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Operation Sepharad. The resistance of the German Palestine pioneers in the Netherlands

From the end of 1943, a what could be called clandestine 'travel agency' was established in a handful of changing hotel rooms in Paris. The last one was in the Hotel Versigny in the district of Montmartre. The 'employees' of the agency were mostly German and Austrian Palestine pioneers (chalutzim and chalutzot), usually in their early twenties. Their work consisted of smuggling pioneers in hiding in the Netherlands via Belgium to France, and for a few dozen of them further on to Spain. In addition to this, the 'agency' workers falsified papers and collected information. The coordinator of the whole operation was 25-year-old Kurt Reilinger, a Palestine pioneer from Stuttgart.

The Pioneer movement was inspired by the Wandervogel and other German youth movements. They emphasized that young people should organize their own activities. The pioneers practiced this principle in their resistance activities as well. Operation Sepharad was a good example of this attitude.

The Hechalutz in the Netherlands

A first agricultural training center for Palestine pioneers (hachshara) opened in 1910 in Gouda near Rotterdam. The training, organized by the Dutch Zionist movement, was not a success, due in part to the outbreak of World War I. Only a handful of Jewish pioneers from Eastern Europe left for Palestine. In 1918, the activity was restarted from Deventer. The initiators were the furniture trader Rudolf Cohen and some members of the Eastern-Jewish community from The Hague. Cohen placed the again predominantly Polish pioneers with individual farmers around his hometown and later also in several collective training centers. Despite the difficult conditions, such as the hard and unusual farm work, the poor pay, and tensions with the leadership of the Zionist Union in the Netherlands, several hundred pioneers nevertheless left for Palestine during the 1920s and 1930s.

The tensions were mainly caused by differences in social background. The pioneers usually came from the milieu of workers and small traders. The leadership came from the upper middle class. In their circle, there was little understanding for the more emotional Eastern-Jewish mentality of the mostly socialist pioneers and their collectivistic ideal of the kibbutz. The pioneers raised in the modern

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110774702-011

Abb. 1: The Palestine Pioneers of the Paviljoen Loosdrecht in the Spring of 1942. Unknown photographer, Ghetto Fighter House Archives, Israel (GFHA).

style of the youth movement went their own way, caring little for the Union's opinions.[1]

Hitler's rise to power in early 1933 changed the situation dramatically. In that year alone, 4.000 German Jews fled to the Netherlands. Among them were a few hundred young people who wanted to move on, to Palestine or elsewhere. The Deventer Association, as Ru Cohen's organization was called, was unable to accommodate them. With subsidies from Jewish circles, the Dutch government established the Werkdorp in the Wieringermeer polder, north of Amsterdam, in 1934. Some 150 young German Jewish refugees received agricultural and vocational training there. About half of the Werkdorp inhabitants were Zionists.

After November 9th, 1938, thousands more Jews fled to the Netherlands, eventually totalling 30.000, of whom 10.000 travelled on. Among the refugees who stayed

1 See: Giebels, Ludy: De Zionistische beweging in Nederland 1899–1941. Assen 1975. pp. 165–199; Benjamin, Yigal: They were our Friends. Tel Aviv 1990. pp. 9–12.

were several hundred pioneers. They were accommodated in the Werkdorp and several new hachsharot, including three religious ones. By the time Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, there were over 800 pioneers in the country: about 300 at the Werkdorp and 500 at the Deventer Association and other hachsharot.[2]

The Pavilion in Loosdrecht

Opened in September 1939 in the village of Loosdrecht near Utrecht, the hachshara had a somewhat special place because its approximately 60 residents were youngsters who had come without their parents to the Netherlands through the Youth Aliyah. This organization had been founded in the early 1930s by among others Eva Stern, Henrietta Szold and Recha Freier. The Youth Aliyah organized the departure of thousands of children from Germany to countries including Palestine, Great Britain and the Netherlands.

In 1940 the Loosdrecht pioneers ranged in age from 14 to 17. They worked with local farmers. Several boys trained as blacksmiths. Girls often learned to milk and make cheese. Some of the pioneers were religious, most were not. The leadership consisted of 23-year-old Dutchman Lodi Cohen, who had studied to be a rabbi, and two female assistants who took care of the household. From 1941 on, Cohen was assisted by Menachem Pinkhof and Joachim 'Shushu' Simon. The former was a 21-year-old Amsterdam technician from a Zionist religious family. Shortly before the war, however, he had joined the socialist Hechalutz. After graduating he had been unable to find work, because of the German ban on Jews working for non-Jewish companies. At the request of the Youth Aliyah, he then went to Loosdrecht as an assistant.

Shushu Simon was born in 1919 into a Berlin Reform Jewish family. He was involved in Zionist activities from an early age and spoke good Hebrew. However, an attempt to obtain a Palestine certificate failed. To have a better chance to immigrate to Palestine, he went on hachshara to Elgut (Silesia) in 1937 with 90 other members of the Habonim socialist youth movement.

