

022216

Ben Brill at Vught: A Jewish Boxer's Dance for Survival in a Nazi Prison

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1. Flight

The boxer stared through the getaway car window into a gloomy Dutch countryside. The wind whistled and a chill crept into the car taking Ben Bril, his wife, Celia, and five-year-old son, Ab, toward Utrecht. Ben peered at the barren fields, brown forests and shuttered farms. They flew by but did not beckon. They were part of a country that he barely knew anymore—where thousands of Dutchmen joined the Nazis and hunted every last Jew.

His thoughts always went back to the same question: Who had betrayed them? Playing their narrow escape over and over, he came up with nothing.

Celia sat up front with Ab on her lap. Talkative by nature and smart, she dared not say a word. She glanced at Ben, but his gaze was locked on the passing roadway. Celia knew he was smoldering. She thought it was all her fault, but it was not that simple.

That afternoon, two local policemen barged into their latest hideout, a plain farmhouse in the rural hamlet of Stroe. They had gone underground months before—first in churches near Utrecht, a small city and their home, and then in the countryside. Sometimes they split up, or Ben's teenage brother, Harry, went with them. They moved when they or their hosts got nervous from prying eyes, police patrols or bad chemistry.

Celia and Ab were downstairs. She was in the kitchen and he was playing on the family room floor. The front door flew open. The intruders yelled, "Police, don't move!" Celia was startled and looked toward Ab and the approaching armed men. Caught off-guard, her lips twitched, as the police demanded her ID. Her hand hesitated as she reached for her bag on the counter, extracting the forgery and straining to stay composed.

Ben was upstairs. He snapped to attention when he heard the police barge in. His first impulse was to rush down. But ever the boxer, he listened, sizing up his opponents. Perhaps Celia would fool them, as she had before. She was short, stout and used to getting her way, with piercing brown eyes behind thick glasses. Her auburn hair, fleshy face with a narrow nose and thin lips, and blond child did not look Jewish. Neither Celia nor Ab had Ben's dark hair, bushy eyebrows and large nose. Except for his blue eyes, he fit the Nazi stereotype.

The officer in charge unfolded Celia's worn tan ID card and held it up to the light.

"Liar," he snapped, waving the paper at her. "You lie! This is fake."

“I am not,” she tartly replied. “How dare you call me a liar?”

Like Ben, Celia thought they would outsmart the Germans and the war would be short. They drove their 1939 Chevy, a rare and flashy American car, for more than a year after the invasion. They were waved through checkpoints, turning heads, as before the war. Celia had been taken to Brooklyn as a toddler by her father, a skilled diamond-cutter and avid gambler, and did not return to Holland until a teenager. She spoke English, French and Dutch and acted like a brassy New Yorker, matching the swagger of her champion husband who had beaten the poverty of his youth.

By spring 1942 their luck was running out. The Nazi decrees isolating and impoverishing Jews had reached Utrecht. They hoarded food and cash, hid their possessions and went underground. Their hosts insisted they pay for everything—lodging and food—weekly and without fail. Ben obliged, but groused he was being swindled and bled dry.

Celia’s bluster did not deter the police. It confirmed what they knew and alerted Ben that they had been betrayed. The officer in charge had enough. Seeing the stairway, he pushed her aside as Ab cowered by a sofa. She gasped and scampered toward the boy. He drew his pistol and ran quickly up the stairs. In a small room standing back from the door was Ben. He knew they wouldn’t leave without him.

Ben heard the front door fly open and leapt from his chair, but stopped to weigh his options. He did not over think things. He had been a dazzling boxer for a dozen years, winning more than 300 fights until the war cut off his career. He was never knocked out or injured. Ben realized that his fast hands and feet meant nothing here. They had guns and he did not. He winced and pocketed his wallet.

Ben heard the officer in charge making his way up the stairs and stood back from the door. The policeman pushed it open, locked eyes and pointed his revolver toward the door.

“Out. Down the stairs...”

“Put away your gun,” Ben calmly replied. “I’m coming.”

Ben kept his arms by his sides and moved deliberately into the hall. Though he had not boxed for more than two years, he carried himself with precision. He went down the

stairway slowly. Without acknowledging Celia or Ab, he stepped into the living room, pivoted and faced the bounty hunters.

“What do you want?”

“You’re a Jew and your wife is a liar,” the officer in charge declared, pointing his gun.

