

In 1939, when I was three years old, my father was called up for the army. The camp was located near the Grebbe Line, which was an important point of defense. My mother and I went there on the train twice to visit him. He was out there with a group of soldiers, all of them in uniform, and I remember thinking how strange they looked. They were living in a large farmhouse. Mom and I were allowed to stay overnight in a separate room. I thought it was kind of fun.

When the war broke out, my father's regiment had to march toward the Grebbeberg, a hill that was in a strategic position. There was heavy fighting, and lots of men were wounded and dying. My father realized it was going badly, so he grabbed his bike and rode back to Amsterdam. He arrived in the middle of the night, without his rifle and his kit bag. He must have gotten rid of them somewhere.

My father always liked to know exactly what was going on, so he found a job with the **Jewish Council**,¹ which had been founded in 1941 on the orders of the Germans to represent the Jewish community in the Netherlands. My father was on guard duty when one of the first groups of Jewish people was transported out of Amsterdam. What he saw made him decide to send me into hiding right away. My parents went into hiding that same week. He had already arranged hiding places for all of us, not just

1. **Jewish Council** (German: *Judenrat*): administrative organizations that the German occupiers ordered Jewish communities to set up to manage Jewish affairs. The council had the task of carrying out some of the measures that the Germans imposed on the Jews. Anyone who worked for the Jewish Council was temporarily exempted from deportation. Thousands of people were involved in the work of these organizations.

Many Jewish people resented the council members, particularly the leaders, for following the orders of the occupying Germans, and they thought the exemption from deportation was unfair, but a lot of Jewish Council members secretly tried to help others whenever they had the chance.

for the immediate family but also for his parents and for all of my mother's brothers and sisters. But they never made use of them. "It won't be as bad as all that," they said.

Soon after my parents went into hiding, their house was "Pulsed," or cleared out. The Germans had given Abraham Puls and his company the job of emptying the houses of Jews who had gone into hiding or who had been rounded up during a **raid**.² We were lucky: Our neighbors, who were good people, had a key to our house, and they took everything they could carry and hid it for us. After the war, we got back our photographs, a set of cutlery, a figurine, and a clock.

The first address where I went into hiding was in Amsterdam, at my father's boss's house. He was Jewish but his wife was not. **Mixed marriages**³ of this kind seemed relatively safe at first, but it was still risky for them to take in and hide a Jewish child. It was around this time that I began to realize I was Jewish, without really understanding what that meant.

Before the war, our family had been all kinds of things: vegetarians, followers of holistic healing, and atheists. Of course, we had traditions. We had plenty of them, in fact. We ate matzos at Passover, and my mother would bake *gremsjelies*, a special Passover cake made from matzos, raisins, almonds, and candied citrus peel. We owned a menorah, a candelabrum used in Jewish worship,

2. **raid**: a police or army action to find people and take them into custody.

3. **mixed marriage**: usually a marriage between two people of different religious backgrounds or nationalities. In this case, a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew. Generally, Jews in mixed marriages were not required to report for deportation, and their children did not have to wear stars on their clothing to indicate that they were Jewish. They did, however, have to obey the other rules that the German occupiers had made for Jews.

and we used to light candles. My mother also used a lot of Yiddish expressions, but that was just normal for me.

What was not normal was having to leave kindergarten about three months after the war started. The little boy who lived next door was also Jewish, and the same thing happened to him. So we just went back to playing together again, as we had before we started kindergarten.

I began to get a better understanding of what it meant to be Jewish when my foster parents started discussing my birthday. When I went into hiding, I was five and it was months before my sixth birthday, which I was already looking forward to. My foster father, Walter Lorjé, said, “If anyone asks how old you’re going to be on your next birthday, you have to say five. Never tell them you’re almost six.”

I thought that was awful. I wanted to be a big girl. “Why not?” I asked.

“When you’re six,” he replied, “you have to wear a **star**.”⁴

I knew that you didn’t want to have that star on your clothes. My mother had had to wear a star, and it was a nuisance. I was five and I didn’t fully understand what it meant to be Jewish, but I could sense that there was something wrong with it. That feeling grew stronger by the week, especially when the raids started and conversations were often about who had been rounded up and who was still around.

The Lorjé family, who had taken me in, had three children. The eldest, Wim, was fifteen. We sometimes used to play together

4. **star**: a Star of David on a yellow background with the word *Jood* (Dutch: Jew) in the center. From May 3, 1942, all Jews six years and older had to wear this star on their outer clothes. The star had to be clearly visible and firmly attached, or the person would be punished.

with his toy cars. That always made me so happy, because it meant that I could do something with another person for once. I didn't get to play with friends, saw none of my family, and didn't go to school. I was very eager to learn, but no one taught me anything. Their daughter Marjo had made me terrified, not of the Germans but of beetles, spiders, dirt, and all kinds of other imaginary dangers. I didn't dare to flush the toilet anymore because I thought all kinds of things would come whooshing out of it.

Whenever Aunt Loes, a cousin of Mrs. Lorjé's, came to visit, I had to go out to a nearby playground. Aunt Loes was married to the man who managed the family's stationery store. Mr. Lorjé was Jewish, so the Germans had handed over the management of the store to Aunt Loes's husband. He was called a *Verwalter* in German, an administrator. Aunt Loes often used to visit the house to discuss the stationery store. If I happened to bump into her, I'd been told to say I was Rita Houtman, who lived across the street. I had to go out and stay in the nearby playground until the coast was clear, and then someone would come for me.

But one time it was different. Aunt Loes had said she was coming to visit, so Marjo took me to the playground. As she left, she said, "Aunt Loes won't stay long. You can come home at six." Of course, she should never have said that.

In the playground, there was a slide and a merry-go-round that you had to push yourself. I didn't do that. There were also a couple of swings and a seesaw. But you can't seesaw by yourself, so I didn't do that either. I just sat there with my little pail and shovel in the wet sand of an enormous sandbox. All of the other children had gone to school. I just sat there alone in the playground, which

was surrounded by a tall chicken-wire fence. After a while, I began to feel cold and thirsty.

As soon as the church clock struck six, I picked up my pail and shovel and ran home.

The front door was closed, so I rang the bell. Someone upstairs pulled the rope to open the door. There, halfway down the stairs, was Aunt Loes. She looked at me. “And who might you be?”

I knew right away that this wasn’t good. “I’m Rita Houtman. I live on the other side of the street. I’ve just come to see if Mrs. Lorjé has some sugar to spare.”

She turned to Mr. Lorjé, who was standing at the top of the stairs, and said, “Hmm, if I didn’t know better, I’d think that was Rita Degen.” Then she walked past me and out of the house.

Huge panic. My suitcase was packed immediately, and I was taken to stay with someone in **the resistance**⁵ that night. The next day, a woman came to pick me up. “Hello,” she said, “I’m Aunt Hil. We’re taking the train together tomorrow, to Hengelo.”

Taking the train to Hengelo. That’d be fun. I hadn’t been on a train for ages.

5. **the resistance**: organizations carrying out activities against occupying forces, such as helping people go into hiding, printing and distributing underground newspapers, and acts of sabotage.