On November 9th, 1938 he was arrested and taken to Buchenwald concentration camp. After about a month he was released, but by then Elgut had been closed by the police. With a bald head and no more possessions than the clothes he was wearing, Shushu Simon left for the Netherlands to continue his hachshara in

2 Stegeman, H.B.J. and J.P.Vorsteveld: Het Joodse Werkdorp in de Wieringermeer. Zutphen 1983. pp. 34–80.

Deventer. In 1940 he became a teacher of Hebrew and group leader in the Werkdorp. Later he had the same positions in Loosdrecht.

Shushu, as he was known, was the spiritual leader of the group. He cracked jokes, recited poems, led folk dancing and even tried to teach the pioneers to march. All efforts were to keep up morale. In fact, the Pavilion was unfit for habitation. The heating barely worked, and the space was too limited for the residents. The frequent lack of food was not such a problem, since most pioneers could eat at work.

Together with the other leaders, Shushu Simon managed to create something of an atmosphere of homeliness and security in the Pavilion. That was necessary, because many pioneers were very worried about their parents and other family back in Germany. They had fled from the Nazis, but the latter had caught up with them. They felt trapped.[3]

Threats, discussions and the hiding operation

Contributing greatly to this atmosphere of threat were the German measures aimed at registering, isolating and deporting Dutch Jews. Registration took place in as early as the summer of 1940, and Jewish civil servants were dismissed in the fall. When in February 1941 a member of the collaborating Nationaal Socialistische Beweging (NSB) was killed in a fight with Amsterdam Jews, the German Police arrested over 300 Jews in the city center between the ages of 20 and 35. They were transported to Mauthausen where they were soon murdered. The raid prompted the brutally suppressed February Strike in Amsterdam and surroundings against the anti-Semitism of the German occupier and its Dutch helpers.

The threat to the pioneers increased as well. In March 1941, the Werkdorp was closed, and its residents taken to Amsterdam. Three months later, in retaliation for a bomb attack by the resistance, the Germans arrested 60 pioneers and took them, along with 240 other young Dutch Jews, to Mauthausen. They too were murdered in short order. All these events made a deep impression in Jewish circles.

From July 1941 the letter J was stamped on identity cards and in May 1942 the Star of David was introduced, which had to be worn on all clothes. One month later, deportations to Eastern Europe began from the isolated Westerbork Camp in Drenthe. The first transport of more than 1.300 people, consisting mainly of Ger-

3 Pinkhof, Miriam and Ineke Brasz (eds.): De Jeugdaliyah van het PaviljoenLoosdrechtse Rade. Hilversum 1998. pp. 15–59.

man Jews, included a group of 22 underage Werkdorp pioneers who lived in an Amsterdam boarding house.[4]

The transports placed the Hechalutz leadership in a dilemma: cooperate or call for resistance. Both opinions had their supporters. If pioneers went along, they could set a good example for their 'hilflosen und halflosen' fellow deportees, the 'cooperators' maintained. The others, however, rejected all cooperation with the German measures.

At the Pavilion, the vote was also divided. Menachem Pinkhof and Shushu Simon were in favor of going into hiding, and Lodi Cohen initially against. However, the two convinced him to cooperate on their plans to escape. They were supported by Menachem's girlfriend, 25-year-old teacher Mirjam Waterman, who lived in Loosdrecht. She was the daughter of a wealthy diamond trader, who together with his wife had given their children a progressive education.

Mirjam Waterman had good contacts in Utrecht student circles, which she approached to find hiding places for the approximately 55 pioneers still living in Loosdrecht. The result was almost zero. Many Dutch did not realize the danger of the German measures or did not care. Waterman now suggested contacting 43-year-old Joop Westerweel, the principal of a Rotterdam Montessori school. She knew him from the Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap, a pedagogically progressive school in Bilthoven near Utrecht, where she had worked for some time.

Joop Westerweel took immediate action. He approached two former employees of the Werkplaats: Bouke Koning and Jan Smit. Both Westerweel and Koning were left-wing socialists, pacifists and conscientious objectors. While working in the Dutch East Indies as a teacher Westerweel had been imprisoned for several months after he had refused to serve in a militia. Bouke Koning, a 27-year-old dynamic-organic vegetable grower, had been imprisoned in the Netherlands for 10 months as a conscientious objector. He had tended the Werkplaats vegetable garden. Jan Smit, a 25-year-old carpenter, who had always been active in the AJC socialist youth movement, had worked as a handyman at the Werkplaats.

In the summer of 1942, the three of them managed to find several dozen hiding places for the Loosdrecht pioneers within a brief time. Westerweel, with the assistance of his wife Wil Westerweel, did this mainly in the leftist milieu. Koning did so with relatives in the northern province of Friesland. Jan Smit arranged for places with AJC comrades.