“Leave us alone,” said Ben sternly. “We’re hurting no one.”

“You are Jews,” sneered the officer. “We’ll take you and come back for the farmer later on.”

“You can leave us and leave him—he’s a good man.”

Both policemen said nothing, holding their guns in front of them.

“Please, my wife is not well,” said Ben, lowering his voice. “You can leave.”

He did not move. Ben peered at their faces, not their guns. These were simple men, like Amsterdam hustlers who bragged but could not box. He had toiled for years in gritty gyms to rise above men like these. They were not Nazis.

Watching carefully, Celia edged beside Ab and pulled him close and away from the policemen. She cupped a hand over his mouth and stroked his hair. The boy understood enough to be still and silent.

“How much?” Ben said, breaking the silence as he extracted his billfold and threw it onto the floor. The raid’s leader hesitated. His eyes shifted from Ben to the wallet and back. It was fat, almost as fat as the sandwiches that Ben had made for years at his diner.

The policeman motioned for his partner to pick it up. He grabbed it and looked inside: 1,900 guilders, a fortune compared to the 7.5 guilders that the Nazis paid for each Jew.

“Okay, Jew. We will be back and you better be gone.”

His partner removed the bills and tossed the wallet aside. He went to the front door, holding it open. Cool October air seeped in. The men backed out slowly, guns pointed, and vanished. Suddenly, the house was silent. A clock ticked like a heartbeat.

Ben held up his hand for Celia and Ab to stay still. He bent his frame toward the door, cupping a hand behind an ear. A car engine coughed, started, hummed and faded away. He shook his head, grabbed his wallet, and looked at Celia and Ab. Exhaling he stared at the door. The first thought was, ‘Who betrayed them?’

“Rotten Nazis,” hissed Celia, her face pale and drained.

“Mommy,” Ab whined, tugging at her wool skirt. “*Mommy!*”

Ben turned toward the stairs. "Damn... damn," he muttered. "Celia, you know what we have to do. I'll get our bags. Just grab some food!"

"No, wait," she stuttered. "The number? What's K's number?"

He halted in mid-stride, taut, one leg on the stairs.

"Celia, you have that. And he told you to call if—"

"Come. Take Ab," she ordered him.

But he ignored her. "Just call him," Ben said impatiently, stepping into the room. "And be calm. We must stay calm."

"Calm? When some lousy Kraut has done this to us? When we have to run again like animals? When they took all our money!"

"Enough now!" he said. "We have to go. And you have to call."

But Celia stood still and brought her hands to her face. She did not share Ben's faith that they could keep hiding from the Nazis. Oh boy, he thought. She slumped toward the kitchen and stared at the black telephone on the wall. She picked up the receiver and slowly dialed K's number. After a half-dozen rings, a male voice answered. "Hallo?"

"It's Ingrid," she said blankly. "It's... it's time to go shopping."

He quickly asked a question.

"Yes... We'll need a ride."

Ben strained to listen.

"Okay. Until then."

Celia turned to him with wide-open eyes. "Thank God," she sighed. "Thank God."

Ben cringed. Had she gotten rid of the police? Wasn't it his accomplishments—boxing in the Olympics at 15, winning international games at 22, eight Dutch championships in a dozen years, and building a business that brought in lots of cash with thousands that K still held—that drew people and offers of help, including from K, their handler?

"What did he say?" he asked. He tried to stay calm. "Tell me. Word for word."

"He said, 'We can go today.'" He can come this afternoon.

Ben was calmest in the ring, but hated losing control. From the days he followed his older brothers into Amsterdam's treeless alleys to play soccer with balls made of paper and string, he did best fending for himself. For years, the Bril boys fought equally poor Christian gangs from across the ghetto's canals. Ben passed boxing clubs in basements on

the way home and saw young men training through the windows. He walked into a gym alone, a scrawny 11-year-old with scars from brawls. The sight of boys becoming tough fighters captivated him. Ben quit school, became a butcher's apprentice and took refuge in the gym's rigors. He was mesmerized as he learned to withstand pain and inflict it without regret. He didn't smoke or drink, and discovered physical gifts and a drive that set him apart from others.

But war was not boxing. It was a fight without rules. The betrayals, fleeing from guns, instead of fighting with fists and moves, and relying on rescuers—they were like punches a boxer did not see. They went against everything he had learned in the ring. His success came from trusting his willpower and little else.

