

Abel J. Herzberg

Amor fati

Attachment to fate
Seven essays on Bergen-Belsen

Translated from the Dutch
by Jack Santcross

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De afhankelijkheid aan het levenslot
Zeven opstellen over Bergen-Belsen

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Contents

| | |
|-----------------------|----------|
| Preface | 5 |
| Scharführer X | 6 |
| The Kapo | 10 |
| The Bitch | 16 |
| Under the linden | 22 |
| Because of a sentence | 30 |
| The last train | 6 |
| Amor fati | 45 |

*even when they are in their enemies' land,
I shall not reject them...*

Leviticus XXVI: 44

Preface

In response to many requests, the following articles, written more or less by chance and independently of one another, which appeared in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, are re-published here altogether.

We acceded to the requests in the belief that dissemination of knowledge about facts, conditions, and moods in the concentration camps is important for understanding society's problems. That many should have preceded me does not detract from this. All accounts by contemporaries who personally experienced the events are inevitably subjective and the present work is no exception. However, based on different subjective accounts, it is possible to form an objective opinion. Such an opinion is important not only for dealing with the German people, but also, and indeed in the first place, for the development of our own future. If knowledge of what took place should contribute to providing insight into what man is capable of and to what he might be driven when one is not vigilant, much will have been gained.¹ This insight alone can prepare us for certain unavoidable decisions.

November 1946

Translator's Note

In an attempt to make the essays more accessible to English readers the translator has added a number of explanatory footnotes for which he assumes full responsibility.

Jack Santcross

¹ "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" (Translator's note, source uncertain)

The last train

On 8 April 1945, five or six empty trains, each some fifty wagons long, were standing in the station of the small town of Belsen on Luneburg Heath. The station consisted only of a number of platforms, three or four parallel to one another, and a couple more adjoining at an angle. There was no sign of any station building or waiting room. There was also no ticket office or ticket barrier. None of those was needed. The station was the loading and unloading point for the inhabitants of the extensive neighbouring barracks and the series of camps which, by means of the many side roads leading off the main road, and barred by one barrier after another, one barbed wire fence after another, and flanked by all kinds of watchtowers, were accessible only to the chosen. The chosen were prisoners of war, political prisoners, and Jews. None of us knew how many people were concentrated there. Taking all the different groups and sections together, it may have been a hundred thousand.

When a German tells you that he knew nothing of the camps or of the conditions that prevailed there, he may not be lying. However, it does not exonerate him. The question is, whether he could and should have known. Whatever, the S.S. liked secrecy. Perhaps because it instils greater fear than openness does. To let a nation guess and suspect that 'somewhere, something terrible is happening' is perhaps a more effective means for a police state to rule by than to tell it the truth. Something else may have played a part as well. When a cat has caught something tasty, it drags it to a corner where it can feast in secret. That, more or less, is how the S.S. dragged its prey to a secret place where it feasted behind closed doors.

The trains on the so-called station of Bergen-Belsen consisted partly of coal wagons. A few were covered with a kind of improvised, tattered tarpaulin. Most were open. When the Russians began to push forward in Poland, prisoners were transported in these wagons for days and nights on end, for weeks on end, through rain, snow, frost, and storm, often without food or water, from east to west. The Germans abandoned everything, except their prey.

The trains on each side of the first platform, on the other hand, were clearly meant as luxury. They were composed of aged, discarded third and fourth-class carriages and old closed goods wagons. Admittedly, many of the windows were broken, but there were traces of repairs having been started. The floors were swept and the toilets clean. After we had occupied these trains for just half a day, it was all one big dunghill.

For the trains were meant for us. Apparently, one fine day, Satan, whom we know from the story of Job, the sufferer, began to get bored with the camps. For however much the wretchedness may grow, as soon as it becomes monotonous, it stops making an impression, and it had indeed become monotonous. Horror's fantasy had become depleted. Something new was called for, so Satan said, 'We'll

put the whole lot on wheels and drive it around the world.’ At that moment the voice of a *Scharführer*² could be heard, ‘*Antreten!*’³

It was rumoured that the British were about sixty kilometres west of Bergen-Belsen. The IPA claimed that Hanover had fallen, but the IPA also denied it.