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4 On the persecution of Dutch Jewry, see: Presser, Jacob (Jacques): Ondergang. De vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse Jodendom 1940–1945 (2 volumes). Den Haag 1965; and more recently: Happe, Katja: Viele falsche Hoffnungen. Paderborn 2017; Benjamin, Friends, p. 16.

Abb. 2: Wil and Joop Westerweel and their children in the 1930's. Unknown photographer. Private Collection.

Time was running out, for it was obvious that the Germans saw the Loosdrecht pioneers without families in the Netherlands as easy prey, comparable to the 22 young Amsterdam pioneers. By mid-August 1942, the time had come. The Hechalutz received a tip-off about a raid and within a few days all pioneers were taken to their hideouts.[5]

New problems and a failure

Soon after the successful hiding operation, new problems emerged. Some of the helpers had indicated that they only wanted to cooperate for a brief time. Others felt uneasy about the Jewish appearance of the people they were hiding, who often barely spoke Dutch. Several pioneers in hiding could not stand sitting in an attic room all day or were not used to the primitive conditions at their hiding place, which lacked running water, for example.

Coordinator Joop Westerweel traveled all over the country after work to discuss issues. He often slept in station waiting rooms to be back at his Rotterdam school on time in the morning. Another problem was that some youthful helpers dropped out, unable to withstand the constant pressure of the resistance work. One of them recalled after the war that he was on a train "with some very Jewish-looking pioneers", when the emergency brake was pulled. A check followed to determine who had pulled the brake. The helper was terrified that one of the pioneers would start speaking German, which would make it clear that his Dutch papers were not correct. But everything went well. The helper went into hiding himself a brief time later.[6]

The situation became untenable and in September 1942 the group fell back on an earlier plan: to transfer pioneers to Switzerland. Through a former Amsterdam policeman, Westerweel met a group of people smugglers, who were willing to take eight pioneers to Switzerland for a lot of money. A total of sixteen Jews went, with the others paying for the impecunious pioneers.

However, the case was a trap. In Brussels, the smugglers drove directly to the Gestapo headquarters and the entire group was taken to Poland via the Dossin Barracks near Malines. This became known thanks to a note smuggled out of prison. It was a heavy blow. Joop Westerweel, who heard the news during a meeting of the group, "cried like a child", as Mirjam Waterman recalled after the war. Imme-

5 Schippers, Hans: Westerweel Group. Non-Conformist Resistance against Nazi Germany. Berlin 2019. pp. 70–73.

6 de Jong, Sytske: Interview met de heer Philip Rümke, 15 Octobre 1998 (Unpublished Master thesis). pp. 1–22.

diately afterwards, however, he told the group members that their work must go on. But it was decided to rely solely on its own strength from now on.[7]

Searching for a safe path

In consultation with the leadership of the Hechalutz, Shushu Simon along with his Dutch wife Adina Simon went on a reconnaissance mission in early October to find an escape route to Switzerland. After some setbacks and with a lot of luck, they ended up in Lyon in Vichy France. However, talks there and with representatives of Jewish scouts and Zionist organizations in southern France, initially yielded no results. The French considered Simon's plan "unsinnig"; they already had enough work of their own without helping Dutch pioneers.

Finally, through Nathan Schwalb, the representative of the Hechalutz in Geneva, Shushu Simon met Otto Giniewski, a medical researcher and resistance leader in Grenoble. He managed to get a Zionist organization to pledge help to his plans. These now had Spain as their destination. The fact that Vichy France had been occupied by the Germans in November 1942 played a key role in this decision. Switzerland, which was already inhospitable to Jews, had now become virtually inaccessible. After some serious setbacks, it was only by luck that Adina Simon was able to reach this country at the end of December.[8]

Shushu Simon reported to the Hechalutz Nederland in November and then returned to France to further work out the escape route. On his way back to the Netherlands, he was arrested at the dangerous Belgian-Dutch border. Not to betray his comrades, and possibly also over-tired, he committed suicide in the Breda prison in early 1943.

His death led to major problems, because in the meantime a start had been made to transfer pioneers to France. The first two were brought across the border by Joop Westerweel near Budel, south of Eindhoven. Simon met them in Paris and then they were taken to Lyon by a passeur. The next two, however, waited in vain for him, already imprisoned, in Brussels. Westerweel finally brought them to a brothel in Antwerp. Acquaintances had put him in touch with Rik Leliè-vre, the friend of the owner. Rik, a steward turned smuggler, took the two plus two other pioneers to Bordeaux. From here a French guide took them across the Span-

7 Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust- en Genocidestudies, Amsterdam (NIOD), Doc. II 296 A, p. 6: Interview Jan Smit by M. Pinkhof, 19 augustus, 1990. The policeman/traitor was liquidated by the resistance later on in the war.