"We have to go," he blurted out, staring from the stairs. "We have to get there first."

"Bennie, get where first," she warily replied.

"To the fields. Near that shed. Like we did before with Harry."

He needed to act, to move, to not explain.

Celia looked at him wearily. Of course, she knew that they had to move fast. Ben flashed a smile to reassure her and disappeared up the stairs. She did not say another word as she rummaged for food. It was easier to do this now, like the way she followed him when they first met. Celia went to almost every fight, week after week, a well-dressed woman sitting with his older brothers. She yelled and cursed like the men, but fawned afterward. Letting Ben get his way was what he wanted, like delaying their marriage until after the Maccabiah Games in Jewish Palestine so that he could vie for a world title. It was only after Ab was born two years later that she began making demands. Ben hired maids, nannies and bought what she wanted, but he did not give up much. He would leave before dawn for the slaughterhouse, return for coffee and to read the paper, and then work and train into the night.

Ab watched his parents struggle. He understood that they were in trouble—it was not the first time that he had been threatened at gunpoint. That spring in Amsterdam, Celia took him to Ben's only sister, Vogeltje, to see his cousins. The Nazis blocked the street while Celia was out and went door-to-door to round up Jews. Ab was swept up and clung to an uncle's shirt until a neighbor pulled him away, scolding the blond boy for playing with Jews.

“Mommy,” the five-year-old called out timidly. “Mam!”

“Ab, Ab, sit here now,” said Celia, pointing to the closest chair.

“I’m scared,” he said. “I’m...”

“Don’t cry love—we’ll be okay.”

The boy stared at his mother’s face. “Are we going again?”

“Yes, dear. We have to,” she sighed.

“Why?”

She looked up, but did not answer him.

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2. Limbo

Moments later, Ben raced down the stairs carrying two small bags. Celia stuffed cheese and bread inside one and grabbed their coats. They did not have much—a few changes of clothes, blankets and a towel, toothbrushes. Celia stood Ab up, slipped on his coat and buttoned it. It was late fall and chilly. She looked to see what they were forgetting.

“Now, remember, Ab, do what daddy does,” she instructed. “No talking.”

“Ab, you’re a good boy,” said Ben, slapping his right cheek. Ab said nothing but nodded obediently.

They left via the back door. Ben went first, then Celia taking Ab’s hand. It was midday. Crouching, they followed a fence until it came to a line of trees leading into a pasture. They followed the tree line across several fields and came to a small shed. They ducked inside, spread a tarp, sat and quietly waited.

Several hours later, an underground contact—sent by their shopping guide—who helped them to hide in Stroe, came. It was too dangerous to stay nearby. He arranged for a driver to take them to Utrecht. They were more than lucky it could be done that day, the man said. Other arrangements were being made for Ben’s brother Harry, who was also nearby. Ben and Celia nodded, taking in the news. They were to return to their old flat above the diner that Ben opened and ran for years. They would arrive at twilight, just before curfew.

Ben listened uncomfortably. Returning to Utrecht meant breaking into the flat. But they had no choice. The contact promised to return soon, and did, with a driver. The fugitives left the pasture and drove westward on dirt roads and then the highway. They rode in silence—the less said the better.

Ben saw they were near the Old Rhine canal skirting the city. Leaning forward from the back seat, he looked at Celia and Ab and tried to smile. It was the sly Mona Lisa grin that he flashed at photographers or customers who knew him as a star athlete. Celia nodded, but also wondered what lay ahead at the boarded-up apartment. If only they had gone to England when she wanted, she told herself. But he would not leave, not the country that gave him everything—everything that the Nazis methodically had taken away. Celia noticed her churning thoughts and turned to the boy, pulling him onto her shoulders.

“Ab, we’ll be home soon,” she whispered to put him at ease.

But the child was still confused by the men who barged in with guns drawn.

The driver stretched his back and rolled his shoulders as they entered the city. He leaned forward and turned with determination toward the Hotel Terminus. Ben’s two-story flat, ground floor diner and kitchen at *Leidseweg 13* shared an alley with the large Victorian hotel. Utrecht was densely packed with new and old buildings—some plain, others ornate, and cobblestone streets, cable cars and canals. Avoiding Nazis or police was dicey, especially in their busy downtown neighborhood. The city never had many Jews, but the Dutch Nazi Party, or NSB, had its national headquarters there.