The IPA was the rumour. Rumour was received with derision, and in the imagination, derision had evoked a Jewish Press Agency and of its initials had formed a word that immediately gained general popularity in all the camps: IPA.

The IPA spoke daily. It managed to raise or dash our spirits at will. It boasted about its reliability and laughed at its deception. It debated with itself. The IPA confirmed its assertions or contradicted itself, and usually did both simultaneously.

Lately, the IPA has been exceptionally talkative. It talked to everyone it met, and everyone searched it out. The tension mounted from one day to the next, and finally from hour to hour. Nobody knew what would happen, but everyone knew that the end was near...

‘The kitchens are closing. Bremen has fallen. Every three persons will be issued with a half ration of bread that has to last for two days. They will drive us into the woods and leave us to our fate. The S.S. is packing its suitcases. They are burning the archives. We are staying here. The *Ältestenrat*⁴ is negotiating.’ The IPA rambles on and has free rein because the newspapers that once managed to reach the camp quite regularly and illegally no longer came. Satan had said: ‘We’re going on a journey.’ The *Scharführer* shouted, ‘*Antreten! Antreten!*’

The prediction of the pessimists, as they are called, who know that the cat toys with the mouse but never lets go, came about. The camp was being evacuated.

Germans are not in the habit of doing something like that without a promise. They deluded us with the promise of exchange to Switzerland. Had they not done so, we would still have had hope. However, little by little we had gained sufficient experience to know that a promise of salvation meant an announcement of doom. Nevertheless, no one believes in his own doom, instead he maintains the illusion of salvation until the end of his very last moment. Then, when that moment has passed, he starts anew, providing he is still able to do so.

Besides, it was beautiful weather on 8 April 1945.

The sick were to be taken to the station in lorries. The healthy had to walk. However, the distinction between healthy or sick was no longer very clear.

A scramble that became ever more desperate ensued. The evacuation took more than a day. The strongest, the boldest, secured a place. The weak, the hesitant, arrived too late. They had to go on foot.

There was little or no food. During the past few weeks, there had been no bread, or so little, that no one could remember it. Instead, we had been issued with a few raw swedes and now and then, at irregular intervals, a container of swede soup arrived which on rare occasions was thickened with a little flour that would immediately send us into a state of ecstasy then.

The British now claim that the Germans soon may receive fewer calories than the rations in Bergen-Belsen used to contain. It is quite possible: on paper. I still

² S.S. Sergeant.

³ Fall in!

⁴ Council of elders.

have to meet the first German who had *nothing* to eat for six days running. In the *Häftlinge*⁵ compound next to ours, it was the order of the day, if not the rule. We had it much better. On the last day we even received winter carrots. Granted, they were rotten, but they still had edible parts to them. The rotten parts we cut out and tossed over the fence to the other prisoners who stood begging for them. However, one had to be careful then that the guard did not see it. He would shoot, right on target.

Evacuation means fighting, shouting, punching, quarrelling, pushing, and securing a place for oneself. For children it means crying and wailing, for mothers snapping, for the sick shivering with fever, and for everyone, being herded, beaten, and afraid.

We, who must walk, carry our luggage on our backs. We left behind as much as possible, but everyone still has a pair of trousers, a shirt, a pair of socks, usually inherited from a dead person in the camp, and a book, that he does not want to part with under any circumstance. It is all in the rucksack. He has also gathered as many swedes and carrots as he could, because he realises that there will be nothing to eat. He also does not part with a dish or a pan, a mug, a spoon, or a knife. Of course, he also has his blankets to lug along, as many as possible, and a pillow. Altogether, it is terribly heavy and in his present condition, almost too heavy to hump. Nevertheless, all this is called being *bevorzugt*.⁶ The other prisoners are not troubled by luggage. They have nothing.

Some amongst us are also without anything. They were robbed.