8 Ghetto Fighters House Archives, Lochamei Hagetaot (GFHA), Catalogue nr. 26, pp. 1–44: Adina van Coevorden, Typescript: Die Entwicklung des Holl. Hechalutz.

ish border near Bayonne. On the next transport, however, Rik Lelièvre was arrested with two pioneers in early March 1943.

Some fifteen pioneers arrived at the brothel during the spring. In June 1943 there was a German raid, which thanks to the cool headedness of their leader, the somewhat older pioneer Willy Hirsch, remained without profound consequences. Hirsch spoke Dutch quite well because he came from Aachen near the Dutch border. He told the Feldgendarmerie that the pioneers were Dutch workers of the Organisation Todt (OT) in France. After a short medical examination – which was quite dangerous because most of the men were circumcised – the thirteen remaining pioneers were allowed to travel to an Atlantic Wall project of the OT in Normandy.[9]

An alternative 'route' to Spain and new helpers

The OT traject became an alternative to the road to Spain worked out by Shushu Simon. The company that built bunkers in France against an allied invasion was well organized on paper, but things were different in practice. Due to a constant lack of workers, papers were not checked. German supervisors repeatedly said that the pioneer workers were Jews, but they could simply continue working or move to another building site for safety.

The Hechalutz, informed by Willy Hirsch, started using the OT project as an escape route and regularly smuggled pioneers to sites on the French coast. This was also much needed as there was increasing pressure on the organization to provide hiding places. In early 1943 pioneers, who were initially exempted from reporting to Westerbork for various reasons, were met by German refusals of their requests for extension. They now knocked on the doors of the Dutch Hechalutz for help.

The 23-year-old chairperson Kurt Hannemann, a friend of Shushu Simon from Berlin, where his parents had a bookstore on Friedrichstrasse, worked from the beit chalutz, the pioneer house in Amsterdam, day and night to help them. An attempt to send pioneers with false papers as Dutch workers to Germany failed due to the strict Gestapo controls. At least five pioneers were arrested and sent to Auschwitz.

9 Schippers, Hans: De Westerweelgroep en een Antwerpse smokkelaar. In: Brood&Rozen no. 2 vol. 24 (2019). pp. 4–21; Asscher, Berrie: Van Mokum naar Jerusalem (1924–1944). Beersheva 1996. pp. 129–148.