Ben noticed the driver’s rising tension. He put his hand on his shoulder to reassure him. “We’re getting close,” he said.

Both men scanned sidewalks and streets. They were a block from the hotel. The street was not busy. The driver wanted to drop them and leave, so as not to arouse suspicion.

“Here, park here,” Ben quickly said, pointing toward the curb.

The driver glanced sideways and came to a stop.

Ben turned to Celia and Ab. “Ab, you listen to your mam, okay? Celia, you go first. I’ll be there soon. Don’t rush or stare at anyone. Just keep moving. Walk like you’re out shopping. Give me a little time to get inside.”

Celia opened the door and lifted Ab, holding him as she stepped from the car. With the child in her arms, she lingered in front of a clothing store. A mother with a sleepy blond boy looked normal—certainly *Aryan* enough.

The driver turned to Ben and reached into his glove compartment. “You might need this,” he said, handing him an old screwdriver.

“Thanks,” Ben replied, taking it and rising to get out.

“Hey, not yet!” the driver quickly shot back. “Let me get out and look. When I bend down to tie my shoe, you go.” He handed Ben a crumpled newspaper.

Ben fell back into the seat. He slipped the screwdriver into a coat pocket and pondered his next moves. If all goes well, he would get everyone inside in a few minutes. It did not occur to him that the flat might have been looted, or the locks changed or even rented to someone else. They had been away for more than three months.

Ben pretended to read the paper. He was preparing himself like he would before a match. Before every fight, he read Lord Lister serials, cheap pocketbooks, in the locker room. Lister was a doctor, inventor, expert at disguise, thief and a gentleman hero who avenged evil. Ben had mastered of the science of boxing: moving precisely to avoid hits, punching with speed and pain, and anticipating his foe's moves. Like Lord Lister, he never took an opponent for granted.

Down the block, the driver glanced impatiently at the parked car. Ben looked up, snapped to attention and quickly stepped onto the street. It had been a long time since his feet felt a sidewalk. He strode toward the alley. Ben had never imagined this street could threaten him. Looking around, he saw nothing out of the ordinary and ducked into the familiar corridor. As quickly, the driver and car vanished.

Ben's sandwich shop and home was the plainest building on *Leidseweg*, two windows wide and dark brick. A shingle mansard roof hid the third floor. An employee 'bought it' with Ben's cash after the Nazis had confiscated Jewish businesses. That was part of his plan to save the business and have food while hiding.

The kitchen was a single-story addition jutting into a grimy alley. An iron fire escape ladder led to a rooftop terrace with three large skylights. Past the farthest skylight was a door that opened to stairway connecting the kitchen and apartment above.

It was dusk as Ben peered through a vent near the kitchen door. The shop was closed and empty. He pondered how to get Celia and Ab inside quickly? The terrace and rooftop door were too exposed and they were too clumsy. They had to go in through the kitchen. He could break into the flat later and cover their tracks so Gerhardus Aalbertsen, its new owner, would not know that they were back.

Before disappearing in July, Ben had covered the flat's few windows with extra blackout paper and hidden keys on the terrace. He clasped the ladder leading to the roof, grabbed a rung and was up top in seconds. He rushed to the farthest skylight and easily pried it open. Slipping in, he dropped to a countertop and closed it. Ben jumped to the floor. Everything was as he had left it—the pots, pans, mixers and food. He went to the door to their flat and yanked its knob. It was locked from behind, also as he left it. He turned and went to the alleyway door and cracked it open, peering outside.

A silhouette soon turned the corner. It was Celia carrying Ab. He whistled and she looked up and quickly came over. "Go inside," he said, taking Ab and putting him into a chair. Celia stumbled in and put both arms on a counter to catch her breath. Before she looked up, he was gone.

Celia heard footsteps on the roof. Holding Ab, she stood still and waited. Minutes later, she heard footsteps on the flat's stairway, the locks turn and door open. Ben forced open a window beside the rooftop door, tore off the black paper, climbed in, shut the window and put the paper back and emerged from the staircase, swirls of dust trailing.

"Let me open up," he said, before disappearing up the stairs to their apartment. The keys worked. Ben entered the foyer, groping for matches and a nearby candle that he left. It was dark, cold and barren but for old sheets draped over a few pieces of furniture that he hadn't hidden. The air was stale and fine dust everywhere.

