building folding itself around the corner with those many windows all looking out on her, and paces back and forth a few times.

She thinks back to that time after the house search in The Hague, when someone wanted the keys to the printer's and she had to report at Noordeinde in front of the statue of William III while Krauts were waiting behind every pillar. Robbie is really starting to cry now, his screams fan out across the square, into the three streets. Janny would most like to press her hand over his mouth, but instead tries to hush him. "We'll be taking the train again soon, that'll be

fun.” Looking over his head, she scans the area. At least ten minutes have passed, it feels all wrong. She pulls Robbie's hand and starts to run, away from the Roelof Hartplein, towards the Concertgebouw.

She walks and walks until Robbie stops protesting and instead tries, as best as he can, to put his legs down next to his mother without falling, her painful grip like a clamp. Janny already feels the *Sicherheitspolizei* breathing down her neck, a hand reaching out to tap her on the shoulder, at each side street she is expecting sirens or cars to surround her, so she racewalks on without looking back. A tram is waiting; they get in, to Central Station. Through the station hall with Robbie dragging his feet, not saying a word. There are spies everywhere, she knows; act normal, calm, or else some Kraut, in a surge of moral awareness, will arrest her for child abuse. She stops for a moment, sits down on her knees and folds her hands around Robbie's face. “Everything's okay, right?” She gives him a kiss, gets up again, looks around, and walks as composedly as possible to the platform where the train to Naarden is waiting.

On the way back she asks herself what on earth has gone wrong. The meadows flit by and Robbie lets an imaginary car fly through the air while his feet are dangling high above the floor. Her heart is still racing, the sticky identity cards on her chest moving around. She listens to the slow cadence of the train and tries to breathe along with the rhythm. Had Trees be caught? And if they question and torture her, would she talk? Tell everything, including about The High Nest? No, Janny does not believe that. Trees would rather

bite her tongue off. But still, there were others who A knot in her stomach blocks her breathing, a clenched fist just below her diaphragm. Weesp station, get out, she has shopping to do.

Robbie is skipping beside her; he seems to have forgotten everything already. To the farmer for a large bag of wheat for all the mouths to feed. They grind it into flour for bread in a coffee grinder. It is still early in the day, but when they walk back to Weesp station carrying two heavy bags, Janny can feel the soles of her feet burning. A few more minutes in the train to Naarden, the carriages are almost deserted, and when the train speeds up, her breathing is calm again. Nobody followed them and alternative scenarios gain the upper hand over earlier doom and gloom. Trees had just overslept. Or she had been given the wrong time. Or location. It had happened to Janny before. She will distribute the IDs some other way, perhaps through her contact in Laren. She rests her head against the seat and sighs. The danger is over.

At Naarden-Bussum station, the tram is just about to leave. Robbie is running ahead, but Janny is slowed down by the load. They catch the tram, a little bit of luck that puts a smile on her face. Sometimes they walk home, across the heath, but not today, with all the shopping. Get off at the Ericaweg, another ten-minute walk on the unpaved road until nature swallows her and will spit her out at The High Nest on the left around the corner, just past the edge of the forest.

The bags now pull on her arms so hard that they almost drag along the ground. She stops every few steps. The sun

shimmers high in the sky, the heather, with combined efforts, is drawing the last water deep out of the ground, but the ends of its bushes already rustle like scorched straw. Almost home. Janny can feel the tension of that morning slide off her shoulders, lowers the shopping to the ground, and wipes the sweat from her forehead. Robbie runs ahead a bit, stops, turns around and waits for his mother. "You go," Janny calls, "and ask if someone can come to help me. I'll be waiting here." And he's gone. She laughs when she sees him running as if the morning hadn't happened. The boy dashes off the final bit of the path before disappearing into the forest and out of her sight.

Janny sinks down on the bag of wheat and waits in the heat. It takes a long time. Too long. Five more minutes. Suddenly she is gripped by the fear she thought she had left on the train. Her heart jumps into her mouth. Goosebumps all over her arms, she shivers. She heaves the bags behind a couple of young oak trees with a wall of shrubs between their slender trunks, digs the identity cards out of her bra, and hides them underneath the shopping bags. She struggles to lift the bag and slide the papers underneath and sees her hands are shaking violently. At a brisk pace she follows the path, dry clods of soil hinder her step and she sprains her ankle, but she hurries on. All fatigue is gone. There is the edge of the forest. Not a sign of Robbie. The shell path crunches under her feet, the house appears between the trees, and her gaze immediately glides up, to the red shutters on either side of the right-hand window on the first floor. The Chinese vase should be standing, in splendor, in the

middle. It is not. Her knees give way and a hand searches for a grip that is not there. A thought flashes deep in the back of her mind: if she turns around *now* and runs, into the forest, she has a chance.

Liselotte. Robbie.

In a daze she opens the gate and walks down the path to the back of the house, where the front door is. The ground beneath her feet is heaving as if she is walking on foam; she has to take giant steps to move forward. Only now does she notice the quiet. All doors are shut. No people in the garden, no music, no sounds of someone sawing from the shed. Even the deafening chirping of the birds has died down. The house rises on the hill, unaffected, but it feels as if all life has drained out. She is standing in front of the deep-red door with the square spyhole, the small, white bars in front of it. One more time she looks back, scanning the bright blue sky. The kestrel is not there. Then she rings the doorbell and the world collapses.