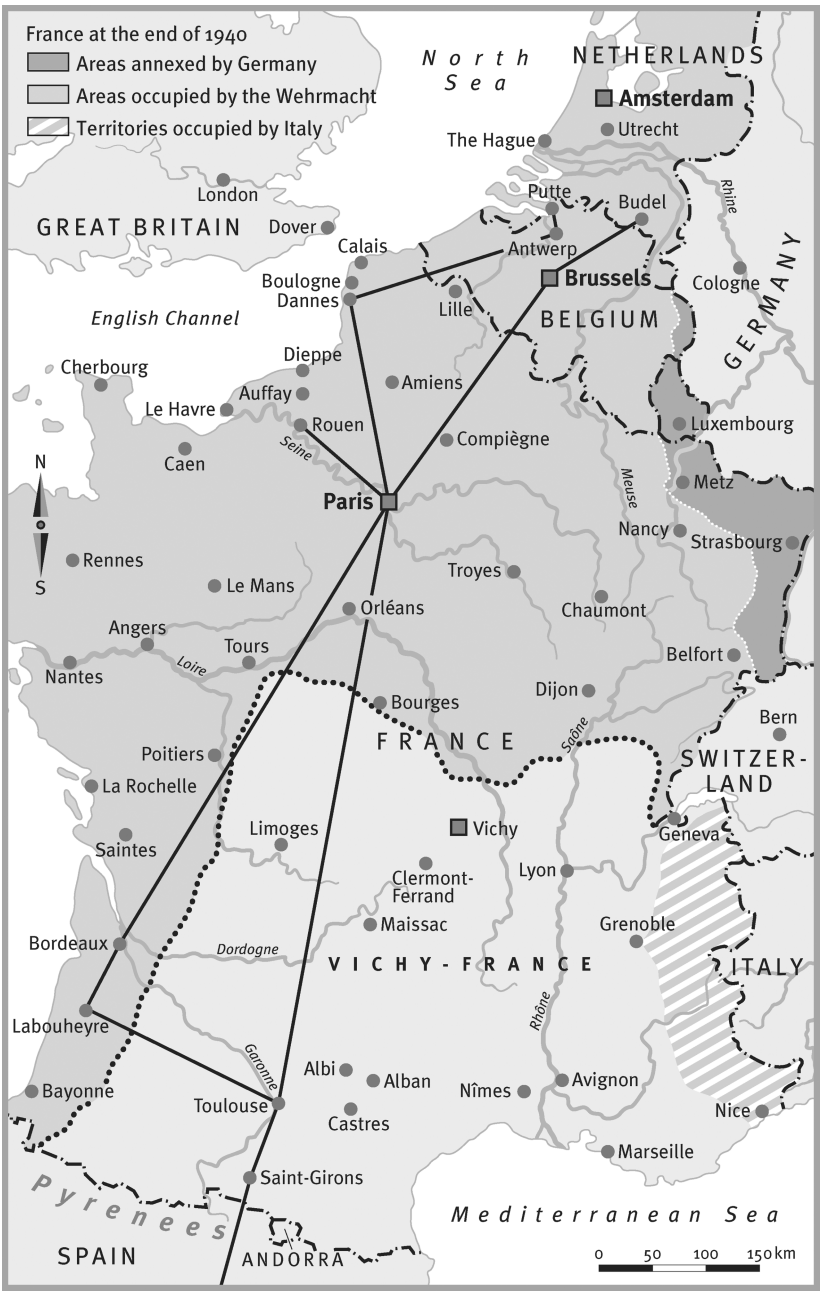

Abb. 3: Palestine pioneers in France, escape routes, OT worksites, maquis. Courtesy of De Gruyter Publishing House.

Help came from pastor Vullinghs of the small Limburg town of Sevenum and Eugénie Boutet, the head of the girls' school there. Through Chiel Salomé, a government official who had helped Jews since 1941, before becoming a member of the Westerweel group, about 25 pioneers were able to go into hiding in Sevenum. Further reinforcement came from the Haarlem industrial designer Frans Gerritsen. He made false papers for the resistance and in this way met Hannemann and another pioneer, the 22-year-old Lore Sieskind from Berlin. After a raid by the SD on the Amsterdam beit chalutz, the two went into hiding with Frans Gerritsen and his wife Henny. Under Gerritsen's guidance, they learned to forge travel documents for OT workers.

Little Palestine in the polder

The beit chalutz, mentioned above, was part of the organization of the Hechalutz Nederland. A house in Deventer already existed there in the 1930s. In 1942 another one was opened in Zutphen for pioneers in that region, for whom Deventer was too far away. By now it was forbidden for Jews to travel by public transport or bicycle. A third beit chalutz in Amsterdam was the aforementioned house for pioneers from the disbanded Werkdorp. It was established in 1941 and located at changing addresses in neighbourhoods where Jews were allowed to live.

The houses were primarily meeting places where pioneers could talk, joke, flirt and read. In short: somewhere to keep up morale. Sometimes there were lectures on subjects related to Zionism or Palestine or there was folk dancing. Every pioneer was assigned a task: cooking, cleaning, washing. All names of the tasks and rooms in the house were in Hebrew. The meals were served in the so called moadon, the central meeting room.

In Deventer and Zutphen only pioneers came. In Amsterdam, the beit chalutz was also open to non-Zionists from the Werkdorp. They were not allowed to join in the meals, mainly because food became scarcer by then. In Amsterdam, there were lessons in modern Hebrew for a long time. The house was also a center of resistance, where false papers were made, and the addresses of possible hiding places exchanged.

In the course of 1943, the importance of pioneer houses diminished. More and more pioneers had to go into hiding, and the German police raided them, as happened twice in Amsterdam. And finally, the beitim chalutzim were closed. During this time of illegality, a henhouse in Sevenum functioned for some time as a nightly meeting place for pioneers hiding there.

Pioneers in hiding in Friesland, Limburg and elsewhere were regularly visited by supervisors of the Westerweel group, pioneers with very good false papers and

pioneers of partly Jewish origin, who were still allowed to travel. However, the isolation, the constant fear of betrayal and arrest, and the often changing hideouts were a heavy burden for most pioneers. Some of them could not cope with the pressure and loneliness, lost heart, and reported to the German police.

The 21-year-old Lolly Eckhardt from Vienna, who was hiding in Friesland, wrote after the war that she often felt so lonely that she considered reporting on several occasions. In the fall of 1943, the Hechalutz offered her the possibility to flee to France and participate actively in the resistance. A probably small number of pioneers from the Deventer Association fell outside the control of the Hechalutz. They felt abandoned and had to find hiding places for themselves or with the help of the local resistance. When offered to go to France, they refused and stayed in the Netherlands.[10]

Operation Sepharad

In early 1943, the leadership of the Hechalutz asked 25-year-old Kurt Reilinger to succeed Shushu Simon as organizer of the escape route to France. Reilinger was born in Stuttgart in 1917. His father, a sales representative, was Jewish, his mother Catholic. Kurt had always been a member of Jewish organizations, most recently as a youth leader of the socialist Werkleute. In 1939 he took members of his group to Palestine, but he himself returned to lead a hachshara near Berlin. In the fall of 1939, Reilinger had fled to the Netherlands, where he ended up in the Werkdorp. Later he worked for a farmer near Deventer. He was also a board member of the Hechalutz.