Onwards! Where to? They are clearing the camp. The archives are being taken to the crematorium by the cartload, to stoke the fire to burn the corpses. The British are advancing.

By the side of the road at the end of the camp, behind barbed wire, a large orchestra, composed of Kapos, is playing jazz. It is Sunday. They look healthy and clean in freshly laundered blue-striped prison uniform. They play superbly. We stop for a moment to listen. When the piece has ended, we applaud, just like on the dance floor of a Parisian casino. The conductor bows obligingly, the drummer smiles, and the saxophonists tap the moisture from their instruments. Then a new piece commences, with a sentimental singer, whose crooning follows us.

Onwards! I am losing my rucksack. A polite gentleman, in prison uniform, comes to help me. What a favour! 'Are you German?' 'No, Czech, from Prague.' 'Pleased to meet you, from Amsterdam.' Names are irrelevant. We will never meet again, but will certainly never forget each other.

Onwards! They are raising the barriers. We are leaving. Someone next to me is talking about the day's dead, and about tomorrow's, and the following day's dead who have been left behind. There are good and old friends among them. It is not possible to dwell on them, though. They are raising the barriers.

There lies the road and the woods, and a bird is hopping. It is difficult to walk on swollen feet and carrying a rucksack on one's back. No one can keep it up for more than ten minutes. However, the soldiers who are guarding us are old and stooping men for whom nothing matters any more. The distance to the station is

⁵ Political prisoners.

⁶ Privileged.

six kilometres. We have all day to get there. Everything smells so pleasantly, too. We inhale and sniff the air.

We meet endless convoys of prisoners who are being brought to Bergen-Belsen from the east. Why? Only someone who knows what is *Organisation* understands that. 'When the enemy advances from the east, retreat to the west.' That is *Befehl*.⁷ 'When the enemy advances from the west, retreat to the east' – that is also *Befehl*. That they must meet somewhere no one has thought about. For if one did think about such things, the entire Organisation would be superfluous.

The convoys greet one another: 'Where are you going?'

'We don't know.'

'Where are we?'

'In Bergen-Belsen.'

'What's the food like?'

'Marvellous, every day potatoes with goulash.'

We try to give the others some of the things that are too heavy for us. A *Scharführer*⁸ immediately responds to this attempt with a mighty blow of his truncheon. '*Weg Sie, Sauhund!*'⁹ At least I learnt now why I am carrying a rucksack.

The prisoners have their orchestras. In the middle of the group they carry violins, cellos, basses, drums, timpani, trumpets, bassoons, flutes, copper horns, in short, every imaginable kind of instrument. The group consists of 'Mussulmen'; those are the worn-out creatures on their final journey. They walk in rows of five, often with linked arms. If they were to let go of each other, they would topple over. The strongest march in front, then the weaker, then the still weaker, then the still much weaker, and stumbling along at the very end, are those who can go no farther. Occasionally, someone grubs with his bony fingers in the cracks between the paving stones in the hope of finding a grain somewhere. Once he has gone by we encounter the corpses. They, of course, are lying in the road, and after the corpses, we meet a new convoy.

How many convoys have passed by like this? When we were still in the camp, people would stream past the barbed wire sometimes for days on end. One beautiful still summer's evening, Polish women passed by, first labourers, then women carrying bags on their backs, women with prams, and with children. Some of the groups were well dressed; others were as beggarly as we were. They do not speak, do not laugh, or call out, and utter not a sob or lament. Even their footsteps are silent. In the middle is a young child with a small dog on a rope. Our children exclaim, 'A doggie!' Where does such a dog come from in a transport of prisoners? What does it live on? Does some child share its last piece of bread with a dog? A woman falls silently to the ground. Quietly the others try to comfort her. Only a *Scharführer* screeches like a crow in a graveyard, '*Rasch, Rasch. Weiter!*'¹⁰

⁷ an order.

⁸ S.S. Sergeant.

⁹ Out of the way, you swine!

¹⁰ Quickly, quickly. Keep going!

That is how it is today: one convoy after another. From one of them, I hear my name being called. It is an old acquaintance from an earlier life. Are we dead now?