Ben went back for Celia and Ab. With one arm he lifted the boy and took Celia's hand, leading them to a third floor bedroom. "Stay here," he said, putting Ab down on bedding covered with another old sheet. "I'll get more food." Celia lay down next to Ab and held him tightly. They quickly collapsed into sleep.

Ben returned to the kitchen to erase his footprints and dust. Wiping the floor, he shook his head and grimaced. He went to the meat case and grabbed a side of beef and cut off several slices. The Nazis and their damn war brought this—hiding, fleeing, bribing and stealing from his business. He wondered what was next.

Ben caught himself. He better be careful. He was paying Aalbertsen plenty, but wanted to hide that they were back. He put back the beef and cleaned up. He checked the skylight and looked at the room. Finally, he went to the alley door and cracked it, peering at the darkening sky. Quickly, he shut it and went upstairs.

3. Cornered

It was dark and quiet when Ben woke up. Celia and Ab's breathing told him that they were still asleep. He wondered what time it was. Behind the covered windows were muffled city street sounds—truck brakes, whirring engines, clanking streetcars. Downstairs was also silent.

He threw off a blanket, softly putting his feet on the floor and sat up, thinking about their next step. Their food was atop a dresser. Before falling asleep he filled large jars with water and brought up a covered pail for a daytime toilet. Both were in the hall. Their living room, kitchen and bathroom on the second floor were off-limits between sunrise and late afternoon, because people in the diner below might hear them.

K will fix this soon enough, he told himself. The tall, taciturn Emile van Konijnenburg was Dutch Army Reserve Major and businessman. K arranged to pay 3,600 guilders to 'purchase' Ben's store from the Nazis while keeping the apartment vacant. He found clergymen and farmers that hid them, arranged for Celia's fake ID, and held 30,000 guilders in Ben's cash for payouts and emergencies. K will come, if not today then tomorrow, thought Ben. He stood up, but there was nowhere to go. The air was dank and the flat dark and bare. His trophies and prizes, framed photographs and press clips, and almost everything that Celia had bought, their Persian rug, silverware, dishes, furniture were gone, all hidden months ago. Stepping into the hall, his nose twitched. The smell reminded him of his parents' musty tenement on Valkenburgerstraat 108, where he and his brothers shared a bed or slept on straw on the floor, and used a pail as a toilet.

"Bennie? Is that you?"

"Yes, Celia, I'm coming," he said quietly, stepping into the bedroom. He saw Ab was asleep. She sat up on the bed.

"I don't believe we're here. I can't believe it..."

"You should eat," he said. "Come here. Let me get some food."

"No. I'm not hungry," she said.

Ben looked at her.

“What are we going to do? We can’t stay here,” she declared. “How can we keep a five-year-old quiet all day, in a room with no light, no toys, no friends? Look at our beds. Everything is gone. It’s all at Gerhard’s. What now?”

“Celia, please stop this. How do you think I feel?”

“It’s all because of those lousy Nazis, look at they’ve done to us!”

Ben was not sure what would come next, but he would find something. He always had.

“Celia, come on. Let’s eat,” he said, trying to console her. “I know this isn’t good. We have to keep quiet... And we have to wait.”

“Wait? Wait for what?” she answered loudly.

He brought his hand toward her lips. She pulled back, glowering. “Shhh... Wait for K. You *know* that,” he said. “You spoke to him. He will come.”

She shook her head. “Yeah, but when? When Bennie?”

“How do I know? He’ll come. You must trust me.”

Her shoulders sagged as she turned to look in on Ab, who was still asleep in his coat. Unlike Ben, she had gone out with Ab in Stroe and the other hideouts. She hated posing as a Christian single mother under someone else’s name, but she relished going out. She assumed that’s how she would spend the rest of the war.

“Well, let’s hope it’s soon,” she said, resigned.

The rest of their day passed in silence. They huddled with Ab upstairs in their coats, their breaths steaming in unheated rooms. Their heavy clothes and tired faces resembled the scrappy Jews who lived above the stores and warehouses of Ben’s childhood.