Kurt Reilinger was a quite different person from Shushu Simon, more thoughtful and serious. The fact that he was, in Nazi jargon, a “half-Jew” had the advantage that he did not have to wear a star and did not have a J in his passport. He could also travel on public transport. In the first month, Reilinger was occupied with organizing transports of pioneers from the Netherlands to OT projects in France.[11]

This was done in a variety of ways. Sometimes with forged tickets on a Wehrmacht train, sometimes on foot over the Dutch-Belgian border and then further by train and bus. In all cases, forged papers were used. The increasing number of pioneers who had to go into hiding created such pressure that not all transports were

10 GFHA Cat. nr. 47, pp. 1–4: Lolly Eckhardt, April 1956; GFHA Cat. nr. 15, pp. 2 f.: Ilse Birnbaum, March 1957; GFHA Cat. nr. 210, pp. 1–4: Gerd Schönebaum, Toos de Leeuw, February 1957.

11 Kassenbrock, Karl: Onderduiker, Kurt Reilinger (1917–1945). Osnabrück 2017.

Abb. 4: Kurt Reilinger, organizer of the Operation Sepharad. Unknown photographer. GFHA.

organized carefully enough. Some transports fell into German hands, probably partly due to betrayal.

In early August when some 150 pioneers were working on OT projects, Reilinger himself left for France. The Hechalutz had given him the dual task of establishing contacts with the pioneers and restoring Shushu's ties with the Jewish resistance in France. Reilinger made visits to most pioneers in the fall of 1943. He told them about Operation Sepharad, which he was trying to organize, which involved crossing the Pyrenees to Spain.

For Hans Florsheim, a pioneer from a village near Kassel, this was a pleasant surprise. "Nach Spanien. Frei von diesen falschen Namen und Papieren!", he noted in his diary.[12] But not everyone was as enthusiastic. Some pioneers had doubts. The Germans did not seem to care about the fact that there were Jewish workers on the OT projects. Reilinger convinced most of them with the argument that the situation might change, for example in the event of an invasion. From the deportation cen-

12 Flörsheim, Hans: Über die Pyrenäen in die Freiheit. Konstanz 2008. p. 86.

ter in Drancy thousands of Jews had been sent to the east. The Germans were unpredictable.

The operation, which was practically completely carried out by the pioneers, also had an ideological dimension. It was far from sure that the British would keep their promise from the Balfour Declaration to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine after the war. Every Jew living there could then contribute to the realization of that home.[13]

Cooperation with the Armée Juive

In addition to the visits, Reilinger established a 'headquarters' in several hotels in central Paris. The last one was in two rooms in the cheap Hotel Versigny in the Montmartre district. Here he and a couple of assistants, including Willy Hirsch and Lolly Eckhardt, took in and further guided pioneers arriving from the Netherlands.

Through Adina Simon in Switzerland, Reilinger also contacted the Jewish resistance organization Armée Juive (AJ) led by the right-wing Avraham Polonski and the socialist Aron Lublin. The AJ operated mainly from Toulouse in southern France, Polonski's hometown. The name Armée was a somewhat grandiose term for the about 300 members of the organization, practically all of them from Eastern Europe. The members helped Jewish refugees, but there was also an intelligence unit that signalled traitors and sometimes liquidated them. Starting in the fall of 1943, the AJ organized Maquis groups in the sparsely populated, mountainous department of Tarn, close to Toulouse.

Together with the AJ, Reilinger started organizing crossings to Spain. This was first and foremost a matter of money. It was necessary to pay a guide and buy warm clothing, good shoes and special food to make the hard trek across the Pyrenees. Most of the money came from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or Joint for short, via Switzerland.[14]

A first attempt by ten pioneers and eleven others in early November 1943 failed due to heavy snowfall. Now the pioneers, 'les Hollandais' as they were called by the French resistance, had to wait three months because of the wintery conditions. A few of them returned to their OT work, but most pioneers joined an AJ Maquis unit in the Tarn. At the end of February 1944, 23 pioneers made another

13 Schippers, Hans: The Palestine pioneers and the Westerweel Group. In: All Our Brothers and Sisters. Edited by Judith T. Baumel-Schwartz and Alan Schneider. Bern 2021. pp. 120–134.
14 Lazare, Lucien: La résistance juive en France. Paris 1987. pp. 115–117.

attempt to go to Spain. Before their departure from a small village at the foot of the Pyrenees, they were addressed by Joop Westerweel. Lore Sieskind had brought him there as a tribute from the Hechalutz. Joop wished the pioneers success in the crossing and in building their country and asked them never to forget the helpers. His simple words made a deep impression. The 23 reached their goal after a very difficult crossing, during which some suffered frozen limbs. All together about 70 pioneers succeeded in reaching Spain during the war. Some 60 arrived by boat in Palestine in 1944.[15]

It is noteworthy that about a dozen participants in Operation Sepharad had escaped from the Westerbork camp shortly before. A group of arrested pioneers worked in the camp in maintenance jobs and were exempted from deportation. Early in 1944 that changed. Because by then most Dutch Jews had been deported to Poland, the Germans were revoking more and more exemptions. As a result, dozens of pioneers were transported to the east as well. In response, the Westerweel group devised an escape plan. The important person in the plan was 21-year-old Bamberg-born pioneer Kurt Walter, the operator of a small freight train that was used to bring goods to Westerbork from a nearby channel.

