

## Ernst David Berets (45)

### WYCKERBRUGSTRAAT 56

Ernst David Berets was born in Krefeld on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1898. He was one of ten children of Alexander Berets (born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1872 in Roermond) and Karolina Moses (born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1868 in Langweiler). After the First World War, the family lived in Krefeld near the Dutch-German border. Ernst, his parents and all siblings ran a vegetable, fruit and transport business. In Krefeld, Ernst met and married his future wife Adele (born Poschen) who was of German origin. They had two children, one daughter and one son, Alexander Ernst Berets.

In the 1930s, while still living in Germany, Ernst and his brothers were instructed to fill out questionnaires by the Dutch consulate. These questionnaires included questions such as how many people were on the streets, whether they wore military uniforms and which colours in order to find out more about the German military activities. Throughout the years the assignments were extended and included the observation and sketching of industrial and military sights around Krefeld, which was famous for its steel and artificial silk production, both essential elements for the growing German military.

After Hitler's *Machtergreifung* in 1933, the Jewish community in Germany experienced increasing hostility and growing encroachment of social, political and economic life. For Ernst and his family this meant that their trucks were set on fire or demolished. Made possible by their Dutch passports, Ernst and Adele decided to move to Venlo, where they lived in great distress because of food shortage for about 2,5 years. After that they moved to Maastricht and opened two libraries, one owned by Ernst in Dominikanerkerkstraat, and the other owned by Adele in Wyckerbrugstraat.

In Maastricht, Ernst continued working for the Dutch government by obtaining information near the Belgian-German border together with others including his brother Franz Hermans. They used to rent a car, and visit the town of Welkenraedt, where trains from Germany bound for France would stop and load coal, water and other supplies. Being able to speak German perfectly, Ernst and his companions obtained important information on the routes and the goods by talking to the German railway workers. The collected material was passed on to the Dutch Secret Service that cooperated with the British Secret Service at that time, which, however, Ernst was not aware of.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1940, the Nazis occupied the Netherlands. Only a week later, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, Ernst was arrested in Amsterdam when visiting his family and procuring new books for his business. He was suspected of spying and was accused of treason. After spending some months in the prison of Münster, he was transferred to the infamous prison Klingelpütz in Cologne. Ernst's brother Franz was the main suspect during the trial, and Ernst as an accomplice. After a year in prison in Cologne, they were tried in front of the *Volksgerichtshof* in Berlin, which was a special court for cases of treason. Ultimately, Franz Hermans was sentenced to death by hanging and Ernst received a 5-year term in Berlin-Tegel. Ernst spent the time between August and December 1941 in Tegel. He was allowed to communicate via letters with his wife once a month. At some point in 1941, Ernst's wife received a package she had sent months before to her husband in Tegel. It contained the note that the package could not be delivered since the detainee had been moved to Auschwitz.

In the past decades, Ernst's son Alexander Ernst Berets has spent much time researching the story of his father. With the help of a former employee of the Auschwitz Documentary Centre, he obtained the death certificate of his father which stated that his father died of *Myocardinsuffizienz (cardiac insufficiency)*. The certificate was signed by a petty officer named Walter Quakernack. In the book *Amidst Nightmare*, former Auschwitz inmates have described Quakernack as a

notorious man who shot men, women and children almost every day for his personal amusement in the old part of Auschwitz. Alexander found out that all death certificates signed by Quakernack stated that the inmate in question died of cardiac insufficiency. And typically those who got gassed in Auschwitz did not get any certificate at all. Thus, he believes that his father was not gassed, but shot by Quakernack. According to Alexander's research, his father was not initially arrested in Amsterdam because of being a Jew, but because he had already been wanted because of suspicion of espionage when the Nazis occupied the Netherlands.

David's wife Adele continued living in Maastricht. In her neighbourhood she was known for supporting those in need with goods that she traded with the railway and military personnel that passed through Maastricht. She and her father continued the library business in Maastricht until the end of the war. Besides Ernst, seven more siblings died during the war. Only the oldest and the youngest of his brothers survived the war.

### Sources

- [http://www.maxvandam.info/humogen/family/humo9\\_/F30855/I82280/](http://www.maxvandam.info/humogen/family/humo9_/F30855/I82280/)
- *Interview conducted with Alexander Ernst Berets – son of Ernst David Berets*