When Celia first saw where Ben grew up, she was astonished at the narrow cobblestone street and the tenement’s steep stairways, tiny rooms and lack of plumbing. She told her American cousins that it was like a dollhouse. She could not even believe that he was a real boxer, let alone a champion. Her niece Annie had a crush on Ben, but Celia swooped in. She came from a more prosperous family and spoke three languages. Over the years, she grew to relish his fame and proudly introduced herself as his wife. She expected and got attention like celebrities did in midtown Manhattan, where her American uncles worked as diamond cutters. Celia never imagined that her life would come to this—hiding like mice in the floorboards.

At sunset, Ben crept down the stairs to sit by the window and listen for a signal from the alley. He thought Celia and Ab could hide in a hospital or nursing home. They had done that before. He could remain in the flat and go out at night to beat up Nazis, he told himself. Ben recalled his triumphs, especially the gold medal podium in Tel Aviv as the Dutch anthem played. He recalled the trip back to Holland, where he, his old friend and fellow boxer Appie de Vries, who also won gold, and their coach, Joop Cosman, were hailed as Jewish heroes. As the memories faded, he stared at the empty stairway.

On the third day back, Ben thought he heard a short whistle. He peeled back the blackout paper and wave of relief passed through his body. There, in the alley, was K, a silhouette in a long coat and hat slowly pacing in the fading daylight. Ben tapped on the stairwell's dirty window—twice quickly, once slowly, pausing, and then again. It was the rhythm that Cosman, a squat bulldog of a man with a ruddy face and receding hairline, beat on the floor with a cane as Ben and others sparred: hit, hit, away; hit, hit, away. K glanced upward. He lit a cigarette, slowly taking pulls. Grabbing his keys, Ben sprinted down to the kitchen's back door and unlocked it. K walked toward the street. Seeing no one, he slipped inside.

Celia heard Ben's footsteps and quickly came down behind him. She saw K and ran some fingers through her hair to cover up her appearance. "Thank goodness," she said, walking into the kitchen. Ben looked at her sternly. He wanted to talk to K alone.

"Well, well," K began, looking at Ben. The austere older man with a military bearing paced between the counters, awaiting an explanation.

"We were very lucky," Ben said. "Those police only wanted money."

"Yes. I heard that," said K. "Rather too much."

"Do you know anything? Who ratted on us?"

"I only know you can't go back near Stroe again."

"What about Harry?" Ben asked. "Where's he?"

"He's with Aalbertsen's brother. We're paying them. He's okay."

"Good," Ben nodded. "But you don't know who ratted?"

"No," K said. He shook his head and stared at the floor.

K knew quite a bit more. Ben had been arguing over money with Alfred Heisler, the farmer who had hidden them the longest. Heisler made Ben pay cash for everything, including trips to get extra food on the black market, plus room and board. Whether Heisler concocted a plot with local police to get rid of Ben was nothing that he could prove, but K had his suspicions. Or maybe another farmer that Heisler had brought the family to for a few weeks did it. Their getaway to Utrecht, with no police following, seemed too easy.

“Emile, what can we do?” asked Ben. “I can stay here, but they can’t.”

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “To be honest, it’s getting harder now.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not the same, Bennie. There aren’t many choices.”

K told Ben that getting Celia another fake ID would be difficult. The Nazis had taken over the mayor’s office and their contacts had been fired. Celia and Ab might go to a nursing home, he said. He knew that she had headaches and eye problems. Some doctors were willing to write notes, and some officials who didn’t like the Germans might stamp them to look official, K said, but Ben would have to stay in the flat. K said that he would tell Aalbertsen that they were back, but would be moved soon and not to come up. Gerhard had little choice but to go along.

It took several days to make the arrangements. Celia and Ab were put in a home, where wealthier families paid for a handful of mothers and their children to stay out of harm’s way. She helped with the children during the day and sent notes to Ben. He was trapped, spending his days in solitude and sneaking downstairs at night for food. He fantasized about going out at night to visit Celia or ambush Nazis, but K quickly shut down both notions. The curfew was deadly serious and Ben was obviously a Jew.

By mid-winter, Celia and Ab were back in the flat—the only option in a worsening situation, and the only place where they would not be seen. It was bitter cold, more than usual, and food and fuel was scarce. The Nazis were consolidating their control over the country and began rounding up Jews from smaller cities and towns. Aalbertsen suspected they all were back when more food went missing. He heard signs—a faucet, footsteps, creaking floorboards—and hoped his customers would not notice.