WESTERBORK

It is early August when the cell doors open. At the break of dawn, Janny finds herself outside for the first time in weeks. She is standing in front of the House of Detention. The cold of the night still lingers, but the fresh air reaching her lungs feels wonderful after the stuffy cell. Amsterdam is still fast asleep, and the sun is warming the paving stones. It promises to be a hot day. Janny looks at the Havenstraat in front of her, the Amstelveenseweg, the Vondelpark further on – she knows this area like the back of her hand. Under guard, a group of them is brought to a tram, ready to take them to Central Station. She stares through the window and sees Amsterdam South passing her by, the center, the canals. The city, the beautiful city. No word is exchanged, everyone is afraid of what is coming; only the squeaking of steel and the groaning of switches disturb the silence. They engrave the images of Amsterdam deep into their memory, eagerly absorbing the details – the stepped gables against the blue sky, the cobblestones on the sidewalk, a bobbing coot in the water – not sure if and when they will ever see these streets again. Although they have often talked about this moment, in the cell with the other detainees, nights on end in The High Nest, it feels surreal to Janny, almost surreptitious, as

if she is being abducted quietly, *before* Amsterdam awakes and can put a stop to it – and that is a comforting thought. Because the hard truth is that this city, *her* city, has allowed an entire community to be snatched from its midst in just two years' time without putting a spanner in the works. Worse yet, it has done its part to ensure this could be done as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

The station square, get out, enter via the side entrance. As soon as they walk into the building, a cold shadow falls over Janny. The last rays of sunlight reach just across the threshold. Another group of people is led in at the same time and walks to the same platform. In silence they all shuffle in the same direction, rows deep. One-way traffic in the central station, an alienating effect. Elderly people and youngsters, men and women, parents with children, and people all by themselves. Janny sees a family dressed in sportswear; two teenage daughters with backpacks as if they are about to go on vacation, their father and mother following behind with long faces. They walk further and further into the dark hall, enclosed by tiles, walls, guards, companions in misfortune.

The trap.

Janny thinks back to her struggle, her frantic attempts of recent years to drag people away from the wide open gates of that trap, save them before they would disappear into the narrowest part of the funnel which would inevitably lead to the mouth of hell. When she climbs the last steps to the platform and her head emerges from the stairwell, she sees the passenger train waiting, its doors opened wide.

With this new transport arriving, barracks on both sides of the fences fill up again. It is easy to tell who has just arrived. Wide eyes in tense faces, people in clean clothes with carefully packed bags and suitcases looking for an empty bunk, eyes flashing nervously as they take in the barracks, the camp, and the guards. Some of the newcomers have been in hiding for months, sometimes even years, and are easily identified by their bloodless faces, their rubbery and yellow skin. For them the train trip to Drenthe was the first time in a long time they had come out of the stuffiness of their hiding places, the first time they could stretch their legs, see the bright blue sky above their heads and, from the benches in the train carriage, see the Dutch landscape pass them by. The villages, the meadows, the farms, and the cornfields. The ditches, the church towers, the railway crossings and the cyclists on deserted polder tracks. All of this had withstood the war, seemingly unaffected. Small delights for people who had just spent months of their lives behind a closet door or underneath a cellar door trying to erase themselves. Reality only presented itself when the train began to slow down and passengers started staring through the windows on both sides of the train, a worried look on their faces. As far as the eye could see a desolate and withered no-man's-land stretched around the tracks, until a watchtower announced the first corner of the camp and the train entered Westerbork.

Another family, discovered by the *Sicherheitsdienst* behind a closet in a stately building at the Prinsengracht 263 only a few days earlier, ends up as prisoners in the barracks too. The family Frank with their two daughters, Anne and Margot. The girls and their mother, Edith Frank, are put to work disassembling batteries. Janny too is assigned to this barrack 56, where her sister Lien is already working. And so the paths of two Jewish hiding families cross and their faces grow black with the flying tar dust all at the same time. The work, simple and mind-numbing, allows the women to chat if they want. For some of them it is a relief to finally be able to share their thoughts with people outside the group with whom they had been locked up. At the tables there is talk, laughter, gloom, bickering, and gossip. While they work, Edith tells Lien how worried she is about the fate of her daughters. For two years and one month, they had been hiding with eight people in five hidden rooms in the secret annex of a large house. On the ground floor was a warehouse with employees who did not know, so during the day, any move, cough, or shifted object could mark their end. A maddening notion for all of them, but certainly for her young girls, aged fifteen and eighteen. They had almost made it and the invasion had come as a complete surprise – just like it had at The High Nest.

BIOGRAPHY

Roxane van Iperen (1976) is a lawyer and a publicist. She writes for *Het Financieele Dagblad*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Het Parool* en *De Morgen* a.o. In 2016 she had her debut with the novel *Scum of the Earth* that won her the prestigious Hebban Debut prize.