*Ausgebombt*¹¹ German civilians are camping in the woods. There are also French prisoners of war and Russians, pretending to be working. And the closer we get to the station, the more Häftlinge lie in the road. They have reached their final destination.

The luggage is beginning to feel so heavy that we even have to throw away the swedes that we are carrying. We will manage, somehow.

The train is the last train to carry Jews or prisoners from west to east. Hundreds of them went that way. When we arrive, it is already overcrowded. It was to carry two thousand four hundred people in all. Of these two thousand four hundred people, two thousand four hundred have dysentery. Additionally, we have seven hundred people who are sick with typhus, paratyphoid, rickettsia, camp-typhus, spotted fever, and similar diseases. Oedema cases are not included. It is crawling with lice. All this is about to set out on a journey together, around the world.

The sick are lying partly in separate wagons, partly elsewhere on the floor. People fight for a place on the floor in the corridors. There is no water, not one drop.

Rumour has it, though, that there is bread, butter and sausage. Some even saw it with their own eyes. The rations will be handed out the following day. They will have to last for a number of days, although they are the normal rations for one and a half days. It then transpires that the S.S. itself has stolen half of the sausage. They advise us to exercise the greatest restraint as no one knows how long the journey will last and the S.S. says that it 'assumes no responsibility'. I have no idea what it means, but it is always good to say something like that.

Yes, we will restrain ourselves! We swear it to ourselves. We will be strong, really strong, and not succumb to hunger. When the long awaited rations arrive, everything is finished within ten minutes.

It is not so terrible. Alongside the train lies a pile of beetroot and a pile of swedes. We steal as much as we can. It will keep us going for a few days.

Evening falls, night sets in. The sky turns black, then suddenly bright yellow and white and red. We hear bombs falling in the distance. The front is approaching. Sirens. Aeroplanes overhead. The train does not budge; it seems paralysed. Will we be liberated now?

Afterwards the sky turns black again and everything grows still. We decide to go to sleep.

Up till now we had a bunk. But Satan said, 'We shall travel without bunks.' We will have to sleep sitting upright, therefore.

Man cannot sleep while seated. He can doze a little. There is no space to lean, either. We are pressed together arm by arm, knee by knee. Next to me on the floor lies a sick woman. The passage between the seats is filled with people, sleeping, sick, and dying. Those who have to go outside step on arms and legs or on a head.

Day breaks. Convoys of prisoners are arriving. Just like yesterday and the day before yesterday. Fifteen political prisoners who had hidden themselves amongst us are caught. Someone betrayed them. Why? Perhaps he was too sleepy. The fifteen are being executed now. Shall we be liberated?

¹¹ Bombed out.

Once again evening falls; it becomes night again. Everything repeats itself, the fantastic glowing sky followed by black obscurity. We shall have to sleep seated upright again. Suddenly we feel a lurch. We are moving. We will not be liberated.

Onwards! Where to? The IPA says they are taking us to the east front where the Germans will let the Russians shoot the train to pieces. I doubt it. They prefer to do such things themselves and deny others that pleasure. The IPA says we will be set down on a bridge and it will be blown up. The IPA says that we are going to Theresienstadt and from there to Switzerland. The IPA says that we are going to Lübeck and from there to Sweden.

The IPA was to chatter fourteen more days. For fourteen days, Satan had the last train driven through Germany, always several kilometres behind the constantly advancing and constantly evaded front. A train filled with screaming desperation, past devastated towns and villages, past the ruins of Berlin whose walls bore the message, '*Berlin kämpft, arbeitet, und steht*',¹² past camouflaged batteries, where the front would be next following day.

By day, we often stopped in a forest or alongside an embankment, seeking as much cover as possible against the airmen who kept finding us and who would then direct their machine guns towards our train, believing it to be a munitions train. All the white shirts, trousers, and towels that we let flutter outside convinced neither the Americans nor the Russians that we were innocent civilians. We had a number of wounded and a few deaths. With every attack, the healthy fled in terror into the fields and the sick awaited their fate.