Ben, and especially Celia, expected K to find another farmhouse. But as January stretched into February, he kept returning empty-handed. No one expected the war to drag on like this. He, too, had to be careful, and visited less frequently.

“The Nazis now control almost everything,” K explained, sitting around a table in their flat on another cold night.

Celia and Ben had little idea how the war was unfolding outside.

“It took a while, but Germans or NSBers are everywhere,” K said. “There aren’t many safe places. Our friends are tired and scared... Maybe something will come this spring.”

“But we have to do something,” Ben said. He did not grasp what K said.

“Bennie, I’m trying,” said K, “but for now you’ve got to stay put.”

“I can do that.” Ben stood up. “But Celia and Ab can’t. Isn’t there another hospital? You know she’s been ill. And we have that note from Dr. Stenvers.”

“Bennie, you’re not hearing what I’m saying,” replied K, getting testy. “Stenvers went out on a limb last fall. We were lucky we got it stamped and that it worked. But it won’t anymore. All of you would be caught and locked up fast.”

“But we have money—we can pay.”

“It’s not about money. They’re raiding hospitals, orphanages, even mental wards. This is the SS. They have special police. It started this winter. They’re taking all Jews, even sick and old people, pulling them from their deathbeds. For God’s sake, that’s why Celia and Ab came back here!”

Ben stopped pacing and stared at his handler.

“And there’s something else,” K said, lowering his voice. “Gerhard. Aalbertsen. You must be careful now.”

“What are you talking about? He’s being paid,” replied Ben. “And he’s hiding Harry?”

“Yeah. Harry’s with his brother. But Gerhard can’t be trusted. He likes your money. He likes your shop—too much. He acts like it’s been his all along. And he likes the Nazis. He tells me that. Do you understand me?” K looked like a teacher admonishing a pupil who wouldn’t listen.

“But we set him up. He has extra food, coffee, canned milk, my machines... There are boxes and boxes under his house.”

“You’re not listening, Bennie. He’s changed. He wanted your shop and now he has it. The war has been good for him. And he’d like to see all of you gone.”

Ben said nothing. He never took defeats well, even rare ones. Weeks after winning a world title in Palestine, he lost the Dutch welterweight championship on points to a rival. He threw down his gloves, barely missing the ringside judges. He was so determined that people know that he was an international champion that he had a Jewish star sewn on one leg of his boxing shorts—years before Nazis forced Jews to wear a yellow star. He had publicity photos taken in those shorts, which he gave out until the war began. He ran his business with equal drive, convinced that he was the best at whatever he did.

“I don’t get it,” said Ben, perplexed. “I’ve been good to him...”

“You sure have,” said K diplomatically. “And we set him up. Your belongings are at his house. We’re paying his family for Harry. He knows it. But war changes people.”

Ben stopped talking. Celia stood next to him, clearly shaken.

“Emile, I cannot thank you enough,” said Ben. He knew they were stuck and slipped into his deferential manner with authority figures. “I can be here. But Celia and Ab...”

“I will try,” K said, edging out of his seat. “I’ll be back. But be careful.” He turned to Celia. Her face was pale. “We have friends, but I must go now,” he said.

“Thank you,” she whispered, as the men shuffled down the stairs.

Stunned, she sat at the table. For years, she was the decision maker, but now she knew they were trapped. She fumed that Aalbertsen was enriching himself at their expense and behaved like a Nazi.

Their next days were filled with waves of anger and uncertainty, but mostly boredom. They tried to keep Ab occupied and sat in glum tension. There was little that Ben could do except to wait by the stairs at dusk, hoping for a whistle in the alley or sneak at night to steal more food.

It was several weeks before K returned, saying he had nothing new. Meanwhile, the food raids and sound from upstairs frustrated Aalbertsen. He groused and wanted to sell some of Ben’s meat-processing machines hidden at his house. As April began, Celia questioned whether they should keep hiding. She believed what she had read in the Jewish weekly

newspaper last summer. Jews were going to work camps and families stayed together, the papers said. She didn't realize that was Nazi propaganda.

One night, as Ab slept, she sat next to Ben in the bedroom. "Bennie," she declared, breaking the tense silence. "We can't go on living like this."

He took her hand. "What choice do we have, Celia?"

"What's the use? This is killing us. We're trapped. So we work in the camps."

He shook his head. "No. You can't trust the Krauts—no."

