

The Westerweel Group: Organizing the Escape from the Netherlands, 1942 – 1944

By Caroline Schoofs

During the Second World War, the Germans occupied several countries in Western Europe. The Netherlands was one of these countries. As soon as the occupation began, people started to fight back in many different ways. One of the ways to resist to the occupier was to organize the escape of people to un-occupied territories. Several groups were organizing the escape from the Netherlands, among these was the Westerweel group. It emerged in the 1942 in the Netherlands and was concerned with the assistance for Jews: helping them into hiding and facilitating the escape to Spain.

In the 1930s, many Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria and Poland came to the Netherlands. Some of these, the Palestine pioneers, came to live in education centers where they prepared for a life in Palestine. One such center was the Paviljon Loosdrechtse Rade.

The picture shows pioneers living in the Loosdrechtse Rade in 1940.



Loosdrecht, August 1942

The Westerweel group emerged when the Loosdrechtse Rade had to be evacuated before the Germans would arrive and deport the residents. The Westerweel group was composed of both German Zionists living in Loosdrecht, as well as Dutch non-Jewish members.

Active with the escape of pioneers abroad were mostly German Jews: Joachim 'Shushu' Simon, Kurt Reilinger, Ernst 'Willy' Hirsch and Max 'Cor' Windmüller. The Dutch Joop Westerweel and Menachem Pinkhof had a more limited role abroad. Frans Gerritsen was mainly concerned with the falsification of identity documents within the Netherlands.

Auffay

Since the route between France and Spain was not established yet, several refugees worked for Organisation Todt (O.T.) in the meantime. O.T. was a national-socialist organization that was composed of different construction firms, working on for example the Atlantic Wall. At these firms in Auffay but also in other places in France, the refugees received money and food.

Albi, near Toulouse, early 1944

Some of the pioneers also joined the French armed resistance, the Maquis. The reason for this is that there were too many pioneers in Toulouse between 1943 and 1944, waiting for the travel to Spain. This was too dangerous. The Maquis formed a cover for these refugees.

Pyrenees

The Pyrenees could only be crossed with the help of a mountain guide. The Westerweel group did not have the required contacts. Therefore, they made contact with the French Jewish resistance, for example with the Armée Juive. These were concerned with the escape of Jews to Spain through the Pyrenees. The pioneers from the Netherlands could join these groups and made the last part of their travel to free territory. From there some continued to Palestine.

Process

In order to contribute to the larger research project on transnational resistance, I have researched the trajectories of both the refugees and members of the Westerweel group, the exchanges and encounters with different resisters and the forging of identities in different contexts during the war. I have used for a great part secondary material, as well as some archival sources. It was a good learning experience to work in an existing research project. The most important lesson I have learned, is that I should not wait for too long to go into the archives and that I should go back and forth between both primary and secondary sources.

Budel – Hamont

In order to cross the heavily guarded border with Belgium, the group initially relied on 'green borders': crossing fields and using bushes and trees as cover. The route between Budel-Hamont was one of the three routes used by the group.

Netherlands – France

Since 1943, the group started to rely on new methods of escape: using falsified documents. This way, both the refugees and resisters could travel to France 'legally', using public transport. This way, the group adapted to the new environment. With these papers, the refugees could travel to France. It even enabled some to use the *Wehrmacht* trains, have dinners in fancy restaurants and stay in military hotels, on the expense of the Germans!

Paris

In 1943 and 1944, many pioneers arrived in France. The group, under the lead of Kurt Reilinger, had established a 'headquarters' in Paris to receive the newly arrived pioneers. Several German, Austrian and Polish pioneers assisted Reilinger at the headquarters.

Conclusion

The Leverhulme project 'A Transnational Approach to Resistance, 1936-1945', led by Robert Gildea, focuses on the transnational aspects of resistance during the Second World War. The case of the Westerweel group clearly showed that resistance transcends borders and that the nation-state should not be regarded as a primary analytical framework. Instead, the local, national and international are interwoven.

The group emerged in the Netherlands and its focus remained on the pioneers who were living in the Netherlands at the time of the occupation, regardless of their nationality. Further links with the Netherlands are hard to find. The group was active abroad, mainly in France. They learned how the system worked and adapted to this, either by using falsified documents or by working for O.T.

When considering the fact that it were the German as well as Austrian and Polish Zionists active abroad and that they cooperated mainly with the Belgian and French Jewish resistance, it seems to be the case that this Zionist identity was more important for both the refugees and resisters than their nationality.