After two days, we had run out of food. A few times our leaders collected money with which to buy potatoes from the farmers. Nearly everyone still had some illegally held money on him. In the main, though, each person had to beg for his own food.

Begging is a profession. First, it requires sound legs and feet, because if they are swollen and infected one cannot walk far. Besides, owing to having to sleep sitting upright and the constantly growing tiredness, our legs kept swelling, our calves began to cramp, and our knee joints began to stiffen. Second, begging requires caring for one's appearance. One must not look too wretched, and above all be clean-shaven. An unshaven beggar, namely, has even less credit than an unshaven banker. But how can one shave oneself in a train like ours? Moreover, a beggar needs to know how to deal with his clients. No less than any other profession, begging is a question of talent.

It also has its attractions. I remember seeing a room in a farmhouse. On the right of one wall hangs a portrait of Hitler and on the left a crucifix. There I was with a Magen David on my breast, standing between cross and swastika begging for a piece of bread. Who would want to miss something like that in his life? In front of me the farmer's wife wears a white scarf on her head. She is out of bread, but does have some milk and even an egg. Perhaps one of us was born for this moment.

The days that we wandered through Germany were, despite everything, wonderful days. The woods were fragrant, the ground was soft with moss, flowers bloomed, and the sky was blue. Above and around us there was war, but war or no war, it was spring, and sick or not sick, free or not free, at least there was no barbed wire. We would fetch a little water in a bowl from a brook or from a pump

¹² Berlin fights, works, and stands.

farther away, build a small oven, light a fire, and cook a meal. Sometimes a swede, sometimes a beetroot, sometimes a few potatoes, and when there was nothing else to be found, the potato peelings that a road worker or soldier had thrown away. It was enough, because it was infinitely better than the food in the camp. Each moment could bring the end. The moment that remained was at least not Bergen-Belsen. Who in the world could prevent one from stretching oneself out on the ground and imagining being on holiday?

The nights that we wandered through Germany were that much worse. Hunger is difficult; lack of sleep drives one mad. As soon as evening falls, everything seems enchanted. Snoozing and dozing is not sleeping but enough for wild dreams. Someone dreams of a large room and a wonderful armchair in which he is seated, and he stands up to stretch his legs and to walk up and down a little. Opposite him, though, a French lady is dozing with her daughter, and of course, he steps on her feet. She swears in French and he does not understand her, and he swears back in spicy Dutch and she does not understand him, but they understand each other's meaning all the better. Then she kicks him, he gives her a shove, she hits, he hits, and when the scuffle ends amidst a little grumbling and sulking, they carry on dozing. In the morning he enquires: 'Did you sleep all right?' And she replies, 'Thank you, not too badly.' Whereupon they exchange a few compliments and each asks the other if there is anything they can do for them. After all, are they not people of culture who a few days before had applauded in the Casino de Paris?

Every night there is fighting. For the sake of a hallucination. Because someone wants a bed, a bed of all things! As if we are not travelling in a stinking train, as if there are beds. He shall and he must go to bed. With each step he takes he treads on someone who then becomes furious and starts to lash out.

People die. We hardly know who or where. People die of illness, of exhaustion, and of too much company. For, although man may be said to be a social animal, it is not in his nature to sleep in company. He needs a room, or at least a tent or a cave, where he can be alone. Just he and his wife.

By day, we see the dead lying on the bridge between the coaches amidst the filth and the pans of food bubbling away on an open fire. When the train is stationary, they are buried alongside the railway line. The gravediggers get extra food. When there is an air raid alert and the train is about to depart, the dead cannot be buried. The only exception is when a man and a woman place a child in a grave. The Scharführer says, '*Die Scheißkerle kennen keine Disziplin.*'¹³

Next to us, among the Greeks, a child of two is dying. Croup. It takes a long time. People whisper. When it is over, a wild wailing breaks forth. It is not even heartrending any longer. It is no longer possible for one person to feel compassion for another. All he feels is tiredness. He is sleepy.