Ben could not fathom why Celia did not understand. She saw him when he came back from Berlin in 1934, after fighting in Germany for the last time. Didn't she remember? He had boxed there two-dozen times before and usually won. The Nazis had barred Jews from boxing Aryans, so Cosman brought his best fighters to Berlin. Ben told her Nazis in brown uniforms with swastikas had yelled at Jews to get off the sidewalks and vandalized Jewish shops, owned by men like him. Ben and Celia figured out that Dutch anti-Semites in boxing circles had kept Ben off of the 1932 Olympic team and ambushed him at the national welterweight final in November 1940. Ben had won his eighth nationwide title that March, weeks before the Nazis invasion. The same boxing judges were now wearing gold lapel pins given to the first Nazi sympathizers. They told him to skip the weigh in for the late 1940 fight. As Ben sat by the ringside and the fight did not start on time, he realized they were about to disqualify him. Before they could act, Ben climbed into the ring at Amsterdam's Frascati Theatre, alone, raised an arm to quiet the crowd and announced that he was now ending his career. He quickly left amid jeers and boos, and drove home, telling Celia that he would not take it anymore.

"Bennie, you've always said that the war can't go on forever," Celia said, pushing him.

"Celia, no. We can't turn ourselves in. We can't."

"But we're running out of money. We're trapped. And Aalbertsen's a Nazi..."

"And where do you think they're taking Jews?" he snapped.

"To work camps, to labor camps... I don't know. I read it in the paper."

"No, Celia. You just don't know the Germans."

K returned during the first week in April. He brought along a Utrecht policeman, one of the few defying the Nazis even though the NSB had taken over the force months before.

Ben had trained Utrecht police to box and knew him. They went to the flat's kitchen to talk. Celia pulled up a chair and listened intently as they discussed possible hideouts.

"Why should we keep hiding," she blurted out. "This is killing us. So what if we work? We're not afraid of that."

"No, no," the policeman replied. "We'll never let you go to them. You can't."

Ben glared at her and looked at him to tell her. He hesitated. "You don't know what they'll do. We'll find a good place for you."

"Okay," she said, her voice faltering. "But let's do this quickly."

The officer returned several days later with some news. They found a new hideout. The family would be taken in a police car in late afternoon, as shifts changed. They were told to pack again and be ready, downstairs, on Monday, April 12.

"Just a few things," Celia reminded Ben as he watched Ab that morning. "Pajamas and a toothbrush—nobody should see we're moving. They're small—the police cars."

After the diner closed, the family went downstairs and waited by the front door. Like other storefronts, a metal screen hiding its windows and front door was lowered and locked. They waited behind the screen, with Ben repeatedly staring at his watch.

"Bennie, what's that sound?" asked Celia.

In the distance, behind the grate, was a low rumble from a motor.

"I hear it. It sounds like a truck. Maybe nothing."

"It's getting closer."

Ben heard the diesel engine approach and sit outside. They knew that the police and Nazis used diesel trucks and busses in round-ups.

"Maybe a delivery truck or something."

"Just stay quiet. We don't know."

"Do we go back upstairs?"

"No. Be still. Listen."

The motor's rumble continued. They heard other cars approach. Car doors opened and slammed shut. Celia and Ben looked at each other and feared the worst.

"Finally," whispered Celia. "Finally..."

"Celia, shhh. Be strong. We don't know..."

Ben said nothing. He stood still and reached for her shoulder. Celia pulled Ab to her side.

“So we’ll go to a camp and work. We won’t die from working.” Celia put her head against his shoulder.

“We’ll be okay,” Ben said, holding her. “We must not show weakness.”

A stiff bang on the metal screen shattered their silence. Celia composed herself. “Open up,” a man yelled.

Ben put his arms around Celia and Ab. The Dutch Nazis threw up the gate and kicked in the door. Four Utrecht policemen ran inside with guns drawn: Cornelis Van Tricht, Jan Gijsbert Van Cleef, Nicolaas De Jong and Jan Smorenburg, a detective in charge. One officer grabbed Ab from Celia, and put a gun barrel to his head. “Now I have you, dirty Jew,” Smorenburg sneered, as they eyed Ben and Celia.

“You’d like to hit me,” the collaborator taunted. “Now boxer, we have you.”

“What do you want,” Ben defiantly replied, with Celia huddling by his side.

Smorenburg pointed to the street. “Out Jews!”

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