Reilinger smuggled false papers into the camp, after which two or three pioneers volunteered for transport. At the last moment they jumped off the train and hid in the camp. With the false papers they left Westerbork the next morning and hid in a nearby pine grove. Frans Gerritsen and Lore Durlacher then took them by bicycle and train to a hideout in The Hague. The pioneers traveled as quickly as possible to France and from there to Spain. About 25 pioneers escaped from Westerbork in this way.

Lore Durlacher was a 21-year-old pioneer from a town near Mannheim. She had fled to the Netherlands in 1939 and had worked in the Werkdorp, among other places. She had shown great coolness and courage during German raids. At the end of 1943 she had joined forces with Frans Gerritsen and Jan Smit in all kinds of resistance work.[16]

Betrayals and arrests in 1943

Possibly related to the failed flight to Switzerland in the fall of 1942, the Westerweel group had to deal with the German police the following year. There were two raids on the Amsterdam beit chalutz and an attempted infiltration by a couple

15 Siegel, Paul: Locomotieven trekken wagons, 1933–1945. Westervoort 2000. pp. 155–164.
16 Siegel, Locomotieven, pp. 127–136.

Abb. 5: Lore Durlacher, pioneer and resistance fighter. Date and photographer unknown. Private Collection.

who said they wanted to take care of Jewish children. As a result, two female pioneers and two couriers were arrested.

More serious was the arrest in October 1943 of Letty Rudelsheim. She was the caretaker of a safe house in Rotterdam of the Hechalutz. It was used for temporary hiding and for pioneers on their way to France. There was a safe bell signal for the residents. When it rang one evening, Letty, a 28-year-old pioneer from an Orthodox Zionist family, opened the door. Three armed SD men stormed the house. Eight pioneers, including Kurt Hannemann, the leader of the Hechalutz, and Sara, the daughter of Ru Cohen of the Deventer Association, were arrested and shortly thereafter transported to Auschwitz and killed.

During an attempt to free Letty Rudelsheim, Wil Westerweel and Chiel Salomé were arrested two months later. Joop Westerweel now had to go into hiding. The arrests were the results of a betrayal by a Jewish student and helper of the group. To save his parents and two younger brothers he had agreed to cooperate with the Germans after his arrest. He had probably also betrayed some transports to France.[17]

Joop Westerweel lived on borrowed time. The tireless organizer of the hiding work was arrested in early March 1944 together with his comrade Bouke Koning while smuggling two female pioneers to Belgium. After severe torture by the SD in Rotterdam, he ended up in the SS camp Vught near Den Bosch. Several attempts to free him led to a German infiltration of the group and arrest of Menachem Pinkhof, Miriam Waterman, and several other helpers. Jan Smit and Lore Durlacher escaped by chance. Frans Gerritsen and his wife had to go into hiding. In retaliation for the liquidation of an NSB mayor, Joop Westerweel was executed in Vught in August 1944.

Because of the arrests, the Westerweel group practically ceased to exist at the end of summer 1944. Jan Smit, Lore Durlacher and Frans Gerritsen remained involved in taking care of pioneers still in hiding in the Netherlands. By bribing German officials, the father of Miriam Waterman prevented her and Menachem Pinkhof from being sent to a certain death in Auschwitz. They were allowed to go to what was known as the better camp of Bergen-Belsen and survived the Shoa. They had to stay in the Netherlands for about a year after the War ended because Menachem Pinkoff suffered from tuberculosis but went to Palestine eventually.

Wil Westerweel, Chiel Salomé and Bouke Koning also returned to the Netherlands, weakened and ill after staying in camps such as Ravensbruck, Dachau and

17 Ben-Heled-Rudelsheim, Letty: Gesprekken met mij zelf in Auschwitz. Kampen 2003. pp. 73–78.

Gross-Rosen. Koning had very severe tuberculosis and would never be able to work again. This was also the case with Wil Westerweel.[18]

Trouble in France

In France, too, the pioneers got into trouble. After the arrest at the Swiss border of a youthful Dutch pioneer, a raid on the headquarters in the Hotel Versigny followed in late April 1944. "Es klopfte, wir machten auf und vier Gestapobeamte in Zivil erschienen mit vorgehaltenen Revolvern",[19] noted Lolly Eckhardt. She, Kurt Reilinger, Willy Hirsch and two more helpers were arrested and locked up in Fresnes prison.