Onwards! Where to? Are the British coming now at last? Where are they? The farmers are saying that the Russians are fifteen kilometres away and advancing. Why do we not wait then?

The S.S. does not wait. It cannot. It will not let go. It is its own slave. Why let a train that is nothing but a travelling dunghill, a lazaretto full of infection, of acute

¹³ Those shit-bags don't know what discipline is.

danger to the health of one's own people – an immense danger, in fact – traverse right through one's country, considering all the difficulties and sacrifices that something like that must involve. What good can that still serve?

The great tragedy has begun – the tragedy of the wounded hero who is falling, but who, in his downfall, is determined to drag his enemy with him. Even though all is lost, he still keeps his grip around his opponent's throat. Beautiful, don't you think? Movingly beautiful! *Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!*¹⁴ Never before has the world heard a more strident death cry. For what else can it mean than, 'Long live death!'

Now and then a Scharführer, seeing the colossus tottering on his feet of clay, feels a trembling in his knees, becomes afraid, and tries to make amends. However, the real one is transported at the sight of the grievously tumbling, tragic hero. He shall worship him for many centuries to come.

Tomorrow or the day thereafter, the fatherland will be destroyed, yet today he still hits the leader of our wagon about the face with both hands because he had made a mistake in reporting the number of prisoners.

Of what importance is the number of prisoners? After all, they are not giving us anything to eat or drink. Had we not had our own leaders to look after us, we would have perished long ago. Now, right in the wilderness, a ration of bread, a portion of sauerkraut, a pickled gherkin and even a raffle of nine hundred eggs, suddenly appear. Does it all grow on trees?

We keep hearing that we cannot go any farther or turn back. Each time we believe it and each time we go farther.

At times, the tension in the train seeks to discharge itself and someone starts to sing. Someone else continues with the song, which then rolls from wagon to wagon, and for a full hour it seems as if the train is aglow with joy. At such times, people think it has ended and that something is about to happen. There will be an enormous explosion, boom! and then...

Nothing happens. It becomes a commonplace day. It begins to drizzle slightly. The brushwood becomes wet and we cannot even light a fire any more. Then a tiny engine comes along and with deep sighs, pulls us farther. The tiny engine, too, cannot cope any more. We wait.

The landscape is quite monotonous. On our left, is a thin row of trees, on our right, is a thicket. It becomes evening, misty, chilly, and damp. We set out to forage a little in the nearby village and return with some begged food. It is already dark and nothing has happened. There is no sound, either. Not even the quivering of a leaf on a tree. Tonight it is bound to happen. It will thunder, there will be lightning. The train will come under fire, we will lie in the line of fire, soldiers will suddenly jump forth, and we will embrace each another...

Instead, a very faint moon sinks leisurely, and we wait. Far in the distance, a rifle cracks. That is all. A tedious night passes by slowly and very gingerly a pale light appears. We leave the carriage for a breath of fresh air.

In the road stands a man with a yellow face and a yellow moustache. He is dressed in a yellow padded jacket and has a fur hat with earflaps on his head although it has long been summery weather. He wears dirty yellow trousers and brown boots and holds a rifle in his hand. He grins.

¹⁴ Hail to Victory!

I thought, where have I seen him before?
He held out his hand and said, 'tovarischi.'
Someone shouts, and it was just as if the word was being torn from his throat,
'tovarischi!' It rolled, and rolled over the fields.
'Tovarischi' means 'comrades.'

Biographical Note

Abel Jacob Herzberg was born in Amsterdam in 1893 and grew up in a non-orthodox but religious home.¹⁵ His father was a broker in uncut diamonds. Around 1880, his parents emigrated from Lithuania to Holland; his mother with her family, and his father by himself. They met in Amsterdam where they got married. Although they had fled from the pogroms against the Jews, his mother remembered with nostalgia her former homeland and the strongly religious Jewish community there. “The essence of the stories my parents told me was that they were Jews. It was a recurring theme. It stood in the foreground. It not only meant that they were foreigners, but that even in their home country they had never been anything but foreigners. Although they came from Russia, and their families had lived there for many centuries, they were not Russians and were never recognised there as such either. That is why they left there.” That is what Abel Herzberg wrote to his eight-year-old grandson in letters first published in Dutch in 1964 under the title *Brieven aan mijn kleinzoon*.¹⁶ Elsewhere he wrote, ‘1908, I was not fifteen yet, a Zionist congress¹⁷ was being held in the Arts and Sciences Hall in The Hague. My parents went there and took me with them. There, on Zwarte Weg, I saw for the first time in my life a Jewish flag, and I knew we were not dreaming. Except that we had to wait forty years, forty bitter years, and that was something we did not know.’