Another pioneer, Max Windmüller, who had fled with his family from Ost-Friesland to the Netherlands in 1933, took over Reilinger's work as coordinator with the help of some other pioneers. Before this, 24-year-old Max had accompanied pioneers who were traveling by train from Antwerp or Brussels to Paris after fleeing the Netherlands. To distract the attention of the other passengers, he played on his harmonica all kinds of well-known songs, and sometimes Hebrew ones like *Hava Nagila.* In his new job he warned the Hechalutz of Reilinger's arrest, looked for other jobs for pioneers, and maintained contact with the AJ.

In June 1944, Max Windmüller came into contact through the same AJ with Charles Porel, supposedly a Canadian agent of the British intelligence service, but in reality, the Abwehr agent Karl Rehbein. After the Allied invasion in Normandy in early June 1944, French resistance activities had increased, but they often lacked weapons. Rehbein told the AJ leadership that he could take care of that problem. Max had joined the contacts in the hope of getting Kurt Reilinger released. However, he and the Parisian leadership of the AJ were arrested when a meeting with Porel was raided by the German police. In the days after the raid most pioneers living in Paris were arrested as well.

In the chaotic situation surrounding the liberation of Paris in August 1944, the commander of the Drancy camp, the SS officer Alois Brunner decided to take those arrested in a separate carriage of his train as hostages to Germany. Most of the Frenchmen in the carriage managed to escape en route. But 'les Hollandais' ended up in German concentration camps like Dachau. This cost the lives of Willy Hirsch, Max Windmüller and several more of the arrested pioneers.[20]

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18 Westerweel, Wil: Lijn of cirkel. Unpublished memories for the children and grandchildren. pp. 72–100.

19 GFHA Cat. No. 47, pp. 4 f.: Verklaring Lolly Eckhardt.

20 GFHA Cat. nr. 47, pp. 4 f.: Lolly Eckhardt; Schippers, Westerweel Group, pp. 195–201.

Two years of resistance – Conclusion

The arrests in the Netherlands and France were largely due to a lack of experience in illegal activities on the part of the Westerweel group and the Palestine pioneers, both in the Netherlands and France. Warnings that the Rotterdam student was a traitor were not taken seriously, for example. This also applied to the arrest of Joop Westerweel and Bouke Koning. Joop, who always used Budel near Eindhoven as a crossing place to Belgium, was warned several times that this had become dangerous as too many people knew him there.

The pioneers in France took too many risks, such as traveling with forged tickets on Wehrmacht trains and visiting the Paris Opera. They underestimated the German ability to strike back.[21] The apparently unnoted arrest of the pioneer at the Swiss border led to the end of the headquarters in the Hotel Versigny. One could say that the chutzpa with which they had built their organization in France had turned against them.

The next events followed a pattern often seen among resistance groups in World War II. To free arrested comrades, too great risks were taken. The German police took advantage of this to infiltrate these groups. This is what happened in the Netherlands after the arrests of Letty Rudelsheim in Rotterdam and of Joop Westerweel and Bouke Koning. A similar scenario played out after the arrest of Kurt Reilinger in Paris. To get him released, Max Windmüller made contacts with shadowy figures like Charles Porel, about whom he was warned by more experienced resistance members.

The strong feelings of solidarity towards each other had grown during the time the group had existed under very difficult circumstances. There were no differences between Jewish or non-Jewish members. The non-Jewish members of the group occupied a somewhat marginal position in Dutch society because of their non-conformist socialism. The same was true for many Palestine pioneers, some of whom barely spoke Dutch and who were distrusted by both the Jewish establishment and the Dutch bourgeoisie. The somewhat aloof social position of both groups, combined with their shared socialist convictions, created a strong bond. The vulnerability to infiltrations and arrests was the downside of this group solidarity.

Of the about 140.000 Jews living in the Netherlands in 1940, more than 100.000 (between 70 % and 75 %) were killed during the war. These numbers show the ruthless anti-Semitism the Westerweel group faced. At the start of the active persecution in July 1942, there were over 700 pioneers in the Netherlands. Most of them

21 Siegel, Locomotieven, pp.150 f..

Abb. 6: A group of pioneers who escaped to Spain meeting in Barcelona. Date and photographer unknown. Private Collection.

came from Germany and Austria; a smaller number from countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Netherlands.

In its two years of activities, the Westerweel group managed to help around 350 pioneers. More than 50 fell into German hands for various reasons. In the summer of 1943, the group offered protection to about 300 pioneers. Of those some 25 were arrested, most of them in France. With the necessary caution, it can be said that the Westerweel group managed to save about 275 Palestine pioneers. In addition, the group gave assistance to several dozen other Jews in hiding.[22]

22 Schippers, Westerweel Group, pp. 207 f.

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