During the Great War he enrolled as a volunteer in the Dutch army even though he did not have the Dutch nationality. He served for three and a half years because he considered it a duty to his new homeland.

After the war he studied law, worked in the courts, and then set himself up in Amsterdam as a lawyer specialising in administrative law.

In the 1930s he played a prominent role in the Dutch Jewish community. He was also editor of *De Joodse Wachter*¹⁸ and from 1934 to 1939 chairman of the Dutch Zionist Association.

Following the occupation of Holland in 1940, Abel Herzberg, his wife Thea and their three children were forced to go into hiding. Their first hiding place seemed to them to be too insecure. In the second refuge in Blaricum, the Herzbergs came to realise what it meant to wipe out their existence, as it were, while simultaneously endangering the lives of other people. The family was unable to endure this way of life and took the risk of returning to Amsterdam. In March 1943, they were arrested by the Germans. The family was interned in Barneveld. Before they were taken to Westerbork transit camp, Thea Herzberg managed to smuggle the children out of the camp and take them to safety on a nearby farm.

From September 1943 until January 1944, Abel and Thea Herzberg were imprisoned in Westerbork. In the middle of January they were transported to Bergen-Belsen. In April 1944, 172 prisoners – among them the Herzbergs – were told they could leave for Palestine in exchange for interned Germans. They were

¹⁵ This biographical note was written by Renata Laqueur and appeared in *Schreiben im KZ, Tagebücher 1940-1045*. Ed. Martina Dreisbach (Niedersächsischen Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, Hanover 1991). It has been translated from the German and edited by the present translator.

¹⁶ *Letters to my grandson*.

¹⁷ In fact, the eighth International Zionist Congress was held in the Hague from 7 to 14 August 1907.

¹⁸ *The Jewish Watch*

moved into separate huts, were exempted from forced labour, and were not maltreated. After five weeks, though, they were returned to the 'normal' camp without any explanation, together with fifty other prisoners. At the same time, Abel Herzberg decided to keep a diary with the intention of expanding the notes 'later'. They cover the period from 11 August 1944 to 26 April 1945.

In the summer of 1945, Abel and Thea Herzberg returned to Amsterdam. Their three children had also survived. Their son and eldest daughter, twenty-one and nineteen years old, immediately emigrated to Palestine. The youngest daughter remained with her parents in Holland. Herzberg's diary was first published in the journal *De Groene Amsterdammer*.

In the letters to his grandson he wrote, 'In those days, who could have expected that those who migrated to Palestine would found a state there for the third time and those who migrated to America would become their financiers? Both were equally poor and equally inexperienced. *We* expected it. We were certain of it. As a child I discussed with both my uncles, who themselves were still only youngsters then, what the uniform of Jewish soldiers should look like. And we were quite serious.'

After the war Abel Herzberg wrote many books: novels, stories, dramas. Most of them had as their theme the persecution of the Jews. He wanted to keep alive both the knowledge of what people were capable of and the debate about how one could prevent it from happening again.

In the 1970s he spoke out for the release of several German war criminals, not from a sense of compassion, but because he was convinced that revenge was inhuman.

He received numerous honours and prizes. In 1965 he was made Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau and in 1974 he was awarded the Dutch prize for literature for his collected works. Abel Herzberg died in May 1989.

For these biographical details I wish to express my thanks to Tamir Herzberg, the author's grandson, to whom he wrote the above mentioned letters.

Renata Laqueur

Comment [JS1]: Championed the release ...